
First Wave: Russian Immigrants, Lod Airport, Israel

Sherry Suris

My parents were born in the Ukraine. My mother grew up in a shtetl by the name of Trostinyets—a town not large enough to appear on a map. In 1919, in Trostinyets, all Jewish males over thirteen years of age were murdered. Those who did not die immediately were buried alive alongside the dead. Some five hundred men were buried in one mass grave. One badly injured man managed to crawl out and drag himself through the countryside to the nearest city, Bereshed. There, he relayed the news of the massacre. But for his eyewitness account, a community left without its men might never have learned what had happened to its fathers, husbands, and sons.

My grandparents emigrated with their families to America in the 1920s, my father's family via Israel, while my mother's mother traveled through several European countries with five daughters, ages three to seventeen. In New York, within a few years, my parents met and married. My parents' language at home was Yiddish, and I grew up understanding it fluently.

In the early 1970s, I was living in Jerusalem where I had begun my career as a free-lance photographer. Forces of history were at work once again for Russia's Jews. This time, however, something remarkable happened: they were allowed to leave the Soviet Union to emigrate to Israel. In 1971, I was asked by *Hadassah Magazine* to document newly-arrived Soviet immigrants at the airport. These first arrivals were history in the making as well as "hard

news” of extraordinary human interest. The release of Russian Jews captured the imagination of world Jewry as well as the larger world, and images from the study were published in *Life* and *The New York Times Magazine*, as well as other publications.

It took about eight hours for an entire planeload to be processed for identity cards and housing assignments. I photographed during the eight-hour period and was so moved that I returned soon again to record another group of arrivals. As I walked among the new immigrants at Lod Airport, only a few people gestured at me not to photograph them, and I of course respected their wishes. Most spoke only Russian, but they understood why I was there and were very cooperative. To several elderly Russians who spoke Yiddish, I was able to describe my family’s origins, and how it came to be that a young American living in Israel at the time was able to converse with them in Yiddish.

I was intrigued by the immigrants’ babushkas and clothing in general, how the twentieth century seemed to have passed them by. They had few possessions, if any. One woman who did not want to be photographed carried a broom; perhaps, when it was time to leave, she had wanted to take along some—any—connection to her past.

These people call to us with their eyes: the weariness and strength of the elders, the trust and vulnerability of the children, and the vivid bonds between the generations tell us where they have come from and ask where the future will take them—as individuals and as a people.

Riding to the airport, I had not given much thought to the connections between the event I was about to document and the journeys of my family. Then, in the immigrants’ eyes, I saw what my grandparents and parents had to have felt when they had been uprooted and relocated to a country with a completely different language, culture, history, and way of life. Although separated by five decades, I understood that the differences and the bonds were inextricably intertwined. Had it not been for my grandparents’ emigration to America fifty years earlier, I could have been on that airplane and in that waiting room, and some other privileged American with several cameras dangling from her neck could have been photographing me.



Family Awaiting Sister



Sister Awaiting Family



Reunion

When I went to Lod (now Ben Gurion) Airport to document the arrival of the new Russian immigrants, I traveled from Jerusalem in a group taxi. There was an older gentleman sitting next to me who spoke to his wife and sister in a language I did not recognize. When we got to the airport, I photographed my co-passengers, but didn't know that we were awaiting the same airplane. Soon after, I was allowed entry into the immigrants' processing area, where I photographed an elderly woman in a white shawl. I didn't know then that she was waiting to be reunited with the family that had accompanied me in the taxi—including the brother she had not seen in thirty-nine years.

Sherry Suris is a New York-based photojournalist and portrait photographer. Her study of Russian immigrants has been shown at the Jewish Museum in New York and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. In 1998, it was exhibited at the Kennedy Center and B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C. as part of a celebration of Israel's 50th anniversary. Sherry Suris is currently working on a book of her Russian Immigrant study. She is represented by the Alan Klotz Photocollect Gallery in New York and the Alla Rogers Gallery in Washington, D.C. All photographs © Sherry Suris.



