

Jewish Hearts



A STUDY OF
DYNAMIC ETHNICITY
IN THE UNITED STATES
AND THE SOVIET UNION

BETTY N. HOFFMAN

JEWISH HEARTS

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*A Study of Dynamic Ethnicity
in the United States and the
Soviet Union*

Betty N. Hoffman

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***Figure 1.** The author (top left) and her husband, Herbert Hoffman, (top right) help the Tsukanov family, refugees from Baku, Azerbaijan, move into their new apartment in West Hartford. Daniel and his older brother, Eugene, stand in front of their parents, Vladimir and Svetlana. To the left is the middle brother, Alexander. Only Vladimir and Eugene spoke a few words of English when they arrived.*

INTRODUCTION

There has never been a time when I was not aware of the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union. Growing up in a kosher-salami-on-sliced-white-bread family in the 1950s, I was always intrigued by the possibility that I might have cousins somewhere behind the Iron Curtain, held captive by the forces of evil. How could I, born in Ohio and steeped in the Americana of that time and place, be related to people who were so different?

The links were my grandparents who had immigrated soon after the turn of the century and had raised their English-speaking children to blend into American life. Revolution, civil war, the internal changes of the Stalin era, and eventually Hitler's atrocities had cut them off from their families in the Ukraine and the Rumanian region of Bessarabia, now part of the Republic of Moldavia. Although my grandparents rarely talked about the Old Country, family legend has it that my grandfather left at the time of the Kishinev pogroms [anti-Jewish riots] and that he also wanted to avoid being drafted into the tsar's army during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. My aunt recounts tales of my grandmother's hiding during the pogroms of her childhood, and I remember her unhappiness that she had been excluded from the Ukrainian schools because she was a Jew and from the serious, male-oriented Jewish schools because she was a girl.

It was not until my husband and I visited Israel in 1965, however, that I met my first contemporary "Russian Jew." Evacuated from Poland into Russia during the war, David's parents had heard in the early 1960s that a few people were being granted exit visas from that country. As soon as they were repatriated to Poland, they sent David to Israel to establish residence so that the entire family could apply to leave.¹ Soon after meeting David, I was greatly affected by two books, *Between Hammer and Sickle* by Arie Eliav (1969) and *Jews of Silence* by Elie Wiesel (1966), which described the repression of the Jews in the U.S.S.R. While trying to imagine what my life might have been like had my grandparents remained there, I internalized the phrase that Eliav used repeatedly: "We have not forgotten you."

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I began to meet Soviet Jewish refugees in Hartford, Connecticut, where I now live, and to hear stories that again made me contemplate "what might have been." Several years later, in 1990, when the Jewish Family Service called upon the community for volunteers to assist the newcomers, we became the "American family" for refugees with no relatives in America. All three generations of "our" family had been born in Azerbaijan, in the old semi-desert city of Baku. The first generation, drawn by the promise of a new life away from the hardships of the designated areas where Jews had been forced to live

before the Revolution, had migrated from Belarus around 1920. Even though their children and grandchildren had prospered, becoming engineers and doctors, all the members of the succeeding generations also chose to leave their homes to give their children new lives away from repression and anti-Semitism.

For about six months I visited or telephoned “our” family almost daily, drove them to doctors’ appointments, filled out Medicaid forms, applied for Social Security cards, took them shopping at Mr. Amazing (a local odd-lot store they had heard about in their English class), registered the children for school, visited the grandfather in the hospital, and celebrated the Jewish holidays with them. They fed us Russian food and Jewish food and, best of all, garlicky oily Georgian eggplant. All of this was with no Russian on my part and minimal English on theirs. Eventually, they met other Russian-speakers and other Americans, the adults found jobs although not as oil engineers, and the boys settled into school. From this experience I not only developed friendships but also insight into the immigration process and its concomitant emotional turmoil.

The following year I began teaching English to those just coming off the plane, a job that plunged me into the lives of hundreds of other refugees from all parts of the Soviet Union. For nearly four years, as my adult students immersed themselves in the English program, I was introduced to the daily problems and issues they faced as they created new lives for themselves in the West. After I had taught them basic vocabulary, we talked about everything that concerned us: from the bad times during World War II to what we expected from our tax dollars (or rubles) and their love for American supermarkets and tag sales. We commemorated the anniversary of the day Minsk was bombed and cried for the loss of children, both to marriage to non-Jews who do not want to leave their homeland and to the effects of Chernobyl. They helped me to understand who they were, not just as refugees, unsure if they could ever become “Americans,” but as individuals, proud of their survival as Jews and of their hard-won achievements in an anti-Semitic world. As I stood among them in the classroom, visitors frequently could not tell which of us was the teacher, and many times I saw the faces of my family reflected in those wrestling with the inconsistencies of English and struggling to understand the American mentality. If my grandparents had not left at the turn of the twentieth century and if my family had been lucky enough to get visas, I might have been on the other side of the desk.

