

Ex-Soviet Jews with Visual Impairments in Israel: Looking for Their Place on the Labor Market ¹

In: A View from the Outside: Russian Experts About Modern Israel / **Ed.**
by Dmitry A. Maryasis; IOS RAS. - Moscow: IOS RAS, 2021. - 400 p.

Worldwide, people with disabilities make up approximately 10% of the population (currently approximately 1 billion people).^[1] According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) Disability Report, around 15% of the world's population displays various health-related disabilities.[®] This data is clearly incomplete due to poor record-keeping in the 'global South; areas of armed conflicts, etc. Improved health, increased longevity and improvements in healthcare and health in the 'Global North' (increased survival of severely premature born children, treatment of diseases previously considered incurable, success in gerontology, etc.) also contribute to an increase in population numbers.

Nevertheless, people with disabilities constitute a significant 'segment' of humanity, with specific needs, unique experiences, behaviors and lifestyles.

In Israel, military operations and terrorist acts contribute to the common causes of disability such as various injuries, chronic illnesses as well as consequences of medical treatment. This prompted Israel to pay a great deal of attention to the rehabilitation and adaptation of people with disabilities, especially those incurred while in the military service. The State of Israel and the Russian Federation both ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012. However, problems faced by people with disabilities in Israel remain, especially with regards to employment. In Israel, this especially affects a group of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants with disabilities who came to the country after 1989.

¹ The Russian version has been published in: Contemporary Israel: Languages, Society, Cultures / Ed. by E. Nosenko-Stein and D. Sobolev. Moscow, IV RAN, 2021. P 292-332 (in Russian). The translation has been completed with the permission of the Publishers.

In this article, I analyze the problems related to employment of disabled people using life stories of former Soviet citizens with visual impairments who experienced various difficulties in adapting to the new reality - both in terms their new adopted country and their disability. Blindness (as well as significant visual impairment) are one of the most serious disabilities, and severely limits a person's life choices, such as acquiring education and training, building a career and/or the possibility of keeping a job after losing (completely or significantly) their vision.

Sources and methodology

The article is based on four life histories recorded by me in Israel in 2013. The interviews were conducted with disabled job seekers in Israel. All the interviewees were individuals with visual impairment constituting disability. All the informants talked about their life and 'disability experience' in the USSR or post-Soviet countries (in cases they already had a disability prior to emigration to Israel), including their work, as well as experiences of living with disability in Israel. Recorded and transcribed interviews were analyzed in the light of participants' disability experience and its impact on attempts to find a job. Biographical methods (Life History) were widely employed in this research, drawing on research by ethnologists and sociocultural anthropologists.

The stories analyzed are of one man and three women from Russia, Ukraine and Moldova (specifically, the unrecognized Republic of Transnistria) with varying degrees of disability (from total blindness to varying degrees of what was once termed 'weak of vision' in the USSR). Interviews were conducted in northern Israel: in Haifa and its environs, at the home of informants (in three cases) and in the premises of an organization for the blind (one interview).

These life stories were considered in the context of a wide range of disability issues in the former USSR and the State of Israel. Furthermore, statistical data published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, the Ministry of Healthcare and other organizations, research centers and individual specialists provided me with important additional sources.

Defining disability

There is no generally accepted definition of disability as a sociocultural phenomenon in academic literature or international legal documents. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines disability as the loss of an organ, physical or mental impairment, handicap and disability (i.e. inability or disability resulting from different congenital or acquired impairments).

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability is the result of a physiological or functional defect resulting from illness, accident, etc.^[3] Hence the great variations in statistical data on disability provided by different organizations and in different countries. These definitions, in turn, determine the availability or otherwise of social benefits, employment schemes and various support programs for disabled people.

Academic interest in the problems of people with disabilities rose after World War II, especially in the 1960s, when various minorities, including the disabled, were fighting for their rights in different corners of the world. Since then, several models or frameworks of understanding disability have emerged in academic literature as part of disability studies.

One model of understanding disability that has become widespread in the past and is still common in a number of post-Soviet countries is the medical model. According to this model, disability is a medical problem (the result of illness, functional impairment, accident etc.) that must be solved by medical means (treatment and rehabilitation). If the problem cannot be solved, then a person with disability must be eligible for social care. According to this model, disability is a personal tragedy causing a serious psychological trauma. People with disabilities are conceptualized as passive recipients of medical treatment and social care and are excluded from decision-making regarding their rights, education, employment, etc.^[4]

Currently, the most common approach to disability outside FSU (the Former Soviet Union) is the social model. According to this approach, the disabled are the most discriminated part of an 'abled society, which bears responsibility for this state of affairs. Disability itself, therefore, is a social construct created by able people to exercise social control and subordination of disabled people.^[5] This model has been criticized for its lack of attention to physiological problems of disabled people (including pain, psychological and emotional discomfort, etc.), as well as for its lack of interest in the historical context and cultural characteristics of different societies.

Apart from these most common models, there are several others: for example, the affirmative (positive) model incorporating the unique experience of people with disabilities, their achievements in different areas. The legal model, which emphasizes the equality of all people, including people with disabilities, and which sees its task in asserting their rights; the socio-cultural, or the historical-cultural model, that regards disability as a concept shaped by specific historical, social and cultural contexts.^[6]

In this paper, I take the view that disability is a biosocial phenomenon that exists in a specific historical and cultural context. I focus on experiences of disability in the USSR and post-Soviet countries, and compare these with the experiences of Russian-speaking disabled immigrants from FSU to Israel.

Needs-based capacity constraint?

In Israel, as in many countries of the 'Global North', a distinction is made between limited ability or partial disability and disability (this is also sometimes attempted in Russia, albeit inconsistently). Thus in 2013, in Israel, according to official statistics, there were 1,360,000 people with partial disability (*anashim im mugabalut*). However, in 2016 their number increased to 1,450,000.^[7] Of these, people of working age (i.e. between the ages of 18 and 67) numbered, according to various estimates, between 800,000 and 1 million.

