The Shorefront YM-YWHA of Brighton - Manhattan Beach: A Nodal Point in an American Immigrant Community

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SHOREFRONT

YM-YWHA OF BRIGHTON - MANHATTAN BEACH, INC.

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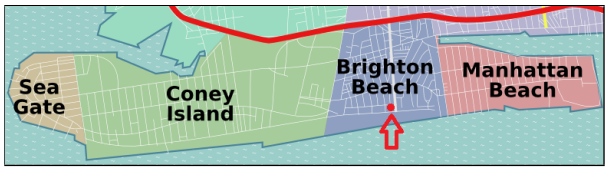
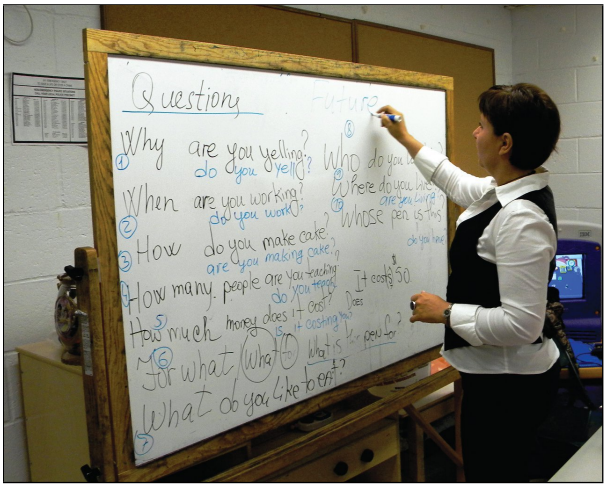
An old joke holds that Brighton Beach is conveniently located—near the United States. Heavy waves of immigration ongoing since before the fall of the Soviet Union have transformed "Little Odessa" into a heavily Russian, overwhelmingly Jewish, incredibly compacted ethnic enclave. On its commercial streets forests of closely-packed stores hawk their wares in glaringly colored Cyrillic signage, shoppers browsing unperturbed by the elevated trains roaring by above; on its residential avenues aging prewar apartment blocks stand proud, their fronts barricaded by elders enjoying the latest Russian literature in the fresh air; on its boardwalks impressive ethnic reasturants stand shuttered through the day, only to come violently to life at night, their celebrations often spilling onto the beach below. For an outside observer to step into the neighborhood is as if to travel to another country, one where aging Soviet citizens still recognisant of Stalin's times share space with the cast of Jersey Shore lite "Russian Dolls", English is often a second tongue, and the winning councilman sees fit to declare himself "the only frum [religious] candidate" in his campaign flyers.



This is the community that the Shorefront Y serves. Located in the sleepy underbelly of the neighborhood, with residential co-ops on one side and the sea on the other, the center (often simply referred to as the Jewish Center by true locals) is the neighborhood's largest community center and the local anchor of the transnational Jewish Community Center (JCC) Association. The Shorefront Y's widely splayed two-story residence is purpose-built for the task, sporting such amenities as a backyard sports area, gyms, lunchrooms, large amounts of classroom and office space, a lunchroom, a rooftop playground, and a pool. Beyond a colorful mural in the small entry lobby the hallways of the center proper are mostly undecorated, bearing instead copious billboards and notices inviting the reader to explore the center's cornucopia of community initiatives, ponder the activities of American Jews, or revel in the achievements and artwork of the center's day campers and afterschoolers. Here or there signs of the center's age can be found: a hallway telephone booth with all of its wires long since cut out; a plaque commemorating the generous contributions of a philanthropist who bankrolled the center's switch from wooden to tile flooring in the 1980s.

To locals like Elon the Shorefront Y is not just a place to go to get help when in need but also binding element of his community. Now a shopkeeper on Brighton Beach Avenue, the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, Elon is an American citizen and a fully proficient English speaker—though most of his business occurs in Russian anyway. He attributes much of his success in this "new life" to the classes that he took on American English at the Y and the financial support he received from the community on his arrival; he retains relatively expensive family membership at the center in part as a token of gratitude. Every few weekends Elon meets up with his friends—many if not most of them formerly students in the same programs—and the group reminisces about old times and discusses the new at the beach, the boardwalk restaurants, the nearby billiards place ("Boardwalk Billiards"), or the center's swimming pool. Some of the most important Jewish holidays and most interesting cultural events find Elon lining up at the door with his family (his wife, Gena, and

the kids and *their* kids, when he can get them) and friends to partake in the festivities.



