

LIFE AT AN ABSORPTION CENTER

The five members of the Bernard Shuman family of Sioux City, Ia., last summer emigrated to Israel to start a new life. This is the fifth in a series of articles by Shuman, a former newspaperman, about their new homeland.

Jerusalem, Israel.

Life at our absorption center has a similarity to summer camp life, a way of life where one is never alone. The sounds of the daily lives of the families in other apartments penetrate the thin walls, ascend the open stairwells around the bathroom cubicles and roar through the open windows. The individual members of the Shuman family can never isolate themselves because the compactness of our two-bedroom apartment makes it impossible to find a secluded and cozy corner.

A few services are available at the center in an attempt to make our lives easier during our temporary stay. Clean bed linens are furnished every two weeks. There is twice-a-week cleaning of the apartment floor by an elderly woman who sashes water around the tile floor, aiming her bucket at the open areas without moving any chairs or furniture, then mopping up the excess with a dirty mop. There is one coin-operated washing machine in the building, a machine which undergoes around-the-clock services for the families living at the center. At some absorption centers in Israel, meals are provided newly-arrived immigrants in communal dining rooms. We prefer Marion's culinary creations from her two-burner gas hot plate and the pressure cooker we brought with us from Sioux City.

Mail call is the day's most important event. Those letters from family and friends in the U.S. are precious treasures, read and reread by each and every one of us.

What is that familiar saying about mail delivery in the United States?

The time element here in the delivery of mail is sporadic, without any explanation for the number of days elapsing between mailing a letter and its arrival at its destination. With Jerusalem and Tel Aviv about 60 kilometers apart, it is inconceivable that a letter between the two cities should take five days.

The purchase of stamps and air let-



Sabbath dinner at the Shuman apartment. Bernard recites the traditional kiddush (prayer) with Judy, Ellis and Debby.

ter forms requires a trip to the post office where an orderly line is unheard of as the customers crowd like sardines around the counter. I remain mystified by what the clerk is doing thumbing slowly through folders of stamps.

Israel's mail boxes are painted red, and the slot for mailing the letter is paper-thin on purpose, making it impossible to put any foreign matter inside. I once spent 10 minutes struggling to get my letter through the slot.

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AS ONE might imagine, an absorption center for new immigrants is a stamp collector's paradise. Mail comes here from all corners of the world, and the stamp collectors hungrily eye the letters with their picturesque stamps. Ellis, Debby and Judy each collect stamps, and their albums have been enlarged considerably since our arrival.

To make a telephone call at our absorption center is a challenge. There is a telephone in the center's office; however, this phone is not at the disposal of the immigrant except on rare occasions and for strictly business transactions. The center's staff recommends that the immigrants use the unenclosed public telephone in the basement stairway, which is also used by the hundreds of residents of the Katamon Tet neighborhood.

There are always large groups of people — no such thing as a line — waiting to use the public telephone. The waiters and their companions are not overly courteous, talking and laughing loudly while they wait, so that you can't hear the conversation

at the other end of the line. Furthermore, they breathe down the back of your neck, exclaiming that you've said-too much on the phone already.

An "in" telephone call for the Shumans at the office generally prompts an "out" call. When someone calls us by telephone, the office personnel obligingly takes the caller's name and leaves us a note to that effect in Hebrew. After we have the note translated, we must return the original call. There is a considerable time lapse between the two calls because the message is left in our mail box, not delivered to our door. We are constantly checking our mail box for messages.

There are other peculiarities associated with the Israeli telephone system, unfamiliar traits that make me wish Alexander Graham Bell hadn't been so inventive. Obviously, there are not enough circuits in operation, and more often than not, lines are generally busy on the initial try. It is impossible to ask information for a telephone number; the operator doesn't seem to possess this knowledge even though it is a certainty that such a telephone number exists.

And yet, the telephone is a necessity. A private telephone in Israel is a prized possession. I have not been involved in the complicated hassle involved in acquiring a private telephone. I have been advised by those with experience in the acquisition that it requires time, money and patience, with each one of those requirements underlined.

