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Billionaire Aids Charity That Aided Him

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By [STEPHANIE STROM](#)

Were it not for the [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society](#), there might be no [Google](#).

Thirty years ago today, [Sergey Brin](#), a 6-year-old Soviet boy facing an uncertain future, arrived in the United States with the help of the society.

Now Mr. Brin, the billionaire co-founder of Google, is giving \$1 million to the society, widely known as HIAS, which helped his family escape anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union and establish itself here.

“I would have never had the kinds of opportunities I’ve had here in the Soviet Union, or even in Russia today,” Mr. Brin said in an interview. “I would like to see anyone be able to achieve their dreams, and that’s what this organization does.”

The gift is small, given Mr. Brin’s estimated \$16 billion in personal wealth, but he said it signaled a growing commitment by him and his wife, Anne Wojcicki, to engage more substantially in philanthropy.

“We’ve given away over \$30 million so far, which isn’t so tiny but obviously small in terms of our, um, theoretical wealth,” Mr. Brin said. “Our philanthropy is something I want to take my time with and develop and systematize.”

He has already learned enough about philanthropy to add immediately: “Our foundation is not soliciting proposals. Please make sure to include that.”

Mr. Brin noted that [Bill Gates](#), the chairman of [Microsoft](#), was widely criticized for not giving away enough money but is now known as one of the world’s leading philanthropists. “While everyone was criticizing him, he was generating a whole lot more money for his foundation, and ultimately, when he got serious about philanthropy, he did it really well,” Mr. Brin said. “I’d like to learn from that example.”

The bulk of the money the Brins have given away has gone to the [Michael J. Fox Foundation](#) and other research organizations devoted to Parkinson’s disease. But this year, in honor of the 30th anniversary of the Brin family’s [immigration](#) to the United States, they have given gifts to several Jewish organizations that aided along the way. HIAS, which helped the family navigate the cumbersome process of leaving the Soviet Union for the United States, paid for tickets, gave them money and helped them apply for visas, received the largest amount.

The family lived in Paris for several months while waiting for visas and then moved to Maryland, and the relationship with HIAS ended. “Although they gave us tremendous help, we didn’t stay connected with HIAS,” said Eugenia Brin, Mr. Brin’s mother. “Then a few years ago, I guess because of Google, we got a call from HIAS asking if we could help them digitize their archives.”

Eventually, Mrs. Brin joined the HIAS board and started a social networking site, mystory.hias.org, initially to encourage Russian Jewish immigrants to post their stories and eventually to attract the stories of other immigrants.

Gideon Aronoff, chief executive of HIAS, said the gift would be put to a variety of uses, like increasing the organization’s use of technology and supporting advocacy on immigration policy.

“One of the most important things that [Sergey Brin](#)’s gift signifies, not just for HIAS but more importantly for the nation,” Mr. Aronoff said, “is the possibilities inherent in being a refugee. The debate over immigration has frequently become so bitter that an important element has been lost: refugees are as varied in their skills sets and contributions as the rest of us.”