

Political Absorption

The Case of New Immigrants from the CIS in Israel

Dina Siegel

Siegel, Dina 1995: Political Absorption. The Case of New Immigrants from the CIS in Israel. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 25: 45–54.

The wave of Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union since the late 1980s has created various groups, ideological trends and new political movements. The setting up of political organizations among the new immigrants in Israel is presented here as a reaction to power-relations, both within the Russian Jewish community, and in the Israeli society around it. This paper presents some empiric findings of my field-work, conducted in Israel in 1994, about the dynamics of the involvement of new immigrants into Israeli's political life, their political tendencies and the activities of their leaders. Two political movements are presented here: 1.) the independent party of new immigrants, based on the representatives of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, who consider Russian and Russian-Jewish culture and history to be commonly shared. On the other side they realize that in order to mobilize wide support among the potential Israeli voters they have to search for a special strategy to combine different identities and ethnic symbols; 2.) the ultra-nationalist movement of new immigrants, based on representatives of the existing ultra-Right parties, trying to unite the Russian Jews against the governmental policy on the territories after the peace agreement with the Palestinians. Some aspects of the relationship between new immigrants and Israeli Arabs, which lead to the tendency of many Russian Jews to identify themselves with the ideas of the ultra-Right parties, are analysed as well.

Dina Siegel, M.A. – Faculty of Social Studies, Vrije Universiteit, De Boelelaan 1105, NL-1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Introduction

The wave of Jewish immigration from the CIS since the late 80s has created various groups, ideological trends and political movements, about which little is known. Though it is considered to be the biggest “*aliya*”¹ in the history of Israel, and though the problems of absorption of new “*olim*”² occupied one of the most important places in Israeli inner politics and everyday life of the society, it remains a neglected area in anthropological research. Knowledge about this immigration is restricted to common gloomy associations with “*professors with brooms*”, “*girls-prostitutes in massage saloons*”, “*hungry people, collecting rotten tomatoes at night at the market*”, or “*playing the accordion in rainy streets*”. These images, especially when featured in the Israeli press and used at the rostrum of the Knesset³, could teach one more

about the social and political needs of those who create them, than about the new immigrants themselves.

Though the policy of “*klita yeshara*” (direct absorption), was accepted a few years ago with the aim to avoid the isolation of new immigrants from Israeli society (previously they were concentrated in Centres of Absorption), the new immigrants found their own ways and mechanisms to remain together in their “*Russian circles*”, in the environment, where the language and information sources for their orientation in Israel is available and convenient. The term “*the ethnic community of Russian Jews*” in Israel became one of the strongest categories of group-identity. This situation led to the raise of a class-hierarchy among the immigrants, to the emergence of a Russian-Jewish elite and leadership, and to the creation

of new ideological streams. But on the other side, remaining isolated from other Israelis, developing a dependency on governmental and public organizations (such as the Ministry of Absorption, the Ministry of Science, the Jewish Agency, etc.), the new immigrants showed little interest in public affairs and politics. They declared that “their purpose is to survive economically and culturally”. The few very half-hearted attempts of new immigrants to form political parties on an ethnic basis, initiated by “vatikim” (immigrant-veterans, who arrived in Israel during the previous waves of “aliya”, in the 70s and 80s), failed in the elections of 1992.

In the course of time, the “olim” learned Hebrew, the principles of politics and the political culture of the Israeli society, which led them to change their own identity and to find their way in different political and public organizations. This paper presents some empirical findings of a field-work conducted in Israel at the end of 1993 – beginning of 1994, about political tendencies among new immigrants, the activities of “aliya” leaders and involvement of “olim” in the political life of the country.

The central theme of this study is the dynamics of the involvement of new immigrants in Israel’s political life. The purpose is twofold: 1) to present two specific political movements of Russian Jews; 2) to explain why the use of symbols plays an important role in the relationship between new immigrants and Israeli politicians.