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LIFE is never dull at an ab-

sorption center. People are always in sight, standing about, walking aimlessly, talking and gesturing. The newcomers are quickly brought into the fold by the experienced hands. Activities at the center are far from abundant, but people are always interesting. Watching others is a great sport.

Coincidentally, our absorption center is a tourist attraction. A government agency, Tour Ve 'aleh, brings travelers to the center on the average of twice a week, visitors from all over the world, primarily America. It is entertaining to watch these tourists step out of their luxurious air-conditioned buses for the great adventure of visiting an absorption center.

As an oleh living at the center, I sometimes feel as though I should step forward graciously for inspection. However, it is not the American immigrant who whets their curiosity; it is the Russian.

Absorption center life has expanded the horizon for each member of our family. We were complacent with life in Sioux City. Now our acquaintances come from everywhere, Russia, Argentina, Uruguay, England, Chile, Romania and, of course, Israel.

On the floor above us, there is a pleasant family from Moscow, the parents, teen-age son and daughter, nine. The father is an excellent violinist already employed with the Israeli Kol-Israel Orchestra. Quite frequently, and much to our enjoyment, he practices and the beautiful music overshadows all other sounds.

One evening we invited the family to an "oneg shabbat" in our apartment, a social blending of conversation and refreshments. It was an evening of much laughter, many smiles and not too much talking. The wife's understanding of English was meager. We know no Russian. And so we used our limited Hebrew.

Despite the superficial conversation, we learned that in order for the father to get his precious violin out of Moscow, the instrument was taken via Finland in the hands of a Jewish Agency official.

The family, and the dog they brought with them from Moscow, will remain at the center until their new apartment in Jerusalem's lovely Ramat Eshkol neighborhood is ready for occupancy.

On another occasion, the Shumans hosted the personable husband and wife from Buenos Aires who are in our ulpan. Once again a superficial conversation, as Hebrew words were bantered about, plus Spanish between the Argentinians, Yiddish between two women, and English between Marion and myself. The husband, formerly a small clothing manufacturer, hopes to open amusement parks with giant slides in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

The Romanian man in our ulpan is a building engineer who made his initial application to emigrate to Israel 14 years ago. A well-known Russian author and his wife, who writes poetry, live at the center. So do a bank clerk from Tangiers and an architect from Chile. There is also a young

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doctor from Moscow who envies the Shumans' knowledge of English.

There are other American families living at the center, predominantly New Yorkers who are absolutely amazed to learn that we are from Sioux City, Ia. They didn't know that there were any Jews living there.

The absorption center staff includes a director, a social worker, employment counselor, housing adviser, cultural director, secretary, house-mother and maintenance men. The staff is available to assist the immigrant with his problems, and the problems of integrating into a new country can be numerous.

The cultural director arranges trips, known in Israel as tiyuls, and these are held once a month.

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OUR first tiyul took us as new immigrants to the Evalyna de Rothschild religious school for girls where charming fifth and sixth graders gave us a heart-warming welcome to Israel. As we entered the school, we were greeted with spontaneous applause that set the mood for a wonderful hour.

We also received an official welcome as immigrants to Israel, this in the form of a three-paragraph letter from Jerusalem's colorful Mayor Teddy Kollek. He extended the city's heartiest welcome to us.

We have been heartily welcomed to Israel by tutors, individual teachers of Hebrew, who are part of an army of volunteer teen-aged boys and girls with one elderly gentleman at the helm. The man is Jacob Maimon, who believes strongly in a person-to-person relationship between the newly-arrived immigrant and the Israeli.

Maimon's goal is to show the immigrant that someone cares enough to help him learn Hebrew and be absorbed into the country. In return, the immigrant dispels any misconceptions that the Israeli may have about the newcomers. The program is designed as a supplement to the ulpan.

Maimon was one of the first Israelis to knock at the door of our apartment after our arrival in Jerusalem. He is no longer a stranger; today he is an old friend who visits us a minimum of once a week. The Shumans have grown fond of this man who was personally commended by former Israel Premier David Ben-Gurion for his development of the Hebrew shorthand system.