Although my vestigial family connection to this group has always intrigued me, it was my training as an anthropologist, specializing in ethnic groups in complex societies, that propelled me into the research I have been conducting among Hartford’s Soviet Jews for the past dozen years. From the beginning it was clear to me that I could not understand this group in the present until I understood its past because two pivotal events—the emigration of an estimated half of the Russian Jewish population between 1881 and 1930 and the Russian Revolution of 1917—had permanently changed the course of Jewish life in both Russia and in the United States. How had these two halves of the same original popula-

tion developed independently and what were the dynamics that created the tensions I was seeing between their descendants: the American Jewish hosts and the Soviet Jewish newcomers? How did the larger context of geographical location define and otherwise affect the identification of Jews—both religious and secular—as individuals and as a group, particularly in light of anti-Semitism? How did Jewish identity affect choices and behaviors in Russia, later in the Soviet Union, and after immigration to Hartford as people decided where to live and which types of education, economic production, and family and friendship patterns to pursue? How did the actual content, loaded into the word *Jew* by the two groups differ? Finally, what was the resulting impact upon religious practice and Jewish community life?

Definitions and Demographics

Not only is group membership a complex issue that can be viewed from various perspectives, but the existence of boundaries can also be perceived in two main ways depending upon one's personal relationship to them: either as a positive separation from the uninitiated by the in-group (the Jews) or as a negative separation of the abnormal group members from the larger (Russian, Ukrainian, or other local) society that surrounds them. For Jews, the religious ideology spelled out in written codes and in oral tradition the roles, rights, and obligations of each category of members within the group. In the past and in some Jewish groups today, those who cross the boundaries into the outside world often do so with the knowledge that they are rejecting both family and community and that return will be difficult if not impossible. Over time, the boundaries maintained from the inside have given many Jews an enormous moral strength, which offsets to some degree their political, economic, and social weaknesses in the larger society. When expressed as anti-Semitism, however, this boundary maintenance from the outside has circumscribed Jews and has defined them as a negative force in the community because of their differences. Derrida sees this juxtaposition of one group against another as a critical factor in group identification and dynamics. "No culture is closed in itself, especially in our own times when the impact of European civilization is so all-pervasive. . . . Every culture is haunted by its other" (1984:116).

With a few notable exceptions²—particularly modern Israel—Jews have always been a minority, forced to act appropriately in terms of the dominant group. In the Soviet Union in 1970, for example, there were 103 official nationalities, each with distinctive features and relationships within its own group (Pipes 1975:457). Soviet Jews, interacting with any number of these and with the central government, developed an enormous range of social practices across the twelve time zones between Europe and the Bering Straits. As a complicating factor, there has rarely been a time when Russian or later Soviet anti-Semitism and other negative forces have not played a role to some degree in these relationships,

molding Jewish life, limiting alternatives, and emphasizing the boundaries dividing them from the mainstream population.

Russian Jews

For the purposes of this study I have selected “Russian Jew” as the designation for those Ashkenazi³ Jews who emigrated from the political entity of the Russian Empire between 1881 and the final implementation of all aspects of the U.S. Immigration Restriction laws (1924–1930). Although the term “Russian Jews” is in common usage for all Jews from the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, in their home contexts “Jew” and “Russian” have always been distinct social categories. This category also includes some who were technically “Soviet Jews” in that they immigrated to the United States after the Revolution in 1917 but before the beginning of the stringent immigrant quotas. By 1929, the end of the open immigration period for “Russian Jews,” there were estimated to be about 15 million Jews worldwide with about 3,600,000 living in the United States. Approximately two-thirds of the 2,338,941 Jews coming to America between 1881 and 1926 were from Poland, Russia, and Rumania. By the end of that period, New York City had the largest Jewish population in the United States with 1,643,012, followed by Chicago (285,000), Philadelphia (240,000), and Cleveland (78,996) (Wirth 1956:149–150). By 1920 Hartford had a Jewish population of approximately 18,000 (Silverman 1970:3), about 10 percent of its total population (Grant and Grant 1986:178).

Soviet Jews

Those Jews who remained in the Soviet Union after the Revolution or were born during the Communist years, I term “Soviet Jews.” This also is a convenience for me and does not reflect the categories in which people place themselves. “Soviet Jews,” then, make up the current population of émigrés including those who have come in the post-Soviet period since 1991.⁴ This study, however, does not include the non-Ashkenazi Jews of Asia, such as the Georgian, Bukharan, and Mountain Jews (cf. Gitelman 1988:295–318) because they did not settle in Hartford. I do, however, include Ashkenazi Jews who may have relocated to those areas but remained part of the general “Soviet” culture.

