

Repeat Migration and Multicultural Identity: A Case Study

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Abstract

Identity, multiculturalism and integration are inherently intertwined for immigrants as the creation of a new multicultural identity determines how successful an individual will be at integrating into a new environment. This paper investigates repeat migration and questions if and how different forms of migration impact the process identity integration. It examines the topic using a single case study, considering three stages of migration—forced, ideological and economic - and their different impacts upon identity. The paper considers the case study through the lens of the population group she represents at each stage of migration and the factors that impact their decision to migrate. Identity is a major issue only in the case of ideological migration, as in cases of forced and economic migration, the individual views adapting identity as a pivotal component for achieving success in the new reality, where improved quality of life is the ultimate goal of migration. In contrast, ideological migration to Israel poses a unique situation in which Jewish immigrants consider themselves to be returning home to an envisioned ideal; therefore, they often resist making the identity and lifestyle transformations necessary to meet the needs of their new reality in Israel.

Keywords: Forced migration; Ideological migration; Economic migration; Identity; Integration; Israel

1. Introduction

While immigration is a very common phenomenon in the modern world, few people can attest to living through multiple immigrations with such different experiences as the case study in this paper. Elena, an Ukrainian-born Jewish woman, moved to United States as child with her "refusnik" parents; she later immigrated to Israel as an adult, and then returned to the United States with her husband, an Argentinean Ole (the word used for Jewish immigrants to Israel, pl. = Olim), and Israeli-born baby girl. As an extraordinarily multi-cultural family, Elena's household offers a unique opportunity to reflect on the different ways in which immigration can impact an individual's identity and their integration into a new culture at different life stages and under different circumstances. This paper will consider the various aspects of Elena's multi-cultural identity and the factors that came to construct it as it is today. It will discuss the various forms of migration and their impact on her identity formation.

In deconstructing and comparing Elena's many migration statuses, the paper proposes that motivation for migration is the primary factor determining an immigrant's success in establishing a multicultural identity and achieving social integration. Socio-economic status in origin and destination countries, age at immigration, language acquisition, reception and recognition by locals into the accepting society and other variables all affect the immigrant's real and perceived degree of their integration. However, migration motivation precedes most of these variables, and affects their intent to remain, thus impacting the immigrant's drive to acquire relevant skills for success in the new environment.

2. Theoretical Framing

Theories explaining the psychology of immigration discuss a multi-stage process that an immigrant must go through in order to successfully integrate into his new environment.

This lengthy development involves mourning, acceptance of loss, missing home, idealization of the country of origin, friendship based on shared identification to the homeland, and finally leads to the immigrant's integration into the new country through a newly formed identity. (Mirsky, 2005) Upon arrival in a new host country, immigrants experience a sense of loss. They mourn the "family, friendships (social and work), language, cultural heritage, and familiar environment" they have left behind, which are naturally connected to the individual's sense of self. (Ward et.al. 2003) The individual feels threatened as self comprehension is related to identity within one's language, connection to others and awareness of behavioral expectations within a certain environment. This leads to identity re-organization, during which the immigrant re-imagines his own membership to the old culture and begins to create a connection with the new one. Ultimately, "it is how the individual perceives the impact of the crisis and the threat to the identity that will dictate how she or he will adjust to accommodate the challenge." (Ward et.al. 2003: 351) There is no need for the immigrant to fully remove all aspects of his native culture in order to successfully integrate during his process of mourning, however, "full assimilation and mourning of loss denotes the ability of immigrants to construct a meaning bridge between the host and native cultures, in effect, internalizing the lost culture in a way that allows the host culture to impact and influence the immigrants' lives." (Henry et.al, 2005: 118)

John Berry (2001) coined this acculturation and explained that the immigrant experiences a behavioral shift in the form of "psychological change resulting from cultural contact...the pace and extent of individual change is clearly related to the degree of cultural maintenance in one's own group, which in turn is linked to the relative demographic, economic, and political situation of the groups in contact." (Berry, 2001: 621) The existence or absence of cultural contact with the new local culture will provide the immigrant with resources that can help in their adjustment process. However, "if loss is not fully assimilated, the continuing bond with the native culture may either shield the immigrant from the host culture or may create an inner conflict between host and native cultures." (Henry et.al, 2005: 117) Without a successful reorganization of the identity into one that is multicultural and accepting of both the old and new culture, the immigrant runs the risk of negatively impacting their integration into the new society.

