We continue our reporting on immigration hot spots around the world. The following article appeared in The Wall Street Journal *(Barron's) issue of October 31, 1994 and is reprinted with permission.*

The Unchosen

By Amy Dockser Marcus

TEL AVIV — Since its founding, Israel has guaranteed citizenship to any Jew who requested it. Now, some frustrated Israelis are ready to renege on that promise.

Isaac Groisman is one reason why. In Russia, the 65-year-old Mr. Groisman, an alcoholic and a petty thief, slept on benches in public parks. As a new immigrant in Israel, he has a room in a state geriatric hospital and is on the waiting list for a spot in a senior citizens' home. In Russia, Mr. Groisman supported himself by picking pockets. In Israel, he receives a monthly pension, health insurance and a cash grant to cover expenses for his first six months. Israel also pays the nearly $100-a-day cost of his hospital stay.

Mr. Groisman's two children live in the U.S. and, he claims, won't have anything to do with him. So why should Israeli taxpayers support him?

"I'm sick," Mr. Groisman replies. "And I'm a Jew."

Generous Perks

For more than four decades, that has been enough to ensure Mr. Groisman and others like him the right to relocate here. Israel's Law of Return, the cornerstone of the state's vision of itself as the Jewish homeland, guarantees free immigration to all Jews, except those who pose a threat to public safety. (Mr. Groisman wasn't considered a threat.) It also gives those immigrants numerous benefits, which can include rent subsidies and below-market mortgages, free vocational training, cash stipends for household purchases, and free health insurance for six months.

Many of the immigrants who have come here are professionals who have helped boost the economy. But as Israel's standard of living has risen, so has the number of immigrants who are aged, infirm or in dire need, with most coming from the former Soviet Union. Many Israelis now fear that Israel is becoming a dumping ground for the impoverished, and a magnet for those with tenuous links to Judaism but a powerful hankering for an easier life — or for a free ride. They want to abolish open immigration.

"I cannot see, even with the best will in the world, why I as an Israeli have to hold an open house for all those who want to come from abroad whenever it suits them," says Mansfred Gerstenfeld, an international industry and business consultant from Jerusalem. "If we give Israeli citizenship immediately to any Jewish comer, we devalue it."

The immigration law was enacted in the wake of the Nazi Holocaust, when many nations were unwilling to take in Jews fleeing Hitler-occupied Europe. It serves as a moral contract that Jews will always have a place of refuge. The law grants automatic citizenship to any Jew, including anyone who has at least one Jewish grandparent or who has converted to Judaism. Spouses and children also are allowed in, even if they aren't Jewish.

Soul of the State

Labor Minister Ora Namir recently suggested that honoring that contract will come at the expense of helping native-born Israelis. She specifically criticized the number of elderly Russian Jews arriving without families and in need of massive assistance. Her stance prompted a flood of supportive phone calls.

But outraged fellow cabinet members passed a resolution reaffirming open immigration. In a public rebuke, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said "*aliyah*," the Hebrew word for immigration, "is the soul, the raison d'etre of the state. There is no such thing as selective aliyah, and God help us if we get to that."

Still, as the new immigrants put an increasing burden on Israel's welfare system, the country is quietly attempting to weed out the undesirables. Officials at the Jewish Agency, a quasi-governmental group that helps screen and assist new immigrants, say their emissaries abroad now actively discourage those likely to become a burden on society from immigrating. The agency also won't provide financial assistance in some instances.

"We tell them, `You are sick or old, you'll need to go to an old-age home and there is a waiting list, things will be difficult,'" says Arnon Mantver, director-general of the agency's immigration and absorption department in Jerusalem. Yet all the agency can do is discourage undesirables. It can't stop them from coming. And once they arrive, it can't deprive them of citizenship or the benefits that follow.

More Aggressive Action

The agency, which sometimes pays for immigrants' air fare, has been especially aggressive in the former Soviet Union, where 15 percent of the immigrants are over age 65, even though the elderly make up only 8 percent of the population of the former republics. It launched a program that targets younger Russians, with marketable job skills, for immigration. It also has urged humanitarian groups to build old-age homes and to establish more social services for the elderly in Russia, in the hopes that more seniors will

stay put.

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But Israel is still the best alternative for people like Mikhail and Ida Korenberg, both 73. A few years ago, while the couple was living in their native Azerbaijan, Mrs. Korenberg had a heart attack. With little money for medical care, Mrs. Korenberg says, the doctors at her local hospital ignored her, sanitary conditions were abysmal, and "I was given a bed that had no mattress … and it broke when I lay down on it."

In 1991, the couple emigrated to Israel. Since then, Mrs. Korenberg has undergone three operations — at the state's expense — for breast cancer and ovarian cysts. Mr. Korenberg, a former history professor, has had a prostate operation; the Israeli government also paid for that.

"We wanted to be useful here," he says, with downcast eyes. "But it's too late for that."

Geriatric Overload

In less than 50 years, Israel's population of people age 65 and older has tripled to 10 percent, an unprecedented pace for an industrialized country. Today, 400 of the 6,300 patients in long-term- care state institutions are new immigrants. Geriatric experts say the number will double over the next two years, as the three-year government subsidies given to new immigrants who care for elderly relatives at home runs out — and as those patients turn to the state for help. Pressures are already so severe that there aren't enough doctors trained to cope with them.