Although few Soviet citizens received exit visas before 1970, increasing numbers of Jews have emigrated since then. Stripped of their citizenship as they left the U.S.S.R., the majority (before 1990) preferred to settle in the United States where they have been welcomed and in many cases substantially assisted by the organized American Jewish community. Between 1973 (when a total of 34,733 Jews fled from the Soviet Union) and 1984 (when the number dropped to

896 because of Soviet limits on emigration), more than 200,000 Jews found new homes in the West. At that time 32,168 families with 88,398 members arrived in the United States, settling in 213 different communities in 43 states (Stoppelman 1990:1). Of these, 128 families made up of 364 individuals settled in the Greater Hartford region (Siegel 1988:26–27). Few more arrived until late 1987 when the numbers began to rise again, with more refugees settling in Greater Hartford between October 1988 and May 1990 than in the entire preceding period.⁵ Currently there are approximately 2,000 Soviet Jewish refugees in the area.

American Jews

Except for a brief time during the early colonial period, American Jews have never been a single homogeneous category. Although the earliest organized Jewish migrants—twenty-three refugees from the Inquisition in Brazil—arrived in 1654, these Sephardic Jews of Spanish and Portuguese ancestry never became a large group in America nor did their descendants have much impact as a collective upon the subsequent absorption of Jews from Russia even though individuals did contribute to their welfare (Hertzberg 1989:19).

Although Jews had migrated from Europe, particularly from Central Europe, Holland, and England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the first large identifiable group—aside from the Sephardim in a few large Eastern cities—was that of the German Jews who had been part of a general German migration in the mid-nineteenth century. When the Russian and other Eastern European Jews began to arrive in large numbers, they found that both the general American population—insofar as it was aware of Jews at all—considered the German Jews with their particular norms and social and religious customs as the reference group, as did the German Jews themselves (Sachar 1990:115).

Over the course of this century in the United States—particularly after 1929 when immigration was strictly limited—the Russian Jewish immigrants became Americans, raising generations of American children and grandchildren who have never experienced the immigrant dislocations and reorganization. American Jews today are the descendants of these plus the approximately 250,000 refugees (Wyman 1968:209) who were allowed to immigrate immediately before and after World War II. The majority—except for those in the relatively small ultra-Orthodox communities and resident Israelis⁶—speak English as their first language and share a common American culture.

The most recent Hartford statistics, compiled in 1982 under the auspices of the Greater Hartford Jewish Federation, estimate that 25,000 to 26,000 Jews are distributed among 26 Central Connecticut towns (Abrahamson 1982:1). This distribution itself is a new factor since the turn of the century when most Jews lived in the city of Hartford. There were, in addition, several small self-contained Jewish communities, such as those in New Britain, Torrington, and Manchester,

which were on the periphery of this region but did not interact with it to any significant degree. This shift in Jewish population, however, is not surprising given the national population migration to the suburbs after World War II. In 1982 only 2.4 percent (1,897)⁷ of Hartford's population was Jewish, and the largest number of Jews (7,353) lived in West Hartford where they constituted 12 percent of the population (Abrahamson 1982:8). Currently West Hartford is home to the majority of the Soviet refugees. The Jewish population percentage of Greater Hartford remains at approximately 10 percent, just as it was in 1920. This is in marked contrast to national trends, however, when in 1990 Jews made up only 2.7 percent of the total general American population (Singer and Selden 1992:144).

Sources of Information

Cultural anthropologists who study contemporary groups depend on three main methods of gathering information: participation in group activities, observation of the group, and interviewing group members.⁸ By immersing ourselves in the culture, our goal is to come as close to living as a group member as is possible for an outsider to do. Additionally, we talk to everybody who will talk to us, in some cases recording formal interviews with key informants and in others making notes from memory about informal conversations.

Unfortunately, participation-observation does not work when we are examining the past. Although I always "review the literature," which may include reading the published results of previous research projects, historical documents, theoretical analyses, and memoirs, I have found that the study of history demands a type of archival and library research that lacks—for an anthropologist—the immediacy of real people talking about their lives and cultures. As a compromise method, I have turned to interviewing to elicit oral histories from those who remember the past that I wish to explore. As an approach, oral history, which falls between document-based history and people-oriented anthropology, "promises unique insights that are profoundly historical in a somewhat special sense. By studying how experience, memory, and history become combined and digested by people who are the bearers of their own history and that of their culture, oral history opens up a powerful perspective." (Frisch 1990:13).