As for disabled people (*nahim*), their number stood at about 600,000 in 2012.^[8] By 2018 their number grew to 704,000, and the number of working age (aged 18-67) people with health limitations reached over 420,000.^[9] This is about 6% of the working-age population of the country. Jerusalem Post presented some evaluations that by the end of 2020 disabled persons constituted 20% of Israeli population (without referencing any sources and details).^[10]

Partially disabled are considered to be those individuals with 'health problems that affect people's daily activities'. Disability, on the other hand, is defined as a condition resulting from health problems that has a serious impact on individuals' daily lives. Disability pensions in Israel are granted to people whose ability to work has been reduced by 50% (due to limited capabilities), as well as to housewives whose ability to do domestic work in their households was reduced by 50%. The criteria for determining an individual's ability to work or function are set by Bituach Leumi (Israel National Insurance Institute).^[11] The criteria, although often rather imprecise, are used to determine the disabled status in Israel which in turn allows individuals to receive a disabled person's pension and various other benefits.

The process of disability assessment is somewhat different in Russia, where designation of disability (including its severity, the so-called groups) is more tightly linked to the degree of working ability loss. These disability groups are determined by a special medical and social agency, which determines and assigns a disability group to individuals (from the 3rd - the least severe, to the 1st - the most severe). The disability degree given to a person determines his or her right to work as well as various restrictions down to prohibition to work. The degree also determines the size of pension and various benefits.

According to the Brookdale Disability Research Center, (Myers - JDC - Brookdale Institute,) in the early 2000s in Israel, of all working-age disabled people, 17.8% were individuals with physical impairments; almost 10% with sensory impairments (4.2% blind and visually impaired; 3.7% deaf and hearing impaired); and 2.1% had a disability due to chronic medical conditions. About 16% of disabled people of working age are people with mental and cognitive disabilities. The rest (around 47%) have so-called multiple impairments, i.e. a combination of several of the above impairments.^[12]

Among Israeli Jews, the percentage of people with disabilities is 13% of the working-age population, in the Israeli Arab community it is 22%.^[13] Moreover, the gap between the two communities has widened over the past 10 years (a decade ago there were 21% and 24% of Jews and Arabs with disabilities, respectively), although the proportion of Arabs with disabilities has decreased slightly. The percentage of disabled people (*nahim*), with severe disabilities, among the Israeli Arabs is almost twice as high (8.8% vs 4.5% among the Israeli Jews).^[14] In recent years, the proportion of people with mental and intellectual disabilities in the country has been increasing, especially among ultra-Orthodox Jews (*Haredim*) as well as in the Bedouin community.^[15] This may be due to an earlier and more complete detection of disability-inducing illnesses. Moreover, intra-family marriages are still relatively common in these groups.

The Russian Federation does not collect accurate statistics on the number of people with disabilities (various agencies give figures between 11 and 13 million people, which constitute less than 10% of the population - the usual number in the countries of the 'global north'). Rosstat (the Russian State Statistics Agency) estimated the number of disabled people as 11.63 million at the beginning of 2020. In recent years, the number decreased by 200,000-300,000 people per year, a drop most noticeable in the most severe 1st and 2nd disability groups.^[16] This can be explained by the hardening of social policy in Russia towards people with disability. For example, the formal 'transfer' of people with severe disabilities to a 'lighter' cohort allows a reduction in pensions, benefit cuts, etc. Unlike the former USSR where a lot of older people were designated as disabled, in today's Russia it has become exceedingly difficult for people over 70 years of age to get disability status and subsequent benefits. In recent years, the number of people with cancer, as well as mental and psychological diseases has increased among Russian disabled people.^[17] Unsurprisingly, after immigrating to Israel, the disabled individuals from Russia and other post-Soviet countries report a notable improvement in their overall situation.^[18]

The share of people with disabilities in both countries increases with age (which is unsurprising): in Israel, 12% of people with disabilities are in the 18-25 age group; in the 64+ age group, almost 50%. In addition, about 80% of all Israelis with disabilities received disability status between the ages of 18 and 65.^[19] The type of disability given to this age group, the so called 'sudden disability, does not always occur instantly (as a result of an injury), but can in fact develop gradually. The number is slightly below the global average: according to the WHO, the proportion of such people in the world constitutes about 85% of all people with disabilities (the lower number in Israel may be due to the high level of the country's healthcare and rehabilitation programs).

Legal frameworks and rights of disabled people

Israel is considered one of the countries with favorable conditions for people with disabilities. In Israel, just as in Western European countries and the USA, the struggle of disabled people for their rights began in the late 1960s - 1970s. For example, in 1972, the Knesset amended the Building Design Act, which specifically provided for the need for people with disabilities to have easy access to public facilities (at that time, disability was mostly applied to individuals with musculoskeletal disorders - MDA. Big changes in this area began at the end of the 1990s and in the 2000s. For example, in 1998, the Equality Act was passed, which set requirements for achieving equal rights for people with various health limitations. For example, the law obliges municipalities to make all public buildings and spaces (law courts, educational and medical institutions, cinemas, restaurants, parks, etc.) accessible to all people with disabilities (and not just those individuals with MIA-related disabilities). City authorities must therefore not limit their efforts to providing special lifts and ramps, but also take into account the needs of the blind, deaf and a number of other disability categories. For example, for the blind, many public places (bus stops, ATMs, lifts, etc.) must have Braille signs (convex point font); for the deaf and those with impaired hearing, many public building and transport - though not universally - are equipped with high visibility electronic displays. Important laws and regulations were also passed by the Knesset in the 2000s regarding the employment of people with disabilities (including people with cognitive and mental disabilities). These laws also stipulated benefits for such individuals and provided access to inclusive education.¹²⁰¹

Many people with disabilities came to Israel from the former Soviet Union, of whom 160,000 were registered as disabled (nahim) in 2013 (i.e. more than a quarter of all disabled people in the country).¹²¹¹ In addition, some became disabled or partially disabled while already in Israel.

