



Irma Simuni, immigrant and current JFCS volunteer coordinator, with a young Resettlement client.

the feeling that we were doomed if we were Jewish.”

Simuni remembers being taken by volunteers to her first seder at Congregation Adath Jeshurun and being asked to come to the bimah and read “Let My People Go” in Russian. She remembers the emotion that swept the room – and the incredible feeling of gratitude in her own heart.

Several women from that period of her life stand out, including JFCS Trustees Lana Dishler and Adena Potok, both of whom were part of that initial “sisterhood” of women. Simuni says that she constantly feels their presence and spiritual guidance in her life.

As JFCS guided her through the early weeks, Irma Simuni stumbled on a serendipitous opportunity. The agency – which was helping her – needed some help itself with resettlement work. Simuni, a former teacher who was fluent in both English and Russian, seemed appropriate for the job. “Never did I expect to find a job so quickly – and get paid for it – doing work that

was so important to me,” she says. “I actually felt self-esteem for the first time in my life.”

If she has one special heroine in her personal and professional life, it is Sylvia Thomas, whose work as resettlement director for JFCS affected literally thousands in the Russian community. “This community could not have

become what it is now without her. She carries a world of wisdom and good will in her soul.”

Today, Irma Simuni is proud to be an American, proud to be working with JFCS. And she is delighted to be working with

some New Americans – most of whom are former JFCS Resettlement clients – who themselves have become volunteers .

“It’s a wonderful way of living your life,” says Simuni. “You get and you give. And the giving is much more fulfilling than the getting.” ●

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For information on volunteering to help with New Americans or other clients, call (215) 698-9950, ext. 112.

JFCS Welcomes New Board Members

We proudly announce three new members of our Board of Directors.



David Colman is an architect and also serves on the Board of Trustees of the School District of Philadelphia. He is a member of the American

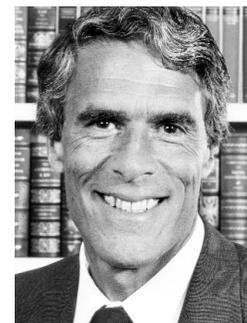
Institute of Architects and the Board of the Philadelphia Area Repertory Theater.



Adam Laver is an attorney with Klehr, Harrison, Harvey, Branzburg & Ellers, LLP and previously was an Observer on the JFCS Board.

He is a member

of the Regional Cabinet: Young Leadership, the Board of Temple Beth Israel - Beth Zion and the Board of Committee of 70 – Philadelphia.



Murray Levin is a Partner with the law firm of Pepper Hamilton LLP. He is also a Board Member of Graduate Hospital and the Philadel-

phia Bar Association, and participates in many national, local, and international activities.

Sylvia G. Thomas Looks Back at Her Role in Resettling Immigrants

Sylvia G. Thomas, director of Resettlement Services, recently retired after 24 years of service to the agency. A licensed social worker with a master's degree from Columbia University, she first started as JFCS caseworker and coordinator before she became director of Resettlement Services. She reflects on her diverse role and responsibility within the agency, and the changing face and needs of serving its immigrant constituents within the Greater Philadelphia area.

On "resettling" into a new phase of life:

"Yes, it's official. I really HAVE retired! After nine office moves in 24 years, it was time for me to 'resettle'—right out the door."

Preparing for a job that had no precedent:

"Somehow this department managed to bridge the language and culture barrier. Even though I don't speak Russian, I do speak Yiddish, which has been a tremendous help. Over the years, I did learn to speak enough key terms in Russian to get by. Plus I was surrounded by a bilingual staff, so we did just fine communicating. In the early days of this department, most of the people who came to us for resettlement services were primarily Russian Jews with refugee status, which meant they had well-founded proof of being persecuted in their country of origin. The agency and this department helped to resettle anywhere from 1,200–1,500 people in a year in the Philadelphia area. There were two big waves of immigration—in the late 1970s and early 1980s and then again in the late 1980s. But the needs remain the same—helping people to acculturate and move on with their lives in an entirely new country."

Why resettlement remains such a huge draw in Northeast Philadelphia:

"You'd be surprised how fast news

and information travels. I once received a letter that was entirely handwritten in Russian. It was sent specifically to me at the agency! The writer said that he was soon to be coming over to Philadelphia, and he had heard about me and our department, and could I please try to find him and his family an apartment in Northeast Philadelphia! So the word was out about me, and people knew to contact me specifically. Why Northeast Philadelphia? Because in the Former Soviet Union, people had heard that

"...the needs remain the same—helping people to acculturate and move on with their lives in an entirely new country."

this part of Philadelphia had a large Jewish population, as well as grass, trees and houses, which were a sign of success and affluence."

Standout memories:

"When I first started, and in the early days of this department, there was one Russian doctor, who was able to open an office. Nowadays, you wouldn't recognize Northeast Philadelphia. There are loads of doctors' offices! Even the billboards along the road are in Russian. Also, the children have excelled really well and have been accepted to top colleges. Many people came here to provide a good life for their children, and they did."

The difficulties of starting over:

"For many immigrant parents, coming here was a big letdown and a big adjustment, because they could never be what they were in the former Soviet Union. In many cases, they had to start all over again."

What resettlement is, and isn't:

"Resettlement is a government program, and because people came here with refugee status, the government is able to provide certain programs and services. Our goal has been to help



Sylvia Thomas, retired director of and currently consultant for resettlement services.

these immigrants get on with their lives and to eventually become productive citizens and an asset to our society. It's NOT all about handouts."

Resettling into a new chapter of her life:

"I'm not sitting still, that's for sure. I'm looking forward to taking some educational courses, volunteering, consulting, and staying in touch with some wonderful people and families I've met through the years. I really didn't want any special retirement recognition. For those who would like to, my retirement can be acknowledged with a contribution to JFCS. Now that would be very meaningful to me." ●

JFCS has established the Sylvia Thomas Fund for New Americans. To donate to this fund, call (215) 496-9700 or visit our website at www.jfcsphil.org.