As an anthropologist, my main concern with using oral histories was that I had not participated in the events recalled by my informants and could not evaluate their relationship to the material nor the absolute accuracy of their memories. Ritchie (1995), however, believes that this is not a serious issue and that all of those who tell about the past—including by extrapolation the anthropologist whose ethnography is an account of past field work—"speak from their own points of view, and no two will tell a story exactly alike. . . . The contradictory tales told in the classic film *Rashomon* (1951) represent the tellers' differing impressions, self-images, and self-delusions, but not poor memories" (1995:13).

Since no memory is an exact photograph of the past, according to Maurice Halbwachs (1980:63–68 [1950]), the degree to which a recollection is a chronologically accurate review of events is not as important as the existence of the collective belief that something significant has occurred. Frequently these memories are transmitted through oral tradition, “the living bond of generations.” Memory, therefore, provides a theoretical mechanism for sorting and symbolizing such events, detaching each item from its context and recombining them into a coherent—but not necessarily historically accurate—symbolic whole. One aspect of this is what Halbwachs terms the collective memory in which the group sees itself

from within during a period not exceeding, and most often much shorter than, the average duration of a human life. It provides the group a self-portrait that unfolds through time, since it is an image of the past, and allows the group to recognize itself throughout the total succession of images. . . . What is essential is that the features distinguishing it from other groups survive and be imprinted on all its content. (1980:86–87 [1950])

Given these caveats on the impreciseness and symbolization of memory, on the inclination of people to remember only what was germane to them personally, and their tendency to “screen their memories in a selective, protective, and above all didactic fashion” (Frisch 1990:12), I evaluated all data gathered by this method in light of additional outside sources. As a result, the oral histories that have provided much of my ethnographic data have given me invaluable insights into the lives of both the Russian and Soviet Jews. Since many of my Soviet Jewish informants believe that the U.S.S.R. suppressed the truth about the contributions of Jews, including themselves, to their former homeland, they were unusually candid and determined to ensure that their experiences become an accurate part of the public record.

To learn about the immigration and resettlement of Russian Jews who came to Hartford between 1881 and 1929, I searched the oral history archives of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Ethnic History Project (Morton Tonken, interviewer), the Archives of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford (Emma Cohen, interviewer), and the University of Connecticut Ethnic Heritage Project (Matthew Magda, interviewer) and analyzed twelve in-depth interviews from these archives.⁹ In addition, I interviewed four more individuals from the early period. One of these latter informants—Rachel Cohen¹⁰—was the only family link between the Russian Jews (1881–1930) and the first Soviet immigrants (1975–1983) in Hartford. Not only was Rachel’s late husband a WPA informant and the WPA interviewer her nephew, but her great-nephew became a key informant from the Soviet period.

In order to become familiar with those Soviet Jews who have immigrated since 1975, the staff workers of the various local Jewish agencies, the volunteers,

and the most recent refugees, I participated and observed in the Greater Hartford Soviet Jewish community for five years. This included my attending selected meetings, activities, and parties; volunteering through the Family-to-Family Program to work with a specific refugee family; becoming a board member for Family-to-Family; and teaching one portion of the English program for adult newcomers. In this last capacity I worked professionally with more than 250 students in my classes and interacted with an additional 150. I also conducted ten open-ended extensive individual interviews with volunteers and staff members.

Between 1988 and 1993 I conducted thirty-four more systematic, in-depth interviews with Soviet Jews who immigrated to Hartford between 1975 and 1983. I also used informal conversational information from four students, an essay from a fifth student, and material from four informants from my current oral history project: *Witness to War: 1941–1945: The Soviet Jewish Experiences*. Vladimir Kaplan conducted the interviews in Russian, Sergei Zaslavsky translated them, and I did the follow-up interviews in English. Together these interviews provided most of the ethnographic materials about the Soviet context. I selected informants from lists given to me by volunteers and professionals who had worked with them during the period immediately following immigration, referrals from a number of informants themselves, and personal acquaintances. Although this was not a random selection,¹¹ it does encompass approximately 10 percent of the population, and I believe that I was able to gather information that represents a full range of experience, ideology, and behaviors.

While it is understood that those refugees coming from different locations in the Soviet Union may have had important regional differences in experience, outlook, and style, any information they provided for me on this subject was tangential and without much depth. Overall, the informants were more concerned with telling me about their specific experiences vis-à-vis the Soviet and American systems than in analyzing various Soviet groups within the U.S.S.R. Therefore, this did not become an important avenue of research for this project.

