

Separation of the Slavic Community and a Call
to Social Integration and Cultural Awareness

A Thesis

Presented to

International Community Development

Northwest University

As a requirement for the Master's Degree

In Behavioral Social Science

By

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April 2016

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Author's Note:

This document was submitted as part of the requirements for thesis in the Master of Arts program in International Community Development at Northwest University. Portions of this paper were written for the following classes: GLST5503 Culture Studies; GLST5962 Practicum IV; and GLST6573 Children, Poverty, and Development.

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Introduction

The United States is now home to many Slavic immigrants and refugees from the former Soviet Union, particularly in the Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington, areas. It has not been an easy time for many of these refugees who did not know English, tended to depend only on their own people, and who unintentionally but effectively chose separation/isolation as the main acculturation process as they “integrated” into mainstream America.

In the course of interviews, observations, and research, I have discovered that this separation stemmed mainly from the immigrants’ not knowing the English language. However, because these people had already endured much persecution before coming to the States, and because they had limited educational skills, it was nearly impossible for them to learn English easily. Still, acculturation of isolation from the greater community isn’t healthy or helpful for Slavic immigrants, many of whom want to become a part of the greater community. It also robs each community of the cultural richness they could enjoy as a whole.

This paper will cover reasons for emigration of the Christian Slavic sub-culture from the former Soviet Union. Also, it will cover several life stories of the persecuted Slavic Christians and their immigration process to the United States as refugees. I will discuss the current state of the Slavic community, its isolation from the greater American community, and the negative results of this isolation on its five microsystems: family, school, peer groups, work, and church. I argue that reconciliation of the past, especially from religious persecution for the Slavic community, is the first step towards being able to include its American counterparts which will encourage and build inclusion within both sides. This mutual inclusion can lead to collaboration and integration which can, in turn, lead to lasting benefits for both the Slavic and American communities. I list the changes that are taking place in the Slavic community now and offer

additional practical ways for the Slavic community to take to build the relationships needed to integrate with its surrounding American community. Together these different cultures can build secure, vibrant, and cohesive communities which engage and transform their members toward a better life for all.

Immigration and History

People emigrate from their homeland, the land of their ancestors, for various reasons such as war, social conflict, faith differences, and other dangers that force people to flee to safety. At times, even the government persecutes and discriminates against people groups so much so that they flee. As one author stated, “Emigration from one country to another represents a significant transitional – even transformative – event; it entails the loss of an entire social world and the reconstruction of a life in a new context with unfamiliar cues and expectations” (Corning 225). Regardless the reasons, when people leave a country that has been their home for generations and immerse themselves in a foreign language and culture, it is a traumatic experience.

Upon the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, President Gorbachev legalized emigration from the Soviet Union, and this act created a mass migration of minorities and refugees (Hardwick 136). The religious refugees who were finally escaping the Soviet Union after many years of persecution and oppression could see a brighter future ahead. Yet, it was not all positive. According to Amy Corning, for those leaving the former Soviet Union, “Emigration was a dramatic rupture; those who obtained permission to leave expected never to return or to see again friends and relatives left behind” (227). My father took the chance, and in 1996, he applied to the United States for my family to emigrate as refugees. His decision to put our family through a “dramatic rupture” from our homeland evolved from his fear that we would again be persecuted in Russia for our faith beliefs.

The period of the *perestroika*¹ in the 90's was an uncertain time for many. A shortage of jobs, provisions, and social structure caused many to worry about their future. Unemployment and criminal activity were already on the rise even before the '90s, and they skyrocketed after the fall of the Soviet Union. The local, persecuted Christians hoped that the economic situation would improve, but they also feared religious persecution, so many of them made the same decision as my family to emigrate to the United States as refugees.

However, even when people change their habitats, even move continents away from "home," they often bring with them their old cultural mentality and traditions. The refugees fleeing after the downfall of the Soviet Union brought along learned behaviors: mistrust, fear, and an unwillingness to collaborate, all born of decades of oppression and mistreatment. Unfortunately, even today they cling to them. Susann Hardwick explains that they "had created a large group of people afraid to trust anyone except one another. The bonds of their faith grew stronger, both faith in God and trust in other believers. Eventually, church friends, and family became their only social network" (128). They arrived as groups, and, for the most part, they still stick only to those groups. Their earlier faith persecution and fear of its return led them to the US where they have raised a generation of committed, strong-willed, and alienated Slavic personalities.

Persecution

People who were known or presumed to be Christian in the former Soviet Union were persecuted at every level. Teachers often scolded and harassed children in front of the whole class for going to Sunday school and for believing in a being that doesn't exist. Students who

¹ The cultural and economic reform program initiated by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev; and the collapse of the USSR that followed the abortive coup attempt in 1991 (Corning, 230).

wanted to attend colleges and universities had to join the Communist Party, but anyone affiliated with any religious organization was not allowed to join. Therefore, because most Christians did not join the Communist Party, they could not get higher education. Many bright young Christians chose the only jobs that were available to them, jobs such as plumbing, crane operating, or working as mechanics, electricians, and cooks. Christians were not allowed to be promoted to receive more pay than when they began the job. They also earned less pay than their coworkers if they openly claimed to be Christians (Chander 3).

Choosing to be different from the accepted status of society, Christians experienced constant persecution and discrimination, even in their homes. Ordinary communists saw it as their civil duty to turn in the enemies of the state at every opportunity, even if those people were their immediate family. Neighbors kept a constant watch of any suspicious house activities and informed the authorities of suspicious happenings. The KGB² and/or the police often came to the Christian home to break up prayer meetings or Sunday school classes. Those attending the meetings were fined or taken to jail for a legal fifteen hours, or for days for no reported cause (Kotyakov). The police and the government officials searched every gathering for religious literature such as hymns, Bibles, and Christian journals/newsletters. They confiscated all as proof for incarcerating pastors who were often beaten, threatened, and harassed (Vergulyanets). These stark facts show more personally in the individual stories of those who have fled to escape persecution. Just as important as the stories themselves is the fact that, if told to “others,” they can lead to recognition and understanding in the larger community. Following are a few of these life changing stories.

² KGB is Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti, translated to English as Committee for State Security.