The two organizations, which I intend to describe in this paper belong to the “Right” wing of Israeli politics. I shall ask why many Russian Jews sympathize with and join Right-wing movements. This question is particularly relevant because it was precisely the support of Russian-Jewish “olim” that tipped the balance of power in favour of the Labour Party in the 1992 elections. The recent setting up of Right-oriented organizations of new immigrants could be the outcome of a number of reasons: disappointment of the “olim” with the policy of the “Left” government, wide propaganda of the “Right” opposition and constant tensions between Jews and Arabs, either living in the occupied territories or in Israel itself. In this paper I shall seek to analyze these aspects more explicitly. I shall

try to show how the “olim” form their ethnic identity in Israeli society and how they set up their organizations, by making use of symbols and meanings of these identities. Symbols and their interpretation play one of the most important roles in the forging of the political and ethnic identity of Russian-Jewish “olim”. I shall try to show how different forms of “olim” organization represent various ways of shaping identity. On the other hand, I shall dwell on the means, used by the “aliya” leaders for the political mobilization of new immigrants, one of which is the interpretation of the “aliya” symbols for their own political purposes. Concluding, I shall sum up the findings of this study.

Key facts and theoretical background

To understand the chain of events in Israel and in the former Soviet Union, which led to the new political developments among the Russian Jews, one needs some background information on immigration in Israel in general, and on the Russian-Jewish immigration in the 90s in particular.

The Law of Return (passed by the Israeli Knesset in 1949) recognizes the right of all Jews in the world to settle in Israel. Immigration embodied the most important issue of Zionism: Jews constitute a national group, which seeks self-determination in Israel, which is considered to be their historical land.

The first Jewish immigrants to Palestine mostly came from Eastern Europe and Russia. But after the establishment of Israel in 1948, the majority of Jewish immigrants came from the Middle East and North Africa. The ethnic gap between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, together with differences in economic and educational opportunities, led to tensions between these two groups of the population. The traumatic experiences of Sephardic Jews during their absorption in a new country led to wide debates on how new immigrants should be treated and even questioning the necessity of mass “aliya” in general. A contribution to this debate was also made by Israeli Arabs – another ethnic group, mostly hostile to any new wave of Jewish “aliya”.

In the 60s–70s the immigration of Jews from

the former Soviet Union began; approximately 230.000 "olim" arrived during the two decades. In the 80s immigration ceased altogether. In the period between 1989 and 1993, however, more than 550.000 Russian Jews arrived to Israel.

One of the reasons for this increase in the immigration influx was the result of the radical change in the emigration policy of the Soviet government in 1986, which was continued by the present leadership of Russia, and the decision of the United States not to grant entry permission to Russian Jews, who had received an Israeli entry visa.

The Russian Jewish "aliya" generated a drastic increase in the housing budget. A lot of poor small towns in the Negev and in the North of Israel became populated by Russian Jews, which led to the ethno-cultural change of these areas, where previously mainly Sephardic Jews lived.

The character of cities drastically changed, with Russian becoming the second, and in some areas the prime spoken language. Many street inscriptions in the center of Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem are written in both Hebrew and Russian, and sometimes only in Russian; the "radio-station for new immigrants" (REKA) broadcasts 10 hours per day, including Saturdays, and there are more than 40 periodicals in Russian; new "Russian literature clubs" were opened and even a "Russian" theatre ("Gesher") performs in two languages.

These facts illustrate a community-building process of Russian Jews in Israel. This is a new development in which a new political and ethnic identity is forged. The anthropological methods of research provide an extremely useful tool for the study of the way in which the "Russian-Jewish" cultural identity has been shaped and how it is reflected in the behaviour of the "olim". It also allowed me to observe and to elucidate their tendency to belong to a specific ethnic group and to re-create "old-new" norms, which regulate their life style and political involvement.

Theoretical remarks

Some theoretical comments are important here, since we deal with the terms "ethnicity" and

"ethnic identity" of Russian Jews. Wherever a movement of people occurs from one country to another the main problem they have to face is their economic survival in the new place. That is why dealing with the concept of "ethnicity" one has to take into account that one is dealing with "varying expressions of ethnic identity... which is the matter of perception, but that perception is shaped and coloured by its social environment" (Epstein 1978: 27).

Barth gives emphasis to the fact, that "ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves" (Barth 1969: 10). To the extent that "these actors use ethnic identity to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction" (Barth 1969: 13f.), they shape "ethnic" organizations. These organizations may use ethnic identity for various needs, for example political ones.