I have edited the interviews from all sources for clarity, brevity, and syntax, removed the interviewers' questions, changed the names of most of the Soviet Jewish informants for privacy, and in some cases have deleted repetitions and reorganized the material so that it flows more smoothly (Frisch 1990:83–86). The purpose of these interviews was to determine the situation for Jews in the Soviet Union prior to their emigration in the 1970s and early 1980s, to develop a picture of Hartford and the assistance provided by the Hartford Jewish agencies and American volunteers, and to explore the previously stated issues of identity and sociocultural change. Although I gathered this information from individuals, I have been able to track trends in Hartford, some of which mirror those found in the literature. Because I have limited this study to examining and comparing the events and issues of ethnicity and how they have changed over time in relation to those who settled in the Greater Hartford area, I did not interview Soviet Jews who

live in other cities. Additionally, I understand that the small size of both Hartford and the sample may qualify the identification of some trends.

"The Literature"

Jews have a long history, illuminated by a variety of archaeological artifacts and written records; an enormous body of knowledge, legend, and law; a number of different languages; insular communities and international connections, all of which have generated an extensive and varied literature.¹² The examination of the American Jewish experience falls into two main categories: those works dealing specifically with Jewish issues and those analyzing Jews as one aspect of American life.¹³ The analysis of Jewish identity from the Soviet Jewish perspective has not been a major issue for researchers compared to the immediate practical problems of resettlement, language acquisition, and preparation for economic independence which face both the newcomers and the Jewish agencies responsible for easing this transition. Most community studies are concerned with how to help people efficiently, effectively, and economically.¹⁴

Two detailed ethnographies of the large Soviet populations in San Francisco (Gold 1992) and Brighton Beach in New York (Markowitz 1993) provide broader pictures of the Soviet Jewish resettlement patterns in those cities during the late 1980s. While Gold compared Soviet Jews to another refugee population in that area, the Vietnamese, Markowitz explored social change and community development in the largest Soviet Jewish population center in America (about 50,000 at that time). Concerned with the creation of community, she postulates that while a sense of Soviet Jewish community exists, it is informal with "quasi institutions" in contrast to the highly institutionalized community formed by their Russian Jewish predecessors at the turn of the century. Although Markowitz believes that Soviet Jews perceive "community" and participate in it, this is on their own terms, which may differ from the expectations of American Jews, particularly those who are involved in organized Jewish groups such as synagogues, federations, and Jewish welfare agencies.

In light of Markowitz's findings, it is important to note here that any immigrant group's style of adaptation to America is tied, in part, to its relationship on a variety of levels with the organized immigrant community that preceded it (Benkin and DeSantis 1982:231–48, Mittleberg and Waters 1992:412–35). Although the previously established group—in this case the American Jews—may become a reference point for the newcomers in terms both of identity and of practical accommodation to the new life, most adult members of the immigrant generation will never become "American Jews" in the sense that Jewish community activists define the term. American Jews have clear ideas of what it means to be a Jew in America with specific expectations for the Soviet Jews, particularly in

relation to religious practice and community involvement.¹⁵ Despite the questions raised by American Jews about the authenticity of the Soviet Jewish identity, Soviet Jews “know” that they are Jews even if their definition and personal experiences differ markedly from others, a crucial issue that will be explored in this study.

Elbert Siegel’s unpublished dissertation (1988) on the styles and uses of mutual aid by the Soviet Jews of Hartford has provided an invaluable statistical analysis that has made it possible for me to add some numerical insights about this population without replicating his research. Many of Siegel’s statistics combine responses from both Hartford and New Haven, the latter not in my study. His total group represents about 75 percent of Soviet Jews living in Connecticut between 1975 and 1983 and provides an important overview of this cohort.

Theoretical Analysis in a Complex World

My interest in this study has been to track the changing Jewish behavior patterns and definitions as individuals analyzed their Russian or later Soviet worlds and decided to emigrate, eventually creating new lives in Hartford, Connecticut. The economically based approach of resource allocation and behavioral strategies of Bennett (1969) and Barth (1967, 1969) has provided me with a theoretical framework for examining individual behavioral choices as they build into social trends (or remain no more than isolated acts of individual choice). The assumption here is that individuals weigh the incentives and constraints of their perceived alternatives for action and then decide which option is best for themselves in terms of resources expended. Sociocultural change occurs at pivotal transition points (critical junctures) when individuals make new choices about allocating resources, alter their behavior accordingly, and then effectively communicate this new behavior strategy to a sufficient number of group members who adopt the change. Bennett’s focus on adaptive behavior is particularly germane when discussing emigrants who must examine their worlds before making the decision to reject them in favor of new lives in the unknown. His “emphasis here is not on relationships between institutions, groups or aggregates of data, but on patterns of behavior: problem-solving, decision-making, consuming or not consuming, inventing, innovating, migrating, staying” (1969:11). Since Barth (1967) believes that people make strategic allocations in terms of the payoffs their previous experience leads them to expect, he sees sociocultural change as resulting from considered decision making based on what individuals, and eventually the group, perceive as more effective patterns of allocating their resources so as to gain desired ends.