Life Stories

a. Aleksandr Gula

Aleksandr Gula's story resembles that of many Christians living in the USSR. Even though Aleksandr was raised in a Christian family, he did not attend church or participated in religious activities. He joined the Communist Party, and he was an honor roll student at his school. Then one day he met some elderly grandmothers who challenged his atheistic beliefs that there was no God. He couldn't then prove them wrong, so he promised to read the whole Bible to prove them wrong next time around. He even told his father, a preacher, of his plan. Unfortunately, however, he could not understand the Bible well and still could not defend his atheistic stance. Embarrassed and ashamed, he couldn't answer the women's simple questions. Then later he became a Christian through searching for answers and seeking God, and that changed his worldview in many ways. He stated that "after I became a Christian, only then I noticed how horribly the Christian people were treated" (Gula). At 27, Aleksandr was sentenced to prison for ten years for preaching the gospel and leading his home church. He served seven years before his release upon Stalin's death. Eighteen months later, the government wanted to sentence him to more prison time, but he had been a young activist before converting to Christianity, and he argued his honest concerns to the government. He stated that it was wrong of the government to jail young people who could work for the government and use their talents to further government programs. As a Christian, he said that he "was fortunate because the government typically saw faith as a threat and jailed young people regardless of their potential" (Gula).

b. Ivan Vergulyanets and Ivan Kotaykov

My maternal and fraternal grandfathers also experienced violent and harsh persecution. Ivan Vergulyanets was a handicapped choir director in his local church. The KGB reminded Ivan that being a choir director was against the law, and they threatened to put him into prison. But Ivan continued to direct the choir regardless of the threats. Unfortunately, one day the KGB took him without explanation, and his family later found out that he had been given no trial. He went to prison for three years only because he was a church choir director. Little did the KGB know that Ivan also rebound old Bibles and gave them to church members. He would have had a longer and harsher sentence had the KGB found Bibles at his home.

The authorities also harassed my maternal grandfather, Ivan Kotyakov. They took half his paycheck each month as a fine for holding unregistered church services at his home. Registered churches were controlled by the government which placed many restrictions on them. The government even restricted who could go to the registered church and how often. So, unregistered churches sprung up in secret. Vasilii, Ivan's son, recalls that God would tell his father Ivan that the KGB was on its way to search the house, and his father would send home the congregants. Consequently, each time, the KGB arrived at the house, they found only the Kotyakov family members. Furious, the authorities blamed the neighbor who had told about Ivan's gathering, and they decided they could not trust him again. Regardless of the Kotyakov's "clean" house, the authorities threatened Ivan and his wife Tatyana saying that they would place their eleven children into orphanages, that the court date for taking the children was already set. However, it never happened, and according to my parents and relatives, "God always looked after our family" (Kotyakov).

Ivan Kotaykov also experienced persecution as he worked in hard labor transporting metal from a local factory. The management gave him faulty tractors, yet if he had missed a load

at the end of his shift, the employer deducted that “loss” from his pay. Every employee received a premium bonus at the end of the month, but because my grandfather was Christian, he was never given a bonus. His work peers were inconstant: some cheated or scolded Ivan, but some defended him because he was a kind and honest worker.

c. Yelena Gula

Christian women, especially pastor’s wives, also saw discrimination. Yelena, Aleksandr’s wife, was often called to be questioned by the government officials. She explained, “They would try to get anything out of me in order to put my husband in jail one more time” (Gula). She went alone to parent teacher conferences and did not allow Aleksandr to attend in fear that he might be arrested and jailed again for no reason. Teachers gave her children lower grades solely because they had Christian parents. The teachers and students also humiliated or picked on the children in every class. The educators tried to force the parents to get rid of their religious “propaganda” because according to the Gula family, “They believed that children will one day make their own decision and follow the logic and facts of God’s inexistence” (Gula). They were correct. Yelena and Aleksandr lived long lives, and all their children believe and serve God.

d. Galina Vergulyanets

Galina Vergulyanets, my fraternal grandmother, also experienced hardships. Her husband was imprisoned for three years without trial, and she had four small children at home. She worked hard shifts as a street sweeper by night to earn enough money to feed her children. My father recalls that it was difficult to live without his father for three years. He took over many responsibilities around the farm to help his mother catch up with housework. After Ivan was released from prison, his personality and character had changed. Such hard environments often

change people, and he had become short-tempered and unkind. Only with many years of readjustment and hard work on character did Grandfather Ivan become the kinder man I knew for my short eight years in Russia.

e. Tatyana Kotaykova

Tatyana Kotyakova, on the other hand, was a bold and strong woman, a mother of eleven children. She did not allow anyone to mistreat her children or her children to bully one another. She gave her children chores, and each had duties around the small farm and house. Tatyana also supported her husband in his ministry and would take a lot of work on her shoulders when Ivan was away on ministry. Today, of their eleven children are Christian and serve God.

I asked the following question of my interviewees who had experienced violent persecution with prison sentences or fines: what helped them overcome the persecution, the fines, the prison sentences, and life's hardships? Almost all of the interviewees stated that their faith in Jesus Christ had helped them overcome every obstacle in life. They explained that for their faith, they were willing to give up everything. It is a very bold and daring decision to give up everything for something a person believes.

Slavic refugees in the Pacific Northwest

For several reasons, the majority of Slavic refugees chose to relocate in the Portland/Vancouver metro area or the Pacific Northwest. First, in the early 1900s, Russian immigrants had already moved to the area. There have been many periods of migration, and each wave brought different kinds of refugees who had fled because of political, economic, or religious reasons. Second, established sponsors in the Pacific Northwest region, affiliated with churches and/or organizations, helped resettle refugees. Third, the upper Pacific Northwest was

not heavily populated with Russian and Ukrainian people. Originally, the educated Russian Jews were drawn to “traditional gateway cities [such as] New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, while the less educated Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian fundamentalists Christian refugees ... were drawn to re-emerging gateway cities such as Portland, Seattle, and Sacramento” (Hardwick and Meacham 240). The Slavic people knew that their lack of education limited their job opportunities, so they would find better work options in less dense Slavic populations areas. Finally, the climate in the Pacific Northwest is similar to most Russian and Ukrainian homeland environments.

The Slavic people felt like they belonged in the Pacific Northwest, and the local Slavic churches made them feel like they were at home. The church services alleviated the transition into American life. It was something familiar to the Slavic people, and the services were spoken in their native language, which made them feel safe when the surrounding environment was still foreign. The church community was the one place that encouraged the Slavic people and gave them hope for a better future. The preachers, however, always reminded their congregants that they should be thankful every day for a country such as the United States, where the Slavic people could live freely and practice their religion without persecution.

Resettlement agencies

Resettlement organizations in the Portland/Vancouver metro area also helped support Slavic refugees. These included the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) and Lutheran Community Services Northwest. As of the 2000 US census, more than 60,000 Slavic refugees call Portland and Vancouver their home. The numbers have increased since this wave of immigration was at its peak between 1995 and 2005 (Hardwick ‘Placing’). One of the refugee organizations helped each new family and tried to ease their integration process. Also,

the US welfare system helped the Slavic refugees, and without this help, many families would have struggled to feed their families and to provide the basic necessities. Slavic refugees cherished food stamps as gold because the stamps helped them supplement the food costs. They could recollect how happy a loaf of bread in Russia had made them feel, and the same pleasure happened with the food that the US welfare system provided.

For limited times, the organizations also gave monthly allowances to help with the rent, bills, and food expenses, and they encouraged the refugees to begin to take English language classes. They knew that the faster the refugees learned the English language, the faster they could adjust to the American life. To gain some perspective, in early 1994, Welfare Services required refugees to be unemployed until they learned English even to be eligible for welfare services. Concha Delgado-Gaitan states that the refugees then spent their time being “unemployed and learning English instead of earning a living” (146). Refugees today face high rent costs and other expenses, both refugee parents have to work, and few have the time to study the English language.