Thus, following these approaches, "ethnicity" here is a combination of identity and rational calculation. Ethnic behaviour is considered as a political phenomenon, which involves a struggle for power between groups of different ethnic origin and the defence of collective interests within one common social context.

The migration from one country to another could only be dealt with by describing the immigrant's social world of changes. This description will bring us to a better understanding of the transition experienced by the migrants (Marx 1990: 191). This method of study focuses on both continuity and impact with reference to his/her former position and status as an individual, as well as on the political influence and self-identification in the new country. In this study it will be shown how the previous high professional and economic situation of the Jews in Russia and their new position in Israel influence each other and affect their image in their own community and in Israeli society in general.

Political tendencies among Russian-Jewish "olim"

In the early days of the Russian-Jewish immigration, in 1988–89, the "olim" were considered ready-made and "natural" supporters of the Likud party, since they had an antipathy for the socialist tradition of the system in the former

Soviet Union. The “conventional wisdom” was that Russian Jews would have nothing to do with the socialist Labour party. In addition, as they came from a vast country with a history of military conquests, they also would not understand why a small country should give up territory. As a result of these considerations, Likud’s electoral propaganda in the Russian language for the 1992 election, attacked Labour’s policy as ruinous socialism with “empty slogans, red flags and May Day parade”. Labour, in turn focused on the widespread feeling that the Likud government had fumbled the absorption effort while devoting resources instead of building new settlements in the occupied territories. They promised to redirect money to the needs of the immigrants. The word “labour” was translated as “rabota” and association was created with the promise to “provide jobs to every new immigrant”. This promise had a greater impact than any political tendency or ideology.

In 1992 many new immigrants voted Labour, more as a protest against the policy of the Likud government, which “did not do much for “aliya”, than out of support for the socialist party. Many “olim” felt anger against the mismanagement of absorption. One of the “aliya” activists mentioned at the time, that immigrants will always be in opposition, because “one can never do enough for them”. According to other informants, the new immigrants were not well informed about all the possibilities they had in order to make a political choice.

Russian-Jewish “olim” are considered to be responsible for bringing two mandates to the Labour party. Two years later they expressed disappointment with the unfulfilled promises they received from the Labour party before the elections of 1992. The other explanation of their Right-oriented political views, which are widely echoed today in the press and media, is that the present wave of Russian immigration came to Israel with no ideological motivation, and most “olim” would prefer to live in the USA or in Europe. This is the reason why they are ready to support any political party that would guarantee them proper housing, jobs and education for their children. “Pure” political issues, such as the problem of territories and the relations with the Arabs, are less important to them.

They are only interested in immediately securing their basic needs. One of my informants explained that he voted for “MERETZ” (a Left-oriented party) because everybody else in his office had voted for it. Out of the same feeling of solidarity another informant sent her children to “Hashomer Hatzair” (a Left-oriented youth movement).

After the elections of 1992 many of those who had voted for Labour claimed that they were “disillusioned with the Leftists”. Being disappointed with the government’s unkept promises and being discouraged by the struggles inside the Labour party, which they said, did not secure for “Russian Jewish immigrants mandates in the Knesset”, they claim that in future they would look for other possibilities and choose other representatives, on both ideological and practical grounds. In addition, as one of them explained: “Those who voted for the Labour party or for MERETZ did not expect peace with the PLO so fast. They concentrated on the economic promises of the Leftists, and ignored their political plans. Now the Russian Jews fear that the Palestinians’ self-rule, which is granted in the agreement between the Israeli government and the PLO will jeopardize their security”.

Changing their ideological argument, they now borrow symbols and terms from Russian and Russian-Jewish culture, from religious Judaism and from Zionist-Revisionist ideas. This combination of values emphasize the specific character of “Russian-Jewish” organization, based on ethnic symbolics. The conflict, which arises in this context is one between the urge to define their own political-ethnic movement separately and the urge to be part of more inclusive groups, such as Israelis, Jews, Ashkenazi, etc. Their “Russian Jewish” group identity is thus coming in conflict with their identity as a part of the Israeli society and the Jewish nation. Dolgin and Magdoff note on the possibility of locating ethnicity on one level and nationalism on another: “the process through which potentially conflicting identities can appear harmonious by the allocation of different aspects of identity to different domains” (Dolgin and Magdoff 1977: 354).