Decisions for most Russian and Soviet emigrant Jews have been filtered through a Jewish microcosm, positioned within an anti-Semitic macrocosm. Whether people remained in the homeland or emigrated, the costs often entailed

separation from family and from community support and/or friendship networks, complete alienation from their previous lives, and in the worst cases imprisonment or death. The incentives for change were freedom—defined differently in the two distinct periods—and a better life without the limitations of anti-Semitism.

Since it is impossible to employ this resource-allocation / behavioral-strategies approach in a vacuum, in light of the diversity of Jewish life in various historical periods and geographic locations, the most useful theoretical context for me to set it into is that of “ethnicity” or “ethnic identity.” The study of ethnic groups—nationalities in the Soviet Union—and their interrelationships cut across class lines and include all of those who identify themselves as part of a specific “people.” Because Jewish identity plays a crucial role in group life¹⁶ and in determining the articulation of many Jews with the outside world, the intertwining of ethnicity and ideology expressed as religion is particularly relevant, as is the relationship of group members to the religion itself.

Although I am aware that socioeconomic stratification and gender are significant factors in delineating group identity, these markers were not my focus because ethnic identity was a legal as well as a social category in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Inasmuch as the label of “Jew” was a “stigma,” an “attribute that is deeply discrediting”¹⁷ (Goffman 1963:3), its negative implications overrode all other group distinctions for Jews. At the turn of the century in Hartford, the status of “Russian Jewish immigrant” was also definitive although this may have been, in part, because almost all of those falling into this category arrived within the same general level of poverty.¹⁸

How, then, do we define ethnicity theoretically and how can we apply the resultant concept to understanding Jewish group life? I see ethnicity theory as having divided along two basic approaches. The first, as articulated by Max Weber (1978:389–93 [1922]), assumes that each ethnic group is a coherent system centered around a basic essence and expressed in terms of particular beliefs, behaviors, social constructs, symbols, and attitudes. All of those identified in terms of a specific ethnicity are expected to subscribe within relatively narrow parameters to its ethos and to be recognizable as members by both those inside and outside the group. The implication in this classic ethnicity theory is not only of a fixed set of reference points for authenticity but also of the possibility, indeed the probability, that there will always be members who drift from the group, indifferent to its cultural content and/or drawn to the alternatives offered by other sectors of the society. This drift—or assimilation—is frequently interpreted by those who remain within the boundaries as a diminution of group integrity (Hertzberg 1989:377–88).

For the study of Jewish identity, an understanding of the problems inherent in determining a reference point against which to measure subsequent Jewish life is significant because Jews are an internally heterogeneous people who have lived in a variety of settings for thousands of years and have developed a variety of “authentic” Jewish religious and secular expressions. It is far from surprising that

the Jews from such diverse places as Ethiopia, Russia, and Spain have developed customs and behaviors predicated not only upon religious ideology but also upon the folkways of the peoples among whom they made their homes. Given this degree of internal diversity, as Barth (1992:3) has pointed out, we cannot expect to reduce any society to a basic essence with variation seen as deviance.

Nonetheless, two basically unanswerable questions arise if we do not view Jewish identity along these lines: What are the standards that delineate “Jewishness”? and How can Jews assure continuity if there are no agreed upon definitions? These are issues that have troubled me greatly, because what I was finding—diversity in definition, belief, and behavior within the label of “Jew”—was incongruent with my own desire to see Jews in Weber’s terms and to collect useful information for those community institutions planning for the Jewish absorption and education of refugees from the Soviet Union.

My results, however, have forced me to view the ethnicity of the Soviet Jews from a second, more dynamic perspective. Here, ethnic symbols—both their relationship to each other within the group and to the society in which the group lives—and their employment within these various relationships become the core of ethnicity. From this viewpoint, it becomes futile to attempt to formulate a precise definition of authenticity for any group, to determine in-group status based upon a single historical definition, or “to speak of authentic as opposed to false ethnic culture, implying that only one deserves cultivation; it is useless to try to distinguish between one existentially lived or symbolic ethnicity, as if the first were real and the latter were a mere supportive romp” (Boelhower 1987:132).

I believe that the series of political, economic, and technological revolutions and the population shifts that have taken place throughout the world during the past century and their concomitant social transformations have affected the identities of individuals and their degree of identification with their customary social categories. Even the most traditional groups, remaining in their ancestral geographical locations, are coming into contact with others who were not previously within their experience, forcing everyone to become aware of complexity and variation as individuals are exposed to new stimuli.

