

Russian Jews Ponder U.S. Welfare Reforms

by Lev Krichevsky

MOSCOW
Mikhail, a 62-year-old journalist in Moscow, has been planning to immigrate to America for several years. He was ready to settle in Maryland, where his elderly mother, as well as a younger brother and sister, have lived since the early 1980s. But now that President Clinton has signed welfare reform legislation that will affect new immigrants, Mikhail is reconsidering his move.

"I don't know what to do now," said Mikhail, who asked that his full name not be used. "I received many calls from my relatives and friends in America who are clearly worried that if I come today, I might have a rough time there," said Mikhail, whose immigration papers are all set.

The newly enacted and highly controversial welfare reform legislation has already sent alarm bells through Russian emigre communities in the United States.

The bill also has sparked concern in the organized American Jewish world, where

officials worry that they will be faced with having to make up for the loss of benefits to Russian Jewish emigres.

Here, in Russia, the new legislation received little coverage in the news media, but would-be emigrants are hearing about the possible consequences from relatives in the United States. They are also turning to local sources to glean whatever information they can.

Despite the scare, the new welfare legislation is not likely to reduce the number of Jews emigrating from Russia to the U.S., according to Mikhail Chlenov, president of the Jewish Confederation of Russia. The reasons behind Russian Jewish emigration are such that not many people would change their mind because of the bill, he said.

"Those who are coming to America these days wish to be reunited with their families or to improve their social and economic status," said Chlenov. In addition, he said, some Jews are influenced by an "old Russian Jewish myth about America as a golden land."

Still the situation of Mikhail, the journalist, illustrates the dilemma of many would-be immigrants who expect to qualify for some form of government assistance and now wonder how they will cope.

Mikhail, who suffers from diabetes, said he is afraid of

being denied access to Medicaid, which is for him the most important benefit he would receive after moving to the U.S.

Most Russian Jews now immigrating to America come as refugees, categorized as such because they have demonstrated a well-founded fear of perse-cution because of race, religion, nationality or social or political ties. Refugees will be affected by the new welfare law five years after their arrival in the United States. That is when their special, protected status expires.

That status enables them to receive eight months of government refugee assistance after their arrival and then to apply for a range of other benefits.

Under the new law, if refugees like Mikhail do not opt for citizenship or fail to obtain it after five years, they will be barred from S.S.I., food stamps, and other programs from which states may choose to bar legal immigrants.

The new welfare law will have an even more immediate impact on future legal immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not classified as refugees. An increasing number of Russian Jews are expected to leave for America as immigrants because their immediate relatives already living in the U.S. are naturalized and are able to support them, according to Clenov. □

Lev Krichevsky is a freelance writer. This article is excerpted from a longer report to Washington Jewish Week, September 12, 1996.