In this context I shall now describe two cases of political organizations of the new immigrants.

The fact that these movements are still in their preliminary phase of organization and do not have official names, may complicate the description of the specific character of each of them. For this reason and for the purpose of this paper they are here called: 1) the Party of "Olim" and 2) the Ultra-Nationalist Movement of Russian Jews. I am aware of the fact that these denominations are arbitrary, and do not fully reflect their self-perceptions. Nevertheless this division is important for a more clear explanation of the character and problems of both political groups.

The first party is based on the representatives of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia of "olim", who consider Russian and Russian-Jewish culture and history to be commonly shared. But they also realize that if they form their party only on the ethnic base they will not be able to mobilize wide support in Israeli society. This is why they search for a special strategy to combine different identities and symbols.

In the second movement Russian Jewish activists, "olim" and "vatikim" begin manifesting themselves politically, trying to work out a political program, based on the ideology of the existing ultra-Right political parties in Israel. The leaders, mostly "refusniks", who survived Russian camps and jails, try to create a "nostalgic myth" of their repatriation to the Land of Israel. This myth is also shared by the orthodox representatives, who emphasize the importance of religious values and the concept of the Jewish nation, connected, in their terms, to "land", "blood" and "historic past".

The Party of "Olim" – a movement of Russian-Jewish intelligentsia or another ethnic party?

The "aliya" and absorption policy were the central issues of the election campaign of most of the parties. It was placed third, right after the issue of the peace process and an economic program. However, not a single new immigrant was included on the major parties' lists of candidates. That triggered the formation of parties aimed at the immigrant vote. One was called "Tali", another "Am Ehad", the third one – "Yad be-Yad" – a coalition of new immigrants and

Israeli pensioners. The biggest and the best known was called "DA" – officially an acronym for Democracy and "Aliya", but with the immediately understood meaning of "Yes" in Russian. The head of "DA", Yuli Kosharovskiy was welcomed as a hero upon his arrival to Israel on March 12, 1989, after waiting 18 years for an exit visa. But his leadership in Russia among "refusniks" did not grant him an automatic entry in the Israeli political arena. After failing in the 1992 elections, his party, "DA", withered away. All those parties were starved of campaign funds. They could not cross the threshold of 1.5 per cent of total votes needed to enter the Knesset.

None of the "olim" movements succeeded in having candidates elected to the Israeli Parliament. None of the representative of the Russian Jews (most of whom were "vatikim"), who were also members of big parties, managed to secure for themselves a place high enough on the party's electoral list that would ensure them election to the Knesset. Beyond that, those who were leaders of "olim" parties then, are not convinced that they should repeat their last experience. Yuli Kosharovskiy, for example, is not interested in rebuilding his "DA" party before the next election. Today he is convinced that new immigrants have to prove themselves as equal members in the existing parties. As a good example for this possibility he mentioned the municipal elections of 1993, in which a lot of Russian Jews became candidates and won, as was the case in Jerusalem, Ashdod, Haifa and other cities.

Nevertheless, two years after the elections, in January 1994, the issue of a new "Russian" party was raised again in the coordination council of the "olim" organizations.

During the debate, a few participants presented a new project, based on the statement that the immigration of the 90s is the most intelligent part of the Israeli society. The choice is between forming a new party, based on this "intellectual elite" of the Russian-Jewish community, or joining another, preferably small party, which would combine voices of Russian Jews and those of regular voters for that party, in order to guarantee securing a few mandates in the Knesset in future elections. One of the

calculations is that even if the ethnic party will not succeed, it will enhance the chance of representatives of Russian Jews in other parties to enter the Knesset. It was stated that very concrete and positive possibilities exist today to organize a party, which will represent the interests of "olim". But, as one of the organizers put it: the problem is that the community of Russian Jews is spread all over the country and there is no real obvious basis for its unification. According to his analysis it is important for the new party to be led by professionals, professors from the former Soviet Union, who would analyze and advise on the real common grounds that could be used in writing up the program of the new party. The solution of the organizers is that program should be based on one conception, in order to avoid conflicts inside the party itself. The sponsors of the new party should be Jewish businessmen from Russia, who would be ready to invest capital here, as a way of safeguarding it, if forced to leave their country of origin.