Once they learned English, the hope was that they would interact daily with local people around them and would slowly become part of the larger community. Still, learning a new language was difficult, and the familiar always helped them feel safe and comfortable in their surroundings. Susan Hardwick writes about the similarities that Slavic people shared:

The shared behavioral norms, dress codes, and values bind believers to each other and to their places of origin and common culture. However, the safety and security of being a part of a larger group can both empower members to feel confident to venture out into the outside world (thereby speeding the adaptation process) or slow down their willingness to move beyond the comfort of their insider church group. Religious affiliations thus

emerged as both a help and a hindrance to the larger assimilation experience for these and other groups of refugees and immigrants. (36)

And in a nutshell, that is the problem: refugee isolation. The hope for future Slavic American generations depends on unity, not division, with the mainstream culture. It depends on working together as a whole to meet common goals of each community. In Portland, Oregon, the Slavic people created an organization called Slavic Coalition whose aim is to aid the Slavic community by “helping with adaptation and adjustment to life in Portland” (Hardwick Slavic Dreams 37). The Slavic community wants to find ways to work together with the greater community in building social and economic infrastructure. At the same time, our Slavic community hopes that its people maintain their ethnic and religious identities which can enrich the greater Portland/Vancouver community with Slavic diversity and culture.

Assimilation vs. Integration

The status of immigrants in a foreign country is different from the status of a refugee. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), an immigrant is “an alien, also known as a Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR), who has been granted the right by the USCIS to reside permanently in the United States and to work without restrictions” (Immigration term). All immigrants receive a “green card” which is their evidence of being an alien with the LPR status.

During the 1951 United Nations Convention, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) defined a refugee as someone who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2010).

The difference between immigrants and refugees is their entrance process into the host country: immigrants are attracted to or ‘pulled’ by the life in the United States, and refugees are ‘pushed’ from their native lands, persecuted for their race, religion, nationality, or political view (Segal 564). A great number of refugees are minorities in their homelands, but there are also majorities who flee their countries to seek protection and asylum. People often leave their homelands for positive reasons, but refugees leave to get away from discrimination and persecution. They are willing to learn a new culture, a new language, and a new way of life in exchange for protection and safety. However, to adapt and thrive, refugees have to learn the systems that operate in their host country.

Further related definitions are of assimilation and integration. When new minorities arrive in a host country, it is important to practice integration rather than assimilation. Integration means that the minority citizens are “accepted as full members of the host society, [and] are at the same time encouraged to retain a link with their roots and their collective identity” (Hofstede 396). On the other hand, assimilation means the minority group should conform to mainstream culture and “lose their distinctiveness as fast as possible” (Hofstede 396). Having experienced being a refugee myself, I was initially wrong to believe that assimilation is the best way to fit into a new culture and community. I thought that by becoming like everyone else, I would be accepted more quickly and that my differences would go unnoticed. It was so much easier to try to fit in than to stand out. “Fitting in” can be a temptation particularly for the younger refugees when newly arrived in a foreign school. But it is through the process of integration that an immigrant or a refugee can continue to hold his or her important values, practices, and beliefs, and also become accepted in a host society.

The large Slavic refugee community in the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area is changing and growing. As are many other communities, the Slavic community is also going through challenges as its members slowly adapt to American society. Unfortunately, the process of integration and adaptation is difficult and takes time, effort, and patience. Also, it is important to remember that cultural change, even in one's original country, is a slow process because it is built on values which are passed on from generation to generation (Hofstede 19). The current Slavic population, however, is not fully integrated into the American society mainly because its members choose to stay outside the dominant culture. Cultural separation is "the acculturation strategy in which people wish to maintain their cultural heritage, and seek to avoid participation in the larger society" (Berry et al. 475). In its acculturation process, the Slavic community has slowly separated from rather than integrated with the culture of the host community.

The Slavic community has some heavy obstacles to overcome so that its members can move beyond separation, exclusion, and isolation. The Slavic religious community did not set out to remain separated from the American society, but through its process of acculturation, it happened as a result of self-protection. But there is still time, and the Portland/Vancouver area hopes to help the Slavic religious community members reconcile their painful past experiences so that they can join the greater Portland/Vancouver communities for mutual inclusion toward personal and community growth and work. This collaboration would benefit the whole community in many ways, and it would also poise the current Slavic group to aid Portland and Vancouver and help the new in-coming refugees integrate better. They will have "been there and done that" and know how to help.

Experiences and integration of the Slavic community

Refugees have to overcome many obstacles in the first years of their integration. To survive and succeed in providing for their families and helping one another, the Slavic people worked together to overcome problems, the largest of which was the language barrier, which still poses a problem for many first generation Slavic speakers. Everyone can imagine how difficult it must be to migrate to a country that has a different language and culture. Geert Hofstede et al. describe this sudden migration as being “parachuted into cultural environments vastly different from the ones in which they were mentally programmed, often without any preparation” (396). Then the difficulty is not only learning a new language, but also learning how to function in a new culture. When people move to a drastically different environment from what they are familiar with, it creates insecurities and fear, especially for the first generation.

The first generation migrants are unlikely to exchange any of their old traditions or cultural values for those of the host country. They are rooted mentally, educationally, and psychologically in the ways and thoughts of their home country. This dissidence further marginalizes them, even if it is unintentional, and they live between the two worlds, but more in their original one (Hofstede 397). Language is not the only barrier, but it greatly affects the rest of the immigrants’ lives. For instance, immigrant parents often held jobs that no one else wanted only because they did not know the English language.

These hard working parents had no time to attend English classes to study the language because they had to feed the family and pay for the bills and expenses. It was a vicious cycle because not knowing English made their lives even more difficult. Simply getting around for daily activities was difficult, and the parents often asked their children to translate words or help with other situations where they needed to know English. The children, who pick up language

more easily than do adults, were sometimes embarrassed because their parents asked for their help.

During an interview, a first generation woman told me that “it would be better if the welfare in the state of Washington, the people who supported us first, would give us more time to study the language so we could get some kind of education. Because in other states like California, they gave the refugees about 5 years to study the English language, before they told us that we have to start working to earn our own money” (Vergulyanets). Those middle aged Slavic people who had an opportunity to study the English language for a few years before looking for work were able to obtain better jobs. Among others, they became receptionists, translators, and even nurses.

The Washington refugees also had to show the welfare offices that they were actively looking for work and provide proof that they had applied for different jobs. Often when the refugees applied for jobs, the employer asked if they knew how to speak English. The answer was usually “no,” and they did not get the jobs. It was a difficult experience for many Slavic parents who worked long hours in low paying jobs such as in fast food places and as cleaning crew in restaurants. The environment was fully English-speaking, and unfortunately the Slavic folks, who could not speak English well or understand it either, were sometimes mistreated (Hofstede 397; Vergulyanets; Sofiskiy).

