

Martin Schwarzschild

144 WEST 86 STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10024

August 1, 1974

Mr. Max Stern
1 West 81 Street
New York City 10024

Dear Mr. Stern,

The enclosed report is the result of our years effort
on behalf of the Russian Jewish emigres.

To put it in a nutshell, I feel that the Jewish community
is not getting one hundred cents for every dollar spent,
primarily due to inadequate leadership, planning and
understanding.

Kindest personal regards, also to Mrs. Stern,

Sincerely,


Martin Schwarzschild

cc: Rabbi Norman Lamm
Rabbi Steven Riskin
Mr. E. Michel
Mr. Jack Weiler

I have been asked to report on the activities of the West Side Volunteers Committee to Aid Russian immigrant Jews and on my own activities on their behalf since last August, 1973.

Originally this committee was formed to offer hospitality to newcomers who at that time were housed primarily in transient hotels on the West Side, such as the Embassy, the Bretton Hall, the Park Royal, and the Latham hotel. The committee arranged for invitations to the newcomers to homes of Jewish families in the neighborhood for Friday evening, Saturdays, and Sundays, to let them feel that there were people in the United States who cared about them, in addition to those who were active in assisting them to come from the Soviet Union. At the outset, nothing was intended by the Volunteer Committee other than to offer them the comforts that hospitality can bring -- friendship, advice, and perhaps such practical aid as obtaining employment for them and putting them in contact with people in the areas into which they were moving.

However, it very soon became necessary to broaden our activities in order to absorb these newcomers into the New York Jewish community. Most of us had never heard of NYANA (The New York Association for New Americans), the agency responsible for refugees when they arrive here and operating under the auspices of the UJA. None of us were familiar with their methods of functioning and the procedures they followed. We learned, in time that NYANA meets those who came to the N.Y. area at JFK airport and brings them to the hotels. (Those who do come to the hotels are really those people who know no one in

the U.S.: no friends, no relatives, usually no contact in the N.Y. area.) At the airport, they are given an envelope with some money and a slip which tells them that they have an appointment at the offices of the NYANA some two or three days later. However, there was no orientation, no welcome. There was not a cup, a glass, a knife, a fork assigned to a Russian Jewish family. The volunteers therefore attempted to ameliorate the situation in the hotels. As the numbers and the pace of arrivals increased, that began to prove burdensome. Clearly, the scope and importance of such service transcends the capacity of a few volunteers, and belongs in the hands of NYANA.

However, with all the good work NYANA does, we have reason for serious criticism of its operation, and question some of the fundamental concepts which guide it. We genuinely and sincerely feel that NYANA must improve and reorient itself if it is to function adequately at this time. NYANA prides itself, justly so, on the aid and resettlement that NYANA and its predecessor organizations made possible for the many immigrants who came after World War II, from displaced persons camps, Egypt, Syria, Hungary, etc. It must not fail now that a new kind of immigration is coming to our shores.

Once the confidence of the newcomers in our group was established, we were informed of certain procedures that NYANA follows. After two meetings that I personally had with Mr. Soskis, and numerous conversations with Mr. Prusan and several of the case workers, I am convinced that these procedures can and must be improved for the benefit of the Russian immigrants.

These are the areas to which I wish to address myself, the areas of the greatest shortcomings in NYANA, some but not all of which derive from its self-definition as a social welfare agency. The whole idea of NYANA as a social work agency, in the same category as the N.Y. State Department of Social Services, is irrelevant, unjust, and counter-productive. The Russian Jewish emigrees are not social welfare clients in the sense that clients of the Department of Welfare are. They are immigrants who want to have their dignity restored, to function as responsible human beings in a free society, to learn the language of their new country and become productive, and perhaps even to live a free and full Jewish life. They are not, in the great majority of cases, "social problems." There is, of course a degree of "cultural shock" which must be reckoned with. For example, it takes a long time for the Russians to learn that the volunteers -- most of whom are women -- are not "agents" of the HIAS, of Joint Distribution Committee, or NYANA -- and certainly not of the FBI, the KGB, or any other governmental institution.