Analysing the development of a new strategy of the organizers, it becomes clear that the emphasis on "professionalism" and on the necessity of in depth research, which would follow the setting up of the new "olim" party would give the specialists—"olim" access to financial sources. People join "olim" organizations only if it serves their interests, and these are largely economic ones. Professional possibilities which could be opened to a large number of sociologists, politologists, lawyers, financial consultants and other "olim"-specialists attract their involvement on the political scene, generated by the economic aspect of the problem.

In emphasizing "professionalism" as a protest of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia against its inferior position today in Israel, a person's status among "olim" is determined by the professional position which he occupied before the emigration. These people themselves emphasize the low status of the "uneducated", thus strengthening their own position in the community. In this context, they also mention the difference between "olim" who emigrated from Moscow, Saint Petersburg and a few other big cities in Russia, and those, who emigrated from the "province", from the periphery, such as

Byelorussia, Middle Asia, Moldova, etc. It is claimed that those who came from the central cities of Russia had better opportunities to receive education and were more involved in the cultural and political life of the country. In the community-building process among the new immigrants of the 90s in Israel, these people make up the apex of the new elite of Russian Jews and of the Russian-Jewish party. As intellectuals, they arrived with a "positive identity", as Epstein defines a sense of worthiness and self-esteem (Epstein 1978: 102). In Israel the "Russians", as they are generally called, regardless of their origin, have been stigmatized as drunkards, prostitutes and criminals. In addition, their bad economic situation and low professional position transferred them from a "positive identity" to a "negative" one. They believe that political organization of their own, set up on ethnic basis could improve their own self-definition and their image in the Israeli society. But these people are also liberals and humanists. This is the reason why they do not see their future party as "ethnically closed". Here again the conflict arises between their ethnical identity and their wish to belong to the wider group of the Israeli society. Reflecting this aspect, one of the ideas was to call the new movement the "Party of the Absolute Democrats", based on the book of Mark Davidor⁴, *Gosudarstvo i narod* (State and People). The name of the new party was supposed to attract not only the intelligentsia of the "olim", which was in one way or another taken for granted, but also wide circles of Israeli democrats. The ideological basis of the party would be built on economic reform and on introducing the referendum as a form of decision making, which the author sees as an important principle of democracy. The party, according to Davidor, would join any coalition, Right or Left, depending on its attitude to "olim".

Davidor also compares the would-be party with other ethnic parties, which succeeded in the history of Israeli politics, such as Shas, an orthodox party of Moroccan Jews in the 80s–90s and the Progressive party of German Jews in the 50s. In the 1930s Israel had a wave of immigrants that were, according to Davidor, far more highly qualified than the rest of the Jew-

ish population: the German Jews, who fled Hitler and were not Zionists. Their Progressive Party is known as a success in Israeli politics. The failure of Tami, another ethnic party, in the 80s, is not mentioned.

Ultra-Nationalist Movement of “Olim” – Conference “Aliya for the Land of Israel”

The second movement of new immigrants started out of several attempts of representatives of ultra-Right parties to unite the “olim” for their struggle against the governmental policy on the occupied territories after the peace agreement with the Palestinians was signed in September 1993. The opposition recognized the high potential of the “olim”, many of whom live in settlements in Judea and Samaria, for the purpose of this battle. Seminars and meetings between political leaders and new immigrants were organized not long after the beginning of the anti-agreement campaign.

One of these attempts of opposition parties was the setting up of an ultra-Right movement of “olim” during a conference that was organized by Russian-Jewish members of existing ultra-Right parties. Though this conference was only a preliminary phase in the crystallization of the specific political movement (compared to more concrete steps, made by the founders of the new “olim” party, described above), it seems to me that the analysis of its symbolics is important for the better understanding of political development among Russian Jews.

In contrast to the study of the party of Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, presented above, in which the strategy of the organization was emphasized, the second movement is analysed from a different angle. The main idea here is the power of argumentation within the community, which should be understood from the “encompassing discourse which constitutes the context from which arguments derive their persuasive power” (Tennekes 1988: 46). The conference “Aliya for the Land of Israel” is a good example of how this discourse is reproduced in the specific social context.

