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Robert L. Smith
Plain Dealer Reporter

The caviar is red, the sausage smoked and the bread crusty at the delicatessen owned by Leny Terekhov and Roma Grinberg, boyhood friends from the former Soviet Union. But the partners are most excited about their newest import - salt from the Black Sea.

They cannot explain what makes Black Sea salt saltier, or Russian sweets sweeter, but their customers - about 90 percent of them Russian immigrants - know the difference.

"We're a little bit different from an American store," said Grinberg, whose heavy Russian accent echoes Odessa, Ukraine.

"It's like a small community in here, where everybody knows everybody."

Overseas Imports typifies the corner stores that anchored ethnic neighborhoods through much of Cleveland history, a bridge between the old world and the new. What's changed is the address. The aromatic shop stands not on a city street corner but in the shadow of the Regal cinema complex in Eastgate, a shopping plaza in the far eastern suburbs - the heart of the new melting pot.

In the surrounding neighborhoods of Mayfield Heights, recent 2000 census data found the highest percentage of foreign-born residents in Ohio.

More than 18 percent of the city's 19,386 residents reported they had been born in another country, compared with 4.5 percent in Cleveland and 3 percent statewide.

Immigrants are also changing the complexion of nearby South Euclid, Richmond Heights, Beachwood and Willoughby Hills as they skip the city for the suburbs - breaking a 100-year-old pattern.

Experts expect to see subtle but significant consequences.

As immigrant families move directly to suburbia, tired urban neighborhoods will lose the vitality that once washed in with immigrant waves. Staid suburban communities, meanwhile, are adding the flavors and ideas of faraway lands.

"It's true nationwide," said John Haaga, a demographer with the Population Reference Bureau, a Washington-based research institute that studies census data. "It's not that immigration to the city isn't happening any more, but it's an even stronger force in the suburbs."

Heading east

Cleveland's eastern suburbs now support six groceries selling Ukrainian pickled

mushrooms and red and black Russian caviar. Most opened in the 1990s, a decade when the region absorbed more than 6,000 Russian Jews.

The Russians, along with immigrants from Croatia and Ukraine, often arrived with college degrees and an appreciation for high culture. Suddenly, the Wednesday night recitals at the Cleveland Institute of Music are drawing crowds.

"They realize they can come here for the same quality concert they get at Severance Hall, and it's free," said school spokeswoman Susan Schwartz.

At Mayfield High School's commencement last Saturday, class valedictorian Mark Polinkovsky talked movingly of the immigrant experience. He was 8 years old and spoke no English when his family arrived from the former Soviet republic of Moldova.

His story did not surprise Mayfield Heights parents. Moments before, class salutatorian Raymond Jin talked about his family's emigration - from China.

"It's quite a cultural mix here," said Mayfield High School Principal Tony Loewer. "In the cafeteria, you'll hear tables of kids talking Russian, but also Italian and Chinese."

Ohio's Ellis Island

Greater Cleveland, once an immigrant port without peer, no longer draws newcomers as it once did. Neither does Ohio, which lags behind the nation in proportion of foreign-born residents in the population. But the region remains Ohio's Ellis Island.

Last decade, Greater Cleveland again drew more immigrants than any metropolitan area in Ohio. It also holds the state's largest foreign-born population, 4.6 percent.

Metropolitan Columbus came in a close second by luring thousands of immigrants from Asia and Africa.

Cleveland, in contrast to Columbus and the nation, continues to draw primarily from the "old country" nations of central and eastern Europe.

"Much of our immigration is family reunification - people joining families already here," said Algis Ruksenas, executive director of the International Services Center of Cleveland, which helps resettle refugees and immigrants.

Immigrants come to America because they want to. Refugees typically leave home because they must, either because of war or persecution. The U.S. accepts a limited number of immigrants each year, typically about 600,000, and a much smaller number of refugees.

So far, the Census Bureau has released only general details of Ohio's foreign-born population. Information on the ancestry of our immigrants is expected later this year. Until then, civic leaders can only estimate the numbers within emerging populations."

While Russian Jews came to Northeast Ohio seeking economic and religious freedom, Croatians and Bosnians often were fleeing war. Many Africans also came in search of peace, or a better education, a desire shared by arriving Indians and Chinese.

Most of them joined a melting pot characterized by strip malls, highways and high-rise apartments.

Cleveland lags behind

During the 1990s, the city drew about 9,300 immigrants, the census found, slightly more than the decade before but not enough to reverse a long slide. In April 2000, about 4.5 percent of Clevelanders were born in another country, probably the smallest percentage in history.

