For Stranded Jews, 'When' Is Now 'If'

The New York Times

December 11, 1988, Sunday, Late City Final Edition

Section: Section 1; Part 1, Page 3, Column 1; Foreign Desk

Length: 858 words

Byline: By CLYDE HABERMAN, Special to the New York Times

Dateline: LADISPOLI, Italy, Dec. 9

Body

All across the main square of this seaside town 22 miles west of Rome, the language is Russian.

Today, as on every day, Piazza Vittoria was filled with Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union, men and women who clustered around the central fountain in the hunched-shoulder cold, exchanging gossip or just killing time because they had little else to do.

Mostly, these recent Soviet arrivals talked of ***when*** they might be able to leave this way station on the Tyrrhenian Sea for the United States. For some, like Yevgeny Shpaer, the question was no longer one of ***when*** but ***if***.

"We planned to celebrate our children's birthdays this month and next month in America," Mr. Shpaer said. "***Now***, I think that must wait." Trapped by U.S. Shift Mr. Shpaer, a 30-year-old biologist from the Latvian capital, Riga, is one of 177 Soviet ***Jews*** who have been stuck in Ladispoli since early autumn, ***when*** Rome-based representatives of the Immigration and Naturalization Service turned down their requests to come to the United States with refugee status. These emigrants, American officials decided, could not demonstrate "a well-founded fear of persecution" were they to remain in the Soviet Union.

It was a major change in procedure, marking one of the few times that Washington had not automatically approved refugee applications from Soviet ***Jews***. In the meantime this year, more than 13,600 other Soviet ***Jews*** with apparently similar backgrounds have moved on to the United States from this primary transit point.

Those left behind say they do not understand why, and wonder what their next move should be. "There is no difference between us and those who were accepted," said Alexander Rabichev, a 34-year-old dentist from Moscow whose application was rejected last month.

"To be a ***Jew*** in Russia is to be discriminated against," Mr. Rabichev said in lightly accented English. "Finding a job was very difficult. To enter the institute there meant many, many problems because we are Jewish."

"The Americans," he said, "***now*** tell us, O.K., we are restricted, but maybe not at a level that qualifies us as refugees. Where is that level? What is the criterion? Maybe it would be better ***if*** I come without an eye or an arm?"

Victims of a Decision

United States officials in Rome declined to discuss their reasons for rejecting Mr. Rabichev and the others. But they apparently have fallen victim to a decision in Washington to scrutinize refugee applications more closely at a time ***when*** a rising number of Soviet ***Jews*** and Armenians are clamoring to leave their country.

Amid a growing dispute over the new emigration situation, Attorney General Dick Thornburgh announced measures on Thursday to ease the bottleneck, including extraordinary use of his parole authority to admit those in Ladispoli who had been turned down. Parole status may be better than but it is more cumbersome than being declared refugees. They must find sponsors willing to promise financial support, and can expect a more difficult time in becoming American citizens.

Word of Mr. Thornburgh's announcement spread quickly through Piazza Vittoria this morning, and it was the day's big news. But most of the people could not determine whether it would help them. More than a few said they expected to be here for a while.

Ladispoli, a town of 17,000, is accustomed to strangers. In the summer, tens of thousands of Romans flock here to cool off by the water; for the remainder of the year, apartments are empty and available for emigrants. There are an estimated 6,000 transients - Russians, Poles, Iranians, Arabs and Africans - waiting for visas that will take them to their chosen destinations.

Soviet ***Jews*** dominate, more than 4,000 altogether, nearly all of whom could expect until ***now*** that they would be admitted to the United States. The windswept town square almost belongs to them. There, some try to sell items passed on from previous generations of emigrants, perching their meager wares for public inspection on the concrete rim of the fountain - a Soviet-made iron, a worn suitcase, a half-squeezed tube of toothpaste.

For the religious, there is a synagogue a few paces away, in a large hall that used to be a movie house.

They live in small apartments, usually one family to a room, and the monthly rent that each family must pay typically runs to $400 or more, quite high by local standards. Most of those who were rejected by the United States subsist on allowances from the American Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish relief and social welfare organization based in New York.

For the most part they are well educated, and their numbers include scientists, physicians, engineers and computer programmers.

Several suspect that their education has worked against them. To American officials, they said, it may have been taken as evidence that they had not suffered discrimination, rather than that they had to overcome higher barriers than normal.

And it is deeply upsetting, they said, not to know what awaits them. "We can't go back - we don't want to go back," Mr. Shpaer said. "***Now*** we are trapped here, and our future is not clear."

Graphic

Photo of Soviet ***Jews*** gathered in Ladispoli, Italy, a way station for emigrants headed for the United States. (NYT/Stefano Micozzi)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: REFUGEES (90%); EMIGRATION (90%); ***JEWS*** & JUDAISM (89%); CITIZENSHIP (74%); IMMIGRATION (67%); APPROVALS (67%)

Company: IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (82%)

Geographic: MOSCOW, RUSSIAN FEDERATION (73%); RIGA, LATVIA (71%); UNITED STATES (96%); RUSSIAN FEDERATION (92%); LATVIA (56%)

End of Document