Before the conference, one of the organizers, who is also a former “Prisoner of Zion” ex-

plained that the conference “Aliya for the Land of Israel”, the first one in the history of the Russian Jews’ repatriation “is an urgent gathering of immigrants in order to create the critical counterbalance in the national-oriented struggle and an opportunity to let them join the battle”.

“The sky is the limit. We are half a million people, and this means not only a considerable number of mandates in the Knesset, but also a drastic demographic change”, said in his speech Yuli Edelstein, one of the leaders of the Zionist Forum and an initiator of the conference.

During the conference new immigrants, including well-known former “refusniks”, launched a new movement, “which will become soon a new political party”. The main aim of this movement is to prevent territorial concessions on the Golan Heights and in the territories of Judea and Samaria.

An emotional culmination of the meeting was the appearance of Miriam, the widow of Mordechai Lapid, a Russian Jew, who was killed together with his son by terrorists. The Lapid family has been living in one of the religious settlements in the territories.

“I hear the Russian language and that reminds me of my husband and my son. We knew that the Russian “aliya” is the biggest hope of Israel, because we want this land to belong to Jews only, and we shall not share it with anyone else”, she said through tears. Near-by sitting women started to cry aloud. Later, someone suggested to elect Miriam Lapid prime-minister, because “she will not extend her hand to the murderer Arafat, were it only because an orthodox woman does not extend her hand to a man”.

Another orthodox activist, a former Head of the Chabad (Lubavitch) organization in Moscow, called on the audience to eat only kosher, because “when you eat pork – you have to know that with this pork Arabs lubricate their guns”.

Two main lines of thought run parallel: emphasizing religious and “Jewish” values (mostly by representatives of religious movements, such as Tseirei Habad, Shivat Zion, Amana, etc.); and non-religious, “national” Israeli symbols (by Right-wing Zionist parties, such as Likud, Moledet, Tehiya, Beitar, and a few others), who tried to remind the audience that the

first Zionists, already in 1882 had been Russian Jews, who had built the first kibbutz of Degania and the first houses of Tel-Aviv. They were thus trying to create a nostalgic link between the Russian pioneers, who had changed the face of the Middle East at that time, and the new immigrants, who were going to change it now. For other, non-layman, purposes, this was also an attempt to show a religious link of the Jewish people with the Land of Israel and the tombs of the Patriarchs. In this context, the symbol of Muslim guns lubricated with pork fat, was an absolute distortion of reality, in both its religious and secular sense, but more important for dramatizing the sins of one ethnic group towards the other and for stressing religious intolerance.

The fact that only one Knesset member accepted the invitation to attend the conference led to divided attitudes. One of the activists used the tribune to shout:

“Most politicians did not come here and so much the better, otherwise TV would be hanging on them. We shall not be an appendix to existing parties. We are going to be an avantgard, Israelis, confident in themselves. Until now we were the ‘Russians’ from other parties, but we are not Russians. We are Jews and we are not racists. But in Russia we hoped that we shall come to the Jewish state. If it is Jewish there is no place here for Arabs, the whole land is ours. We are one big power”.

Others were more sceptic, explaining that politicians do not take this gathering seriously, or maybe they try to show the dependence of Russian Jews on the existing political system.

The symbolic context of this event may rest in the fact that this was not just another meeting: it was an attempt by some would-be leaders to secure a public mandate that would strengthen them in their relationship with the authorities.

The analysis of the political discourse during the conference shows that the speakers did not have to convince the audience. The 500 people who arrived to the conference “knew” all the arguments presented at the rostrum. We were witnessing the process of “consciousness-raising”,

the description of reality as they understand it, the interpretation of the situation with warnings, with a symbolic and authoritative discourse. There are a lot of examples in anthropological literature of how symbols inspire practice. Symbolic presentation of “well-known” facts during the event has a strong influence on action. The mastery of speakers “over authoritative discourse enables them to present insights which others feel are true, though they themselves could never have expressed them so well” (Tennekes 1988: 47).