Jews in the Soviet Union were strictly contained, marked "J" for Jew on their passports, placed under a strict university quota, and subjected to widespread petty discrimination—so much as approaching a jeweler and asking for a Star of David could get you thrown in jail. Elon was part of a long line of reasonably well-off immigrants fleeing such conditions to the prosperity of the West, so-called refuskis awarded preferred refugee status under American immigration laws for reason of religious prosecution. Tens of thousands of Jews left "the old country" for the new every year (the United States maintained a majority lead over Israel); most arrived by way of New York City and about a third chose to stay here, usually resettling near American peers in Brighton Beach and other enclavic neighborhoods in southern Brooklyn. By the time Elon arrived in the United States in 1994 these migrants were met by what may be one of the most robust immigration support networks in the United States, run by an alphabet soup of Jewish interest organizations (NYANA, HIAS, JCC, JASA) with long reach. In his case it found him right out of the plane—a NYANA (New York Association for New Americans) volunteer, schedule-book in hand. Two days later Elon was already sitting in the office of one of the organization's caseworkers, receiving basic identification, a modest three-month stipend, a few articles of furniture, housing recommendations, and a letter of introduction for one of the nearby Jewish center's new immigrant English tutoring programs—Shorefront's. A month and a half saw him enrollment in the program, a permanent place of residence, and a job at one of the neighborhood's Russian-language bookstores; the support and services that NYANA and the Shorefront Y offered saw Elon very quickly ascend to a modest, but comfortable, new life.

Elon got the job with the help of his English-language tutor, a woman that he says helped him immensely with adapting to American culture and to the American way of life. Anastasia Milek, a present day English language tutor at the Shorefront Y, takes great pride in this aspect of her job; she likens the role her lessons play to that of the Israeli *ulpanim*, Hebrew language instructionals in Israel that were set up to handle the diverse voices of the Jewish diaspora in the *aliyah* (return). As the first regular point of contact for many of the centers newly arrived immigrants Milek is similarly more than just a language tutor—in fact, she goes as far as to say that calling the class something as mundane as "Basic English" is nave. Milek aims to instill in her students an understanding of not just the English language but of American culture and the American way of life as well, and her classes often go into tangents on the intricacies of American culture, into discussions on Texas, pizza, and Uncle Sam. She makes heavy use of audiovisual aids, often bringing to class examples of the words to be discussed that day—kitchen utensils, measuring cups, basketballs and spatulas—and often introduces her students to the concepts they are learning with classic American songs like the Beatles' "Can't Buy Me Love". Those that pass these classes often move on to more intensive cultural ones meant to prepare the immigrants for taking the citizenship test--but this is in her words a challenge for a secure future, and working cultural knowledge is necessary to "thrive today".

The neighborhood, however, is changing. Ask a Shorefront Y member what they think about today's immigrants and you'll likely get some angry fist clenching over the "riff raff" settling in as of late. Jewish immigration to Brighton Beach reached its peak in the late 90s, and as these immigrants have found work and status they have begun to move out in a steady stream of out-migration. It is unfair, as some residents want to claim, to say that the community is dying; Jews still dominate the neighborhood, as evidenced by the recent district city council election—all four candidates Jewish, all but the winning one ethnically Russian. But as the disgruntlement of the "old-timers" shows, the neighborhood is maturing. Todays new residents are often either non-Jewish Ukranians or Pakistanis moving in from the direction of Nostrand Avenue, and though the co op residences immediately in the vicinity of Shorefront are still almost wholly dominated by their long term elderly Jewish residents the streets and residential housing closer to Brighton Beach Avenue, the commercial heart of the neighborhood, is showing signs of increased diversity. To young, upwardly mobile children of immigrants Brighton Beach is not a destination in of itself, but merely a stop on the journey, a quaint, timely place which one would want to visit occasionally to sample the stores, walk down the boardwalk, or visit their elders—but no one wants to *live* here. Younger people are moving out, preferring trendier neighborhoods and residences like Manhattan Beachs single family housing: to quote a Midwood (former) classmate of mine, "Brighton Beach is, frankly, disgusting." With the general slowdown in Jewish immigration they are not being replaced. Though those that may leave often do may of the neighborhoods older timers are more reluctant to go; its most elderly members, living in frozen apartment rentals, often cannot. Both Elon and my brother's piano instructor, who recently moved out of the neighborhood, acknowledge that life in Brighton Beach might be boring for "youngsters": but they fret about the communitys dilution and are especially nervous about a return to the bad old days of the 70s and 80s.

The workers of the Shorefront Y itself are too polite (or, depending on your perspective, too politically correct) to much acknowledge the shifting demographic winds, at least publicly, and at a cursory glance it dont seem to have affected the center at all. The Shorefront Y is a Jewish community center after all—a fact proudly displayed on the, well, everything—and though anyone and everyone is *encouraged* to receive services from the center, in reality the centers assistance base reaches few of the new immigrants. The Shorefront Y is an ethnic enclave within an ethnic enclave; if you dont blend in, youll likely get more than a few asinine glances from the more typical constituents relaxing in the centers lounges or in line for government paperwork consultation, and possibly even difficulties at the security desk. As a result most of the immigrants today that receive support from the center do so remotely, referring to it for one-time assistance with paperwork and durable essentials like mattresses, hurrying to and from their appointments and not sampling any of the center's other programs. Elements of soft power are clearly on display at Shorefront Y, and although it does run some programs specifically targeting an outside demographic, like an "All Stars" afterschool program at the Kingsborough-affiliated PS 225, they seem cursory compared to the centers intracommunity activity.

