

The Ellis Island of 1990 - Ladispoli

* By Alan B. Rosenthal

Most people die once. On the edge of the Tirreno Sea, there is a little known pergatory where thousands of Jews have already died twice. This Isaac Bashevis Singer made to order town, 50 miles North of Rome is Ladispoli. As did the Greek G-d Prometheus, Stalin, Hitler, Khrushcev, and Breshnev reached deep down and ripped the inner fragile soul out of these people. These maniacal mortals could not complete their goal. The Jews survived once again, only to wander in destitution, malnutrition and an unknown future.

Along the tree lined main street of Ladispoli, Via Italia, bakeries sell fresh pastries, fish markets sell calamari and Bars sell pizza, espresso and cappacino. There is one part of this scene that does not belong - twenty thousand Soviet and one thousand Iranian Jews strolling by these shops. The Russians wear their beautifully colored scarfs, carrying English textbooks and try to speak Italian -- gratzi...spacebo...prego.

There are many paths to freedom. Ladispoli has been one bridge in the passage to freedom for over 15 years. Others have been such towns as: Santa Marinella (the second largest population of immigrants after Ladispoli); San Severa; Ostia; Passo Scuro; Anzio, Nettuno and Tor-Vaianica. The immigrants are free to choose and area to live while being a 'guest' of Italy, although most stay close to Rome. There is a love/hate relationship between the immigrants and the Italians. The economy has certainly benefited from the constant influx of people, although resentment and frustrations are still thick. Communication is limited due to a language barrier, and ethnic mannerisms create friction. (Both the Italians and the Russians seem to have an extra chromosome for expressing emotion). 'Living' in Italy for the Soviets is like visiting the Galleria Uffizi with a blindfold. It is a place more beautiful than you have ever been before, but you still receive



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no pleasure from being there.

There are some people living in Ladispoli that are very happy...the Italian landlords. The vacancy rate for apartments is practically zero. It is not unusual to see a Russian on the beach in a sleeping bag during the summer, when apartments are at a premium. Most of the families I visited 'live' in small apartments with occasionally six people sleeping in one room. There is little or no privacy for sometimes six months to a year. Electricity and water is an additional expense and therefore considered a luxury. The room I shared had no heat. The temperature during January/February averages 40°.

Cooking utensils are usually old and very basic. The furniture consists of several wooden chairs a free standing closet, a kitchen table, and single beds with thin mattress's on metal spring frames.

The American Joint Committee gives 378,000 lire/month (exchange rate approximately \$1.00 = 1300 lire) to a single person. For a family, each person receives 174,000 lire plus an additional 204,000 lire for the entire family. A family of four therefore will receive 900,000 lire/month. Rent for a single bedroom with a bathroom and kitchen shared by other tenants can average 250,000 lire/month in the winter and 500,000 lire/month in the summer. For a single person spending 250,000 lire/month for his rent, approximately 125,000 lire/month or \$3.00 a day is left for all other living expenses - food, clothing, telephone, etc. Three dollars a day! Needless to say nutrition is a major problem. A typical diet of 'immigrant food' in Ladispoli is potatoes, bread with mayonaise or ketchup, inexpensive sausage meat, cabbage, apples, turkey soup (less expensive than chicken) made with turkey wings and bones, eggs, and some cheese. I still remember my grandparents (from Khmelnetsky in the Ukraine), living in the Bronx making mashed potatoes with hard boiled eggs, fried onions, and chicken fat. In Ladispoli there is

a large vegetable market in the center of town although even fruit and vegetables may exceed the immigrants \$3.00/day budget.

For those of us who have been lucky enough to spend time in the Soviet Union...as tourists, being exposed to the 'black market' is inevitable. The immigrants have brought that same 'black market' with them to Italy. It is amusing to see the Soviets throughout Rome, Venice, Florence, and other cities selling Russian military watches, scarfs, lacquered wood spoons, and some jewelry. There seems to be a good market for these Russian items in Italy. Most of the 'black market' items are brought out when they leave the Soviet Union, but some receive packages from relatives while in Italy.