In Israel, considerable attention is paid to the comprehensive rehabilitation of people with disabilities. For example, such people (regardless of the specific disability) are accommodated on the ground floor in the municipal housing sector, and the entrance to the building is often equipped with a ramp and special disability-friendly lifts (at least in buildings constructed over the last 10 years). Educational institutions and areas used by students with disabilities are also equipped with ramps. Even people with some mental and learning disabilities (memory problems, ADHD etc.) have access to higher education by law.¹²²¹

Thus the legislation of the State of Israel aims not only to protect the rights of disabled people, but also to improve their quality of life, i.e. make it as fulfilling as possible. The socio-cultural rehabilitation of people with disabilities is designed to facilitate this. Special attention is paid to the so-called primary psychological and domestic rehabilitation of people with disabilities, carried out in designated rehabilitation centers. This is especially important for those who became disabled as adults (people with sudden disability) and did not receive special skills and training in childhood. They are helped to acquire new skills: blind people (or people whose vision has deteriorated sharply) learn to navigate in space, walk with a white cane or guide dog, use computer sound programs, light a gas stove, make a hot drink. Individuals with musculoskeletal problems learn new forms of mobility using the wheelchair or a walking frame. For most disabled people, it is also necessary to overcome feelings of hopelessness and intense frustration (common after receiving a diagnosis of disability), as well as to understand their employment prospects and, more broadly, their life possibilities.

At the end of 2013, I visited a rehabilitation center 'Migdal Or' (Tower of Light, Beacon in Hebrew) for the blind and visually impaired near Haifa. The center provides rehabilitation programs for people who have lost their sight in adulthood. Among the visitors, there were many people who had come from CIS countries where very few services of this kind were available. For instance, in the former USSR, there were only two centers for the rehabilitation of the blind: in Volokolamsk (Moscow Region) and Biysk (Altai Territory); both are still in operation. However, this is clearly inadequate for the needs of the vast majority of visually impaired people, of whom, according to estimates of experts from the Russian Organization for the Blind, there are about 1,200,000 in Russia.

At the same time, persons with disabilities in Israel, including visually impaired people, experience a number of employment-related problems as evident from the interviews that I conducted. Below I offer several stories that are interesting cases illustrating the issues touched upon in the paper.

Life with disability

Raphael

The first person I interviewed was Raphael; (at the time of our meeting, he was 63 years old). My husband and I came to see him in one of Haifa's new districts, where Raphael and his family lived in a multi-story apartment block although not on the ground floor. (He received his disability status ten years after he emigrated to Israel, despite this he decided not to move house.) Raphael met us alone (it was a work day) and took us into his small office, where there was a computer and many books. He was wearing thick glasses for his severe myopia.

Raphael was born in Odessa, he suffered from problems with his eyes from birth (high myopia, -10D, after graduation myopia increased to -14D). He attended a regular secondary school and, according to him, did not experience any major difficulties during his studies. There were difficulties with geographical maps, as well as the fact that he did not see what was written on the blackboard (despite sitting in the front row in class). He said the teachers

and his classmates helped him by reading out what was written on the blackboard; some teachers let him come close to the blackboard. No one, according to Rafael's memories, teased or bullied him. After finishing school Rafael was hoping to study biology, but the university admissions office explained to him that with his poor vision he would not be allowed to do it. The following year, he applied to the Pedagogical Institute to train as a mathematics teacher and was admitted. There, he said, he did not face any serious eyesight-related problems either:

'Yes, it [his eyesight] was a hindrance, of course, but I got used to it, in general, everything was fine. At that time, we studied mostly from textbooks, but I could read OK from close range, in general, I managed.'

That is, Raphael was not a disabled child, despite his poor eyesight. He experienced the first major constraint when he was precluded from studying biology at the university. However, he was able to realize his potential in another area.

After graduating, Raphael was dispatched to a rural school in the Nikolaev region (in the USSR, university graduates were required to work for three years in a government-designated, often remote area. This was designed to 'compensate' the state for providing free education). However, making his student's homework turned out very difficult for Raphael. He contacted the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and received a permission to find a job closer to home. He returned to Odessa and started working as a computer programmer at the Food Industry Institute. Rafael was not offered a disability status, however. He claimed he was successfully coping with his vision difficulties.

Raphael eventually married a young woman from Tiraspol (Moldova; currently unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic), where he also worked as a programmer. It was possible to distinguish images on black-and-white computer monitors at a short distance. Thus the absence of disability allowed Raphael to build a career and have a family. He also managed to successfully cope with everyday problems. He did not want a 'disability status' because of the stigma attached to it in the USSR and later in the post-Soviet countries.

In 1990, Raphael emigrated to Israel with his wife and two sons. He continued to work as a computer programmer in his adopted country for several years. However, after a while, Raphael's vision started to deteriorate rapidly (as is common in most people with high myopia):

'I went through the surgery, on both eyes. My eyesight got better; I was able to see much clearer than before coming here. But it didn't last long. They found retinal degeneration. Then the glaucoma. ... I had to quit my job, I worked as a programmer for an electrical company for 11 years. ... in short, it was clear that I was visually impaired. *They did not want to do business with me* (italics mine - E.N.-S.) despite my experience.' When it became clear that Rafael could not find a job, his wife suggested that he register as a disabled person. However, the doctors treating him did not offer him this option at first: 'Nobody offered me anything. And then I applied to the relevant commission, my eyesight was checked, and it became clear that it was very poor. Disability here [in Israel] is a 50 per cent loss of working ability. And I was given ... I was insured, I had insurance and I started to receive a certain amount ... But unemployment insurance due to disability has stopped. ... This is state insurance, from Bituach Leumi. Moreover, when I reach retirement age, when I'm 65, the benefits will be revised. They will be revised upwards. So I will not have an old-age allowance, but a disability allowance.'