It was especially difficult for this older generation to manage many duties and work a full time job, especially when they did not know English well. The mothers worked shifts after their husbands because both parents had to work to provide for their family, and most families owned only one car. Generally, the Slavic religious immigrant families are quite large and frequently have six or more children. That created another difficulty for the Slavic mothers who had to

leave their children at home to work at their jobs. Many women I interviewed stated that it would be much better if “there were programs that allowed mothers to stay with their children at home” (Avramenko, Vergulyanets). These mothers wanted to invest in their own children’s lives, to teach them the values and beliefs of their family’s culture. It was particularly hard for them to leave their children to work away from the home. Most of my interviewees in their home country had been full-time stay-at-home mothers who had paid work leave for up to two years and additional governmental benefits for each additional child (Avramenko, Vergulyanets).

School Experience

In public schools, being different was difficult. Having an accent and wearing old styled clothing automatically marked Slavic children, and the mainstream kids picked on them. The Slavic children chose Slavic friends because the English-speaking children could not understand them and made fun of their speech. Many children practiced several times a day speaking English words in front of the mirror to lose their Slavic accent and say words as did other American children. Meanwhile, for protection, they joined only the Slavic groups. This I know, because it took me three and a half years to feel that I had become a part of the greater community, and to sense that I belonged.

No matter how hard the Slavic children tried to act and be American, they knew that they would be different, and the language was still a factor. Speaking in their native tongue was forbidden in classrooms. Also, the other students always reminded the Slavic kids, “You are in America, and we speak English here.” In the three and a half years my younger brother and I were first in school, we both tested out of the English Second Language (ESL³) program. However, when we first arrived to the United States, we had practically no peers to help us

³ English Second Language

understand and assimilate into the American culture. Later when we had the opportunity to help the new immigrants who came to our schools, we were glad to help because we understood how they felt. We were the translators and guides for our Slavic peers up until the end of middle school.

It is easy to see that my generation, those of us who have grown up in America, has integrated well, but we will always see ourselves as immigrants. Our parents identify with both statuses, immigrant and refugee. This identity is not a negative one, but it is a different one from what our children will identify as. Our children will identify neither as immigrants or refugees, but as Americans, and that is why it is our obligation to teach them of our history and pass on the important values the Slavic people brought to the United States. It is important for the Slavic people to continue telling their stories to younger generations even as they move toward fuller integration with their American neighbors.

The concern for the Slavic community

After recognizing the main problems that the Slavic community faces, we must find new solutions to help its integration. But the integration should be a two-way process: The American Immigration agency needs to educate the US community about the Slavic refugees and advise ways to work with this culture, and for the greater good. It is not healthy to stand back and watch as an incoming refugee people segregate from the greater community. Additionally, the Slavic community needs to work on its three inadequate microsystems – school, peers, and work – through which segregation first began and then move to create systems for community as a whole. The Slavic community has to move beyond segregation into inclusiveness. According to Concha Delgado-Gaitan, there are many structural factors in social segregation, such as the following:

(residential segregation, prejudices, language barriers, cultural – especially religious – and other differences) beyond the control of newcomers which may isolate them and prevent from integrating into the community and school. These factors, if neglected, result in a long-term disadvantage, alienation, and social distance between newcomers and mainstream resident. (Delgado 138)

The Slavic and mainstream communities should address these factors for the benefit of the greater community as a whole, and the Slavic people should begin to integrate themselves fully into the American society, without forgetting their own roots.

Children and adolescents of the Slavic refugees actually wrestle with and try to meet the challenge to fit into the American society, so they tend to focus on adjusting to their new host country. Their parents, on the other hand, are more concerned with being able to provide for the family, so they primarily use their native culture adaptation skills in the new country, perhaps because of the fearful and untrusting mindsets they brought with them to the US. As a result, the younger immigrants have to balance the demands of their new environment with the demands of their native-oriented parents. The parents use strategies that help create and cement segregation between themselves and their children, and between the Slavic people and the greater community.

Separation Problem in the Slavic community

The Slavic refugees rely on already established microsystems and operating networks within their religious community; however, in the process, they are separating their older and younger generations, they are building their own isolated community, and they are alienating themselves from their local American community. Consequently, they do not interact with the greater community. This continued isolationist action takes a negative toll on the community

members. For example, many Slavic refugees do not vote in elections because in their former countries, the system was either rigged or they were not allowed to vote. But voting in the United States is a citizen's duty, and the Slavic people need to vote for their candidates and concerns. They do not need to fear the political system, and they should claim their right to vote in local and national elections so that they have a voice in their own future in the US.

Communities need strong microsystems that help produce stronger individuals and stronger societies. Successful communities serve people in all aspects of life – the social, mental, spiritual, and emotional. Strong social microsystems also help individuals share their assets with the greater community. Searching for ways to help the Slavic people integrate more fully with their host country, I analyzed their microsystems by using Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development. I explored the five relevant microsystems: family, school, peer groups, work, and church. The Slavic religious refugee community of concern in this thesis operates within only two of these microsystems: the family and church.

Each of Bronfenbrenner's microsystems is essential for a person's healthy development. Bronfenbrenner once stated that in order "to understand human development, one must consider the entire ecological system in which growth occurs" (37). For Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development to work properly, each system in the micro level must work well both individually and collectively. Microsystems drive the community and help maintain production and growth on a meso-level and are vital for the healthy development of the community. A mesosystem consists of interactions between two microsystems. When the microsystems are strengthened, they will help define and encourage our natural talents and assets that we all then can later use to contribute to society.

The Slavic community lacks three of the five support microsystems: school, peer groups, and work. The middle-aged Slavic people primarily prefer to work with other Slavic co-workers, and this tendency separates them from their larger community. In school, the younger Slavic people choose Slavic friends, perhaps because of negative presumptions about the general community, but regardless, they separate themselves as well. Because the older and younger Slavic generations lack adequate action in these three microsystems, it creates a fracture between the Slavic community and their local American community.

Slavic communities and the first microsystem: the family

When the Slavic refugees immigrated to the United States, they created communities centered on the two microsystems of the family and the church. Microsystems exist to “ease the economic and sociocultural adjustment process of foreign-born newcomers” to new communities (Hume and Hardwick 191); however, the Slavic people built networks and surrounded themselves only with their familiar culture and religion. This action provided the refugees with essential emotional and spiritual support systems (Hume and Hardwick 199), but it also created negative consequences of social separation and isolation. At the beginning, this separation may have been necessary because when adversity occurred, the religious refugee community relied on each other and on their faith in God for emotional and spiritual support.

The first microsystem, important in any community, is the family, and almost every person belongs to a family microsystem. For the Slavic people, the family is the most important microsystem of all because they and their culture revolve around the family setting. The Slavic family provides a support system for its members who learn and grow together. This initial system creates and cultivates the family’s assets and has as a goal to surround and nurture the children with love and care, to provide them an ideal environment in which to learn, to grow, and

to become good participants of other microsystems. The family is where people learn everything for the first time. If a family is a safe place, then, fortunately, it will also be a safe place to make mistakes and solve problems.

