

Stabilizing Lefrak City: Jewish and Muslim Immigrants Help Revive Troubled Complex

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Body

Back in Guinea, Mohammed Bolde had heard from those who journeyed to America of a place called **Lefrak City**. The promised land was dotted with hardships, but in **Lefrak City** the fellowship of Africans made them easier to endure.

Since arriving here six months ago and quickly moving into one of the 20 buildings of **Lefrak City**, the Queens development, Mr. Bolde has prayed every day in a two-bedroom, ground-floor apartment that was converted into a mosque two years ago. In fact, he was surprised to hear that **Lefrak City** did not always have a mosque. "After all, we were told that New York had everything," Mr. Bolde, 31, said in French, after 60 residents prayed together recently.

In another apartment in a nearby building, Bluma Palvanova and two other **Jewish** refugees from central Asia were discussing the synagogue they expect to open in **Lefrak City** this summer. With as many as 10 **Jewish** families moving into **Lefrak** each month, they decided last year they, too, needed a place to pray.

Two decades ago, racial fears led to the departure of **Lefrak City**'s white middle class and left it teetering on the edge of collapse. Many believed that crime and other social problems associated with the poverty of the new residents would doom the housing experiment that had played a crucial role in developing central Queens. But in the last few years, an unlikely combination of newcomers has **helped** bring new life to **Lefrak City**: **Jewish** refugees from the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and **Muslim immigrants** from Africa.

While no precise figures are available, the president of the tenants' association estimates that about 20 percent of the 25,000 people living in **Lefrak**'s 5,000 units are African or Soviet **Jewish immigrants**.

The coincidental arrival of the African **immigrants** and **Jewish** emigres has **stabilized Lefrak City**'s population, said Samuel J. **LeFrak**, the 78-year-old builder who developed the **complex**. And the mosque and synagogue underscore the two groups' deepening roots in a **complex** whose motto has been from the start "total facilities for total living."

Meanwhile, some shrewd policies and nearly \$1 million in renovations have made **Lefrak**'s disparate groups, if not closer, at least tolerant of one another.

Stabilizing Lefrak City; Jewish and Muslim Immigrants Help Revive Troubled Complex

"We went through the whole cycle of frustrations," said Mr. LeFrak in his office on Queens Boulevard, a few blocks from the only 1 of his 300 New York-area developments that bears his name. "It took hard work, blood, sweat and tears. But it's still there. And high up, you can still see our name on the building. We didn't remove it. And now we're into the third chapter of the history of Lefrak City."

Sprawling across 40 acres in Elmhurst, Corona and Rego Park, Lefrak City was built privately starting in 1960 as an instant neighborhood with retail and office space -- and 20 18-story balconied buildings of regimented brick, with names like Peru, Singapore and Rome. A typical two-bedroom apartment now rents for \$865 a month.

For the original residents, most of them Jewish migrants from the South Bronx, the Lower East Side and Brooklyn, Lefrak City was a step up into apartments with air-conditioning, a place where they could play tennis, swim, shop and park their Buicks in garages.

But in the mid-1970's, a Federal housing-discrimination suit accused the Lefrak Organization of bias against blacks. Lefrak never admitted wrongdoing, but a consent decree settled the lawsuit, with the company promising to prohibit discrimination and to give a month's free rent to 50 black families to help them move into white buildings. The prospect of change set off a near panic among many longtime residents, and in 1974 and 1975, the Jewish residents virtually abandoned Lefrak City.

A Decline, Then a Revival

According to Census data, in 1970, whites accounted for 82 percent of Lefrak's population, and blacks only 8 percent. In 1980, blacks totaled 67 percent, whites, 25 percent. By 1990, whites made up just 9 percent, with blacks up to 79 percent.

As Lefrak faced rising vacancies, Mr. Lefrak said he had to loosen some of the strict criteria that had been used in screening tenants -- in particular, by accepting applicants whose incomes would have been too low to qualify earlier. Indeed, by 1980, the population was largely poor.

Lefrak was becoming a different place, with rising crime, broken benches, damaged locks on entrances and graffiti on corridors and in stairwells. In 1989, the complex suffered another blow with the departure of the Social Security Administration, Lefrak's largest commercial tenant.

But things began turning around in 1991 as the City Department of Environmental Protection filled the vacancy, bringing 4,000 employees. Management began evicting more problem tenants, a policy that Governor Hendley, president of the tenants' association, said his group had been pressing for years. And the revival gathered speed four years ago, many tenants said, with a new general manager, Carl R. Niveyro.

Mr. Niveyro tried to introduce programs that would knit the development's diverse population into something resembling a community. To keep teen-agers and younger children busy, Mr. Niveyro said, he built a small soccer field during the World Cup and a basketball court with bleachers, organizing various sports leagues. For the retired, he created a vegetable garden. For families, he and the tenants' association have held summer barbecues.

"After many years in real estate management, you realize that people need these things," Mr. Niveyro said. "They create a sense of community."