As with most people who have become disabled as adults, Rafael has thus been subject of downward status change. This change in status can be seen as a kind of reverse rite of passage. Unlike the classic rite of passage described in ethnographic literature,^[23] when a young man, as a result of an initiation rite, acquired a higher status by becoming a full member of the team, the exact opposite happens when one becomes disabled: a person regresses to a lower status by becoming dependent on the state, relatives, charity organisations, etc.).^[24]

As a result, Rafael received a disability ID card and a blind person's card, which gave him a number of benefits which he described as follows: 'So the drugs are not free. There is free travel on buses. This is for urban buses, and a 50% discount on intercity buses. In addition, city taxes, I pay only 10% of regular city taxes, not just me, but the whole family. This is a significant amount; I will tell you that. In addition, I have an allowance for a 'chaperone. I have received documents that I am blind... In addition, there are benefits for electricity bills. We are looking into these now, we have recently learned about these... These are the main benefits that I receive. In addition, since I have a disability certificate, I get various benefits - for visiting museums, a zoo, I don't know what not. They [the benefits] can give as much as 60% discount. They come with different IDs. I have a blind person's card and an invalid's card. There are various ways to get these [benefits]. But the main thing, of course, is the city tax [discount].'

Rafael has also joined the so-called Blind Persons Association that regularly organized lectures, meetings, social clubs and special tours for the blind. There was also primary psychological rehabilitation ('Courses for blind persons. And not only for us, but also for husbands and wives, family members, they were explaining to them what to do in such cases. The main thing, we were told: life is not over, that it is also possible to live with it'). It should be noted here that psychological rehabilitation

for the blind (.....) exists in Russia only in the two rehabilitation centers already mentioned. The numerous branches of the Russian Society for the Blind (RSB) do not provide such services. Psychological rehabilitation for family members of the late-blind (as well as for parents of children with visual impairment) is practically non-existent (with very few exceptions).

In general, such Israeli establishments are analogous to the Soviet and post-Soviet societies for the blind (Soviet Organization of the Blind (AUSB), later Russian Organization of the Blind). In the USSR, the AUSB ran enterprises that employed visually impaired people; these enterprises offered basic manual work (assembly of electrical sockets and

switches, production of lids for jars, etc.) that nevertheless provided money-earning opportunities for visually disabled people. Such enterprises had very significant tax benefits (sometimes they did not pay taxes at all). This gave them an opportunity to provide social benefits to their employees (trips to sanatoriums, concerts, excursions, sometimes accommodation, etc.).^[25]

At present, the Russian Society of the Blind has practically no resources. Having lost state support, the branches of AUSB, not unlike their Israeli counterparts, have turned into leisure and social centers. Currently they do not employ the blind and visually impaired.¹²⁶¹ In Israel, however, according to Raphael, various aids (speaking clocks, thermometers, scales, electronic magnifiers, etc.) can be purchased from such associations. They also provide audio books, which are brought home by numerous volunteers. Rafael also talked about the 'Migdal O' rehabilitation center.

'This is a kind of cooperative; there are doctors, as well as retired doctors. They are former professors, ophthalmologists, experienced ophthalmologists, and they provide advice. Besides, they provide many different devices for the visually impaired. For example, special lenses, which are yellow, are worn on your glasses. They absorb diffuse light, they only let in polarized light. The sun is bright here [in Israel], so wearing them makes things much better. I bought myself a special monocular device there: you look through it and you see prices in a shop from a distance. <...> There you can also buy helping devices there, including computer programs (at a discounted price) - zoom in (ZoomText), and sound (the so-called 'Balabag')'.^[27]

Although Raphael made use of these assisting technologies, despite his efforts, he was not able to find employment. Rehabilitation centers and social clubs for the blind did not provide such opportunities. He explained:

'At the Ministry of Labor, there are such opportunities... if a person is able to work. There are retraining courses which they offered. (Interviewer: Have you been offered such courses?) The thing is, when I applied, it was already too late for them to offer me anything. But I haven't lost contact with them, I said that I could give computer advice over the phone. But the thing is, people at home don't work on such computers. I'm not an expert in those things [home computers]. I can give advice on a user level. And for those who work at home, I am an expert. But the computers [I know well]- they are in banks, corporations, they prefer paid consultants, they have money for it. They do not need me. That's why they couldn't really use me. It just wasn't very clear what they could offer me.'

At home Raphael was able to read emails and news on the Internet. He also helped friends and acquaintances with consultations on computer programs installation. However, even with the help of a text-magnifying programs (multifunctional sound programs like JAWS, NVDA, as well as more advanced MagicEye programs which at the time of the interview were not as affordable and user-friendly as they are now) he could only work for two hours at most. Audiobooks (on CDs at the time) and the Internet provided Rafael with things to occupy his time. His sources of income were his disability allowance as well as his wife's salary.

Another factor hindering Raphael's employment was his limited Hebrew. At the end of our meeting he told the story of his friend Meir, a religious Jew who, at the age of about 40, suffered from detached retina in both eyes. Despite treatment, his vision had deteriorated dramatically. However, Meir looked for work and found a call center job in Tel Aviv, and later a similar job in Haifa. Raphael admitted that unlike Meir, Sabra (born in Israel), - a native Hebrew speaker, he could not have been able to do the job due to his poor language skills. Moreover, according to Raphael, religious Jews 'support those who are in trouble, on top of what the state is doing. Religious people have their own kinds of support networks.' These networks 'are not available' for 'new repatriates'.

Thus, in addition to severely impaired vision and disability status, as well as employers' disinterest in hiring people with disabilities, the employment possibilities for disabled persons from the FSU in Israel are further hampered by age, poor knowledge of Hebrew and the lack of informal support networks. Raphael's 'transition' to disability status was not as sudden and traumatic as for many others: his vision deteriorated gradually, he had obtained working experience in Israel and has done the corresponding payments into the social system. His wife's wages and the fact that his sons were adults and earned their own living meant his economic situation was tolerable. Support from family and fellow blind people he had met somewhat smoothed for Rafael the transition to a life with disability.

Svetlana

We went to Svetlana's suburb in Haifa, where she lived with her husband and two small children. We were met by a friendly young woman with an infant in her arms and were cordially invited to her small first floor flat. At the time of our meeting Svetlana was 36 years old and had been living in Israel for 10 years. Before coming to Israel, Svetlana lived in Klinty (Bryansk region of Russia) where she worked as a nurse and later got married. However, when she was 24 years old, she completely lost her vision (total blindness) as a result of rapidly progressing diabetes mellitus. Svetlana was no longer able to work as a nurse and stayed at home for almost a year. As she explained, her family was afraid something would happen to her outside her home (it is also possible that they were ashamed to be seen in public with a disabled person, a fairly common pattern of anxiety behavior in the former Soviet Union). In the end, Svetlana told her family: 'I want to live, not exist. She decided to go to Israel, but since her family - her parents and husband - did not want to emigrate, she left alone.