The strong tendency of many Russian Jews to identify themselves with the ideas of the ultra-Right parties, including hostility not only towards the Palestinians living in the territories, but also towards Israeli Arabs, is the result of a high degree of disconnection and an assumption of mutual hatred between the two communities – Jewish and Arab.

In interviews with Arab leaders, most of them mentioned that the new immigrants are used as a political issue, the whole aim of which is to achieve political power and jeopardize the peace process in the territories and the life of Arab citizens of Israel (Majid Al-Haj 1992).

Findings of my field-work show that in most cases an important reason for this mutual antipathy is the economic one, which in turn leads to the use of stereotypes and the raising of mutual accusations from other fields of life.

“They (Russian Jews) are cheap labour. Their garbage cleaners earns 7 shekels per hour, Arabs ask minimum 10 shekels. They take all our jobs”, told me one of the owners of a “manpower office” in northern Israel. Israeli Arabs are very much concerned with the Russian-Jewish immigration, viewing its economic aspect. The competition is strong, not only for the low-paid and unqualified jobs, but also among physicians, scientists, engineers, etc.

The attitude of those new immigrants who have the possibility of meeting Arabs, is not limited to the economic aspect. Luba, a music teacher, who is a Russian Jew, who gives music lessons in an Arab village told me her story:

“When it was suggested to my friends and myself – then we worked at the music school in Nathania – to teach in Bakka-al-Gharbiya, most

of my friends refused to go there. They were afraid, they never saw an Arab in their life, and what they saw on the TV screen were Palestinian terrorists with guns. Only eight of us agreed, mostly because of the money, but I also wanted to teach violin, and in other places I had to teach piano, which was not my specialization. I thought that Arabs were second rank citizens, like we used to feel in Russia as Jews, and had no fear to go to their village... But they disappointed me, the way they treated us, new immigrants. They told us: you want to drink, bring your own coffee; they let us wait for hours near closed doors in the rain, until somebody finally came to let us in... And when we wanted to complain they told us: if you don't like it here – go away! There are a lot of you playing in the streets of every big city...”.

Other teachers emphasized more the economic aspect of their meeting with Arabs, and made it clear that they had been forced to come to the village, because of their financial situation. Almost all of them said that they “did not like to teach Arabs” and would prefer to work with Jewish children.

“If I was told in Saint Petersburg that I would have to teach in an Arab village I would have thought twice before I asked for my immigration permit’, one of them explained. ‘It is not a matter of intellectual level, most of my pupils are sons of lawyers and engineers, but they live much better than Jews, look at their villas, they are rich and they allow themselves to exploit us, they pay little and humiliate us. What are we, Palestinians from Gaza?’ ”

The relationship between the Russian Jews and the Arabs living in neighbouring districts depends on the level of intensity of their inter-relationship and mutual dependency. A social network is created, mostly based on the economic factor. When there is no competition for resources, the link between the two ethnic groups almost does not exist and stereotypes appear, introduced by people who have a political interest in it. When there is an economic dependence on both sides, the relationship mostly leads to competition and to hostility. The

prestige criterion thus leads to the use of nationalistic symbols.

Conclusions

Every wave of immigrants presents a unique process of absorption and its reflection on public consciousness. The absorption of Russian Jews in the 90s was influenced by their past and by the specific social conditions in which they found themselves in the “receiving” society.

In the former Soviet Union their nationality was indicated in their passports, a fact that forced them either to shape their Jewish identity, or to assimilate. Those who chose the first and arrived to Israel had to undergo transformation from “Jews” to “Russians”, the label which was forced on them in the Israeli society by the image, that was created and spread by those who are interested in it. And, as I tried to show in this paper this definition serves both the “Aliya” leaders (in the case of the party of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia), and public officials (in the case of complaints of music teachers) for their own purposes and interests.

As representatives of this ethnic group (defined by the “officials” and applied by the “clients”), the Russian Jews are trying to become active members in the political arena. If in the first years of the “aliya” they were still busy searching for jobs and studying Hebrew, in 1994 they felt secure and confident enough to create a wider network of relations not only with the officials, whom they are directly dependent on, but also with those, who are much more dependent on them. Their demographic increase also meant an increase in political power.

