

**Russian Jews in America: Status, Identity and Integration**  
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**Size of the population discussion.**

It seems that the discussion about the numbers of Russian Jewish immigrants in America (and in New York) never ends. Yet, it is obvious that the exact number could not ever be obtained, nor the discussion on numbers is much relevant to real life of Russian-Jewish immigrants and adds to better understanding of the processes developing in the Russian-Jewish community. Recent New York Jewish Population Study suggests there are about 223,000 individuals living in 92,000 Russian-speaking Jewish households in Greater New York (which includes 5 city boroughs, Westchester County, and two Long Island counties).<sup>1</sup> However, there are reasons to believe that the number of Russian Jews in New York is much higher. My estimation that is based on NYANA refugee statistics and RINA surveys, commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, suggests that there are about 350,000 Russian Jews in New York metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup> The survey conducted in Philadelphia in 2000-2001 estimates the number of Russian Jews there in a range of 35,000 individuals.<sup>3</sup>

In 2002 two different studies revealed two sets of figures regarding the number of Jews in America. Professor Tobin suggested there are 6.7 million Jews in America, or 18% increase since 1990.<sup>4</sup> Another respected study, conducted by Glenmary Research Center and sponsored by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, suggests the number of Jews as 6.1 million.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, not all of them are Jewish, regardless of an operational definition one may use to identify who is a Jew. Probably, the extended definition Tobin used brought him to a figure of 6.7 million, while some more restricted definition may suggest the 6.1 million figure is correct.

To the contrary, the numbers from newly completed Jewish Population Study suggest there are only 5.2 million Jews in America, a decrease of almost 5.5% from 1990. However, 6.7 million people live in Jewish households, and 6.9 million have Jewish origins. The study further suggests that 15% of all Jews are immigrants. This brings us to an estimated 780,000 Jews from the FSU.

HIAS statistics and other indicators suggest that New York Russian-Jewish population is close to 50% of the total Russian-Jewish population in U.S. Therefore, the number of Russian Jews in America fluctuates in a range of 700,000. By any account, the Russian-Jewish immigrant group in the U.S. is probably close in numbers to the size of this group in Israel. And if we take into consideration only Diaspora proper, **Russian Jews in America form the largest Russian-speaking Jewish community in the world.**

In a series of surveys conducted by Research Institute for New Americans since 1998 in New York and Philadelphia, we studied the Russian-speaking Jewish population using a self-reporting method with four alternatives: “definitely Jewish”, “somewhat Jewish”, “non-Jewish”, and “hard to say”. All surveys indicate that roughly 60% of the Russian-speaking population in New York and more than 70% in Philadelphia identify themselves as “definitely Jewish”, another 20% (15% in Philadelphia) -- as “somewhat Jewish”, 15% as “non-Jewish”, and for the rest 5% it is “hard to say”. For many practical purposes it is helpful to combine the “somewhat Jewish” population with “definitely Jewish” category and consider them together as Jewish.

If we further define a Jewish household as one that includes at least one “Jewish” or “Somewhat Jewish” individual of 18 years old or more, we will find out that 90% to 95% of all Russian households in New York are “Jewish” households.<sup>6</sup>

### Immigration in Progress

Immigrated from:	Place of Origin	
	RJI in Philadelphia <sup>7</sup> (%)	RJI in New York <sup>8</sup> (%)
Ukraine	54	41
Russia	26	28
Uzbekistan	5	6
Moldova	5	4
Belarus	4	10
Other Republics	6	11
	----- 100	----- 100

### Relatives in the Former Soviet Union

Many (35%) still have first-degree relatives (spouses, children, brothers/sisters) in the Former Soviet Union. This is quite understandable for the “Freshmen.” Indeed, 61% of the “Freshmen” have first-degree relatives in the FSU, while only 22% of the “Seniors” do. Those from Russia are more likely to have first-degree relatives in the FSU (49%) than those from other republics.

Among those who have first-degree relatives still in the FSU, almost half (49%) are between 35 and 55 years old, and 29% are younger than 35 years old. It is natural that elderly people tend to join their relatives in America while younger folks are more likely to come first to establish their life in America before bringing their elderly here. In fact, only about 13% of those who have first-degree relatives in the FSU are older than 65.

**Relatives in Israel.** Russian-Jewish immigrants’ personal ties with Israel are enormous. 61% have first degree relatives (spouse, children, parents, brothers/sisters) in Israel and another 20% have more distant relatives.

Russian American Jews are well connected with their brothers and sisters in other Diaspora countries. 45% have relatives or close friends in Germany, 29% -- in Australia.