Nevertheless, Ward proposes that that the "person can develop a new identity to enable living and surviving in the new country, however, they may not always cultivate a strong sense of belonging." (Ward et.al, 2003: 364) This sense of belonging is related to integration into the new culture and creation of relationships with locals from that place. It is for this reason that experts dealing with the process of immigration and integration discuss the role networks have in the resettlement and adaptation process. (Brettell, 2009: 125) With the loss of family, and the social or professional networks in the native country, immigrants must build new networks in order to gain social capital in the new country; this is the only means of creating the necessary sense of belonging, because, as Ward et.al. (2003: 364) puts it "social interaction and interpersonal relationships shape the self."

3. Elena's Story

In the following section, we will discuss the three types of migration in Elena's life, shortly describe the group characteristics of each type and present Elena's personal story.

3.1. Forced Migration

Forced migration – including refugee flows, asylum seekers, internal displacement, and development-induced displacement – has increased considerably in volume and political significance since the end of the Cold War. It is closely linked to current processes of global social transformation. The global refugee population grew from 2.4 million in 1975 to 10.5 million in 1985 and 14.9 million in 1990. A peak was reached after the end of the Cold War with 18.2 million in 1993, under the fairly narrow definition of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which refers only to people forced to leave their countries due to individual persecution on specific grounds (Castles, 2003). The emphasis of this definition is on the protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution. A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. (1951 UN Refugee Convention)

3.1.1. Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union

Around 400,000 Soviet Jews arrived in the United States between 1968 and 2000. Until 1989, they were admitted as refugees due to the USSR's institutionalized anti-Semitism; a quota of 50,000 visas per year was created after the fall of the Soviet bloc. In the following years, large numbers of Soviet Jews continued to enter using alternate means of entry. (Cohen & Haberfeld, 2007) The majority came from Ukraine and Russia, but considered themselves to be "Jewish" above all else. Most spoke Russian and not the local dialect. (Cohen & Haberfeld, 2007) Despite their strong Jewish affiliation, they chose America over the Israel because "they could expect higher returns on their schooling." (Cohen & Haberfeld, 2007:656) The majority were highly educated, a fact that demonstrated high self-selection and assisted FSU Jewish immigrants in overcoming their initial lack of capital resources toward achieving economic assimilation in the United States.

With regards to economic assimilation into the larger American job market, FSU immigrants (both Jews and non-Jews) had great success. They relished the opportunity to be considered a part of the "white middle class in ways that was unthinkable in the Soviet Union, where they were perceived as ethnic/racial minorities." (Persky & Birman, 2005:567) As a result, they reached "earnings parity with comparable natives" within a relatively short period of time. Upon arrival, FSU males earned an average of 59% of native-born worker salaries, but had comparable salaries within 16 years of migration. FSU women earned 54% of their cohorts, but demonstrated a similar pattern in only 13 years. (Cohen & Haberfeld, 2007:663) They demonstrated a progressive movement from blue collar jobs into self employment opportunities, as well as professional, technical and managerial positions (PTM). (Haberfeld et.al, 2—7:22)

Additionally, they made a significant effort to Americanize their behavior and language. The level of English language knowledge possessed by FSU-born teens surpassed their Russian language ability within only four to five years of arrival; adults did not diminish their knowledge of Russian, but consistently improved in English. (Birman & Trickett, 2001) Adults also held onto Russian cultural patterns, while their children quickly adapted and became "more American than Russian oriented with respect to language and behavioral acculturation." (Birman & Trickett, 2001:471) In this way, by using their education, skills and work ethic brought from the Former Soviet Union, along with a desire to attain American language and culture, Jewish immigrants from the FSU quickly entered the white majority of middle class America.

