

Private Aid Efforts

Soviet Union Wakes Up to Poverty

By MASHA HAMILTON,
Times Staff Writer

LENINGRAD, Soviet Union—Elena Gareliv, 88, spooned tomato slices onto her plate as she described to a stranger her days before the Soviet Union's first soup kitchen opened its doors.

"My monthly pension normally lasted two weeks. The rest of the time I could only afford bread and tea," she said, drawing knowing nods from the three women sitting around her. "And then, even when I could buy sausage, it was difficult to prepare a meal. I live alone and need a cane, you see."

The fare may be plain and the tables rickety, but the presence of a soup kitchen off quiet Novoizmailovskiy Prospekt in this maritime city has wrought a small miracle in the lives of 100 elderly Soviets. It provides a free midday meal five days a week and, perhaps as important, it offers a chance to escape loneliness, if only for 60 minutes a day.

A Small Miracle

It also is a small miracle in the pages of Soviet history.

Ever since the founding of this Communist country 72 years ago, Soviet officials have asserted that the state protects the social welfare of all, preventing unemployment, poverty or **homelessness**.

"To acknowledge the existence of poverty was to acknowledge that this society has a class structure, and for obvious reasons, no one wanted to do that," one American specialist in the Soviet economy said in an interview.

But now, under the leadership of President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, officials are slowly admitting that millions of people have fallen through the cracks of the social welfare system—and that the state can use some help from private, voluntary organizations to cope with the problem of elderly poor.

The process, however, is slow. The problem of elderly poor exists nationwide. Leningrad is one of the few cities where it is beginning to be addressed.

Nonetheless, the American specialist, who asked not to be identified, noted: "Just by saying, 'Yes, we've got a problem,' they've taken a big step forward."

\$95-a-Month Pensions

One-fifth of the Soviet population is of retirement age, and, according to official estimates, more than one-third of the country's 58 million retirees receive pensions of less than 60 rubles a month, or about \$95 at the official exchange rate.

Those earning less than \$120 a month are considered to be living below the Soviet poverty level, and Soviet officials privately acknowledge that as many as 50% of the country's elderly may fall into that category.

Comparatively, 9% of the U.S. population, or 23.8 million people, are retirees receiving Social Security, and 1.4% of the population is composed of retirees living below the poverty level of \$450 per person per month.

In the Soviet Union, however, health care and housing are subsidized, generally costing only a few

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