Svetlana's case is a typical example of the so-called sudden disability, when a person loses a function almost instantly or very rapidly, subsequently experiencing a serious mental trauma and almost instantly loses his or her previous position in society. She did not receive any primary rehabilitation: (psychological or/and domestic help), an

experience typical for most people with late disability in Russia. Thus 'a transition to the lower world' is very painful for such people.^[28]

Svetlana said that when she arrived, she was visited almost immediately by a rehabilitation specialist (coach). The training began with learning to cope with domestic chores. She was taught to light a gas stove, pour water into a cup and other life skills. She was also trained to use sound computer programs (Svetlana showed me how she worked efficiently with the 'Jaws' program that reads from a computer screen). In addition, the specialist taught her how to walk with a guide dog; we met this cute Labrador dog while Svetlana was making us tea.

'All I can do now is thanks to her [the coach]. Look, I'm confidently able to light the gas (shows) - before, I was afraid to even approach the cooker. I learnt how to handle boiling water and not get burned, how to use the knife correctly - Vera [instructor] showed me [all these things]. She taught me how to walk with the dog, further and further, with more and more confidence. And now I am able to walk everywhere [with her dog].'

As Svetlana could no longer work as a nurse, she decided to go back to university. She enrolled at the University of Haifa to study musicology and successfully completed her degree. Svetlana explained in detail how she studied and lived in a university dormitory. In addition, she was also able to work at the university center for blind and visually impaired students. There she made use of a computer with a so-called 'Braille printer' (i.e. a printer prints convex point text using the Braille system), as well as of volunteer readers. Svetlana dreamed of working in a library, or rather, in the University of Haifa Phono Library (or another major library), where many audio recordings are kept.

Soon after graduation, Svetlana married a Russian-speaking sighted man (from the Baltic States) and gave birth to two children. Hers is an example of a very successful domestic, psychological, and partially social rehabilitation. In addition, Svetlana was able to create a new family.

However, at the time of our conversation Svetlana was unable to find the job she desired. She told us that she gave lectures (often free of charge) at various clubs; she also gave French lessons. Unlike Raphael, Svetlana spoke fluent Hebrew, her age was not an obstacle either. However, Svetlana claimed that being unemployed and having disabled person's status hindered her employment. Still, Svetlana said that her situation - for as long as the children were young - was overall satisfactory; she was going to start looking for a permanent job more actively in three or four years'time (in the course of our further communication with Svetlana, it became clear that she had not found a permanent job).

This is also a typical example of unsuccessful employment of people with disabilities; it is hindered by both high unemployment and disability status.

Natalia

We met with Natalia in a building of the Association for blind people in Haifa, where we were shown various equipment for people with vision disabilities. I talked to the people who came there as well as the employees. Natalia, an employee of the organization, received us in her office and spoke in detail about many aspects of becoming disabled and blind in Israel. She spoke in detail about the disability assessment process in Israel as well as subsequent benefits and payments. Her story clarified and complemented previous interviews.

Natalia (51 at the time of our meeting) was born in Rostov-on-Don (Southern Russia). She was a visually impaired child (she suffered from nystagmus - an involuntary oscillating high frequency eye movement, often resulting in a significant reduction in vision). She studied at a boarding school for the visually impaired (in the USSR there were boarding schools for the blind and visually impaired where children studied from Monday to Saturday, this was common in large cities where working parents had difficulty escorting their children to and from school due to long distances). According to Natalia, she did not experience significant difficulties during her studies. She also talked about the pros and cons of special schools for disabled people that had become the subject of criticism over the past two decades. Speaking about the benefits of inclusive education, Natalia emphasized:

'The child learns to communicate with people, and he does not perceive himself as disabled, but as a person who has some limitations. And he learns how to establish connections with others, to communicate, and then returns to the larger world, you see?'

At the same time, Natalia also described the merits of special schools:

'But on the other hand, there were benefits [in special schools], I myself attended such a school, I saw that - because classes were small, there were specially trained teachers, and everything was condensed. The standard of teaching was higher [than in an ordinary school]. You see, this is the difference between a class of 40 people and a class of 10 people where the teacher could pay attention to each child.

That is, the pupils' isolation, interaction only with similarly disabled children, as well as the difficulties of staying at boarding school (which Natalia also spoke about) and the resulting difficulties in 'communicating in the larger world' (i.e. going beyond the boundaries of the 'disabled' sociocultural ghetto) was partially counterbalanced by smaller classes, specially trained teachers, individual approach and the availability of special aids and appliances. The same advantages and disadvantages, according to Natalia, applied to special schools in Israel, despite their higher technical level (computers with special programs in classrooms) and the presence of trained psychologists and rehabilitation specialists.

After graduating from secondary school, Natalia went to study history at Rostov University. Despite her disability, she successfully completed her degree. She was greatly helped by her parents. Natalia repeatedly stressed that in Russia

and Israel a person with disabilities needs very significant family support to make success in one's life. After graduation, Natalia worked for some time in a boarding school for the visually impaired as an assistant, as it was very difficult to get a job as a teacher. She later left school and worked as a tutor teaching history. Eventually, Natalia got a job at a special enterprise for the blind as a social worker, got married and gave birth to a daughter.

At the end of the Soviet era and during the first years of perestroika, the system of state support for special enterprises for disabled people began to collapse, the employees of such enterprises lost their jobs on a massive scale. Eventually, Natalia and her family immigrated to Israel in 2000.