3.1.2. Elena's parents: Political Refugees

In 1989, Elena and her parents left Kiev, Ukraine seeking political refuge abroad. Originally departing for Austria en route to Israel, they were granted entrance visas to the United States due to persecution encountered as refuseniks. Her parents had been harassed, sent to jail multiple times, had phone lines tapped and endured other traumas under the Soviet rule. They preferred the US over Israel, fearing that the socialist society would be too similar to communist rule, despite pointedly telling their daughter that "Israel is our country." Ultimately, perhaps tied up with their education and professional aspirations, they felt that the United States offered a better opportunity for the future.

They were required by the Soviet regime to leave all material possessions behind. They boarded a train and, following a difficult three-month journey through Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Italy, living off of money earned selling match-boxes on the black market surrounding the refugee facilities, the family arrived in Chicago, the city in which their sponsor lived. Upon arrival in the US, Elena's parents immediately went out in search of work. Her father, a sculptor with a dual Master's degree in art and math in the Soviet Union, found an entry-level position at an architectural firm. Her mother, a music teacher and with a Master's in Art History, sold curtains in a drapery store – a job she felt was degrading, but viewed as a necessity for long-term survival. With time, Elena's father continued working in architecture, eventually obtaining his license, starting his own architecture firm and ultimately being named Chicago's Architect of the Year in 2005. Her mother never returned to her profession, but rather utilized the English she had gained to become an ESL teacher for the large wave of Soviet immigrants that followed their own family's arrival. She taught English language for more than ten years and then became an administrator in the Chicago Board of Education. She reports being very satisfied with her chosen profession.

They divorced two years after arriving in the United States. The family moved to a new neighborhood annually during their first years in America, where Elena's mother met her second husband – an American-native.

Elena was enrolled in an elementary school where she felt isolated and different; she was initially the only "Russian" child in her class, teased regularly for dressing differently. She picked up English quickly, and soon became a translator for newer FSU arrivals. The first part of Elena's journey was definitely one of forced migration and included her parents successfully undergoing a process of redefining identity and rebuilding community relations in the United States. Elena's family was motivated to leave their country of origin due to persecution and therefore it never occurred to them to "look back". They invested an enormous effort to fit into the new environment and to succeed to establish a new life.

3.2. Ideological Migration

Ideological Migration is a form of immigration specific to Israel and seldom found in other areas of the world. Israel is built upon Aliyah (the word used for Jewish immigration to Israel), the migration of Jews from their Diaspora homes, which was "the central plank and raison d'être of classical Zionism. Every stream of Zionist ideology has emphasized the return of Jews to what is declared as their once and future homeland. Every Zionist political party, every institution of the Zionist movement, every Israeli government, and most Israeli political parties from 1948 to the present, have given pride of place to their commitments to Aliyah and immigrant absorption. (Lustik, 2001:33) As a central tenet of the State of Israel's establishment and ongoing existence, and the importance the ingathering of exiles plays in traditional Jewish liturgy, Jews have arrived in Israel from all parts of the world with this as their motive for moving. From before the State's establishment individuals and groups arrived wanting to be a part of the Jewish State, and believing that after years of "Living in Exile" this was the ultimate form of Jewish living.

North American Olim have consistently trickled into Israel in small groups since the establishment of the Jewish State. In the past decade, a total of 30,000 North American Jews made Aliyah. (Amit & Riss, 2009: 294) As members of the largest Jewish Diaspora in the world, they are comfortable, successful and accepted in the United States and Canada; they move to Israel by choice, inspired by Zionist ideology, religion, spirituality and discontent with the American Jewish way of life. (Amit & Riss, 2009) Due to English-language skills and a nearly 70% rate of academic degrees, they integrate quickly into Israel's hi-tech job market. Overall, those surveyed express high satisfaction after their move and enjoy a high quality of life in Israel.