On the other hand, the community that is present has less control over Shorefront than many of its members would like. The Shorefront Y is run from the top down: it is a cog in the intranational machine of the JCC, and so important positional vacancies and budget breakdowns are filled by a regional board with no direct relationship to the community center on the ground. As a result, professional appointments based on resumes and interviews, not on community activism and ground-level skills; being a Russian language speaker is not even strictly necessary. In an odd juxtaposition that is not mentioned anywhere on the centers website, the JCC even makes JASA (the Jewish Association for the Aging), which runs the buildings old-age wing and owns an elder-care apartment block behind the center, pay a fairly sizable rent on its wing of the building. Rules are maintained on many things—like on-location interviews—that many of the sites actual, boots-on-the-ground workers aren't even aware of.

To what extent is the Shorefront Ys monocular

focus acceptable? As part of the JCC Shorefront is after all a Jewish center, funded by donations from Jewish patrons (both wealthy and not) interested in Jewish constituents and Jewish activities. Diluting the overall mission of the center steps on the toes of the centers constituents and donators alike, and risks the organization going the way of NYANA. Despite its "New York" name, NYANA was an organization run and funded by and targeted at Jewish interests (my family actually received our first apartment and most of our early furniture from the organization; according to my mom our caseworker even gave her all sorts of strange looks for not actually being "fully" Jewish). When Soviet immigration began to slow down the organization also began to handle more general immigration—but this caused the organizations funding base to slowly evaporate, and after chronic budget problems it was finally forced shut in 2008. The JCC is a national organization vastly bigger the exclusively New York City based NYANA, but it still has the same, probably well-placed fears. One particularly cynical way of looking at Shorefront Ys curriculum vitae is that it is merely designed to do just enough for the general community to not get in trouble for not doing anything at all.

On the offensive front the Shorefront is making a quiet but serious effort to shift its approach to match the changes in its demographic. For one thing, immigration services, once the center of the Y, has been shuffled far, far aside in terms of size and funding—there simply aren't enough Elons entering the neighborhood anymore. Community services and cultural programs on the other hand have increased in prominence, and the center now runs many paygated endeavors— summer camps, day camps, afterschool programs, and a gym—which obviously target a much wealthier demographic than the penniless immigrant. Even entering the center has become a process: the Shorefront Y has installed a card swiper at the entrance, and the general public can—for a low flat rate of three to five hundred dollars a year—buy a recurring monthly membership that earns them access to the centers leisure activity centers, like the tennis and basketball courts in the backyard sports area and the gym in the basement.

Shorefront Ys strategy can thus be summarized in one word: cross-marketing. Take Tamara for instance. Like Elon, Tamara's family immigrated to the United States in 1994; with only a music degree in hand she was able to use her parent's financial support to put herself through college. Today she is a financial professional and her husband works in engineering; together they make in the vicinity of $200,000 a year. In the summers they drive their daughter to the Shorefront Ys summer day camp, what she explains she feels is the best option for socializing her in the summer short of taking time off from work and renting a bungalow upstate (which they have also done in the past). Tamara and her husband are both extremely busy with their jobs and cannot easily leave their daughter at home in the summers, and to them the service that Shorefront Camp provides—a place to drop of their daughter during their busy workdays—is essential. On closer inspection the camp begins to look like a (paid) service for families like Tamara's, successful members of the Jewish middle class with nowhere to keep their children in the summers. The children are in turn exposed to the centers other cultural activities, invited to attend the centers especially children-themed festivities during holidays and at cultural events; their parents are in turn exposed to the centers afterschool, pre-school activities, and cultural events de jour.

Another, similar draw is the Lenny Krayzelburg Swim Academy. Part of a "chain" of such academies overseen by the four-medal Olympic swimmer—the original is in a JCC in his hometown, Los Angeles—the academy offers swim lessons for all ages, including toddlers, and maintains a fairly well-lauded swim team if their awards cabinet is anything to go by. Well run and exceedingly well marketed, the swim institute is also a paid service—the students are again wealthier children from outside the neighborhood. The pool further maintains hours for members' use: being a fairly large well-maintained indoor pool with a sauna, this is a popular feature in those colder months when the beach becomes nonviable, and a big part of the center's membership draw.

These two programs are not alone amongst the center's extra-communal repertoire—but they do represent among the most popular and well-funded (and, likely, lucrative) programs the center has to offer. Take the Q or the B train out as far out as Church Avenue and get off at any stop along the way and you will likely find a board or a poster somewhere in the station advertising one of the two (and often multiple, and often both); Shorefront Y promos are commonly found amongst the local area adverts of Russian-language channels like RTVi and News One. They represent for the center a transitional model, a movement away from a role as a vital nodal point on the immigrant journey and local area link in an immigrant community and towards a new, cosmopolitan vision. The Shorefront Y of the future, at least the one it seems to aim to be, is a gathering point for the now-successful immigrants and children of immigrants that are drifting away from their migrant roots, into neighborhoods—and paychecks—far removed from those of their past. In the meantime it exists in both worlds, offering a large variety of individually small programs to a wide—but always Jewish—audience. Thought the future of the neighborhood's "Jewishness" has been cast in doubt, even as the community drifts away the Shorefront Y's strategic pivot may well secure it a bright, but very different, future.