The immigration of Jews began thousands of years ago with the exodus from Egypt. Since then history has given us a continuation of that exodus - Germany, Ethiopia and the USSR. The life of an immigrant is psychologically and physically difficult. Observing their socialization is a fascinating experience of human adaptation. The obstacles are numerous and difficult. There are some theories that physical and mental suffering create the inspiration that produce the works of our great artists. If that is really a sequelae of suffering, the people of Ladispoli will be the next Van Gogh's, Beethovens, and Rembrants.

Most immigrants desperately want to shed their past. In an almost self-humiliating effort they want to cleanse themselves of being Russian - their language, their accent, their clothes, their food and their association with other Russian immigrants. They are struggling to rise above the crowd. If someone would push or shove while waiting in line - a common remark with a strong Russian accent from an immigrant would be "look at him - he's typical Russian". These people want to belong and be a part of the world of Time, Vogue, IBM, Ford, New York University, etc. It is sometimes difficult to look into their lost sullen eyes, and even begin to understand

the cultural and intellectual strangulation of their minds. It is also important to remember that some of the greatest minds in the history of the world were Russian - Nijinsky, Stravinsky, Rachmoninoff, Prokoviev, Rostopovich, etc. The genius of their minds were too powerful to be crushed by the Soviet machine. The undercurrents of emotional insanity are reinforced when thinking of the future - 'Will I ever be able to learn English?'; 'Will I ever be able to find a job?'; 'Will I ever be able to find an apartment?'; 'Will American people hate me because I am Russian?'; all this and with no money.

Their bitterness and depression is a result of low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and fear of prejudice. They are facing seemingly insurmountable odds. This mentality lies somewhere between that of the hopeless and the homeless. Most people are struggling with learning English. They are trying to master vocabulary, proper pronunciation, and syntax simultaneously. For most people the progress is excellent, but still far from the level needed for an engineer interviewing for a position at AT & T. Some of the older (60 yrs. +) immigrants who speak no or little English have resolved themselves to live a "Soviet" life in America. They will live in a heavily populated Russian community (e.g. Brighton Beach) and continue to speak Russian. Unfortunately there is also a young, healthy segment of the immigrant population that are also developing a 'defeatist' attitude. This lack of understanding about the importance of ones self potential and the importance of it in contributing to society is also a major problem.

There are two schools in Ladispoli, staffed and supported by the American Joint Distribution Committee - Via Barri, and Via Fiume. In both schools there is an emphasis on learning Jewish: history, customs, holidays; Hebrew; and facts about Israel. The teachers are Russian immigrants and get paid a small salary to teach in the school. Other subjects such as math and physics in Russian - are taught. The Director of the school David Ur, is an Israeli who

speaks Russian, English and Hebrew, and sent by the American Joint-Israel to develop an educational program with a emphasis on the familiarization of Israel. The American Joint cultural director of Ladispoli is also an Israeli, Uri Ben-Zion, who tries to coordinate logistics with the Rome officce. One major monumental task Uri has taken upon himself is to develop a self-motivated, self-governed and self-confident atmosphere within Ladispoli. I could not help but feel a healthy kibbutz type of lifestyle developing throughout the community. There is also a community center called Club Shalom, where there are movies (English & Iranian), lectures and dancing (disco for the teenagers). In a small open room in Club Shalom of (maybe 150 feet) there is a divided area for a shoemaker, barber and a manacurist. The immigrants pay a small fee for these services and learn a little about helping each other while also earning a living.

There are approximately 1,000 Iranian Jews also in Ladispoli. Their Sephardic appearance certainly contrasts with the Russians, although Uri (who is also from Iran) has again developed a system to insure peaceful coexistance. Whenever possible, he will have one Russian and one Iranian paired together working on various projects in the schools and in Club Shalom. There is no favoritism, discrimination, or resentment towards either the Iranians or the Russians.