The family is similar to a trial-and-error system. In the safe family, its members can improve individually and also learn to understand others and to glean how the community and society operates. For instance, family members might come together to discuss the political candidates and their choices for voting in an election. It is also the place where members can safely plan steps for integration into the larger community whether that be voting, shopping at unfamiliar stores, getting a library card, or just walking through city streets and smiling at others. The family is the building block of all other systems because each family member also participates in each of the other microsystems. For example, young Slavic people, my peers, have been living in two different worlds for the past fifteen years, and it has become stressful and difficult for them. They have begun to build their own sets of microsystems which leads them to detach from the older generation and from their traditions, language, and practices. According to David Vergulyanets, the Sunday school coordinator at a local Slavic church, “Not all, but a good portion of young Slavic people are not doing everything in their power to have a family environment like their parents had. The young generation is very egocentric because of the detachment from the older generation and not receiving guidance or life examples from the older generation.” One reason the younger generation members are detaching from their elders is that they do not know how difficult it was for their parents to rebuild their assets – individual, relational, and financial – in a new country while they sustained and provided for a large family.

The family microsystem also informs the children and youth about the external and internal assets which they later use in other microsystems. The family’s external values include

family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, parent involvement in schooling, safety, family boundaries, adult role modeling, high expectations, and quality time at home. The family's main internal assets are to nurture the positive values within each child and to encourage each to be committed to learn. The family exists to support, create boundaries, and aim for high expectations. Unfortunately, today the Slavic families do not have many of the internal assets of support, and the external assets are disproportionate to the internal. For example, the Slavic family parents often have high expectations for their children, but because they have separated themselves from the dominant community, they lack the "inclusive" support and role modeling that will help their children meet those high expectations.

a. The second microsystem: school

The second microsystem essential in holistic development of a child is the school. Strong communities must have strong educational systems that teach children values and knowledge. School also serves as a "broad context for acculturation not only for academic development and language acquisition but for cultural learning through experiences as peer relations, class expectations ... [and] school norms [depend upon] parent involvement" (Trickett and Birman 27). When an educational system lacks resources or the ability to teach a child, especially parent involvement, it removes an essential component of development. School provides children external assets: a caring school climate, adult relationships, parents' involvement in schooling, school boundaries, adult role models, high expectations, and creative activities. The internal values include motivating achievement school engagement, homework, bonding to school, reading for pleasure, planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, cultural competence, resistance skills, peaceful conflict resolution, and all of the positive value assets (Benson 76). Education encourages children to grow assets by committing to learn, obtaining

positive values, and cultivating social competencies. Schooling is essential in a child's development because it helps create boundaries and expectations, and it provides the opportunity to learn and grow.

The main problem the Slavic parents face with the US education system is the language barrier between themselves and the teachers/programs. Consequently, most Slavic parents are unable to help in their children's classes or even to help their children with their school assignments. Neither do they use the academic resources that are present in their child's school. Either they do not know about the programs in place to help students with homework, or they do not have time to leave their children for such after school studies. Also, traditional Slavic families continue to discourage their children from pursuing higher education, which results in yet another disconnect from the larger community.

b. The third microsystem: peer groups

The third microsystem is peer groups. Support among peers is vital for healthy development at every age. According to Boyden et.al, "Social approval from peers is absolutely critical to resilience and adaptation in children" (26). Social approval and acceptance creates a positive atmosphere for growth which, in turn, creates an atmosphere in which assets can develop. Peer group external assets include a caring neighborhood, a community which values youth, service to others, safety, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, and youth programs. Peer group internal values include gaining personal power, self-esteem, a sense of purpose, and a positive view of personal future.

Peer groups both empower and help produce positive personal and social identity in children and youth. They serve as a secondary source of support for the Slavic youth and children, and they are key in the development of young immigrants. However, the Slavic

community tends to choose primarily Slavic peers, thus limiting their own and their children's circles of influence. Often the young Slavic men choose groups that separate them from the older generation, that include only Slavic people, and that alienate other groups. Such behavior forms a micro culture rooted in separation from their larger American community. Identifying healthy, inclusive peer and school groups is essential for an immigrant's integration into the larger community. The Slavic and larger communities need to implant programs that can support and help students to feel more included in mainstream America.

c. The fourth microsystem: work

The fourth microsystem, work, directly relates to the family microsystem. The parents work environment has various effects on children that may not be easily noticed. Slavic parents often work hard so their children will have a better future than they have had. Consequently, Slavic parents spend the majority of their time at work to provide for the family and not with their children to help develop their assets. Parents can model the value and importance of work, but it is at a personal loss to them. According to Bronfenbrenner and Scarr, "The most effective transmission of occupational value and choice occurred under a combination of a prestigious parental role model and a close father-son relationship" (728). Close parent/child relationships are important in many ways, but children can have a skewed vision of a healthy work microsystem if their parents are always working. However, that work/life is not an easy balance to achieve, and it has negative consequences. If both parents work and are often absent, they cannot help their children build strong assets during their development stages. Unfortunately, these hard working Slavic parents have not been able to invest in their children's lives as much as they would have preferred because both parents had to work as often as they could.

In the Slavic culture, women often worked as stay-at-home mothers and did not work outside the home. Unfortunately, when Slavic mothers began to work in the United States, it created a negative effect on their children because then neither parent was home and available to provide emotional support for their children. Furthermore, siblings helped each other with school work because parents could not understand the foreign language. Eventually, the siblings provided the important support system for school, and parents, when they could, provided emotional and mental support at home.

As for work choices, Slavic middle-aged and elderly men primarily still prefer to work with other Slavic people and to limit their interaction with the outside community as a whole. The majority of them work lengthy hours, which robs their attention from their families and creates two divides. The first divide is between those parents and their children, and the second is between the parents and their larger communities. They have effectively isolated themselves from their larger community to rely only on one another. As a result, the parents often become passive regarding the friends their children choose and about their interactions with their children's schools. They struggle to take the time and the responsibility to participate directly, or even indirectly, in their children's life and development.

The work microsystem encourages internal assets such as achievement motivation, all of the positive values, all of the social competencies, and the positive identity asset. However, if work also teaches children external assets such as other adult relationships, service to others, adult role models, and positive peer influence, then the Slavic children and youth do not receive these developmental assets. Ironically, the work microsystem teaches Slavic youth its internal assets but, because of their parents' isolationist work preferences, it fails to teach them the required external work assets.

d. The fifth microsystem: Church

The church is the last of the five microsystems, yet one of the most important in the Slavic refugee communities. The church microsystem provides support for the families and brings in resources for its community members. According to Hume and Hardwick, “Religious and social connections and relationships continue[d] to sustain [the Slavic people], especially in their first few years in the United States” (199). A religious or a spiritual organization provides all four of the external assets: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The internal church assets include positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (*The Asset Approach*). To have this support, the Slavic children and youth typically stay close to the family and church microsystems.