There, Natalia started working quite quickly (When still in Russia she already taught Hebrew; she worked hard to further improve it when she came to Israel). What is more, her experience in social work with the blind and visually impaired turned out to be an asset: 'I was 37 years old, and I still managed [to change career] before I was 40 years old, [In Israel] I was given an opportunity to get another university degree. And I graduated from university in four years with a degree in social care. Later, Natalia started working as a social worker at the Society for the Blind and Visually Impaired':

'This is a society for the blind <...> . It is an amuta, a private organization, its purpose is to provide various services to the blind, it is not a commercial organization to earn money. It does not make a profit, it is a public organization, <...> where cultural events are held, there are two social workers in this society. I am a social worker for Russian speakers, and I have about 450 people on my books. ... We are a society in Haifa, there are other such societies and centers for the blind and visually impaired in Israel, and we have the Haifa Municipality responsible for them. We work together.'

In addition to cultural events, which Raphael also mentioned, and in addition to giving psychological assistance for the blind and their families, a social worker like Natalia provides very significant assistance in processing disability assessment, obtaining the relevant documents and securing subsequent benefits. In addition, Natalia works as a social worker at the Rambam Hospital (ophthalmology department), where she provides similar assistance in obtaining disability status, but - importantly (and unlike the situation in Russia) - she refers blind individuals, often suffering from the shock of the recent diagnosis, to a psychologist and rehabilitation specialist. Natalia's contribution was all the more important because she knew Russian, and her engagement with the Ministry of Health and the Social Insurance Institute as well as her help with relevant paperwork was very important for Russian-speaking immigrants.

However, according to Natalia, it is much more difficult [for disabled people] to get a job even after completing a good degree. Natalia did not mean employment at the workshops of Migdal or rehabilitation centres (basic manual jobs with minimal pay), but working in a profession or being able to get another qualification. This was especially true for young people:

'Then, if they are young, I send them to the municipal service and there is a special person responsible for retraining.' Natalia continued: 'If a person had previously had good vision, then something happened, such people are given opportunity to re-train. They had to either study further or do something else. This is my responsibility - I must assess his or her level of education, physical and mental condition, emotional state. Together with the National Insurance Institute, they build a rehabilitation program for such people. If the person is young, under 30 years old, he or she has learned the language, they see that such people have potential, they can work.'

As it was mentioned above, such opportunities are not readily available in Russia. However, despite such services and programs, not all young people in Israel, as Svetlana's case exemplifies, are able to find paid employment.

Individuals over 50 years of age are not offered employment opportunities, rather, they are offered various cultural programs (lectures, excursions, concerts, etc.) Some of them work as volunteers, as Raphael mentioned. I have seen such volunteers helping to organize various events (utilizing both Hebrew and Russian), call clients, serve tea etc.

The middle-aged disabled is the group of people who find gaining paid employment most difficult. Natalia explained:

'Here it is problematic, rather problematic. If, for example, at the age of 40, a disabled person had been able to gain a degree, now there are big cuts. They can offer a course, for example, they love doing it here, they send one to do a course, a massage courses for example, but [afterwards] they don't find work very often. Why not? Because it's hard for even sighted people to start a business and working through a health insurance company is very difficult. If it's private or public, it's very hard to accept a disabled person. If there is an opportunity, if they can work on their own, they can work at a simple [manual] job in this..., it's hard to call this a factory (workshops at Migdal Or). What are they doing there? They pack medical supplies, for example, pack clothes or hats, clean phones, do basic work. Yes, the simplest, very simple tasks. And they get, that's the maximum...well, 800 shekels (around \$220).'

As a result, disabled people in Israel often never find a job, although they volunteer, give free lectures at various clubs, etc.

Natalia was a rather rare case when a person with disabilities over 40 (in addition to being a recent immigrant) has successfully socially adapted and gained professional employment. Several factors contributed to this: her good knowledge of Hebrew, prior experience in social work (in this case with blind people) as well as gaining additional relevant degree before the age of 40. Another helping factor was Natalia's relatively good vision, which allowed her to commute to work independently, read documents, etc. Being a disabled person from birth and having not experienced a sharp deterioration of vision in adulthood, Natalia avoided a serious psychological trauma that many late blind people often experience. Studying at a special education school, although temporarily prevented her from 'communicating

with the [normal] world, her school and subsequent work experience in a factory for the blind helped her to successfully 'fit' into a similar area in Israel. Her identity has not undergone as much transformation as the identities of other informants, and this has also contributed to her successful adaptation to her new life in Israel.

Rita

We traveled to a small town in Northern Galilee where Rita lived with her husband in their own house. At the time of our meeting she was 64 years old. She refused to record the interview on a dictaphone, so we had to restore our conversation from memory. Rita was born in Kiev (Ukrainian SSR) . Although suffering from poor eyesight, she had no official disability status and went to a regular school. Rita said she experienced learning difficulties (she could not see the blackboard well but was too shy to say so). Rita later went to a technical school, although her poor eyesight was an impediment there as well. She got married, but soon divorced. She believed that her poor vision played a role in her worsening relationship with her husband. She later found a passion for painting, which she first practiced on her own, and then in various art studios. Painting, according to Rita helped her cope with ensuing depression. In 1992, Rita immigrated to Israel, but could not find a job as an engineer because she was no longer young, had poor Hebrew and poor eyesight, which soon began to deteriorate further.

In Israel, Rita got specialist assessment and received a blindness and disability certificate (which entitled her to many aforementioned benefits, though less than enjoyed by Raphael, who had paid contributions when employed in Israel). Unlike the informants mentioned above, Rita did not join a society for the blind and did not use rehabilitation centers. At the same time, despite the dramatically deteriorating vision, Rita not only continued to paint, but also began exhibiting her works - both online and in small galleries.¹²⁹¹ In some cases, her works sold well, which was of great help to her. The walls of her house were covered with paintings: still lifes as well as surrounding landscapes. During the meeting Rita showed me flowers in her garden, noting which of them served as 'models' for her paintings (it would more appropriate to call her not a 'blind artist; as she is described on some websites, but a 'visually impaired' one). After a few years of living in Israel, Rita married a Russian-speaking Orthodox Jew and began to follow all the prescriptions of Judaism for a woman (including observance of ritual purity, kashrut, etc.): 'I am non-religious, but as it happens, I have to follow it' - she said.

