Jews in the Communist Soviet Union were not allowed to practice their religion and if they tried to apply to immigrate they were blocked from jobs and schools. They became known as refuseniks. In the 1970’s, it became easier for Soviet Jews to emigrate and the Milwaukee Jewish community welcomed the immigrants at the airport and provided advice on everything from English classes to navigating the supermarket. Stan Azimov, born in Odessa, Ukraine, immigrated with his grandfather, father, mother and sister in 1993 at the age of 17. Stan describes the lengthy immigration process, which included a series of interviews, and vividly recalls the pivotal moment when at age 14 he became convinced that America would provide the best future for him and his family:

The whole [immigration] process started when I was 14. It took us like two or three years to go through the interviews, and we had to go to Moscow to meet with the American Council of Refugees; it was a very lengthy process...In Russia there was an interview to kind of prove that you are indeed a refugee; it was with a Washington official...so that’s the first moment which I actually realized that we are gonna be leaving, that the immigration is actually in place. We’d been talking about it, talking about it, but it wasn’t real until I actually attended that interview, and it was an interesting process. I kind of watched my family being interviewed... and they were recollecting all the instances of anti-Semitism throughout their life, because they had to show the Council that they are refugees indeed. And the Council was doing a very good job persuading them that they had a lot of Jewish friends who lived in Russia and doing very well and there is no anti-Semitism, and everything is peachy, because he was doing his job, I guess...But it was very interesting for me... because I wasn’t interviewed as a child, but I had...the opportunity to watch my family recollect this stuff which I had no idea, like how... it was written ‘stinkin Jew’ on the door of the apartment when they came from work; how they got laid off because they were Jewish; my dad was not able to attend the university because he was a Jew; my grandpa even worse because he also witnessed the...post-war and during the war, during the Holocaust, he was deported...My grandpa had a lot of immediate cousins who died in the Holocaust. So everything like that was brought up at this interview, so that [was] kind of the deciding moment; after the interview I’m like, “Okay, we’re going to America.”

Stan adds:

So, it sounded like we were doing the right thing...Even though my parents were well off, much better than most other people, because they were middle-class...we still felt like there was no future in Russia for us.

Stan describes his family’s unusual situation in Russia:

The reason was that we were well-off...Our apartment was five bedrooms because it at some point contained all our family who had moved to New York earlier, so it had five households living in the apartment at some time in the ‘50s and ‘60s. So my grandma actually had 11 sisters. Six did not
Despite their middle-class lifestyle, Stan was excited to leave for America:

As a young person, 14, 15..., it's everybody's dream I think to go to the United States...My mom actually visited America prior to us living [here], so did my grandpa, so she brought all the Snickers, and all the Coke, and all the [videocassette] tapes, and the music, and the bubble gum; I think it was all very positive for us to perceive. Again the only downside was my mother's kind of attachment to the apartment, but everybody really wanted to leave as soon as possible, I think. Plus...the fact that...when I was young, all my friends were Jews...As I grew up they were all gone and I was very lonely at the end, I think...It was just—it was just time to go; it felt like we have to join the others. I don't know, I think a couple years after us...the Jewish immigration pretty much ceased, because everybody left during the early '90s.

Even though the Milwaukee Jewish community made efforts to resettle the refugees in an organized manner, confusion could still arise. Says Stan:

We immigrated in 1993 along with my grandfather and his wife. Most of our family actually lives in New York, so we were not familiar with Milwaukee at all...Actually, my grandfather found out that he is going to Milwaukee at the airport... New York is the most common destination which absorbs Russian Jews, so for some reason we all assumed that New York it is. And my grandpa was leaving a month before us, so when he opened his ticket at the airport, he was like, "Wow, we went to Milwaukee." So we had to call all our family in New York because they were waiting for him at the airport. So it was kind of a confusing experience...We don't have any family in Milwaukee or any friends, so it was completely new. But we figured, we'll give it a shot, and if we don't like it, we'll just move to New York...and we're still here.

When it came time for Stan, his parents, and his sister to take the long flight to the United States, Stan describes his emotions:

I did feel very excited; I felt overwhelmed. I mean, it was just a feeling when you travel just to any new country. I think you feel excitement just because you don't know what to expect...But moving...permanently and it finally happened I was anticipating it for a long time so there was a lot of excitement. At the same time I was super tired because we had so much luggage, and I was wearing like three sweaters on the airplane because there was no space for them in a bag, so I was sweating, but none of that mattered. My sister actually also had a bump all of a sudden on her neck; it was like a cold condition...so she required some medical attention and we were worried about her, so it was a very mixed, mixed sign and, it was a very long flight. I think we had to make two connections, so it wasn't easy but the excitement was definitely there.
and anticipation, so when we actually made it and we saw our grandpa and we actually met with our volunteers right away in the airport, it was just very exciting times.