On a recent Friday afternoon, about 60 men from Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Somalia, Egypt, Tanzania and the Ivory Coast slipped off their shoes and streamed through a door above which a small sign read, in Arabic and English, "Masjid." (One young man, unwilling to leave his Nikes on the doorstep, carried them inside.)

As teen-agers played basketball outside, the men crammed into a large room -- young, old, one infant, most dressed in Western clothes, a few in African robes. Behind a curtained-off room could be seen the shadows of a solitary woman. Under the whirl of three ceiling fans, the men sat in prayer, white tape on the green carpet pointing them to Mecca.

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Jerry Williams, a **Lefrak** security guard who used to live in the development, said he approached the management with the idea of establishing a mosque three years ago when he noticed African residents trekking to a mosque in Corona. Mr. Williams, a black American who converted to Islam a decade ago, then went knocking on each **Muslim** resident's door, raising enough funds to cover the rent of about \$700.

Word spread quickly.

"When Africans come to New York," said Taiye Siyonbola, 35, a Nigerian who moved to **Lefrak** in 1990, "the first thing they want to find out is where they can worship."

Another draw for Africans is **Lefrak's** reputation as being safer than Harlem and the Brooklyn neighborhoods where Africans have concentrated. Because of improved security and the **city's** overall drop in crime, little remains of the drug sales in the courtyards and the nightly gunshots Mohamed Salem witnessed from his fifth-floor apartment four years ago.

Back then, Mr. Salem, 46, an Egyptian **immigrant**, said he locked his three teen-age children in his apartment the minute they returned from school. "We live in peace now," Mr. Salem, a travel agent, said.

No one knows exactly how many Africans live in **Lefrak City**, partly because they come from many countries and speak different languages, though French and English, legacies from their former colonizers, unify some of them. But on the playground, in the courtyards, around the entrances, along the surrounding sidewalks, they are a presence.

Most of the **Jewish** residents are refugees from the former Soviet Union's Central Asian republics and call themselves Bukharan Jews. Mrs. Palvanova, who has become something of a spokeswoman for the new diaspora, said many come from around her hometown of Kokand in Uzbekistan. About 60 of the 300 families in **Lefrak** share some ties with the Palvanova clan, she estimated.

Lefrak's self-contained world **helps** them sustain their tradition of living with several generations under one roof.

"We have lived like this for 2,500 years," Mrs. Palvanova, 46, said. "We don't want to lose our traditions. We want something good from American people. But we don't want to lose our customs. We don't want to lose our children."

'Together Is Better Than Living Alone'

The journey of Gavrial Kagzakov, 59, seems typical. After arriving in the United States in September, he stayed with his son in Flushing and waited for a vacancy in **Lefrak City**. Mr. Kagzakov recently moved into a three-bedroom apartment with his wife, mother-in-law, son, daughter-in-law and two granddaughters. His daughter lives in a nearby building with her husband and daughter.

"Together is better than living alone," he said.

Another tie is their religion, which they practiced secretly in a Communist nation's predominantly **Muslim** republics.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Kagzakov and Mrs. Palvanova, both children of rabbis, talked of the synagogue coming to the apartment of Esther and George Ackerman. The Ackermans, one of the few **Jewish** couples who did not leave in the 1970's, said **Lefrak City** had a synagogue when they arrived 26 years ago. It closed a few years later.

Last year, as more **Jewish** refugees moved in and many elderly found it difficult to cross the highway to attend synagogues in Rego Park and Forest Hills, Mrs. Palvanova and others decided to bring it back.

The **Lefrak City Jewish** Center has been incorporated and should open in August, in the basement of a building named Ceylon.

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So far, the African immigrants and Jewish refugees say they have mixed little. Mrs. Palvanova said she hoped they would grow closer once the Jewish Center also starts offering various classes and tutoring programs for children -- which would be available to all residents.

Instead of the racial suspicions that tore Lefrak City in the 1970's, the small encounters between the new groups have reflected the immigrant experience's unifying force.

When Mrs. Palvanova arrived four years ago, hers was the only Jewish family on a floor occupied by immigrant families from Africa, the Caribbean and India.

"They helped me. They gave me clothes and furniture," Mrs. Palvanova said. "Now our children play together. I like that."

Graphic

Photos: A coalition of Muslim and Jewish immigrant groups has brought new life to Lefrak City. The complex now has a first-floor mosque. (Nancy Siesel/The New York Times)(pg. B4); About 20 percent of the 25,000 people living in Lefrak City, in Queens, are African or Soviet Jewish immigrants. Gavrial Kagzakov, on the balcony, recently moved into a three-bedroom apartment with his wife and five other family members. Programs at Lefrak City are intended to knit a diverse community. At age 5, children can learn to play tennis free. Flags flying at Lefrak City mirror the diverse roots of the residents, many of whom are immigrants. (Photographs by Nancy Siesel/The New York Times)(pg. B1)

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