Coming from the Communist system, the immigrants consider anybody who sits behind the desk as somebody to be watched; anybody who has any authority (and what greater authority is there than the purse strings!) is somebody to be feared. Anybody who at the moment really has the power of existence over them is somebody to be held in awe. And the case of workers at NYANA, with very few exceptions, are fully cognizant of this, and fully exploit it. We are dealing with a group of immigrants the likes of which we have not seen in the

U.S., certainly not in the last 50 years. They are not Western-oriented. Since the majority of these people are under sixty, the Soviets have successfully prevented them from major exposure to Western ideas. They are all products of Soviet orientation, ways, and culture -- in everything from religion to abortion. This awareness must guide NYANA employees.

The policy of NYANA is often unnecessarily insensitive. At the first meeting the immigrants have with a NYANA social worker (a meeting which often takes three hours), many of them are asked questions which are totally irrelevant and really not the business of the representatives of the Jewish community (which NYANA employees, of course, are). The immigrants are told that they must leave the hotels and find themselves an apartment, but they are given no direction as to where to find such apartments. They are not enlightened about any of the problems of housing that we have in the city. They are told nothing of the problems of schooling in the New York City area. They are given a map of the subway and told to report back to NYANA for another appointment. (Incidentally, there is not enough discretion exercised in choosing the transient hotels for their initial stay. Thus the choice of the Holland Hotel on West 42nd St. was truly unconscionable.)

The following is but one illustration of the consequences of this attitude. In the early part of this year, people would come back to the hotel, having found very reasonable apartments-- five rooms at \$140. But when questioned as to location, they were

unfortunately in areas where one could not in clear conscience permit them to reside. Were it not for volunteers, many would have moved to such undesirable locations, many of them notorious high-crime neighborhoods.

There was no talk at the initial interview at NYANA about any kind of English schooling, nor was anything said about vocational guidance. An appointment is scheduled to see a guidance counselor, often two weeks or 18 days after the initial interview with the social caseworker. After the meeting with the guidance counselor, the caseworker and guidance person decide whether the refugees should be given lessons in English. The volunteers feel very strongly that every immigrant should be provided with English language instruction. NYANA is fully aware that the greater the degree of education of the immigrant -- physicians, journalists, lawyers, and scientists -- the greater the motivation to learn English. But shoemakers, clerks, and grocery employees were told to go out and find a job and told nothing of the need or opportunity to learn the language.

Yet, without English, even the simplest sales clerk cannot function.

Following is another of many examples of insensitivity -- and worse. People arrived at the hotel in June, 1974. Because the immigration at this point is way down from what it was in March and April, the waiting period at NYANA is very short. Immigrants were told on their second day here to find an apartment, and that should they fail to do so they will not be given English lessons or assistance in finding a job! Seventy-two hours in a totally strange city to find an apartment -- how? In what neighborhood? near what schools? near what trans-

portation? This is indeed cruel.

The policy of NYANA of removing people from the hotels as quickly as possible, is justified on the one hand and not realistic on the other. It is justified for people with children; the hotels are not an ideal living situation. But it is unreal from the point of view of what it takes to adjust people who have left Russia, many of whom have spent 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 months in Italy waiting. It will take them a month or 6 weeks before they can even acclimate themselves to New York, find directions, developing a sense of proportion.

People tend to be clanish. Just as the Italians settled in one neighborhood and the German Jews settled in another neighborhood, so we find that many of the Russians are moving to Brighton. After having paid visits to Brighton on several occasions, I would hate to have a reporter from The New York Post join me in looking for sensationalism. What he would see there would be the kind of scandal that makes for journalistic sensation: Four and five people living in a one bedroom apartment without furniture. People who have been here for 7 and 8 months and who do not speak any English, because they haven't been given English in a foreign language school by NYANA-- and who therefore cannot really find employment. Because of NYANA's policy, I am afraid many of these people are going to be stuck in the \$2 per hour category for many years rather than to work their way up quickly when they could do it if they were given the rudiments of English. Russian Jews who are sent to a factory

today very often learn Spanish more easily and more quickly and with more facility than English! NYANA must formulate a set of directives which should include as number one priority that every head of a household with or without children, man and his wife, should be given English lessons for a minimum of 12 weeks upon arrival here, as quickly as possible. Because some social workers felt that there was no great hurry for a vocational appointment, and since the vocational guidance person seems to have the final say as to who goes to which school they often miss the beginning of a six-week semester due to unnecessary delays.