Meanwhile, more than two-thirds of the 33,000 people who came to Cuyahoga County from foreign lands settled outside of the city. Summit County saw a similar pattern. Its foreign-born population grew by about 6,700 last decade and most settled outside of Akron. Lake County, meanwhile, absorbed more than 5,000 immigrants.

The newcomers sought the suburbs for familiar reasons, resettlement counselors say: good schools, safer neighborhoods, more jobs. But also, they find more help in suburbs because they find more immigrants.

"Immigrants look for areas of affinity," Ruksenas said. "If an uncle arrived and planted the flag first, they'll go there."

Petar Osap came to Cleveland from Croatia in 1998. For six months, he lived with relatives in Seven Hills while working at a machine factory in Willoughby. After the Croatian National Credit Union, based in Eastlake, helped him secure a loan, he bought a house in Euclid with his wife, Anda, and their two young sons.

Then last fall, Osap and his sister, Ruzica Pasalic, opened Rose's Grill next door to the post office in Willoughby. Osap now serves tulumbe, a doughnut-like pastry, and fresh-ground Croatian coffee to the region's growing Balkan community.

A new gateway

No longer clustered in urban enclaves, today's immigrants are less conspicuous, and their numbers surprised many community leaders.

Parma is now home to about 7,800 residents born in foreign lands, the highest number of any Cleveland-area community.

Nearly half of Lakewood's 4,900 foreign-born residents arrived in the 1990s. Similarly, more than half of the more than 4,100 foreign-born residents in Cleveland Heights arrived after 1990. But the Heights gave way to a new gateway - the middle-class Hillcrest communities of the eastern suburbs. Along the Interstate 271 corridor in Cuyahoga and Lake counties, the state's largest concentration of immigrants took root.

"All I can equate it to is the old days, when everyone came over to start with," said Mayfield Heights Mayor Margaret Egensperger.

Her new constituents hail from several nations, but Russians comprise the largest, most significant group. They began arriving in large numbers in 1989, the year Soviet authorities agreed to allow persecuted Jews to emigrate.

Cleveland's Jewish community rallied to accommodate the political refugees, establishing a new migration pattern here.

The Jewish Family Service Association sought to place the new arrivals in apartments on bus lines that could reach their offices at Lee and Mayfield roads, explained resettlement director Cheryl Lewis.

Thus did Mayfield Heights, with its many high-rise apartment complexes, become a new "little Odessa."

Recently, Egensperger bristled to hear of an AM talk radio host who disparaged Mayfield Heights for its changing hues, claiming the Russians would hurt property values and schools.

The mayor suspects her Italian and German ancestors heard the same prejudices voiced as they arrived to change a city neighborhood.

Many of the early arrivals have since moved out of Mayfield Heights, buying homes in Lyndhurst, Solon and Bainbridge - assimilating without ever having touched the city.

The new pattern may be lasting, said Cleveland historian John Grabowski.

Cleveland is still experiencing the changing force of immigrants, especially in Hispanic neighborhoods of the near West Side. But the days of urban ethnic enclaves are over, Grabowski said.

Immigrant neighborhoods formed because people walked to work, he said. For immigrants arriving with job skills, or to reunite with family, the suburbs might make more sense.

"If you're a Hungarian doctor and you get a job in a hospital, you're not going to live in Buckeye," he said. "Immigrants are being Americanized, I guess."

Still, in many ways they have not changed. And so there is a cost to a city that loses them.

Peter and Sophia Krakovich are a diminutive couple who sigh a lot and then smile, as if winded by victory. They came in 1990 from Odessa - one of the most Jewish of Soviet cities - bringing their parents and their 12-year-old son, Jason, and little else. They settled into a Coventry Road apartment and embarked on an odyssey of survival jobs.

Somewhere between working as a nurse's aide and cleaning houses, Peter Krakovich learned the craft of shoe repair.

He bought a storefront in a shopping plaza in Chagrin Falls. And so the village has a cobbler.

Sophia, who holds a degree in economics, works as a cashier at the CVS/pharmacy next door.

When she breathes deep and says, "We have a life of freedom now," she's recalling black moments.

Her husband was once held for 11 hours at the police station after a neighbor overheard him making a joke about the government. And when her husband says, "We made it," he's referring to the news his wife walked over to share that morning.

A newly faxed resume rests on a counter scuffed with heel marks. It's from their son, Jason, and it describes him as a June graduate of Ohio State University.

Dave Davis and Lila J. Mills contributed to this story.

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