Three volunteer tutors come each Sunday and Monday evening to the apartment for an informal learning session that often extends beyond the scheduled hour. There are odd twists to the sessions. Ellis, Debby and Judy exchange card tricks with their tutors. Marion has become a personal friend of her volunteer, Judy, a woman who has returned to Maimon's program after an absence of 20 years.

The tourist, mentioned previously, is the backbone of Israel's economy. Thousands of tourists come each day to the land where the Bible lives, to marvel at what the Jewish people have accomplished in 24 years since the state was born.

The tourist traffic has brought many friends from the United States

to our door; opening the door to greet them with "shalom" has been a close link with those left behind us. Our visitors quickly examine our apartment, ask a few stock questions about the absorption process, and then use our facilities. Many are experiencing minor stomach discomfort because of the differences between American foods and Israeli foods. We are immediately praised because of our preference for the soft tissue in our bathroom.

This necessary household item is generally purchased at the supermarket located in the basement of Jerusalem's only department store, Hamashbir. The five Shumans — Marion, Ellis, Debby, Judy and myself — go grocery shopping as one family unit, traveling to and from the store on our dependable No. 13 bus. The five of us shop as one purposely. Five of us doubles into 10 hands with which to carry home our purchases.

There is no such individual as a smiling, eager checkout person at an Israeli supermarket. Once I have paid the cashier at the checkout counter for our groceries, we are obligated to put our own groceries into the shopping bags we have brought with us. The grocery stores do not provide us with king-sized paper sacks, which explains why it is essential for the Israeli shopper to always be armed with a shopping bag. Those large paper sacks that American supermarkets hand out so abundantly are only a fond memory for an American in this country where paper goods are understandably a priority product.

Entering Hamashbir, or any other large building, whether it be bank, theater, or government agency, generally requires passing a guard at the entrance. The guard inspects all the packages the individual carries

into the store, a reversal of the search for shoplifters. The underlying purpose is to detect any possible explosive device the individual may have hidden for ulterior motives. I feel certain, however, that the new superficial check made by the guard won't disclose anything, not even the lipstick in Marion's purse or the fountain pen in my briefcase.

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THE Shumans have fallen in love with Jerusalem, and although at this point in our odyssey to Israel there is nothing definite, we hopefully intend to remain in this majestic city. As previously discussed, employment and housing are the No. 1 and the No. 2 considerations. Other former Sioux City families live in Tel Aviv, the Israeli metropolis often referred to as the New York City of the Middle East, and we have visited Tel Aviv on several private Sabbath tiyuls. Nevertheless, Jerusalem is Jerusalem, and there isn't a single word in either the English or Hebrew dictionary that can adequately describe the city.

Call her dirty because of the garbage dumped carelessly, and the colorful flowers blooming in minute spots will dispel the choice of that word. Call her noisy because of the sounds of construction everywhere, and the quiet of the Sabbath will be a blessing for the ears. Call her historical and there will be no argument, except that she is the seat of Israel's future. Call her inspiring and one's emotions will soar upward, except that people are people and not everyone is holy in the Holy Land.

One quickly spots the tourist with the camera hung loosely over his shoulder and the well-used map of the city in his hand. The clothing he is wearing is also a dead giveaway, particularly the knit trousers and the tennis shoes. I have recently switched to the more popular Israeli sandals; however, this meager attempt at casting aside the tourist image proved unsuccessful. I even let my hair grow for four months in the attempt.

But I am not a tourist; I am an immigrant whose goal is total absorption. Will I and Marion and our three children be successful? Do we possess all of the ingredients that when put together add up to successful total absorption?

These ingredients include a sense of humor, savlanute (patience), kesef (money), mazel (luck) and motivation.

Motivation is the key. When the olim can't laugh because the Israeli way of doing things is no longer humorous, when there is no more patience because the olim is tired of waiting for the job to get done, when the pocketbook continues to grow thin without any sign of replenishment, and when something goes wrong each day without a change, it has to be motivation.

Our personal, individual answers to the question "Why?" are the reasons the Bernard Shuman family has made aliyah to Israel.



Above, Jacob Maimon, the man who created the Hebrew shorthand system, often spends some time with the Shumans. Right, Ellis, left, goes over Hebrew studies with student volunteer Yizhak Dassa.