Some of the Iranians have fascinating stories about their exodus from Iran. Some bribed their way directly from Iran to Italy. Some hired smugglers to bring them across the border to Turkey on camels. The cost of this trip by camel is approximately \$4,000. Once in Turkey, without a legal passport, they remain there until finding a way to another country. They are in constant fear of being caught by the Turkish police and then returned to Iran, or thrown into a Turkish prison. Even by Iranian standards Turkish prisons are feared to be horrible. One Iranian who worked in Club Shalom,

Joseph Farajian escaped Iran by camel to Turkey. He had a friend that also crossed the border but was caught by Turkish police and placed in prison for three years. Some Iranians will buy falsified passports for about \$3,000 and go to Italy. Once in Italy they need to obtain Refugee status from the American Embassy. Many of them already have family members in America (some are wealthy) and are awaiting a community assurance guarantee after they receive their refugee status.

There are two synagogues in Ladispoli and one Christian center called the American Club. The Rabbi (Rabbi Gersch) has been there for 10 years. He is supported by the Lubuvich movement. Even though there is tremendous encouragement to recreate and stimulate Jewish identity by both AJDC and the synagogue, the atheist mentality of most of these Russians has been deeply ingrained. Unfortunately the American Club is playing a destructive role in preventing their Jewish identity develop. Many Russians frequent the Christian American Club to see American movies, listen to lectures, and even get Matzoh on Passover. There are several members of the American Club who are Jews for Jesus, and encourage the Russian Jews to seriously consider following the New Testament. I spoke with Rabbi Gersch about this problem and he responded with an interesting but logical response. --"...it is easier to be Christian than to be Jewish". The immigrants have been persecuted all their life for being Jewish, and now want people to accept them for who they are, not for their religion. The American Club does this. They don't encourage the Russians to become more Jewish but rather feed on their wounded and starved ego. The ADJC also strives to develop self-assurance but also reminds the immigrants that they are Jews. '...it is not alright to be an atheist, and to be better Jews takes work'. Fortunately it is a very small percentage of Jews that do get persuaded to follow the Jews for Jesus route of the American Club. '...but even a few is a tragedy'.

While in Ladispoli I tried to live, eat and generally live as an immigrant. I shared a room with a 25 year old forest engineer, Alex (Sasha) Dobin from Leningrad. His father died of cancer four years ago. He has no brothers or sisters, and his mother was denied permission to leave the USSR. Now that the Vienna-Italy route is closed for new immigrants, she cannot request an invitation from Israel, and then switch to America in Vienna. She must now wait in the Soviet Union until Alex can send a request for his mother to come to America. He needs to wait five years before being allowed to take an exam to become a citizen of the United States. Alex arrived in Vienna Sept. 22, 1989. After spending one week in a hotel paid for by AJDC he travelled to Ladispoli where he knew some friends from Leningrad. When he left Russia, \$140 was the maximum allowed dollars an immigrant could bring out. (Since last month the Soviet Supreme ruled that immigrants now may not take any dollars out). AJDC gave no additional money to Alex while staying in Rome. They did pay for his hotel in Rome for one week. He used some of his \$140.00 for additional food. Now he lives on the \$6/day from AJDC. His daily diet is very poor, 2-3 sausages and bread in the morning; a mayonaise sandwich and sometimes potatoe chips when he has enough money, and turkey soup, potatoes and sometimes an egg for dinner. He is very worried about his mother and grandmother. Congratulations Gorbachnov, you have created yet another orphan!

My desire to help Soviet immigrants brought me to Ladispoli and gave me a lesson of how hard life can be. The three major objectives I set for myself were accomplished: 1) To assist in helping with education: (nutritional) counseling, English, re-establish Jewish identity and self dignity; 2) to specifically assist the Zilber/Layeuski family in resolving their refugee status, community assurance, and transport papers to New York; 3) and to share the life of these people with other Americans and create and understanding of their plight.

The Russian people are truly wonderful, warm and loving people. They have suffered greatly but still maintain an optimism and burning desire to live a good life in their new home--America. Just as my grandparents passed through Ellis Island from Russia to join thousands of other immigrants, so will the people of Ladispoli. And I am confident America will become a better place for giving these people a chance to live in freedom.

- * Dr. Alan Rosenthal, who is very involved with the Alaskan Council for Soviet Jews, practices endodontics in Anchorage, Alaska. He is a Jewish activist and has made several trips to Israel and the Soviet Union to fight for Jewish rights. He is also a pilot and avid outdoorsman.