

Chicago Matters: Old Roots, New Ground

There's a recent group of immigrants in the northwest suburb of Palatine that's starting to get some attention. They're Russian speakers from the former Soviet Union. Like many immigrants, they've had to leave almost everything behind. But this particular group faces some unique challenges. Not only are many of them refugees, most are senior citizens who had already retired before they left their home countries. Now they're having to start all over again, in what should be their golden years. As part of [Chicago Matters: Beyond Borders](#), Lynette Kalsnes reports.

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Sound of classroom

Twenty-two elderly students sit around long thin tables, facing their instructor, who speaks over a microphone. Julie Ponce leads an English as a Second Language class for seniors at the Palatine Opportunity Center. They're about to tackle idioms. Ponce asks them to imagine they're out with a man who's ordered five or even 10 vodkas, and now wants to split the bill.

PONCE: So you just have to say to him, let's go Dutch. Repeat.

CLASS: Let's go Dutch.

PONCE: So he can drink as much as he wants and you don't have to pay for it.

WOMAN: Is it polite you say it after dinner? Or you have to say it before?

PONCE: I would say before.

WOMAN: Because afterward, it's not polite.

PONCE: It's not polite.

There are no good numbers for how many of these Russian speaking seniors live in the northwest suburbs these days. Town officials say the population's grown a lot since the last Census. But the Palatine Township Senior Center alone serves more than 300. In fact, so many Russian speakers signed up for a Harper College ESL class, the college decided to start a class just for seniors.

Russian Gennadiy Merlin and his wife are regulars.

MERLIN: We understand we cannot live without English in the United States. We must learn English. We try, we make it.

The first big wave of Russians came to Chicago in the late 19th century. This latest group arrived after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. They've lived through World War Two, and the Stalin regime.

WEIL: To come from a society which is repressed, into a society which is almost wide open, I'm almost speechless in trying to describe it.

Irwin Weil is a professor of Russian and Russian literature at Northwestern University.

WEIL: Many people when they first come to this country, say, but things are totally out of control, look at what these people do, look at what they say, look at the way they dress. This is outrageous. The possibilities and the negative sides of freedom, are something that absolutely strike them in the face.

Adjusting to their new freedom is just one of many challenges the seniors face. Living in the suburbs can be isolating. Public transportation is limited. And so are their incomes. They survive on Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, subsidized housing and food stamps, plus help from their families. Most are refugees. And some left because of terrible events in their home countries, and they carry those memories with them, including encounters with anti-Semitism.

Arlington Heights resident Nina Perkina:

PERKINA: I will tell you one thing. I work like a bookkeeper all my life, one factory, with the same salary, 25 years. I can't go in another because I'm Jewish.

But it was another event that finally pushed Perkina and others to leave. In 1986, a nuclear reactor blew at Chernobyl. A radioactive plume covered the Soviet Union, including Belarus, where Perkina and her husband lived.

PERKINA: It was very dangerous. My daughter said Mom, we need to save our child.

In 1995, Perkina and her husband, moved to the United States with her daughter's family. But not all the former Soviet families emigrated together like Perkina's. In many cases, the adult children came first to find jobs. By the time the elderly parents arrived, the children already had learned English, found jobs and began adapting to their new culture.

O'GRADY: In the home country, the elders in the family are at the pinnacle of the family.

Beth O'Grady heads the Coalition of Limited English Speaking Elderly.

O'GRADY: They have the wisdom, they have the power. They generally have the money, the finances. Once the family comes to America, all of it turns upside down.

Sound of classroom

Back in Ponce's classroom, an exchange between her and Irina Mikhalets reveals just how difficult this new world is.

PONCE: Can anybody help us with the culture? How is the culture different?

IRINA MIKHALETS: In our country we were very interested in everything. We knew all things, we read all newspapers and magazines, and now we are like children.

PONCE: Good point.

This base of knowledge isn't the only thing seniors leave behind.

PONCE: Sometimes their lives weren't that affluent in the Soviet Union. They didn't have a lot of different things and a lot of material things. But they had their identity. They were known as a professor, they were known as a doctor, they were known as engineers.

Julie Ponce says that shift in their professional status can have profound effects.

PONCE: Nobody knows them and they become almost invisible. And there's nowhere to go, there's nothing to do.

Perkina speaks for many of the seniors when she talks about how lonely she was at first.

PERKINA: I tell you, when you plant a young tree in the new ground, it's OK. But if you have the old tree with the old roots, and you send in the new ground, it's terrible. It's very, very difficult.

It still affects her outlook sometimes.

PERKINA: Oh, it's better. But sometimes I miss my life, when I was young, when I work, when I have friends, with all my family, my sister and my brother, and we come together and we have dinner. Right now, it's impossible.

There are signs things are improving for the seniors. But progress has come in baby steps.

LEVITINA: so much we know, but we cannot explain and to say what we know.

For Yevgeniya Levitina from Ukraine, navigating a big box store was a major milestone.

LEVITINA: I went to store, K-Mart, this I remember good. And I need for my grandson glue. And I ask salesman, he explain to me what shelf and what line, and I found. (laughs). I was happy.

Gennadiv Merlin says he cannot work in the U.S. But he gets to spend time with his grandchildren, and keep a garden for his family.

MERLIN: I very like grow vegetable and my son give me a little place in your backyard (laughs), in his backyard. I work in that place.

Overall, the seniors say they're grateful to be here. Here's what Inna Vayner, who comes from Ukraine, says she repeats daily:

VAYNER: God bless America, Palatine too. Thank you every day. Thank you every day.

As for Nina Perkina, she's discovered a surprising benefit to living here.

PERKINA: in my country, 68, old, old, old
But here, one woman said, you're young. She's 90, 91.

And that, says Perkina, makes America an excellent country.

I'm Lynette Kalsnes, Chicago Public Radio.

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Stephanie Lecci assisted with reporting and producing this report. It was edited by Alison Cuddy. The executive producer of *Chicago Matters: Beyond Borders* is Sally Eisele and the series is produced by Alexandra Salomon.

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