Volunteers from Jewish Family Services helped the refugees settle in. Stan describes how he and his family benefited from the programs:

We received...assistance from several services when we came. I think our apartment has been paid for four months by the [Milwaukee Jewish] Federation. We've been offered volunteer services, so there were two local Jews who volunteered to help us...So they...took us around as far as showed us the supermarket, where to purchase food. We stayed actually at Wisconsin Hotel for the first month and I believe that [was] also paid for by the community...And while we stayed for the first month, we were looking for an apartment to rent, and the Federation would cover the first four months, so that gave us five months to adjust and to find the area. I think the school was the deciding factor, so we picked up a place in Shorewood right...across from the high school...We stayed there for, I believe, two years, and then we have moved to Fox Point I think right after I graduated high school...I think my mom also found work in Fox Point... Everybody was more than helpful to point out the right directions for school, for employment, because we couldn't learn it by ourselves without any English.

Stan describes how he and his family adjusted to the language and customs in America:

[My grandfather] remarried and he came [to America] with his wife, and his wife also had... her parents...They were really old...from really little place in Ukraine, so they probably couldn't adjust to a big city in Russia...They were really shocked to be here...So what happened is a month through, when we came, my grandpa was already here for a month, so he was already, , somewhat established, and he showed us around and there was a commercial on TV for some product in a bottle, and...he told us, "This is a product that is constantly used; thank God that we figured it out. Originally we thought that it's oil, and my wife's father actually drinks some every day because, for his medical reasons, he needs to drink some oil, but thank God that we figured it out that it's actually shampoo."

Stan continues, "And my grandpa of course never spoke English except the most basic words, but they were the coolest words; they were like, ‘My grandson,’ ‘My granddaughter.’”

Stan had some adjusting of his own to do:

I actually graduated high school in Russia at age 16 because that’s kind of the most common graduation age. But then since I didn’t have much English, I had to go to the high school again for two years...[I] picked up some English, and that allowed me to kind of glided through my college and I graduated in three years.

In addition to help with the language, the Milwaukee Jewish community also provided job counseling for the Russian refugees. Says Stan:

The Federation also helped us with [finding a job]. The first couple of jobs were very odd, my also first couple of jobs were very odd...I started by shoveling snow from people’s driveways, then I
moved up to Sendik’s mid-department; I was cleaning some of the fridges where meat was held, and I think it was about a minimum-wage job. Then I moved to being a busboy for two years in a Pandl's restaurant, and from there I had a huge jump in my earnings when I switched to ice cream truck driver. It was actually a great job, which I worked for five summers. While I was attending UWM [University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee], every summer I would just drive every day on days off and I think I was about to make $150, $160 a day by selling ice cream…After just two summers I was able to buy my first car.

Stan describes the process his parents went through:

My parents also started, I think it was a place called "Cash Factory," which was just a packing facility; they were there for a while. And then my dad went to work to fix cars trying to apply his knowledge from Russia. I don't believe it worked out successfully because his biggest skill was to actually fix the broken parts of cars, like fenders…let's say, if your car was hit. In Russia you would actually straighten the existing door or existing car part and make it look like new, but the skill was completely useless here because in America they would actually just change the part…So he then switched to driving elderly to medical facilities and that was the base of his business, so he’s now in business driving elderly to the doctor…My mother was always into salons locally because that's what she felt like doing, I think. It gives you an opportunity to meet a lot of people and she really enjoyed it because...my mother loves keeping in touch with her friends and she met a lot of really interesting people by doing it, and she really enjoyed it. It was a new career for her, which I think...she still enjoys.

Once Stan had established himself in America, he explains how American movies played a role in his career choice and his vision of what America would be like:

I majored in Finance…My goal was to become a stock broker…Movies played a huge role in my kind of vision of what America would be like because we did have a VCR [Videocassette recorder] in Russia because mom brought it from the States and we rented a lot of movies, and so that kind of determined my expectations and what would be my career choice, I guess. So being a stock broker seemed super cool, so…upon graduation I joined all the discount stock brokers which was a discount company, one of the cheapest stock brokerage houses. After a couple of years I switched to UBS Financial Life, which is actually a really nice company, and worked there for a couple of years until I decided to pursue a completely different career…And so I decided to open a business…The cleaning business seemed like a really good idea because it didn’t require any initial investment…My company’s called "American Dream Cleaning,” and we’ve been in business since 2000, 2001.