Studies show that 50% of American Olim believe they are related to as "American" and not "Israeli" by Israeli locals. About half also attest to having a majority of friends from the United States or other Western countries and settle primarily in specific Anglo-friendly areas. (Amit & Chachashvelli, 2007) Additionally, their Hebrew skills are not extensive; English remains the primary language of family and social interactions. (Amit & Chachashvelli, 2007) It is fair to say that socially, American Olim are poorly integrated into Israeli society, reflecting their ideological desire to live in the *Holy Land*, but not necessarily be a part of Israeli culture and society as is.

Russian-American Olim represents an even smaller sector of this group. As outsiders to the American Jewish community they are generally less religiously observant than their American-born counterparts; for those who do not have a strong religious identity, having a positive attitude towards Israel is an important source of Jewish identity. After visiting Israel they describe feelings of "longing" and "fascination" being in a place "where everybody is Jewish" for the first time (Zeltzer-Zubida, 2004:13). While the majority of Russian American Jews visiting Israel do not ultimately immigrate to the country, these sentiments seem to be the main motivating factors for those who do.

3.2.1. Elena's story: "Aliyah"

Throughout her early experiences, and despite a Bat Mitzvah trip to Israel for her 13th birthday, Elena felt no connection to the Jewish State. As a teenager, she suddenly became obsessed after reading Exodus and was jealous of her youth movement friends who participated in Israel summer programs. Upon arrival in college, Elena was thrilled by the prospect of Birthright – a free ten day trip to Israel, but was unable to attend following her mother's begging requests that she not visit as the Second Intifada had begun. Elena channeled her energies into becoming the poster-child of Israel on-campus advocacy. She ran events, spoke at large rallies, and eventually expanded the Israel group she started to every university in the Chicago area. She even won awards for her work - having visited Israel only once at the age of thirteen. Elena found a job doing on-campus Israel advocacy, and was immediately sent for 6 weeks of post-college trips around Israel to fill in this gap. She did not particularly like Israel during Birthright, noting that participants do not come into contact with "real Israel."

It was not until she worked with young Israelis in the United States that she began to consider Aliyah and Israeli culture as a potential way of life for herself. Four young Israelis gave Elena "her first real contact with Israelis" and stimulated the consideration of making Aliyah. In 2006, Elena made Aliyah. She had already met an Argentine Oleh, through her work. He, a Spanish-language journalist with a non-religious, non-Zionist family background, had moved to Israel a year before, following after an Israel trip for 20-something Argentinean Jews. At first, Elena lived in an immigrant absorption center set up specifically for young, Western Olim. The two later moved into a nearby apartment in Emek Refaim, a neighborhood known to be filled by English-speakers. They married in the summer of 2007 at a ceremony where Russian, English, Spanish and Hebrew held equal parts. Elena's story demonstrates the ideological motivations that push American Jews – as well as second generation Russian Jewish immigrants in the United States – to make Aliyah: the desire to be in the Jewish homeland. This ideological urge, based on the ethnic bond to the Jewish State, causes them to set aside material comforts of America in lieu of a more "meaningful Jewish life." Economic and professional considerations are given thought, but are not – and cannot be – understood to the fullest extent until migration and the realities of Israel versus the United States are realized. This impact will be discussed in the next section.