For most Slavic families, the church is their community’s primary support source, especially for the older generation. It has been observed that the Slavic church has realized its capabilities, and it wants to help its people (Vergulyanets, David). The contemporary Slavic church encourages its young people to pursue higher education and good employment. However, traditional conservative Slavic churches do not encourage their children and youth to pursue higher education. One reason for this difference may be because most older Slavic people were denied pursuit of higher education in the former Soviet Union, so they do not understand the importance of higher education today.

The Slavic people already value and learn from the church microsystem which provides vital lessons for life and teaches children important assets. The parents, as best they can, now need to balance their time so that they provide for their families and help their children develop their natural assets. After all, the two microsystems, family and the church, teach the children/youth to be good citizens in the greater community. The ultimate goal in the religious

Slavic families and community, however, is to cultivate not only the essential assets in the children so that they become good people and valuable citizens, but also to cultivate the love for God and faith in the higher calling. This thesis will not examine the faith works of this community.

In general, the Slavic community members have a stagnated microsystem collective. They need to better define and understand these systems so that they can begin to work together to create growth and positive changes in the way they invest in their children's lives to teach them values and positive assets that will sustain them in the future. The Slavic community members need to let go their fear of those in the greater community so that people from both groups can learn to trust one another and work together. Healing of relationships also needs to take place between the older and younger Slavic generations, so that each generation learns to include and connect with its larger American community. After the Slavic families rebuild their parent/child relationships, they can more confidently move out into the larger community. The refugee community definitely needs to step up and provide its valuable assets to the greater Portland/Vancouver metro area. It is time to fully step out of the separate community and give back to the community which helped the Slavic people resettle in the United States more than twenty-five years ago. Understanding and working within the five microsystems will aid this transition.

Older generation fear and separation

The Slavic religious refugee community endured much persecution, suffering, and pain in their homelands, all because of their faith beliefs. The older Slavic generation survived this persecution in a tense state of fear and worry. Consequently, they learned to protect their own

and to distrust others. They had brought this distrust with them from their former homelands where “they had learned to distrust, unequivocally, the state and its elaborate bureaucracy” (Clarke 5). To some extent, possibly even unintentionally, this method of protection, separation, and distrusting others reflected on their future generations. Nurturing a culture of protecting oneself from danger can later create a new generation that works in the same kind of fear. The persecuted and discriminated Slavic Christians feared for their lives and constantly hid from any police or authority brutality. A professor and researcher Susan Hardwick explains the following about the Slavic immigrant community:

Most fear outsiders and remain guarded throughout preliminary discussions. Experiences in their homeland caused many to be withdrawn and unwilling to give information about their past lives. Fear of persecution by authorities lingers decades after resettlement in North America. Most view outsiders as intruders and are unwilling, at first, to divulge details about past and present experiences, living in fear of repercussions. (12)

As a result of past fears, some Slavic folks may never fully integrate regardless of how their community changes around them, but it is hopeful that many will integrate fully.

A call to Reconciliation, Inclusion, and Embracing

The horrible past experiences of discrimination and persecution against Christians in the former Soviet Union will always linger in some older Slavic members’ minds, but the younger generations can still help these first generational people heal from their trauma, perhaps simply by hearing their stories. It is easy to tell someone not to fear the acts that caused them pain and suffering when we have not experienced them first-hand. But the Slavic people and their communities need healing from their past wounds and fears so that they can live in the present

and future with peace in their hearts. The Slavic community elders need this healing, but they must first acknowledge it before they can move on. Perhaps telling their stories to their young people can help this transition and even lead them into the next positive stage of forgiving their former enemies. My grandparents have shared their stories with me, and I share them with others.

The Slavic community members want to build bridges between communities and to end their unintentional separation created in their initial integration process to protect themselves from the unknown culture. As Miroslav Volf states, separation by itself can “result in self-enclosed, isolated, and self-identical beings” (65). Not only did the Slavic community excluded themselves from the American community, the American community also excluded the refugees in relation to work and school. According to Volf, exclusion “can entail cutting of the bonds that connect, taking oneself out of the pattern of interdependence and placing oneself in a position of sovereign independence” (65). Therefore, exclusion can hurt a community greatly because it breaks connections and excludes others. It allows no interdependent system.

To exclude others is to not create space to make a relationship with them. Excluding others is an act of creating “impenetrable barriers that prevent a creative encounter with the other” (Volf 67). As people, we all need communication and relationships with one another in our larger communities. The Slavic community cannot exist alone and independent of the dominant culture.

Instead of living in separation, Miroslav Volf calls the Slavic community to apply the concept of differentiation in their lives. This concept is described as “separating-and-binding that results in patterns of interdependence” (65). Both the Slavic and the American community can begin to interdepend on each other as important players in society. Examples of interdependence

can be allowing the neighbors to borrow tools and asking for their help in return. It can be simple steps organizing a mutual garage sale, or watching a movie together. Recommending doctors, dentists, a good QFC, a local car repair shop – all create simple connections that lead to realizing similar interests, challenges, and goals. Interdependence is an act, not a passive abstraction. Both groups can begin to create and work together by including each other and also by embracing the differences that each community offers. Language differences can work both ways: Slavic people can help the English-speaking Americans learn to say “thank you” in Ukrainian or Russian and introduce them to their language’s alphabet. They can inform their neighbors about how they celebrate Easter, for instance, and even invite them to church. After all, differences can bring a variety of thoughts, ideas, and actions that the community as a whole can use to develop more productively than when the two communities operate separately.

Currently, separation still isolates the two important cultures. But as people who long for community and acceptance, the Slavic refugees need to come together as God intended us to, and begin to work in unity with the neighbors who surround us.

A call to collaboration and integration (a call to create movement of mutual help)

The Slavic community’s self-imposed separation from its larger American community is slowly becoming less of a factor. The change has begun because many young Slavic adults have noticed the need to begin a “deeper integration” in which they collaborate more with the American community. Deeper integration relates to the neighboring love and social justice which Cynthia Moe-Lobeda explains in her book, *Resisting Structural Evil*. She states, “Social justice aims at correcting any oppressive and alienating trends within the community” (178). To restore justice, neighbors must practice neighborly love and respect. Doing so might mean showing up at a neighbor’s door with a plate of Slavic cookies, starting a conversation, even if in broken

English, about the weather, or going for a spring walk in the local parks which often teem with ethnic families enjoying the sunshine, food, and conversation. These acts can lead to relationships, and “[r]ight relations are those that allow the needs of all to be met in a way in which relationships can flourish and community can be preserved” (Moe-Lobeda 179).