In addition to pursuing his American dream, Stan also rejoices that America has given him the opportunity to embrace his identity as a Jew. He describes how the communist regime in the Soviet Union left his parents with no knowledge of the traditions or history:
As far as Jewish traditions...because of communism, and my parents were born in the mid-'50s—that's kind of the height of the communism—so they do not have any knowledge of anything Jewish—nothing, zero...So they still put [up] the Christmas Tree for example because it's a Russian tradition...And they don't have a Santa Claus but they have Grandpa Frost, that's what they call him, which looks exactly like Santa Claus, and we tell them to please stop...But that's what they grew up with, so they want to have it, so I guess it’s kind of funny.

Stan describes how he acquainted himself with his Jewish identity and history:

There was an organization called "Jewish Reach." It was...a huge organization targeting young people similar to myself at the age range of from maybe 13 to 20, and they...promoted kind of reintroduction of Judaism, just explaining to people who they are and what the history is. So that kind of was my initial source for reconnecting. I've also became friends with number of Russian guys who'd already been through that process and been much more active in celebrating the holidays...So they've also been able to help me get reacquainted. To be honest with you, I'm still maybe a third way through [laughs]. So I'm still sometimes feel very dark as far as knowing the prayers...knowing the holidays, so, it's a process which I hope maybe my kids will not have to go through...I actually take Hebrew just to be able to speak with [my son].

America gave Stan the opportunity to embrace his Jewish identity and raise his children Jewish, a freedom for which he is deeply appreciative:

For me as a young person...I felt very strongly that...I could learn and it's not too late. I've actually circumcised at age 19, so...I was very positive to becoming a full-functioning Jew finally, and I feel very proud that America gave me a chance to do that...I take a huge pride that if my parents would not immigrate when they did, I would not be able to raise my kids as a Jew...I feel very privileged to be able to give them a Jewish education.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

- What is different about Stan’s immigration experience, than others that you have read about?
- How would you respond to being asked to repeat two years of school that you had finished in another country? What do you think Stan’s attitude was?
- What holiday traditions do you and your family celebrates?
- How do you and your family celebrate your heritage?
- Stan and his family were welcomed by the Jewish community in Milwaukee. Create a guide for a new immigrant—what sort of things would they need to know in order to be comfortable in your community?
VOCABULARY AND GLOSSARY

Circumcision: removal of the foreskin from a boy’s penis; Jewish boys are traditionally circumcised at eight days old.

Communism (also communist, adjective): a political philosophy that promotes worker control of society’s means of production, such as factories or businesses. In Soviet Russia resulted in a regime that suppressed religious expression.

Pivotal (adjective): of decisive importance.

Stock broker: a type of middleman who manages stock market transactions.

Tapes (Videocassette tapes): before DVDs, people used cassette tapes to watch and record movies and television shows.

Vacate (verb): to leave

VCR (Videocassette recorder): a device that plays videotape tapes.

RESOURCES

American movies played a major role in defining Stan’s career choice and vision of America. The following is a list of films about immigration to the United States; have your students think about how the films present America and the immigrant experience.


DVD release of the 1986 movie. The film tells the tale of Fievel Mousekewitz, a young Russian Jewish mouse who is immigrating to America. During the passage over, Fievel and his family are separated, and the young mouse undergoes a series of adventures while trying to reunite with them in America. 81 minutes. Recommended ages: 4–10.


DVD release of the 1990 movie. Avalon explores Jewish family relationships, focusing on the story of immigrant Sam Krinsky and his Baltimore-based family. 128 minutes. Recommended ages: 11–adult.


DVD release of the 1985 film. Molly is a 9-year-old Russian-Jewish girl who is bullied at school. When Molly brings in a Russian-looking doll as part of a first Thanksgiving class display, her classmates begin to understand Molly and her family’s struggle for freedom. Based on the book Molly’s Pilgrim by Barbara Cohen. This film won an Academy Award for Best Live Action-Short Film. 24 minutes. Recommended ages: 5–14.


(Personal history account obtained from a January 12, 2012, interview and is now kept in the Jewish Museum Milwaukee archives.)