Commentary

Eyesores once radiant

Apartment buildings heralded a rebirth for immigrants.

By Victoria Gomelsky

When I heard that the derelict apartment buildings that stood on Route 38 across from the Cherry Hill Mall were being remade into a luxury complex, I had to suppress my nostalgia.

On a frosty December evening in 1978, my parents, twin sister and I moved into a fifth-floor unit in the East Tower. To our delight, we discovered several rooms full of donated furniture, a freshly baked chocolate cake, and a huge balcony, where my dad promptly began to smoke.

Even though we lived in that apartment for just six months before moving away, our experience there will always figure prominently in my memories. As Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union — where space, like fresh fruit, was a prized commodity — we were amazed by its two enormous bedrooms. (Of course, everything in America amazed us: the countless orange juice brands at the supermarket; the concept of car insurance; that all-too-seductive, super-sized mall.)

Today, about 5,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union live in South Jersey. But when we settled here, the area's émigré community numbered just 25 families. So typical were we of the new arrivals that The Inquirer profiled us for a cover story in the paper's old Jersey Life Sunday magazine. Called "Strangers in a strange land," it ran on Feb. 4, 1979.

Over the years, I've read that three-page article at least 20 times, yet always with a sense of awe, for it captures my family in a short-lived period after our arrival in America but before we became Americans. The reporter also profiled two other Soviet Jewish families new to South Jersey, the Boyarskys and the Kletzmans.

Together, we represented the most recent surge in a growing wave of Jewish refugees who were streaming out of the U.S.S.R. by the plane load — more than 51,000 in 1979 alone.

By the early 1980s, when exit visas had dwindled to a few thousand a year, more than a quarter of a million Soviet Jews had emigrated to Israel and North America. Another wave of Russian-speaking immigrants began arriving in the late 1980s, on the eve of communism's collapse.

All told, since 1969 (the first year that the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society has figures readily available), about 400,000 Jews have chosen exile in the United States over life in the former Soviet Union.

Julie, my fraternal twin, and I were 5 years old when we emigrated, but we remember our journey to the West with surprising clarity. After leaving our hometown of Leningrad, now called St. Petersburg, we spent two weeks at Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society headquarters in Vienna, Austria, and three glorious months in Ladispoli, Italy, a visa-processing way station for this tide of refugees.

By the time we got to Cherry Hill, our expectations of America, nurtured behind the Iron Curtain by a steady stream of black-market movies and books (*The Godfather*, for one, was instrumental in my dad's English studies), had grown to near-mythic proportions. America didn't disappoint.

Everything in our new life — the apartment, the furniture, the cake — had been subsidized by Jewish Family and Children's Service of Southern New Jersey, the agency still in charge of resettling Jews from the former Soviet Union.

JOHN OVERMYER

Today, about 5,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union live in South Jersey. But when we settled here — into our fifth-floor apartment that stood on Route 38 across from the Cherry Hill Mall — the area's émigré community numbered just 25 families.

Our meager personal belongings amounted to the equivalent of $200 in rubles and two suitcases containing clothes, Russian children's books, and a small collection of my parents' scarlet-and-gold wedding china. This conspicuous lack of possessions always strikes me when I read the magazine story.

The way we live today is a far cry from how we lived then.

My parents have resided in a suburb of Los Angeles since 1982, after a stint in Maryland, where my physicist father began a career with NASA that eventually brought us to Southern California. They own a four-bedroom architectural gem of a home designed by modernist developer Joseph Eichler.

Rather than driving a boat-size 1971 Chevy Caprice, as he did in South Jersey, my dad cruises around L.A. in a silver Chevy Camaro, while my mom, an avowed shopaholic, prefers her sleek, white Mercedes SUV.

Julie is a graphic designer in L.A. Even my maternal grandmother made it to the West Coast in the mid-1990s with her husband, Karl. I moved to New York to attend graduate school and still live there.

Like millions of immigrants who came before us, we have assimilated. My parents still listen to schmaltzy Russian folk music, eat *blinis* and black bread, and frequent vodka-soaked nightclubs where dancers wear garish outfits decked out in gold lamé. But they no longer struggle with their English vowels or search want ads in vain. All in all, life is good.

"Tfu, tfu, tfu," as my superstitious mom would say, spitting three times over her left shoulder. May good fortune continue our way.

Victoria Gomelsky writes from Brooklyn, N.Y.