Helping and loving our neighbors is also a Christian value, one we give to others and do not hoard among a few. Beyond connecting with its larger American community, the Slavic community members can also use their close ties and local resources to help new refugees to integrate and adapt to the new culture. They can share ways to cope with the stress of moving and integrating into a new world by helping them move in, by helping them find schools and churches and libraries. The Slavic religious refugees can offer the most practical assistance for the new incoming Slavic religious refugees because not only do they know the refugees’ culture, language, past experiences, they also know the resources that are available in a country so foreign to the new refugees.

The already settled Slavic community members need to step up and provide help and aid to the new refugees. I argue that it is not only our duty but also our particular responsibility. We were once new refugees in the US which gave us a chance to thrive here, to live in freedom and with opportunities. It is reasonable that we, the earlier Slavic community members, should extend kindness and aid to new Slavic refugees. There are many more persecuted Christians around the world who need refuge and aid, and if the United States grants them entrance into the country, then the Slavic community should be there to help them, Slavic or not, as other people helped us. It is a traumatic experience to move from one side of the world to another, and it is difficult to adjust to a totally different culture and language. But it is possible with the help of previous resettled refugees and of the American community. America is known for its open arms

to the persecuted and oppressed, and it provides a home in a new country that many proudly call their own.

Each community needs to build trust with the other before they can work well together. As Brené Brown points out, “Trust is built in very small moments.” The Slavic community can take small steps to open up to its local American community, to create an environment where this mutual exchange can take place. Both communities need to take a step towards each other. We should not ask people to do what we are not willing to do ourselves (Cho 172); therefore, immigrants in the host country should take the first step towards the American community. The first step can be as simple as the immigrants learning to trust another culture, language, or community group perhaps through going to a “town hall” meeting or to a local school football game. It can be the younger Slavic people teaching the older that the community and the neighbors want the best for them here. The grandson can take his grandfather for a burger at a MacDonald’s. In these and other such acts, the participants learn to lose the distrust of those different from their own group. As stated earlier, the acceptance of others starts with inclusion and with building trust. The Slavic youth particularly want communication and relationship between communities to change so that they may work well with the English-speaking community, organizations, and incoming refugees.

Historically, many different cultures and communities have immigrated to the United States and have worked together towards a common goal, a fact which has brought vast cultural and economic richness to the US. For instance, during the 19th century industrial revolution, people from many nations worked together to achieve two goals – their own American dream and making this country great. An adverse occurrence, of course, was the American Civil War which threatened to divide the country but ended in unity. Now as then, different cultures and

people work better together when they focus more on their similarities instead of their differences, and when they work toward common goals. So, the Slavic community members must own their part of the American dream and detail ways that they can help themselves and their neighbors realize it.

Integration and a call to help incoming refugees

Ironically, Slavic community members can work together with different refugee organizations and the American community to help resettle the new, in-coming Slavic refugees from Ukraine or other countries but only if the current Slavic members have reached out, engaged with the organizations, and offered help. In short, they have made the crucial steps toward inclusiveness.

Former and resettled refugees can help incoming refugees. First, the former refugees know the violence the new refugees have fled. Second, no cultural barrier exists between the settled and new refugees. Third, no language barrier exists. Fourth, those who have “done it” can teach the newcomers how best to achieve it. They can suggest schools or language programs for the adults, name the best schools for the children, offer help at grocery stores, help newcomers find jobs through a list of willing employers, suggest churches and welfare programs, and so much more, the workings of life.

Community development can begin at any stage, and as long as people invest in it and work together to accomplish it, it can also build networks toward gaining more resources for help. For instance, Seattle’s own Gates Foundation is famous for its donations to foster local and global health and reform. Community organizations such as IRCO was created by a group of immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia who wanted to help newly arrived refugees establish themselves within the community. Later they began to help all types of refugees, not

only their own kind. Development work always involves people working together to create change. Change changes lives.

Overall, the Slavic refugees have resisted change. They rely on themselves, their family members, and friends. The younger generation, however, will change this picture. They must bridge the gaps that their parents' initial insecurity created, and they must act now for several reasons. They want to integrate into the American culture, retain their precious original culture, not only survive but thrive in this "new land," and pass on this hope to their own children. If Slavic Christians examine the full picture, they will admit that living in fear is not what God called them to do. Rather, God called different cultures and communities to come together and live as one, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19). It is the love of God towards us that "generates and nurtures community" and gives us the ability to care for one another" (Moe-Lobeda 173).

At first, there was little neighboring love or communication because of the early separation. The language barriers prevented older Slavic community members from full integration into American life. Now, the elders are slowly beginning to include, embrace, and collaborate with the English-speaking community, especially when the receiving community appreciates their amazing efforts. The older Slavic people should try to converse and see how the people are doing around them. It is proper to ask neighbors how their day has gone, even if there is a language barrier. They can ask "how are you," and keep up with a simple conversation. Also, they should not be afraid to ask questions in the grocery or department stores. The easiest barrier breaker is a smile.

Changes that are taking place

Important changes are taking place in the Slavic communities: members are becoming American citizens; they now include English translations in their churches and conferences so that both generations understand; and the Slavic youth are moving toward inclusiveness in the larger community. There are, “more than 400 businesses in Portland/Vancouver area that are owned by Russian-speaking entrepreneurs” (Hume and Hardwick 205). Businesses such as construction, authentic grocery/food stores, and even restaurants not only help maintain ethnic cultural heritage but also bring positive economic value to the area.

In general, the Slavic people are taking steps toward cultural American integration, but they really need the greater community also to encourage them to engage. The young Slavic adults already encourage their parents and grandparents to seek professional therapy and church advice to help them move beyond their immense past trauma into peace and forgiveness. Also, the already established refugee communities are helping newly arrived refugees to settle in. They provide transportation, translation, furniture, and cash.

A Call to Action

The “integrating” plan of action’s first step must be to help the older Slavic generation heal their past wounds enough so that they can move forward, which may include the necessary but difficult act of forgiving those who persecuted them. Forgiveness can be a major step towards healing and reconciliation. Second, the Slavic community needs professional cultural brokers who can introduce and/or provide trauma therapy to the community. The Slavic people look down upon mental health support and simply do not discuss the subject, so they are unfamiliar with PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Cultural brokers, such as the young Slavic adults need to hold conferences and meetings with families of the older generation to help them receive mental health treatment toward their healing and better integration into society.

Professional cultural brokers help with mental health topics by encouraging that mental health is not a taboo topic and that everyone has the right to help with such issues. These conferences can take place in local Slavic churches, welcoming and familiar places for these elders. Conferences should include English/Russian translators, full screens for visual understanding, pre and post consultation opportunities with settled Slavic and local American community members willing to invest in helping this older refugee generation find its peace and place in the new land.

The second step calls for the communities to acquire four components of cultural competence: cultural awareness, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and inductive learning. Mutual cultural awareness is awareness of “one’s own life experiences which are related to culture and contact with other cultures” (Segal 569). It assumes that refugees from other new nationalities will step forward as well, but especially that the “established” Americans will embrace the others and include them in the country’s goals and plans. Each group should learn something about the other culture and the people because the more people learn about one another, the better they understand each other. Knowledge acquisition involves learning about other diverse groups. Skill development and inductive learning both involve gaining knowledge about cultural diversity and experience with other culture. Young Slavic adults know both of their worlds, and because of it, they can discuss the many life topics that the host culture and its refugee cultures have in common and not. The resulting cultural competency can open a door to understanding and accepting the other.

