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THIRTY YEARS OF VOCATIONAL SERVICE FOR NEW AMERICANS

The Earliest Years

The Bramson ORT Trade School will be in its 30th year of service to new Americans in 1973. The school was organized in New York City in 1943, in the midst of World War II, at a downtown location in a loft on Canal Street. The impulse for its establishment was the situation faced by refugees from Naziism as they arrived in the city. It was a time when the Jews of Europe were at bay, programmed for destruction. Those few stragglers who could escape to New York required some assurance that they had set foot on solid ground in a place where they could begin to build life anew. The school responded to one facet of that need.

It was in the years immediately after the war, however, that the school reached its peak time. When DP's began to be admitted to the U.S. after 1947, and others were permitted to come through a variety of immigration schemes, the school became more than a school. In its crowded premises, which could have passed for a needle-trades shop in the garment district, families and friends who had lost track of each other, and had assumed that the worst had befallen them, were reunited. An emotional atmosphere pervaded. There were no strangers; all had gone through similar experiences and memories were still the wellsprings of their lives.

It took the better part of a decade for the camps to empty, the other scattered refugee centers in Western Europe and refugees from the Kielce and other pogroms and displacements of Eastern Europe to get out. It was a unique process. The school was a mirror. The faces at its machines and in its waiting room were victims of these experiences who, by reason of one or another set of circumstances, found themselves in New York rather than Tel Aviv.

Statistical Chart

A few figures illustrate statistically the drama of that period. As it begins its 30th year, the Bramson ORT Trade School will have served approximately 19,400 people. Of that total, 11,137 enrolled at the school during the years 1946 through 1954. The rate of enrollment for the last seven years has hovered around the 400 mark. In 1972 it dipped to 335.

Projections indicate that the number of people applying to the school in the next several years will plateau at between 300-400 annually. The school, there-

fore, continues to perform a basic service, even though the numbers involved are not as great as during its heyday. The depth of the need for what it provides is as great as ever.

Migrant Mirror

Until quite recently, the greater majority of its trainees had been people with a history of Nazi persecution or World War II displacement. Enrollment reflects the levels of Jewish immigration to the U.S. After 1954 - end of the D.P. period - immigration declined, and so did the school's enrollment. When the Hungarian revolt was crushed by Soviet tanks at the end of 1956 - early 1957, several thousand Hungarian Jews came to the U.S. under "parolee" legislation; the school's enrollment expanded with them. Through the 60's it remained more or less stable at about 700-800 a year. But after the June 1967 Middle East war and the expulsions that followed in Moslem lands and in Poland, an increasing number of Jews from Morocco, Libya, Lebanon and even from far-off Afghanistan began to show at the school. Galloping inflation and the deteriorated economic situation in South America that have driven Argentinian Jews to leave and in the last several years also find its human reflection in the school. This is not to be exaggerated; their numbers are not monumental. But it is a simple fact that every tremor that has disrupted Jewish life in any part of the world is sooner or later represented at the school by some portion of its victims.

Many Kinds of Needs

The Jewish refugees and immigrants of today -- about 5,500 Jewish immigrants come to the United States annually -- no less than in the past, come here with deficient skills or lacking in the essential orientation for setting down new roots in the New World.

The new immigrants are usually whole-family units. Some are able to begin job-hunting at once and training for it. Others will be ready at a later time. As a consequence, the Bramson School can have a father and son enrolled, and a year or two later the mother will be able to come.

In addition, there exist areas of Jewish poverty, particularly in Brooklyn, of people, usually in their fifties or sixties, who may have a past history of migration and who have reached a point where the school's services to acquire a basic job skill become immediately relevant to their condition; or they may never have been refugees but, nonetheless, need job-entry skill training because they have been left behind by the onrush of occupational change.

The Jewish poor come from the Chassidic or Orthodox parts of Williamsburg, Crown Heights, Boro Park, Bensonhurst, Tremont in the Bronx and Astoria in Queens. They are by no means always elderly. Most are in their early twenties

or early fifties -- the daughters and mothers. But there are also Jewish youths who were not able to find employment or whose religious schooling had not prepared them for work.

Profiles of Troubled People

Perhaps better than the enrollment statistics, descriptions of some of the individuals can better indicate the meaning of the school.

Take for example Dezir Barminska, a Hungarian national, 52 years old, who came to the U.S. from the Soviet Union six months ago. When the Germans occupied Hungary during World War II the young Barminska escaped eastward, where he was immediately incarcerated as an undesirable alien and sent to labor camps in Siberia. He was in Russian prisons until his release 6 months ago when fortune smiled at him and he received a visa to New York. It is not surprising that he has no skills to speak of, or that he is debilitated. He picked up an unskilled job in a sweatshop on the lower East Side, sewing ties. He never had enough energy to come to the school on his own accord. He has no family. He could very well have remained a tie-maker for the rest of his days, at weekly wages of \$70 - \$80, below welfare level. He read about the school in the Yiddish Press, however, and was convoyed to the school by a friend. At the time of this report he has attended his classes regularly for three weeks. He will need enormous guidance in job location and placement.

Simion and Sima Volodarski came to New York four months ago. They were Russian nationals. He is 55, she is 46. They were given exit visas from the Soviet quite suddenly, before they were prepared to make plans. In the confusion and panic to get out they found themselves in Rome rather than Lydda, and there went to the ORT school to learn English. Simion had been a foreman in a coat factory in Odessa; she was a dressmaker. They speak Russian, a tiny smattering of Yiddish and a tourist English. Simion now pushes a broom in a textile shop in lower Manhattan and Sima is caring for their two adolescent children. Both give as the reasons for coming to the school, very simply: "I want to learn an American trade."