Modernity with all of its ramifications must now be viewed in light of “rootlessness and mobility,” which alters previous cultural realities, requiring that “individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re-)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages” (Clifford 1988:14). There are no “pure” groups among immigrants (cf. Clifford 1988:1–17, Sollors in Boelhower 1987:2), no reference point beyond the individual for the “authentic” because even the immigrants from the same place came from diverse social settings over time. Immigrants who are out of context have become inauthentic in terms of the old definitions, having already plunged into the process of creating new identities. Since it has never been possible to transplant the previous world of the ethnic *in toto*, all ethnic behavior in new contexts must be a re-creation and a response to the new environment. Therefore, we can assume that every group,

migrating at the turn of the twentieth century, has been transformed in a variety of ways, creating new American forms that differ markedly from both those of the past and from those brought by modern migrants from the original homelands. All of these employ a variety of ethnic symbols that continually alter the heart of the specific ethnicity.

In the United States and the Soviet Union, as the intertwined political, educational, economic, and social systems have changed, ethnicity has been affected, eliciting different strategies for success in the new worlds and creating new cultural identities for both the group and for the individuals within each group. In America new behaviors and personality characteristics (flexibility, creativity, individuality, the questioning of authority, and personal decision making without reference to a context group—even one as small as the extended family) are valued, altering ethnic and religious behavior. In many cases, individuals do not need or want the pervasive cultures of their grandparents but choose to identify with a limited number of symbols—abstracted from the previous traditional life—whose employment does not demand an inordinate amount of time from their mainstream lives (Gans 1979:9). Not requiring active daily commitment, this “symbolic ethnicity” is for Jews generally the focus of holidays and family occasions. While a distant memory of the Jewish religion remains, the forms, content, and boundaries have altered to fit the new environment, and many if not most of the distinct behaviors and beliefs that have, over time, defined Jews and Jewish life are redefined by the nontraditional.¹⁹

Many individuals are not interested in the constraints inherent in ethnicity but in ethnicity as a way of dealing with the world, a filter through which they may view their options and in many cases as an enrichment of their multifaceted lives. According to Boelhower, “The issue, therefore, is not ethnicity *per se* but the *uses* of ethnicity in a post-industrial society” (1987:120). In addition, Americans tend to see ethnicity as an extension of family, perhaps with a vague connection to place and—with the exception of ethnicity as it interacts with race²⁰—as partially, if not wholly, voluntary (Waters 1990:19–20).

Even though white Europeans, as exemplified by the Soviet Jews, may interpret ethnicity in terms of an ascribed nationality, the reality once they arrive in America is that nationality is rapidly transformed into an American ethnicity, which becomes increasingly voluntary and symbolic as they and particularly their children, over time, adapt to the American mores. Thus, according to Stuart Hall, we can expect that identity will evolve as the social context changes. “Cultural identity . . . is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (1990:225).

For Jewish traditionalists and those who view Judaism as a fixed entity, Hall’s concept of “becoming” and constantly being in “production” is at the least

uncomfortable and at the most untenable unless the individual is involved in “returning” to orthodox religious practice. Nevertheless, Hall’s conceptualizations are at the heart of the perennial debate among Jews over Who is a Jew? In a decade-long, nationwide study, Bershtel and Graubard (1992) have documented this process as many American Jews move away from traditional European practices and develop diverse and unique American Jewish forms.²¹ It is evident that Jewish life is rapidly and radically changing, a fact acknowledged by all sectors of organized American Jewry and commented on endlessly in the Jewish media. How this change is perceived depends upon the relationship of the analysts to the Jewish environment.

Although this study is rooted in the historical experience, and I am aware that many immigrants may be trying—albeit unsuccessfully—to reconstruct what they perceive of as the “authentic” of their own homeland, my goal is not to measure social change in terms of the distance between the perceived “authentic” and the “attenuated,” or “assimilated,” but to examine the changing environments and relationships that have generated the variety of twentieth-century Jewish identities in Russia, the Soviet Union, and Hartford. I believe that the constantly shifting dynamics of ethnic group identity are broad enough and flexible enough to permit diverse individuals to unite within the rubric of a given ethnicity even if they do not hold precisely the same world view nor invest the same meaning in all of their symbols. Thus, ethnicity as an analytic approach—in this second sense of a dynamic reevaluation and reconstruction of Jewish identity—provides a context for understanding “Jewish” interpretations of group life, individual behavioral choices, and group strategies.

In the following chapters I will explore a series of dimensions of Jewish community life which define the context and conditions in Russia, in the Soviet Union, and Hartford in two time periods as they affect life decisions and concomitant changes in behavior for Jews. This will include an examination of alternatives available to Jews, including those generated by outside political and social forces, particularly anti-Semitism, which acted upon them as individuals and as a group. Specifically, within each period I will focus upon key issues of politics and power, ideology and religion, kinship and social structure, educational opportunities, and economic production. Since I believe that community life constitutes a system, new pressures that alter any aspect will generate change throughout and will call for new responses. These, in turn, will affect the ethnic identity of group members who find themselves within a new social-political-economic context.