3.3. Economic Migration

One of the most prominent and visible forms of migration in the 21st century, with an impact on markets, development and policies worldwide, economic migration at the micro level is largely decided by the pursuit of a better life, or when the expected economic gains will exceed the migration costs. (Zaletel, 2006) The Neoclassical Economics Theory, one of the longest-standing and best-known migration theories, explains that "individual actors decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return, usually monetary, from movement." (Massey et.al, 1993:434) Individuals expect a higher return on their human capital; they believe moving will lead to a better quality of life and for that reason, willingly make sacrifices and investments including travel and moving costs, learning a new language and living far from social ties. (Massey et.al, 1993: 434)

Economic migration relates to both unskilled labor and highly skilled labor. In the case of Israel, emigration is usually performed by the countries' better educated population and often explained as brain drain. "If the return to education and capital after taxes is lower in the country of origin than in a potential country of destination, then those who choose to emigrate should come from the upper ends of the education and income distribution." (Gould et.al, 2007) In Israel this is true, as the probability of emigration is 2.5 times higher for those with at least a bachelor's degree, but it is even more probable for new immigrants. (Gould et.al, 2007) The rate of emigration is exponentially higher for immigrants with higher education and "English speaking immigrants tend to leave Israel at the highest rate, most likely due to the lack of a language barrier and visa problems to enter the United States or Europe." Russian immigrants tend to leave at a similar rate. (Gould et.al, 2007) Studies done on Israeli emigrants to the United States indicate that the rate of immigration is directly related to economic circumstances in Israel and their considerations are identical to those of other economic migrants. They claim to leave in order to create a better, easier life than can be achieved in Israel. And, due to positive self selection, Israeli emigrants in the United States integrate into the local labor market quickly, "their skills, whether measured by education, occupation, or hourly wage, are higher than those of natives," thereby most often achieving their goal (Cohen & Haberfeld 144).

3.1.1. Elena's story

In 2010, Elena and her husband moved to Chicago with their newborn baby girl. While not a decision made lightly, both felt it was the right move for their family's future. After four years in Israel, Elena's Hebrew skills were still limited, offering her restricted access to jobs in her field of art and education. Her husband had already reached the glass ceiling in his profession, and had started his own business in video editing. They were struggling financially and saw few opportunities for change; worries about their daughter's future overtook Zionist ideals. They lived in a social circle composed mostly of Olim, and began to feel the absence of support (financial and emotional) that new parents generally rely on family members to provide. Leaving Israel seemed like the best choice for their family's future. Upon arrival in Chicago, they lived with Elena's family for a few months as they settled into the new surroundings. Her husband immediately found a good-paying job in his field. Elena had the economic means to stay at home with her baby before beginning to sell hand-made Judaica. Two years after their move, both missed certain aspects of Israel, but do not regret their decision to leave. They moved once again, this time to Texas following a job offer.

They plan to raise their daughter as fluent English, Spanish and Russian speaker, Hebrew is less relevant for them. Israel will continue to play a role in their family's multi-cultural character, but it will never be a fully integrated part of their family identity. This part of the story indicates that while individuals may feel a connection to Israel as the Jewish State, ultimately the fact that it “offers less economic opportunities and mobility” wins out. (Zeltzer-Zubida, 2004) After living a few years in Israel, Elena recognized that Israel is a difficult place to succeed in and realistically offers fewer opportunities than the US. After a few years of struggle, economics played the same role for her as a new immigrant that it does for many Israeli-born emigrants – “it leads them to view Israel as a symbolic home and homeland, but not as a place they would consider settling and living in.” (Zeltzer-Zubida, 2004) Ideological motivations for moving were replaced by a realistic understanding of the situation and led to the decision to migrate once more in search of a better quality life with more opportunities for mobility.

4. Conclusions

In considering Elena's story about repeat migration, it is evident that at present, she possesses a multicultural identity of various components that she intends to pass on to her young daughter. She very eloquently summarized her complex mix of identities by saying:

"I spent all this time really worrying about my identity. Am I a Jew or am I a Russian, or am I a Russian Jew or am I an Israeli, or am I an American Israeli? What am I? So, in the Soviet Union, I was not a Russian or a Ukrainian, I was a Jew. I came to America, and I was a Russian or a Ukrainian. And then I went to Israel, and I was an American. And what I really learned from it all is that it's just not important."