Rita's experience is quite different. Like many visually impaired people who did not have disability status in the former USSR, she could not count on either disability pension or other benefits and social services available to the disabled in the USSR. In addition, unlike many Soviet disabled people, Rita was not in a situation of a 'disabled' socio-cultural ghetto, where people with disabilities studied, worked and spent their leisure time mainly among their own kind, often marrying within the group as well. At the same time, because of her poor eyesight and stigma attached to the disabled in the USSR and post-Soviet countries, Rita was also unable to fully 'fit' into the community of 'healthy' people. The situation changed in part after she moved to Israel, where Rita was granted disability status and corresponding benefits and entitlements. Her paintings, which had some commercial success, not only supported Rita and her husband financially, but also gave her a sense of fulfilment. This is a case of a disabled person's self-realization through creativity, beloved by the media, as well as by supporters of an affirmative (positive) approach to disability, which emphasizes the value and uniqueness of a disabled person's personal experience.TM In a situation where a disabled person can hardly count on employment (lack of appropriate training or education, age, poor knowledge of Hebrew), realizing their potential through artistic creativity may be a kind of solution to the employment problem.

Rita's unwillingness to come into contact with disabled people through their associations was due to her unwillingness to 'enter' into a 'disabled' ghetto, whose members are often stigmatized and have little connection with the world outside the ghetto, i.e. the world with which Rita wanted to belong to.

Thus, as in her past in the USSR, Rita sought to distance herself from the world of the disabled (although in Israel her official disability status has helped her materially). The situation where the majority seeks to distance themselves from highly stigmatized groups is common in many societies (Hoffmann wrote in the early 1960s about the mechanism of avoidance and distancing from Jews in Nazi GermanyTM).

Conclusion

As a rule, it is very challenging for disabled persons in Israel to find jobs, even if they are well educated and their qualifications are in demand. Although disabled people are not legally discriminated, in practice, employers are not interested in hiring a disabled person because they are obliged to provide them with a specially equipped workplace, arrange transportation to and from work, etc. Thus, only 5.4% of employers have expressed their readiness to provide work to people with disabilities. As a result, only 50% of disabled people are employed; by comparison: 72% of conditionally healthy people are employed. Incomes of people with disabilities are on average 1,400 shekels (around \$390) less per month than those of conditionally healthy people. It is not surprising that 51% of disabled and partially disabled people in Israel are dissatisfied with their income level.^[32] And while people with disabilities had for a long time been reluctant to publicly protest against their low level of welfare out of fear, according to Raphael, of losing what they have, in recent years they have increasingly begun to express their dissatisfaction, including through public protests.^[33]

Many people, especially Russian-speaking people with disabilities, whose challenges in finding work is compounded by poor Hebrew skills, are unable to get any employment for years, let alone a job for which they are qualified.

Informants and employees of organizations for disabled people and rehabilitation centers have repeatedly told us this, confirming time and again what Natalia said about employment of people with disabilities, especially those over the age of 40. Individual 'inspiring' examples, such as the recruitment of a young blind man into the Israeli Defense Force (he noted to the admissions committee that it is possible to work in the army not only as a sniper, but, say, as a programmer), do not change the overall the situation with employment of the visual impaired. The support given by the Israeli Prime Minister to the case of the blind soldier described above has not seemed to make much of a difference.^[34]

The situation is similar with the employment of people with visual impairment (and more broadly, people with disabilities) in Russia. One of my informants, a blind Moscow-based businessman Anton said: 'A blind man in our country can either be pitied or admired.' Granted, such state of affairs is common not just in Russia and Israel, but in most countries, even those that are considered favorable for people with disabilities (here is an example of how such 'inspiring stories' from the lives of disabled people are perceived in society.^[35] The commercialization of many disability issues leads the media to bring to the public either such 'inspiring' examples or tragic stories about distress situations in which people with disabilities find themselves. As a result, many everyday problems experienced by disabled people in the areas of education, employment, rehabilitation, leisure, family and sexual life remain outside public discourse.

Prolonged involuntary idleness leads to a loss of motivation to work, especially considering that the average disability allowance in Israel, although lower than the national average, is higher than the old- age allowance. This discourages disabled individuals to seek work and increases dependency on the state. It should be noted that despite the meagerness disability benefits In Russia (especial outside Moscow), the same phenomenon can be observed.

In Israel, there is a kind of 'gap' between a well-organized system of psychological and domestic rehabilitation, education opportunities (including higher education), for people with disabilities on the one hand and the state's indifference to the employment opportunities of these people. Therefore, after many unsuccessful attempts to find work, people with disabilities often stop looking for paid employment altogether. In Israel, there are approximately 60,000 young people with disabilities between the ages of 23 and 26 who have never worked or studied. This is 14% of all people in this age group in the country.^[36] Every year, the chances of employment and successful socialization of such people, especially Russian-speaking immigrants, decrease.

It is true that some rehabilitation centers have special workshops where people with disabilities are able to work, although this is often extremely primitive and monotonous work for a very low wage. 'Migdal Or' employees revealed that such workshops are created for those who do not want to achieve much. This is a kind of degraded analogue of similar workshops for the visually impaired people that existed in the USSR in the 1920s-1930s (for manufacture of brushes, baskets, barrels, etc.).

Natalia's words regarding employment of people with visual impairment are very revealing: 'If we could combine the Russian experience, before perestroika in the USSR, with what exists in Israel, it would be close to an ideal.'

Natalia was referring to the highly profitable enterprises where people with disabilities used to be employed in the USSR. Such enterprises were established in the 1960s and 1970s. She expanded:

'I was working in a kind of blind universe in Russia, I saw the factories, I saw that system and I thought it was optimal! Yes, it was a state-run factory, the state placed the orders. At the factory, there were 51% of disabled people and 49% sighted people, professionals, and they produced goods that were in demand, a person could earn money. He worked 8 hours and received almost the same salary as an abled person working in an ordinary factory. There are no such factories in Israel.'