PART I

THE TRANSFORMATION OF JEWISH
LIFE IN TWO CONTEXTS, 1881–1970

The Old Country

A Jew was under the handicap of being a Jew, and this handicap followed him throughout his life.

—Isaac Waldman

Ethnicity and Anti-Semitism: Critical Boundaries

There has never been a time in Russian-Jewish history—traditionally dated from the First Jewish Exile from Jerusalem between 586 and 538 B.C.—that Jews were not identified as members of a distinct ethnic group, characterized by its religious practices. Although Jews were accepted to a greater degree in some areas and historical periods than in others, both the host societies and the Jews themselves recognized essential boundaries and focused on the divisions. The fact that these differences were visible and constant evoked opposite responses from the dominant group and from the Jews with the former frequently attributing negative connotations to Jewish belief, practice, and appearance while the latter organized a positive identity around the same traits. Because of the hostility directed toward them from all levels of society, Jews were excluded from many regions and relegated to others so that most lived in Jewish enclaves where they maintained the traditions that encompassed all facets of their daily lives. Even within individual villages and neighborhoods, Jewish social life was isolated from that of their neighbors and coalesced around kinship, community, and a religion they believed marked them as God's Chosen People. That others chose to see Jews in a different light did not detract from this intrinsic Jewish truth.

Over the centuries, these differences became even more significant as the Jews were caught up in the turmoil and politics of the regions where they settled. By the early sixteenth century the Jews had become the center of an institutionalized anti-Semitism and a focus for Russian frustrations, fears, and anger that had little to do with the group itself (Pinkus 1988:7–8). For the next century and a half the tsars concentrated on preventing the Jews from “polluting” what they perceived as the pure homogeneous Russian Orthodox religion. One manifestation of this was the harsh treatment meted out to the established Jewish communities of Poland and Lithuania when Russian armies under Tsar Alexei

Mikhailovich (1645–1676) conquered those regions. With many Polish and Lithuanian Jews killed outright and others transported into Russia, the irony of Alexei's policy was that a number of the exiles remained in Russia and became the nucleus of the Ashkenazi Jewish settlement there (Baron 1976:8–9). These, however, were small groups compared to the large numbers remaining in Poland.

It was not until the partitions of that country under Catherine II at the end of the eighteenth century and the annexation of former Polish territories with nearly half a million Jews, that Jews became a permanent, increasing presence within the Russian Empire. Restricted by law to the twenty-five western provinces of the enlarged Russian Empire, primarily to the annexed regions, most Jews lived in what came to be known as the Pale of Settlement (Johnson 1987:304). In addition, many Jews living outside this area were required to have residence and work permits, which could be revoked at any time.

Living conditions in the nineteenth century varied considerably for the Jews, depending on where they lived and their economic status. Nonetheless, for both rich and poor, residential location was determined by ethnic identity. In 1897 5.2 million Jews lived in the Russian Empire with all but 345,000 of them in the Pale. Nearly half lived in the small traditional villages, the *shtetlach*, where Jews survived under marginal economic conditions, if not in abject poverty, while maintaining their traditional Yiddish culture (Gilbert 1990:51). Michael Singer¹ who eventually settled in Hartford, Connecticut, grew up in the Pale.

I was born in the little town of Kachinovitch, Grodno, which boasted a population of about 5,000 people. 20 percent of the inhabitants, who were Jews, were concentrated in the center of town. The town itself was laid out in a circular fashion with offshoots leading to the outskirts, which were populated mostly by poor tenant farmers. There were no sidewalks, nor, for that matter, were there any streets in the modern sense of the word. The houses were built around a vacant, rutty lot, which served as a market and central meeting place for the inhabitants. The houses were constructed mostly of wood. They were one-story affairs, dilapidated, ugly, and old. A few of the richer people had brick houses. The public buildings consisted of a large and beautiful church, an old wooden structure that served as a synagogue, and a little cottage that housed the police force, a chief and his assistant. (Tonken 1938)

In that same year, Jews made up 52 percent of the combined urban population in Lithuania and White Russia, with many living in Jewish neighborhoods (Baron 1976:68). In these regions and in the other large cities of the Pale, Jews led very different lives from those in villages. Some retained their religious orientation and held onto the Jewish customs and values and while other nominal Jews ignored the behaviors of the past and attempted to create new strategies designed to enhance their cosmopolitan lives. Since Russian society defined people perma-