

June 5, 1990

"Hello, this is HIAS calling from New York. We have a flight number for two families (of four) scheduled for arrival, Italy/New York/Altoona.....Aryevs and Belenitskys on successive days." It was official.

Names and faces would be coming into focus; lives would be depending on us. And why? All because they were Jews feeling the effects of anti-semitism in their country and in their lives. And we were Jews responding to their needs. This time, HIAS (Hebrew Immigration Aid Society) was able and ready. And this time, we would be ready too. The system works--ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

The decision had been made. Altoona Federation said yes to the request that our small Jewish community be a part of a national effort to resettle Soviet Jews. Federation President Ed Giller enlisted the commitment of all our local Jewish organizations to support a project of great magnitude in terms of time and money. Phyllis Port, Judi Sue Meisner, and Bill Wallen accepted the challenge to co-chair the community effort.

At a well-attended community meeting, Dr. Richard Krieger, national HIAS adviser, shared facts of the nationwide effort of resettlement in small communities. 150 people voiced a pledge to lend "our hands, our substance, and our hearts." They came forward to sign their commitment to the different areas of need.

There were three short weeks to activate our people in readiness for the arrival. So much to do, but such an outpouring of many hands and hearts willing and wanting to do it. In a work, this town became mobilized. Our two new families would be arriving at any moment.

The door is opened. The Aryev and Belenitsky families and thousands like them take flight while they can, and before the door shuts. The enormity of it all. Years of struggle. Families and friends splintered, some remain behind, some emigrate to Israel, others with plans to emigrate to the United States. Finally, the opportunity for a new life.

How does one leave the known for the unknown---not to mention abandoning possessions, memorabilia, a place called home for generations? The answer must lie in history, a history that keeps repeating itself for Jews. It has been said...Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Never Again!

There was an aura of anticipation as the commuter taxied toward our greeting party at the gate---flowers, candy, gifts and cameras in hand. The door opened, and we stood breathlessly as the passengers descended the stairs. The Aryevs. Central casting couldn't have done better. They were beautiful. Boris with his full mustache looked so Russian. He wore a tag which said HIAS. We were struck immediately by Irina's blue-green eyes. She carried a bouquet of multicolored flowers bearing a small American flag. By their side stood Daniel and Ella, full of smiles and wonder. How handsome they looked together! How receptive they were to our genuine outpouring of affection. It took a couple minutes to get over the tears.

The enormity of it all. The joy of it all---coming home. We exchanged gifts and had our grand photo opportunity. This was a long awaited moment for all of us, and we wanted to hold onto it and to preserve it on film. Through our marvelous local interpreter, Michael Kharkovsky, we communicated our welcome in words. Boris and Irina spoke of their joy of being here and of their appreciation for making this possible for them. Irina said "mlchtah" it was like a dream. Boris, in his wonderful English and Yiddish expressed his thanks. When he learned that the Belenitsky family would be arriving the next day, he said, "I want to help."

A new day brought the Belenitsky, another beautiful and handsome group---Gary, Mina, and their two smiling children, Viktorya (20) and Leonid(17). Boris and Daniel Aryev joined our welcoming entourage along with our interpreter, Mara Kharkovsky (who now says that her claim to fame is being Michael's mother).

The Belenitsky's long journey began in Kharkov, the Ukraine, and took them to Vienna, Italy, New York, Pittsburgh, and Altoona. What a marvelous family they were as we sighted them deplaning at Martinsburg. We immediately reached out to embrace one another. It was a sight to behold at our little airport on two successive days! There were gifts to exchange, instructions to share, baggage to transport, and yes, pictures to snap. And it all felt so good.

When we arrived home, the Belenitskys were visibly joyful with their new surroundings. As we were getting ready to leave them to get settled in and to rest, Gary insisted that we wait a moment. He drew us to the dining room around the table and reached into his baggage. Mina ran to the kitchen for glasses. He poured a chocolate liqueur for us all. Gary raised his glass to say "Thanks." We responded to the emotion of the moment saying that they had come here because they were Jews and we were here because we were Jews. And the world became a little smaller for that moment. We are one people!

Every day a new page is written, a new chapter in the resettlement story. Much has already been accomplished. But much more remains to be done. Happy beginnings are the stuff of which memories are made. Each one of us has the opportunity to put his/her signature on this story. Please call to volunteer.

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