One of the chief problems at NYANA is its bureaucracy. It seems that everybody has a supervisor, and nobody can do anything without somebody else's O.K. Everybody is dependent on somebody else. Now we are not talking about a multinational corporation; we are dealing with an office which, according to its director, has somewhere between 50-60 employees, including the secretaries and the receptionists and the security guards. The organization has 12 or 13 case-workers, and 4 or 5 people in a vocational department. It would seem that so few people do not need a half dozen supervisors; that the administrator of an organization ought to know the people who are working for him and not publicly state that the case-worker who has the greatest load at the moment, ~~somebody~~^{he} who has worked there for a number of years, is somebody that/has spoken to for only 10 or 15 minutes! The director's job should not be primarily public relations, but rather that of an administrator trying to tie

together all the difficult areas which one has in an absorption organization, one dealing with human lives. NYANA deals in no product; NYANA deals in the destiny of human beings.

There is a great deal of autonomy given to the case worker, despite the above-mentioned plethora of supervisors. He or she can make certain independent decisions in the realm of finances, in granting English lessons, in helping find apartments. It is the administrator's duty to lay down hard and fast rules, as firm as one can be in dealing with people, in all of these and other relevant areas. Administratively, a number of sources of irritation and dysfunction can be eliminated. It should be arranged that when the "client" does come in, that he is seen by the caseworker and somebody from the vocational department either at the same time or within a very few days -- not two weeks apart. A little efficiency can eliminate a great deal of unnecessary heartache.

Articles that have appeared in The New York Post and The New York Times report statistics of the percentage of people who have "made it" here. (There is, indeed, a large number who have succeeded in a very short time!) According to the June 11th article in The New York Times, the statistics given by Mr. Soskis indicate that about 45% of them are self-supporting (granting that there are degrees of self-support). But we are at least equally concerned about the other 55%! It is time for the community to recognize that this failure is to a degree the result of the lack of a uniformity of policy at NYANA. Very often there are people in the social work department who

do not know what is going on in the vocational department.

Because NYANA prides itself on being a social work agency, it insists upon confidentiality in everything to do with any of the immigrants. It therefore effectively discourages any real activity by volunteers. It has been publicly stated by an employee of NYANA that they strongly discourage and dislike volunteers. Yet, to my knowledge, no Russian immigrant has refused to give us name, address, and telephone number. They know that no volunteer has any ulterior motive and seeks only to help them in areas as varied as obtaining used clothes, cribs, baby carriages, furniture, dishes, radios, air-conditioners, assisting them in getting jobs, and making them cognizant of the services the city offers, such as day-care centers, evening classes in English, etc. NYANA would save us a great deal of trouble and effort if they would not stick to this confidentiality and thus hamper volunteer efforts. I realize, of course, that they cannot indiscriminately give out lists, but NYANA must also appreciate by whom they are offered volunteer assistance in our several communities. The volunteers, through their own limited abilities and resources have done a great deal for the Russian immigrants. Sixty jobs were provided. Many of them, because of the policies of NYANA, were not held long by the employees. Furniture, clothing, education has been provided by the volunteer groups. Sometimes I feel that some of the volunteer groups have themselves become absorption agencies in miniature, and this is wrong. There is no need for this. There is a place for volunteers and there is a place for the professionals. The professionals, in

this case, were they to be reorganized and re-directed; were a policy set down; were there an honest attempt made to be frank with the immigrant -- to tell him shortly after his arrival what he can and what he cannot obtain from NYANA, what NYANA is able to do for him and not able to do for him; then the Russian immigrants could be settled much more satisfactorily.