The setting up of political organizations among the “olim” is a reaction to power-relations, both within the Russian-Jewish community, and in the Israeli society around it. It is a result of social developments, which trigger political discourse and activities denying the legitimate power of existing political parties. Forming their “positive identity”, the “olim” manifest their own power inside their group and outside it, especially in the political arena of Israel, where this identity and its symbolic presentation serves as a protest against the

existing order and the existing legislation. Symbols play a very important role both in forming political organizations of new immigrants, and in the mobilization of new members into these organizations. Further research is necessary to establish how Israeli politicians use the “aliya” symbols among the Russian Jews for their own purposes and how the “aliya” leaders themselves use the same symbols to advance their demands and to defend their rights.

I have tried to describe two specific political groups of Russian Jews. Both of them are still at their preparatory phase of organization. If there will be no dramatic changes they have two more years to prepare for the election to the Knesset. According to information from the Zionist Forum there are five more political groups among the Russian Jews. The leadership of one of them identifies with the Labour party, as a reaction to the Right-wing orientation of those, described in this paper. It is also possible that an ultra-Right movement will be prohibited by the electoral law, as was the case with a “Kach” party and “Cahana chai” movement in 1992. The outlawing of this organization could however result in its partisans supporting other Right-wing parties that will legally run, or driving the movement “underground”.

According to Sochnut representatives in the former Soviet Union, a growing number of Russian Jews have applied to emigrate to Israel after the electoral success in Russia of the ultra-nationalist and anti-semitic leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. This new influx would increase the influence of new immigrants on the Israeli political arena. It might also mean that new “potential voters” would arrive before next elections in 1996. In all likelihood they would continue to be considered as non-Zionists: people who fear violence towards the Jewish population in Russia – and in other former Soviet republics – and have no other choice, but to immigrate to Israel. Further research is needed to study the process of their political absorption in the social context of their integration in the Israeli society. Moreover, it is necessary to study the role of ultra-orthodox Jews, especially representatives of political organizations and movements, such as Tzeirei Chabad, Amana, etc., and their influence on the process of shaping

the political identity of the new immigrants from the CIS.

Furthermore, the analysis of the relationship between Russian-Jewish immigrants and Israeli Arabs in the period of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, will contribute to a better understanding of political tendencies among the “olim” as well.

Notes

1. “Aliya” (in Hebrew) – going up. The meaning is to ascend to Jerusalem, which is situated in the mountains. In ideological Zionist sense, Jews do not immigrate to Israel but repatriate to their historic fatherland.
2. “Olim” (in Hebrew) – people who make “aliya”, new immigrants or repatriants.
3. Knesset – the Israeli Parliament.
4. Mark Davidor was the leader of the movement of “olim-pensioners” in 1992. In the 80s he was a member of the ultra-Right “Molodet” party, which preaches the “transfer” policy of all Arabs away from the territory of the Land of Israel. Davidor explained that the idea of the “transfer” did not seem terrible to many Russian Jews, since “they come from a country, where entire nations have been transferred from place to place”, but he did not mention that this policy would appear in the program of the new party.

References

- Al-Haj, M. 1992: Soviet Immigration as Viewed by Jews and Arabs: Divided Attitudes in a Divided Country. In: Calvin Goldscheider (ed.): *Population and Social Change in Israel*. Boulder. Westview Press. pp. 86–108.
- Barth, F. 1969: *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. London. George Allen & Unwin.
- Davidor, M. 1993: *Gosudarstvo i Narod* (The State and the People). Jerusalem Nili-Press Publishers.
- Dolgin, J. and Magdoff, J. 1977: The Invisible Event. In: Dolgin, J./ Kemnitzer, D./ Schneider, D. (Eds): *Symbolic Anthropology*. New York. Columbia University Press.
- Epstein, A.L. 1978: *Ethnos and Identity. Three Studies in Ethnicity*. London. Tavistock Publications.
- Marx, E. 1990: The Social World of Refugees: A Conceptual Framework. In: *Journal of Refugee Studies*. vol. 3, no. 3. Oxford. University Press. pp. 189–203.
- Tennekes, J. 1988: Religion and Power: Modernization processes in Dutch Protestantism. In: Quarles van Ufford & Schoffeleers (eds): *Religion and Politics*. Amsterdam. Free University Press.