**Socio-demographic Indicators.** Basically, there two crucial factors that determine many of the socio-economic characteristics of this population: age and time of living in America.

Age Category	In New York <sup>9</sup>	In Philadelphia <sup>10</sup>
Less than 35 years old	20	24
35 to less than 55 year old	46	48
55 to less than 65 year old	16	15
65 year old and more	18	13
	----- 100	----- 100

Though Russian Jewish immigrant population in Philadelphia is a little younger than in New York, roughly one third of the population is older than 55 and is getting older, since the average number of children in immigrant families is 1.35, which is far below simple reproduction.

Women outnumber men across the sample: 53% female and 47% male. However, within different age groups the proportion varies. In the elderly age group (more than 65 years old) there are significantly more women than men.

We divided all respondents by four groups according to the **time living in America**. We call these groups the “Freshmen” (less than 3 years in America), the “Sophomores” (3 to less than 6 years), the “Juniors” (6 to less than 9 years), and the “Seniors” (9 or more years of residency in America).

	<b>Time of Residency</b>		
	In America (as of 01.01.01)	In Philadelphia <sup>11</sup> (as of 01.01.01)	In New York <sup>12</sup> (as of 12.2000)
The “Freshmen” (less than 3 years)	12	14	24
The “Sophomores” (3 to less than 6 years)	16	18	20
The “Juniors” (6 to less than 9 years)	26	24	30
The “Seniors” (more than 9 years)	46	44	26
	----- 100	----- 100	----- 100

The Philadelphia immigrant population – both of those who have initially resettled in Philadelphia and those who moved in from other places in U.S. – have lived in America on average longer than have the New York immigrants. “Freshmen,” for example, comprise about a quarter of the New York’s immigrant population while only 14% of Philadelphia immigrants. Generally, the Philadelphia immigrants have had more “American” experience than New York immigrants.

	<b>Live in America:</b>			
	Less than 3 years	3 to 6 years	6 to 9 years	9 and more years
Refugee	57	77	91	89
Parolee	11	2.5	–	2
Asylum	–	2.5	3	3
Lottery	19	7	–	1
Relatives or spouses of Americans	2	6	4	3
Other status/ don’t know <sup>13</sup>	11	5	2	2
	----- 100	----- 100	----- 100	----- 100

We can observe a considerable change of immigrant population structure. Almost half of those who arrived within the last 3 years and almost quarter of those who came within last 3 to 6 years came as non-refugees. Some of them are apparently illegal immigrants, and those who are non-refugees are more likely to be non-Jewish.

## Education and Learning

Since education was a primary social value for the FSU Jews, Russian Jewish immigrants come with high level of educational attainment. And their striving for education continues in America.

### Educational Profile

	RJI in Philadelphia <sup>14</sup>	RJI in New York <sup>15</sup>	American Jews in Philadelphia <sup>16</sup>	American Jews <sup>17</sup>
High school or less	15	14	16	14
Attended some college	25	26	12	26
4 years of college	—	—	33	24
5 or more years of higher education	60	60	40	35
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	100	100	100	100

Though it is hard to compare education in America with education in FSU, it is clear that Russian immigrants have higher level of education than American Jews in general.

While 47% of RJI never studied in USA, 53% of them have some sort of American education, while 19% of total have some sort of higher education in America.

## Income.

### Annual Household Income

	Under \$30K	\$30-\$50K	\$50-\$80K	\$80K+	Total (%)
RJI in New York, 1999/2000 <sup>18</sup> *	78	11	9	3	100
RJI in Philadelphia <sup>19</sup>	44	16	22	19	100
American Jews, 1998 <sup>20</sup>	25	23	27	25	100

\* In these surveys, income breaks were: under \$25K, \$25K to \$50K, \$50K to \$75K, and more than \$75K.

## Identity.

By and large, Russian Jews identify themselves along 5 basic categories: Generally Jewish (like “just a Jew”), Ethnic Jewish (like “Soviet Jew”, “Russian Jew”, “Bukharian Jew”, etc.),

Immigrant identification, American identification, and Cosmopolitan identification. In any individual case, these 5 identities may present with different intensity, making Russian-Speaking Jews a specific cocktail of mixed identities.

The younger cohort (35 years or less) has fewer “definitely” Jews than the older cohorts. The proportion of non-Jews in younger cohort (23%) is almost 4 times higher than the rate of non-Jews among people of 55 and over years old (6%).