It is of the utmost urgency that NYANA reevaluate its currently negative approach to volunteers, whom it considers meddling amateurs and unwelcome nuisances instead of a source of assistance. It must look for cooperation, not confrontation. To that end, it must recast its policy, mood, and public relations. NYANA must seek to make the Jewish community at large cognizant of its activities. NYANA's contacts with the wider Jewish community have been extremely limited. I spoke to Rabbis in the city who know nothing of NYANA and nothing of its work. I have made the suggestion to NYANA that the New York Jewish community be informed of its activities through the New York Board of Rabbis. To date nothing has been done. When I suggested that the Jewish Press be used as an avenue of obtaining jobs, Mr. Slater of NYANA wrote to me that, "the Jewish Press knew nothing of NYANA's functions." One wonders at the procedures and effectiveness of NYANA's people in the vocational guidance department if the Jewish Press is not aware of the activities of NYANA. It does not take genius to realize that American Jews are sensitized to Russian Jewry, that if they were but asked, they would be an excellent source of jobs. The Rabbinate of New York must be

mobilized in order to provide employment for Russian Jews. Housing too is available in decent neighborhoods at reasonable costs, but the landlords in the community, through NYANA and the Anglo-Jewish press in New York, must be made aware of it. NYANA's efforts are not being channelled in those areas which would be most helpful to the organization itself.

Suggestions by "outsiders" to NYANA should not be automatically dismissed with the patronizing sneer of the insecure "professional." When, for instance, we suggested to NYANA that New York be no more inhospitable than Rome, and (as in Rome) provide each family with pots, plates, cutlery, etc., the answer was, "maybe" -- and nothing was done.

The question of residences is very important. People who have sat for innumerable months in Italy really don't want to sit another 6 or 8 weeks before they do something concrete in their new home. NYANA must formulate some sort of a policy on helping them to find apartments. It becomes somewhat easier when they have friends who recently arrived in the country and who have found apartments. These friends, whom they met in Rome, invite them to the same neighborhoods. IF NYANA prides itself on being a social work agency and if its employees must have a master's degree in social work, it is high time that some of them left their offices and went to visit these people, especially in Brighton, to see how they live and under what circumstances they have moved in.

At the outset NYANA had a far more realistic attitude toward apartments; people were taking apartments up to \$250 a month. Now they have a limit of \$200 for 3 people, which forces people to move into one bedroom apartments, very often to houses in areas which are undesirable. We have to face up to the fact that housing in the city is a very difficult thing. I recognize that these immigrants, in many instances, came from housing which is far inferior to whatever they get here. But obviously they immigrated for a purpose, and we should help them and assist them in achieving their goal. Is it our aim to duplicate the Soviet system, and crowd 4 to 5 people in a one-bedroom apartment?

I think NYANA could save the Jewish Community a great deal of money if a policy was set whereby when a man finishes his 12 weeks of schooling (we may assume that at that point he has been here for 4 months) he then obtains a job, and regardless of what type of job it is (with the exception of those very, very few people who we know have jobs of \$10,000 a year or better), NYANA would promise to pay the rent for another three months. NYANA would thereby eliminate the great amount of cheating that is going on by the immigrants, for the Russians frequently don't tell NYANA that they are working. They do this because, unfortunately, some immigrants do have or acquire the "welfare" mentality, and consider it cheaper for them not to work, or inform NYANA of their employment; they get more money from NYANA than in those places where they are making the minimum, where after deductions they come home with \$70 or \$80 a week.

NYANA should establish a policy of giving these people sufficient money to exist. Can any single person today live on \$21 a week or a family of 3 on \$65 for transportation, telephone, and food? The community must budget that small percentage difference that it would take, above and beyond NYANA's budget, to make the difference between a sub-subsistence level and a subsistence level for the Russians.

The New York Jewish community is a large and prosperous community. Taking Mr. Soskis's figures of approximately 2500 Russian Jews in New York at the moment, that would mean there are now 600 or 700 heads of immigrant families with us. This Jewish Community of 3 million people in the greater metropolitan area should be able to absorb that number and should be able to absorb the 300 or 400 heads of families, wage-earners, who will come into this area in the foreseeable future. They must all be given English as a tool, and the wherewithall to see them through for the first 6 or 8 months, in the hotels and the first few months in an apartment, so that the money that they do earn can be used to buy some of the necessities that they require. In this manner, the refugees can very readily be absorbed into this great city and nation.

I personally do not think this is a very difficult task. It can be done. But it requires a new attitude, better administration, more efficiency -- more humaneness. Through a total reorganization at NYANA, through a re-direction, through a rethinking of its policies and the establishment of a stream-lined organization attuned

to this new group of immigrants, using the most modern methods of administration and benefiting from the experience of the past to the betterment of those who arrive in the future, the task of absorption will and can be smoother and more satisfactory.