Her sense of identity and belonging is not one that she believes as being entirely contingent on her own behavior. Her actions to become integrated into each of those societies had much to do with external perceptions of her ethnicity, religion or nationality. Those same external factors often hampered her own self identification with a group to whom she wanted to belong, and ultimately causing her to declare “that it's just not important.”

Still, when looking at Elena's history in the context of Berry's (2001) discussions of acculturation and Ward et.al. (2003) or Mirsky's (2005) explanations of an immigrant's process of development, it is apparent that her three migration experiences were not the same. When Elena and her family came to the United States as refugees they created a "bridge between the host and native cultures, in effect, internalizing the lost culture in a way that allows the host culture to impact and influence the immigrants' lives" (Henry, 2005). Her parents made strong efforts to learn English, to adapt professionally and to take on the American way of life as their own – as demonstrated by their career choices and decision to divorce a few years after arrival. Still, they held onto aspects of the Russian culture they felt were important, such as a refusal to allow Elena to live at her university. Elena's family went through Berry's behavioral acculturation during their adjustment to America, as she said “I feel like Russian Americans, we have some things that make us different as Russians, but overall, we're American.” Her words are representative of the behavior Birman et.al. (2001) attributed to Soviet Jewish immigrants in the United States as a result of the psychological loss of forced migration patterns.

In contrast, Elena's arrival in Israel was due to ideological motivation and she therefore experienced less of a loss from the immigration to a new country. As Ward explained, “it is how the individual perceives the impact of the crisis and the threat to the identity that will dictate how she or he will adjust to accommodate the challenge;” (Ward, et.al. 2003:351) Elena's belief that job interviews should be conducted in English shows that she did not feel moving to Israel threatened her American identity. She expected Israelis to adjust and accommodate her as an American and not the other way around. Elena lived and socialized in Jerusalem surrounded primarily by other English speakers; she did not experience a complete "psychological change resulting from cultural contact" because she did not have extensive contact with Israeli culture. She represents the pattern of separation in Berry's (2001) acculturation theory. Elena expresses a love for Israel and while she may have developed somewhat of a new identity in order to live and survive in Israel, she did not "cultivate a strong sense of belonging" to its culture or society. (Ward et.al, 2003: 364) Throughout the interview, her sense that she was not a part of the "club" was a reoccurring motif; *"I certainly felt like an outsider in Israel even though I had a wonderful community that I was a part of. I definitely never felt like one of the Israelis. I feel like it's a welcoming society, but at the same time it's also a closed society."*

Ideologically motivated migration often does not sustain reality, particularly when the new reality is more difficult than the original one and there is a constant awareness of the option to return. In Elena's words:

“Sometimes I feel like I never really made Aliyah, because it was always in the back of my mind that I could leave. I was never fully committed or 100% sure that was I was going to be there forever... But you know, we never signed up to give away our lives to Israel, so if we're not going to be happy there and if we're not going to be able to give our child the kind of life we want her to have there – well, we never signed up for that.”

For this very reason Elena decided to migrate again and this time for economic reasons. Family income was not sufficient to provide them with the desired quality of living, which they knew could be attained easily in the United States. Thus her final migration fits Zaletel's (2006) definition of economic migration, the pursuit of a better life: expected economic gains will exceed migration costs. The vast difference between the successes of the three migration experiences discussed in this paper ultimately come down to the focus placed on integration resulting from migration motivation of the immigrants themselves. Thus the importance of this act is one determined by the motivations for their migration. In the case of FSU Jewish immigrants, turning back was not an option and the United States was considered a path to improving quality of life on many levels following forced migration. In contrast, the ideological motivations of American Jewish Olim who move to Israel by choice always retain the option of return to America. Therefore, when reality finally catches up, economic considerations dominate. It seems that ideological migration does not force the immigrant to put in the effort into full integration into their new country, which then increases the chances for return.

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