To close the gap, Shmuel HaRofe Geriatric Medical Center outside Tel Aviv, supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, is offering intensive geriatrics training courses to new immigrant doctors — many of whom are Russians with Russian patients. "We get many patients who land in Israel and are brought here straight from the airport," says Arthur Leibowitz, head of the long-term-care geriatric ward at the 355-bed medical center. He adds that many of the immigrants arrive with untreated hip fractures, cancer and tuberculosis. "They come to Israel to get proper care."

The Christian Contingent

Many of these immigrants don't even consider themselves Jewish. Some 29 percent of last year's 76,410 immigrants declared themselves non-Jews on their citizenship applications, according to Israeli government statistics.

Philip Dubinsky, a 70-year-old immigrant from Kiev, for example, is a Protestant, and so is his 56-year-old wife. But his mother was born Jewish. So, three years ago, with his health rapidly deteriorating, he and his wife moved to Israel.

In the corner of his room in a Jerusalem hostel for new immigrants stands an oxygen tank; his spine is so twisted that he has trouble breathing and he can only fall asleep in a kneeling position. "We came here because it is our only chance to survive," says Mr. Dubinsky, who says the couple's pensions from Kiev couldn't pay for the kind of medical care they required. "Israel should help people no matter what religion they believe in."

The Lost Tribes

Among the most controversial of all the new immigrants are those claiming to be members of the so-called lost tribes. There are about a million Indians who believe they are descended from the Israelite tribe of Manasseh, which was expelled by the Assyrians 2,700 years ago. About 5,000 of these members try to follow religious rules listed in the Bible — including animal sacrifices. Some Africans, Afghans and others also believe they are lost-tribe descendants. At least 200 lost-tribe members have come to Israel in the past two years and can become citizens if they formally convert to Judaism.

Nissim Maloon, for example, is a 22-year-old tribe member from Manipur, a state on India's border with Burma. He was finishing up a political-science degree at an Indian university when he decided to move to Israel 18 months ago, saying that only in Israel can he properly follow all the religious commandments. Now he works six hours a day as a farm worker, and spends the rest of his time studying Hebrew and Jewish religion and customs.

Looking for the Good Life

Israeli governmental and rabbinical leaders reject the tribe members' claim that they are Jews. Uri Gordon, chairman of the Jewish Agency's immigra-tion and absorption department, contends that most are attracted to Israel by the high standard of living — not by the chance to live in a Jewish state.

Mr. Gordon believes the latest wave of immigrants is stretching Israel's Law of Return to the breaking point. Acting on his own, he has launched a high-profile campaign to revoke a 1970 amendment that gives citizenship rights to anyone with a Jewish grandparent. He has held meetings with Parliament members about the issue and lobbied rabbinical leaders. Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin and other members of Parliament also have issued public statements calling for changes in the law.

Israel, says Mr. Gordon, can no longer allow itself to grant automatic entry to people "who could change the face of the country. We're a small nation. We have

to protect ourselves."

Impossible Choices

This new rallying cry is echoing through Kiryat Gat, a sleepy desert town in southern Israel. Since its founding in 1955, the town has absorbed immigrants from more than 40 countries, including Ethiopia, India, Morocco and Tunisia. In 1989, as the gates of the Soviet Union opened, local officials eagerly drew up plans to help absorb the latest wave of immigrants, expecting to take in 1,000 families over three years. Instead, they were deluged by newcomers, many of them elderly and infirm, who have caused the town's population to more than double in four years to over 44,000.

"[The mayor of Kiryat Gat] informed…the agency that oversees immigrants that new immigrants on welfare are no longer welcome to move to his town."

Welfare department head Georgette Erez says her days are now spent making impossible choices. Should her department fund the salary of a home assistant for a disabled new immigrant, or buy hot meals for out-of-work Israeli families? The desperate needs of her new charges have come at the expense of solving the problems of veteran Israelis, and she increasingly finds herself explaining to people who have served in the Israeli army and whose families have been in the country for two generations why she can't help them."I can't give them what I don't have," she says.

With the town's welfare department on the verge of collapse and tensions between veterans and new immigrants running high, Kiryat Gat's mayor took matters into his own hands. He informed the Ministry of Absorption, the government agency that oversees immigrants, that new immigrants on welfare are no longer welcome to move to his town. To emphasize his point, he refused to turn on the water at 23 government-owned apartments in Kiryat Gat reserved for new-immigrant single mothers until the ministry agreed to also provide subsidized housing for veteran Israelis in the town.

After years at the forefront of immigration absorption, Kiryat Gat's gates, once open to all, are swinging closed. "We were embarrassed to say we can't accept everyone. We thought, how can we say we don't want aliyah?" says Ms. Erez. She now counts herself among those who want to see the country's immigration policies changed. Maybe then, she says, "it will be easier to say, `Excuse us … but we can't take you anymore.'" ■

[*Editor's note: See the related articles, pp 108-118*]