



Global Detroit And The Jewish Role

Morris and Anna Tobocman and their sons, Irv (standing) and Al - 1950

Less than a century ago, my grandfather Morris Tobocman emigrated from Lukov, Poland, to America without much formal education and, most likely, without formal legal status. Little could he imagine that both his sons would become renowned architects from the University of Michigan who design and build some of the most expensive and beautiful modern homes in the region. Nor could he imagine that his grandson would end up as the elected state representative from Southwest Detroit for three terms, including a term as the majority floor leader, the second-ranking position in the Michigan House of Representatives. It is a typical American story of immigration; and it helps define a central piece of what makes America so economically and politically successful.

The Backdrop

Morris Tobocman and the tens of thousands of Jews who found their way to the Detroit area came to this region to pursue the American Dream. That dream was

about freedom and opportunity—freedom to live without fear of persecution for his religious and cultural identity and opportunity to share in America's economic prosperity.

Today's immigrants and refugees coming to America seek the same American Dream pursued by Morris Tobocman and other Jewish Detroiters. Despite the global recession, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, budget deficits, crumbling infrastructure and other challenges, America remains the most prosperous nation in the world, with the highest standard of living and strongest constitutional protections from persecution. In short, there are millions of global citizens eager to immigrate to America and even to Metro Detroit.

More than two years ago, I was asked to study the impacts immigrants have had on our regional economy. The results of the Global Detroit study (found online at www.globaldetroit.com) were startling. While I was keenly aware of how much Hispanic immigrants had done to revitalize Southwest Detroit (or Arabic immigrants had

done for East Dearborn), I had no idea how much immigrants had contributed to our overall economy.

Strong Support

Metro Detroit's immigrants have been fueling our region's entry into the new global economy. They are 150 percent more likely to possess a college degree, three times as likely to start a business, six times as likely to create a high-tech company and seven times as likely to file an international patent than non-immigrants in Michigan. Additionally, immigrants tend to possess degrees and skills in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields critical to the New Economy. Incredibly, 47 percent of all scientists and engineers with Ph.D.s and 24 percent of all scientists and engineers with bachelor's degrees in the U.S. workplace are foreign born.

Immigrants also have been critical to starting the businesses that power the New Economy. One quarter of all the high-tech firms started in the U.S. from 1995-2005, and 32.8 percent of all such firms in Michigan, were founded by immigrants, ranking Michigan third after only California and New Jersey, an incredible statistic

born are working-age compared to 50.8 percent of the non-immigrant population, a critical fact in a rapidly aging state that also is rapidly losing working-age residents due to out-migration. An example of immigrant industriousness can be found in the Hispanic population in Southeastern Michigan; they make up just 3.5 percent of the region's population, but 6.5 percent of its total employment.

As noted by *Washington Post* columnist Conor Williams, "Bottom line: The Midwest can't survive without immigrants. The nation's heartland can't afford any more partisan gamesmanship on immigration policy. Millions of Midwestern jobs are at stake."

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder embraced this opportunity in his first State of the State address: "Immigration made us a great state and country. It is time we embrace this concept again as a way to speed our reinvention."

Moving Forward

No one strategy will, by itself, revitalize the Detroit regional economy. However, nothing is more powerful to remaking Detroit as a center of innovation, entrepreneurship and population growth, than embracing and increasing immigrant populations and the entrepreneurial culture and global connections that they bring and deliver.

The Jewish community has a particularly important role in leading this effort. Our historical diaspora experience, our understanding of the importance of America's freedoms, and our community's notions of charity and welcoming can serve as the critical foundation for Metro Detroit to embrace an immigrant welcoming campaign.

Local institutions such as JVS and Jewish Family Service, as well as the Jewish community's partnership with the Arab, Chaldean, Christian, Muslim, African American and Hispanic communities, provide important models upon which to build.

I hope you will join me by visiting www.globaldetroit.com. □

Steve Tobocman lives with his wife and daughter live in Detroit. He is a former state representative from Detroit and a former Michigan House majority floor leader. He was co-founder of Community Legal Resources, co-directs the Michigan Foreclosure Task Force, co-directs the Michigan Political Leadership Program at Michigan State University and spearheads the Global Detroit initiative. His email address is: steve.tobocman@gmail.com.



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