However, Natalia knows that similar enterprises in Russia have either not been operating for a long time or are working in the 'grey market':

'I know what happened, I know that factories have closed. I know that they have been sold off, I know that people get practically no wages. It is an outrage! For example, people are fired in Russia and then pretend to be taken back, they receive money from the state for the disabled, money from the employment service. And then people with disabilities come to get paid, and they receive five thousand [rubles].'

In Israel, people with disabilities working in the workshops (many of them immigrants from the former Soviet Union) are often either poorly or not properly trained at all. In addition, there are many disabled people from the FSU who do not interact at all with rehabilitation centers. Still, among them, there are also inspiring individuals who not only found their 'niche' in Israel but also realized themselves creatively.

Overall, although Russian-speaking immigrants with disabilities find themselves in a more comfortable environment in Israel than in the countries of origin, they face considerable difficulties in social and cultural adaptation and integration into the host society. This is partially due to language barriers that are common to most new immigrant Israelis. In some cases, indifference and negative stereotyping of disabled people in a wider society also play a role. However, the main reason behind employment difficulties experienced by disabled people is due to the lack of a clearly defined public policy aimed at the integration of such people, which might include, for example, significant tax benefits for businesses employing a certain percentage of disabled people, the creation of social businesses and other measures.

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[2] <https://www.un.org> > desa > uploads > sites > 2019/07 PDF (last accessed: October 10, 2021).

- [3] *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (URL: <http://www.un.org/ru/documents/declconv/conventions/disability.shtml> January 21, 2020); *World Report on Disability 2011* (URL: http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/ru Last accessed: - January 21, 2020).
- [4] See, for example: Jonston D. *An Introduction to Disability Studies*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: David Fulton Publishers, 2005); Siebers T *Disability Theory, Boldly Rethinking of the Last Thirty Years from the Vantage Point of Disability Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Watson N. Roulstone A., Carol Th. (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012); Bolt D. *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-reading of Twentieth-Century Anglophone Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).
- [5] (Oliver M. *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. London: Macmillan, 1996; Shakespeare T and Watson N. 'The social model of disability: an outdated ideology?', pp. 9 - 28, in Barnartt S. and Altman B. (eds), *Exploring Theories and Expanding Methodologies. Research in Social Science and Disability*. Volume 2 (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2001); Tregaskis C., 'Social model theory: The story so far, *Disability & Society*, 2002, 17 (4), pp. 457-470; Jonston D. *Op.cit.*; Bolt D. *Op. cit.*
- [6] See in more detail: Jonston D. *Op.cit.*; Goodley D. *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (London: Sage, 2011); Nosenko-Stein E. E. 'Antropologiya invalidnosti: problemy i zadachi' *Et-nograficheskoe obozrenie*, 2018. 1: 5-1; Endal'ceva A.S. 'Izuchenie i poiski chistoj modeli: chto ostalos' za predelami vnimaniya na puti mezhdru Global'nym Yugom i Global'nym Severom?' [Exploring and searching for a pure model: what has been left out of attention on the path between the Global South and the Global North?], pp. 43-54, in Kurlenkova A.S., Nosenko-Stein E.E. (ed.). *Obratnaya storona luny, ili chto my ne znajem ob invalidnosti (teoriya, reprezentaciya, zhiznennye stili)* [The flip side of the moon or what we don't know about disability (theory, representation, life styles) (Moscow: MBA, 2018) (in Russian); Kurlenkova A.S. 'Invalidnost kak effektpraktik: popytka novoy konceptualizacii' [Disability as an effect of practices: An attempt at a new conceptualization], pp. 25-42, in: Kurlenkova A.S., Nosenko-Stein E.E. (ed.). *Obratnaya storona luny* (in Russian).
- [7] *People with Disability in Israel* (Jerusalem: Myer's - JDC - Brookdale Institute, 2013); Report: Gaps Between Disabled and General Population Expanding in Israel, *Jerusalem Post*, December 03, 2016 (URL: <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Report-Gaps-between-disabled-and-general-population-expanding-in-Israel-474334> Last accessed: September 21, 2021).
- [8] *People with Disability in Israel* (Jerusalem: Myer's - JDC - Brookdale Institute, 2013); Persons registered at Social Service Departments by selected characteristics (2013), in *CBS. Statistical Abstract of Israel* (Jerusalem, 2014), pp. 7, 12.
- [9] *Facts and Figures. People with Disabilities in Israel, 2018* (URL: https://brookdale.jdc.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Facts_Figures_2018.pdf Last accessed: September 21, 2021).
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- [13] *Facts and Figures. People with Disabilities in Israel*.
- [14] Shemesh A., Nacamulli-Levi D. *Op.cit.*; Persons registered at Social Service.; Facts and Figures ...
- [15] Persons registered at Social Service.
- [16] *Kolichestvo invalidov v Rossii, 2020* [Number of disabled people in Russia 2020] (http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/population/disabilities/# Last accessed: May 22, 2020).
- [17] *Ibidem*.
- [18] Nosenko-Stein E. 'Byt' invalidom v Izraile. Opyt russkoyazychnykh immigrantov [To be a disabled person in Israel: experience of Russian-speaking immigrants] In *Asia and Africa segodnya*, 2015. 12: 67-72 (in Russian).
- [19] Shemesh A., Nacamulli-Levi D. *Op.cit.*; Persons registered at Social Service..Facts and Figures...
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- [21] (Persons registered at Social Service, 2013).
- [22] See: Nosenko-Stein E. 'To be disabled in Israel'.
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[29] Rita's works can be found on <https://artnow.ru/ru/gallery/0/3308.html>

[30] For details, see Jonstone D., *Op. cit.*

[31] Goffman E. *Stigma and Social Identity*, in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs Publishers, 1963); Allport G. W. *The Nature of Prejudice* (London: Addison-

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[32] See e.g.: [http://mignews.com/mobile/article.html?id=170917_123114_29126](http://mignews.com/mobile/article.html?id=170917_123114_29126;);

[33] https://www.vesty_co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5438226,00.html

[34] <https://stmegi.com/posts/50395/slepoy-soldat-pristupil-k-sluzhbe-v-tsakhale/>

[35] <http://slon.ru/calendar/event/!115043/>)

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