By their Jewish identities – be it General or Ethnic – Russian-Speaking Jews understand “belonging”. All types of Jews say their most significant meaning of being Jewish is belonging to the Jewish people.

However, there are at least three different set of indicators of belonging. First, I call “**direct belonging**”. It includes such indicators as “To feel oneself part of Jewish people”, “To remember the Holocaust”, “To be proud of Jewish people”, and “To know and remember Jewish History.” The second set of indicators has to do with **references to Jewish tradition and the state of Israel**. This means that while one may not directly belong to Judaism and Jewish tradition as well as to Israel, he or she feels that Judaism and Israel are the points of reference in person’s explanation of who he is. And the third set of indicators includes the **indicators of Jewish Practice**. What we measured here is not indicators of actual behavior, it is rather attitudes or indicators of meaning. To be a Jew for many Russian-Speaking immigrants has more social and cultural meaning such as “to marry a Jew”, “to do Bar/Bat Mitzvah to children”, “to circumcise male children”, “to attend Passover Seder”.

In addition, there is a set of identity meanings that I call “indicators of negative belonging”. In other words, Russian Jews are much less likely to identify themselves with such meanings as anti-Semitism, hostility, and separation from other nations. Indeed, only 21% said that being a Jew means “feeling different from other nations,” and only 18 indicated “hostility from other people, anti-Semitism” as meaning of being Jewish.

### **Intermarriage.**

Overall, the intermarriage rate in Russian-Jewish immigrant community is similar to that of American Jews. About 24% of all marriages that involve a Jewish individual have a non-Jewish spouse. Probably, within the immigrant population Jewish men more often marry non-Jewish women than vice versa. Indeed, within the non-Jewish population 67% are women, and 33% men.

What is interesting that within the younger generation (less than 35 year old) the intermarriage rate is less than in middle generation, while still higher than within the older generation (55 and more years old).

### **Comparison of three generations**

	Percent of Non-Jews	Percent of intermarriages	Percent of Non-Jewish children
Less than 35 years old	23	17	38
35 to 54 years old	13	23	22
55 and more	6	10	9

Probably, many marriages in “younger” generation cohort have occurred in America. Since they are not yet fully integrated into American society, individuals of this group search for a marital partner within the Russian-speaking community. Potential spouses are more available within the immigrant community. Further, they still feel like immigrants and therefore prefer immigrants for marriage. In a new and sometimes hostile social and economic environment they are trying to build a safe home and a family with a Russian Jewish partner – the one that is culturally and psychologically most close to them.

### **Religion.**

Generally, Russian Jews see religion a cultural, traditional, or philosophical concept. I found out four levels of religiosity. The first level has to do with contemplation of God’s existence. And here, which I call “Oblomov’s” level, are about 60% of RJI who say they are sure that G-d exists. On the second level are the “believers”, or those who say they are “veruuschie” (about 30%). The third level (which I call “Dostoyevsky’s” level) is comprised by those who say only a believer can be a moral person (about 15%). And on the fourth level are religious observers, or those who practice religion.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, for about 70% of Russian-Jewish immigrants Judaism is the most attractive religion. It does not mean that these people observe Jewish religious traditions and rituals or that they attend synagogue.

“Attraction” does not necessarily mean practicing a religion or sharing its doctrine. In most cases “attraction” means merely sympathy and a positive emotional feeling. For cultural reasons we did not ask questions of what particular denomination of Judaism – orthodox, conservative, or reform – people were affiliate or attracted to. Most of the Russian immigrants, in fact, cannot distinguish between various denominations. A typical mid-age Russian Jewish immigrant who knows very little about Judaism is, nevertheless, attracted by it because he believes that this is the religion of his ancestors. He may simultaneously attend a reform synagogue because it is close to his home, invite an orthodox rabbi to officiate at a Bar Mitzvah ceremony, put up a Christmas tree, admire the Russian Orthodox architecture, and admire Buddhist meditation.

For the majority of Russian Jews, religion, while not playing a significant role in their lives, has at least some role. About 36% of all Jewish immigrants indicated that religion plays an important or very important role in their lives. Another 41% said religion is “not very important.”

For all specific groups, there is not significant statistical difference. Religion plays probably the same role in all age and gender groups.

Religion is more important among those whose reported household annual income is under \$50,000. 50% of individuals with household income between \$30,000 and \$50,000 said religion plays an “important” or “very important” role in their lives, while only for 25% of those with income over \$80,000 religion is “important” or “very important”. The “less importance” of religion for the affluent group may be attributed to their need for higher social status. They don’t want to be humiliated by coming to a synagogue, where they don’t understand what is going on.