Elizabeth Alishaev was referred to the school by the New York Association for New Americans, a New York based migration agency related to the United Hias Service, with which the school has had an intimate working relationship right along. Mrs. Alishaev was born in Afghanistan 40 years ago, married a Roumanian Jew who had escaped into central Russia during the War; the two had settled in Tashkent. They have two grown up children. She is an energetic, vivacious personality who long ago learned to bend with the wind without losing her verve. She works hard and with humor. She is specializing in Merrow machine operation.

The above sampling of the fifteen Russian immigrant Jews served by the

Bramson School in the last period is one phase of its human drama. There have been others, from different places.

Name of the School

The school acquired its name from Dr. Leon Bramson, who died in Marseilles in 1942. The school memorialized him as founder of ORT as an international movement. In its early years, Mrs. Leon Bramson, while she lived in New York, was a hard-working volunteer in the school. When she died, the school was re-dedicated as a memorial to both of them.

The name was changed in recent months, after the school moved to the new location in the National Headquarters of the American ORT Foundation at 817 Broadway, from the Bramson ORT Trade School to the Bramson ORT Training Center. It was felt that the "training center" designation is a more accurate description of what it is and what it does. The use of the appellation "school" had created some confusion.

Occupational Instruction

With fewer students in the power sewing machine classes last year, it became possible to extend and to intensify studies. The student-teacher ratio was advantageous for more individual attention. Lesson plans were revised in accordance with new styles and production practices in the garment industry.

For operators, the largest job market is in Merrow machine operation. Reduction in the number of students made it possible to allow more time on the Merrow machines. Many more former students came back for refresher lessons or first practice on the Merrows between season, or to upgrade their jobs.

The Training Curriculum

The basic course given to newcomers is in power sewing machine operation. The aim is to produce an operator in a period of six to twelve weeks. The big problem, once the mechanics have been mastered, is for the student to develop factory levels of speed since pay rates above the minimum depend on this.

Specialty Machine Operation

Some practice on specialty machines is included toward the conclusion of the basic course for all students. However, because of the growing demand for specialty machine operators, such training is also provided as a distinct course. Most often, the students for this course are people who have completed the basic

course, worked several weeks or months and found the first step in advancement is to learn these machines. Further diversification has been made possible by the purchase of several new model Merrows, blind stitch and buttonhole machines.

Cloth Cutting

This course trains the alert, energetic and younger newcomers for this higher paying job category. Many students are former Bramson graduates who have done well and are ready to move ahead to more challenging work. The course lasts four to five months. It does not pretend to train finished cutters, but it has produced cutters of good quality on simpler garments, as indicated by the high level of employment of its graduates. Cloth marking and spreading are included in this class.

Pattern Making

This course is for those working in the industry who have past experience as tailors, dressmakers, sample makers, cutters, graders, etc. Immigrants need to switch from the metric to the linear system. Those now in advanced skills still need to supplement their experience by pattern making. This course was extended from 9 to 10-1/2 months in order to include study of new methods and to provide more practice time. The same prolongation of studies was extended to classes in marking and grading.

Marking

The acquisition of new equipment was a help for the cutting room craft of transcribing patterns on marking paper, highly skilled. A select group of no more than four can be enrolled at a time.

Pattern Grading

Grading means to work out a complete set of sizes for a given pattern. Apparently jobs for graders have become more available and more attractive.

Employment of Graduates

Those completing the courses -- and this school prides itself on a negligible drop-out rate -- have no difficulty obtaining jobs. There exists a substantial shortage of workers in almost every category in the garment industry. There is constant recruitment of operators, especially in cloth cutting and

spreading. Job placement was getting more difficult toward the end of 1971. Nevertheless, the school continued to get calls for special machine operators and cutting room craftsmen.

Graduates from the advanced course, especially in cloth cutting and spreading, were already on better level jobs while at school or immediately thereafter. The last few years have seen significant easement of employment in these higher paid and higher qualified jobs. ORT students are finding such positions more readily, at better pay and with greater opportunity for upward job mobility.

Contributions of Materials

Gifts of cloth and other work materials have been a significant factor in holding down the school's budget. Such donations are equally indicative of the standing of the school in the trade.

Tilton Textiles and Inwood Knitting Mills have repeatedly through the years been generous and helpful in many ways.

The school is grateful to the Pleaters, Stitchers and Embroiderers' Association and its head, Jack Schwartz, and to Mr. Lewis who again this year, as for so many in the past, were generous with the contributions of thread.

Baron de Hirsch Fund

The Baron de Hirsch Fund, whose aim is to aid the Americanization of Jewish immigrants and their instruction in trades and agriculture, made its first grant to the school in 1963. The Fund has recognized its close community of aims with the school and has substantially increased support over the years. During 1972, the Fund's contribution was \$12,000. It is hoped that this subvention will continue to grow since the budgetary needs are increasing steadily due to increased costs.

The Manischewitz Fund

A grant of \$10,000 was established over a three-year period for the school and we are most grateful for this.

Friends of the Bramson School

The late Joseph Tuvim inaugurated in 1967 a supporting organization called

the Friends of Bramson School. The impulse for the group, functioning as a membership chapter of the American ORT Federation, was in recognition of the need for funds for the school. Since the death of our chairman, Mr. Tuvim, a memorial fund in his name has been inaugurated at the school.

New Chairman

Martin Gerber has been designated Chairman of the school. A beginning has been made toward constructing a supporting committee.

Prospects for 1973

Change and uncertainty are the very nature of Jewish migration and the school is constantly affected by these. Yet each year hundreds of newcomers arrive at the school to use its facilities and to prepare for self-support, without reliance on charity, public or private. This is now supplemented by the needs of older -- and not so old -- impoverished Jews, especially the Orthodox, for whom this school is the only institution of its kind where they feel at home.