Eventually, the third step can lead both the American and Slavic communities to cultural integration as they find similarities and celebrate the differences. Then they can accelerate the cultural integration process in which both groups can come together to integrate with one another as a mutual effort towards understanding. Integration does create overlaps, but it never removes

the uniqueness of each individual involved. Instead, it adds diversity and cultural richness to all who accept it.

The fourth step requires creating more mutual involvement opportunities for both communities. Single community events are great, but dual community events invite the “other” group to participate, and encourage all, to work together toward common goals. This call asks all to be open, friendly, and true with one another, and as such, it can be a first step where the combined community members meet, work together, and get to know one another.

How will it all come together? It can be through private or community means. Perhaps each Slavic family commits to inviting an “American” family to enjoy a cultural food evening, where both cultures share their food, converse, and, if it works well, bond and plan to do more for the mutual communities. Or an American family can invite a Slavic family over for dinner to get to know them better. Also, the co-joining communities can host a picnic and movie event and show a relevant immigrant film with subtitles. These activities will bring both cultures together to enjoy similar interests, share different foods, and learn about another culture living right next door.

The fact is that these immigrants and refugees are here to stay, and many have become citizens; now it is the right time to become involved, to include and embrace the new residents of the community who have settled here. Likely, they are also willing to step up to help make any transition and/or collaboration comfortable and safe for everyone. As they reach out into our mutual society, they can become vital players who seek common goals for change, for improvement and development of their communities.

Practical ways to break down the isolation barriers and to integrate

How can it work? Specific acts will enable the Slavic community to integrate into the American larger communities. First, in-coming Slavic refugees today need to take language classes every day, for two to three years. This initial step will help them understand the American culture, how life works in their resettled areas, and how best to communicate with the American people. Much of this advice is in unwritten rules that the settled Slavics can explain to the newcomers.

The second step is to record interviews of the Slavic people with translation on local TV stations, and play two to three such interviews every day. These interviews will contain stories of the Slavic Christian refugees who detail their history and transition to America so that the American people can better understand and converse with their Slavic refugee neighbors. In this way, TV introduces the refugees to the public so that the local people might strike up conversations which also might lead to fruitful friendships. These interviews will show Slavic refugees as real people, not as the ones who isolate themselves, and perhaps, can also answer questions and clear misconceptions about foreign people living within the community.

Third, Slavic Christian refugees should also to attend American church services to immerse themselves into the language, make local friends, and worship God. When attending local protestant church services, the Slavic community members should bring along a parallel Bible that presents the gospel in both Slavic (Russian or Ukrainian) and English. That way they can follow along in both languages and also worship God. This translated Bible can help them read at home and also teach or reinforce English pronunciations when juxtaposed to Russian ones. The more they include the English language into their daily lives and in their interactions with the locals, the faster they will integrate into the larger American society.

Fourth, the Slavic people can invite their local neighbors for a “meet and greet” at a local park. Members from all respective communities can gather to share their foods, stories, laugh, and become friends with their neighbors. It happens each weekends at different parks. Perhaps the instigators are all of one ethnicity, but they can reach out to others and invite them to their table, especially if it is a safe and planned community event. The more the Slavic people interact with the local neighbors, the more they will leave their comfort zones to meet and talk with others outside their exclusive communities. Speaking even broken English will encourage them to practice more and work toward mastery of the language, and most English speakers appreciate their effort and will help them with pronunciation.

Fifth, the Slavic people can invite their “other” neighbors to dinner to get to know them better. The hope here is that the more they interact with the American people, the more they will learn about the culture, community, and American society. For example, I interviewed a male Slavic refugee who left his comfort zone to enjoy a wonderful friendship with an American coworker. When Vasiliy Burchak came to the United States, he lacked English but worked as a welder. His coworker Ron invested in their friendship and helped Vasiliy around the job. Later, they fished together and visited each other’s families. Over time, this friendship grew, and as a result of his time with an American, Vasiliy could speak English much better than did his peers who had not made friendships with other American citizens. Vasiliy stated that “the friendship that I had with Ron was the best thing that ever happened to me. I met a person who was kind enough to show me how things work around here and who spent time with me outside of work” (Burchak interview). The more time they spend together, the more Vasiliy understood and could communicate with Ron. It took both people to make the friendship work regardless of their language barriers. Both Slavic and American community members stand to benefit when they

make friends of the “other” and become open to communication without fear of the language barrier. This barrier will ease out as members from each spend time together, get to know one another as distinct individuals, and start to know each other’s culture, interests, and passions.

Conclusion

This thesis incorporates interviews from the Slavic community members and their struggles with integration upon immigrating to the United States. Language was their most important barrier to integration, and lacking English prevented them from working a better job. Because many worked hard hours to sustain the entire families, these early immigrants had no time to study English. The language barrier, then, decreased their chances at finding better work, and it also prevented them from integrating into their American society. As a result of their problems with language and work, they created a closed community that interacted with and depended solely on each other. This thesis calls the Slavic community members to move from the acculturation process of separation towards integration, and to bridge the gaps they unintentionally created through segregating themselves from the greater American community. The resulting collaboration will benefit progress and growth in both communities and also create a better environment for incoming refugees. The Slavic people believe it is important to keep their own identity, culture, and language, and while that fact is understandable, they can also build relationships with the American community. This step calls for intentional choices on both side; we must all try to understand one another and learn to appreciate our similarities as well as our differences. This process will enrich the diversity of the community, create relationships between neighbors, and allow both communities to collaborate toward common goals within the whole community.

It is time for both the American and Slavic community to commit to change. Different we may be, but we can embrace that difference and learn from it. Our differences make us unique. As a society, then, we can help newly arrived refugees with their integration process. I argue that several integration methods will improve the refugees' chances of working, contributing to, and fitting in with their American counterparts. First, the government needs to allow refugees and immigrants a specific time period to study English. The sooner they know the language, the better they will become true citizens. Second, the American community needs to become aware of the cultural differences the immigrants and refugees bring with them so that mutual understanding grows between the two parties. The language barrier is enormous, but once the refugees and immigrants know English, they can better find suitable jobs, use the skills they brought with them, learn new skills, get additional education, and work together with the greater community toward reaching common goals.

The current Slavic community can learn to cooperate with the larger American community, and it needs to happen now because the Slavic people are already becoming American citizens: they include English translations in churches and conferences, the older generation is slowly learning English, and the younger generation is already moving among the larger community for work, school, and friendship. After all, working within both communities and serving the neighbors creates a stronger environment for all and teaches all youth an obligation to take care of the people. When different cultures work as a team, they depend on each other, and their combined efforts can lead to successful community development.

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