People attend synagogue regardless of how important role religion plays in their lives. This shows that synagogue is regarded by Russian Jews as both a center for community religious service and as a cultural and social institution. Those for whom religion is important go to synagogue to fulfill their religious obligations for communal prayer, and those for whom religion is not important attend for social and cultural reasons.

While the synagogue attendance is high among Russian-Jewish immigrants, their synagogue membership rate is low (about 13 percent are synagogue members).

The main reason RJI give for not attending synagogue has to do with Russian Jews cultural perception of religion. 32% indicated that because “religion is personal,” they do not attend synagogue. Two other main reasons given for not attending synagogue are “don’t understand what is going on” (13%) and “not interested” (11%). It is also important for Jewish organizations to know that more than 8% do not attend synagogues simply because they do not feel welcomed.

**Political Integration.**

While many are registered as Democrats, especially in New York, and are often voting along the party lines, Russian Jews remain essentially swing voters. Indeed, more than a third (both in New York and Philadelphia) consider themselves as independent, and also every year a significant number of first-time voters are added. Since the process of becoming a U.S. citizen takes on average 7-8 years, we expect this year tens of thousand of those who arrived between 1993-1994 and 1997-1998 to become new voters and to enter political scene in New York and other states. They may play a significant, and yet underestimated, role in deciding 2004 presidential election in such states as New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Florida, and even New York.

**What candidates do you prefer?**

	RJI in Greater Philadelphia <sup>22</sup> (%)	RJI in New York <sup>23</sup> (%)
Mostly Democratic candidates	38	56
Mostly Republican candidates	17	11
A candidate who is close to me	23	22
Not interested in politics	11	
Other response	1	
Hard to say	9	11
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	100	100

## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> The Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002 Highlights. UJA-Federation of New York
- <sup>2</sup> See: *Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City: Status, Identity, and Integration*. The American Jewish Committee. N.Y. April 2000, p. 8.
- <sup>3</sup> New American Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia. Portrait of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Greater Philadelphia. Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia Report. 2001.
- <sup>4</sup> The Jewish Week, September 25, 2002.
- <sup>5</sup> The New York Times, September 18, 2002, p. A22
- <sup>6</sup> *Profile of the New York Russian-Speaking Jew: Implication for Jewish Education*. Paper presented at “Identity and Culture: A Symposium on Jewish Educational Practices in the Russian-Speaking Community”, New York, October 21-22, 2002.
- <sup>7</sup> New American Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia. Portrait of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Greater Philadelphia. Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia Report. 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> *Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City: Status, Identity, and Integration*. The American Jewish Committee. N.Y. April 2000
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> New American Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia. Portrait of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Greater Philadelphia. Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia Report. 2001.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> *Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City: Status, Identity, and Integration*. The American Jewish Committee. N.Y. April 2000
- <sup>13</sup> Here we probably captured illegal immigrants. Among other statuses, respondents mentioned “working visa,” “student visa,” “other immigrant status,” and “do not remember, hard to say.” Those who said “do not remember, hard to say” and perhaps some of those who said they came under “other immigrant status” are likely to be illegal immigrants. In fact, it is hard to believe that a person who came just in recent 3 years “does not remember” under which immigrant status he/she arrived.
- <sup>14</sup> New American Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia. Portrait of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Greater Philadelphia. Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia Report. 2001.
- <sup>15</sup> *Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City: Status, Identity, and Integration*. The American Jewish Committee. N.Y. April 2000, p. 12.
- <sup>16</sup> Men 35 to 64 years old, Philadelphia area, 1996/1997. See: *The 1996/97 Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia. Summary Report*, p. 22.
- <sup>17</sup> *1998 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion*. The American Jewish Committee. 1998.
- <sup>18</sup> *Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City: Status, Identity, and Integration*. The American Jewish Committee. N.Y. April 2000, p. 15.
- <sup>19</sup> New American Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia. Portrait of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Greater Philadelphia. Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia Report. 2001.
- <sup>20</sup> *1998 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion*. The American Jewish Committee. 1998.
- <sup>21</sup> See: Samuel Kliger. *The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union*. In: *New York Glory: Religions in the City* (Edited by Tony Carnes and Anna Karpathakis). New York University Press, NY 2001, pp. 159-160
- <sup>22</sup> *New American Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia. Portrait of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Greater Philadelphia*. Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia Report. 2001.
- <sup>23</sup> *Election 2000: Russian Jews as Voters in New York City*. The American Jewish Committee. N.Y. December 2001.