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# Jewish DPs and Their «Repatriation» to the Promised Land

by *Angelika Königseder*

*Abstract* – When the Allied armies occupied Germany in 1945, they found some 6.5 to 7 million displaced persons (DPs) in the future three Western zones of occupation. Among them were between 50,000 and 75,000 Jewish survivors. They were forced to live in hurriedly erected, overfilled camps. In the summer of 1946, the situation of the Jewish DPs changed fundamentally, the main reason being the constant movement of Jews from Eastern Europe, primarily from Poland, into Germany and Austria, reaching its zenith after the pogrom of Kielce in July 1946. Nearly all the Jewish DPs agreed that after the Holocaust, Zionism was the only political movement that held any meaning for them. So, the declaration of Israel's independence in May 14, 1948 was greeted with wild enthusiasm in the Jewish DP camps. The mass exodus to the newborn state and to the United States and Canada brought about the closing of the DP camps in Germany.

When the Allied armies occupied Germany in 1945, they found some 6.5 to 7 million displaced persons (DPs) in the areas that were to become the three Western zones of occupation<sup>1</sup>. They applied the abbreviation DP to individuals who had fled or been driven or deported from their countries of origin because of the war and its aftermath. In practice, it included forced laborers who had been employed in German factories during the war, prisoners of war, former concentration camp inmates, and Eastern Europeans who had either voluntarily sought work in Germany at the beginning of the war or had fled from their homelands to escape the advancing Soviet Army in 1944. Not included in this category were the many millions of German refugees and expellees who, like the Silesians and Sudeten Germans, had also been forced to leave their countries of origin because of World War II.

Jewish survivors constituted a relatively small minority among the multitude of DPs. The Allied armies found between 50,000 and 75,000 survivors on

<sup>1</sup> For more details and annotations, see A. KÖNIGSEDER - J. WETZEL, *Waiting for Hope. Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany*, Evanston IL 2001, German original *Lebensmut im Wartesaal. Die jüdischen DPs (Displaced Persons) im Nachkriegsdeutschland*, Frankfurt a.M. 1994.

the territory of the future Western occupation zones. These figures, however, are merely surmises, since there are no exact statistics for this early period and the few surveys conducted by the Allies did not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews but only between nationalities. In addition, one has to take into account the enormously high mortality rate during the first days and weeks after liberation, which invalidated the reliability of statistics almost as fast as they could be collected.

However terrible the fate of the non-Jewish displaced persons may have been, it does not compare to the tragedy of the Jews. Millions of non-Jewish slave laborers and POWs at least had the option of returning to their homes and families, whereas the Jewish DPs were completely cut off from their roots and had nowhere to go. One survivor described the experience:

«The Jews suddenly faced themselves. Where now? Where to? For them things were not so simple. To go back to Poland? To Hungary? To streets empty of Jews, towns empty of Jews, a world without Jews. To wander in those lands, lonely, homeless, always with the tragedy before one's eyes ... And to meet, again, a former Gentile neighbor who would open his eyes wide and smile, remarking with double meaning 'What! Yankel! You're still alive!」»<sup>2</sup>.

Accommodations had to be found for those non-repatriable DPs who remained in Germany, Austria, and Italy. Especially the US Army set up camps that were technically known as assembly centers. They varied in size from sites with fifty people to camps housing over 7,000 persons. They comprised barracks, former POW and slave labor camps, industrial workers' housing, tent cities, hotels, apartment buildings, garages, stables, monasteries, hospitals, sanitariums, schools, and so forth. In the first weeks after liberation, the Allies did not recognize the Jews as a separate group. This had far-reaching consequences, because it meant that camps that housed only Jewish DPs were the exception and that Jews who had suffered persecution were often forced to live in camps alongside their former tormentors, for instance, concentration camp guards. It is difficult to gauge the psychological effects this new form of humiliation had on them. During the long years of persecution, Jews had come to believe that after liberation the world would welcome them warmly and seek to make amends for the injuries that had been inflicted on them. Instead, they were once again compelled to live in camps. Although these could not be compared to Nazi concentration camps, they nevertheless kept alive the negative feelings associated with the Nazi period.

<sup>2</sup> *Homecoming in Israel*, in L.W. SCHWARZ (ed), *The Root and the Bough: The Epic of an Enduring People*, New York 1949, p. 310.

Jacob Biber described his initial experiences in the DP camp at Föhrenwald:

«I had thought this might be a place of quick transit, a chance briefly to recoup our energies and spirits, but the word 'camp' started my heart pounding in fear ... In Föhrenwald, our group was directed from the theater kitchen to our assigned quarters. Survivors of all ages, wearing torn clothes or concentration camp stripes, were passing us on either side ... Other survivors who had arrived there before us invited us into their crowded quarters ... That first night, we had exchanged much information about the death camps, and also learned that no one had yet been transferred from Camp Föhrenwald. Our stay would not end tomorrow and probably not next week or next month, something we had not really expected ... We were very tired after a long, hot, and active day and evening ... For us, sleep was not a respite, but a reliving of tragedy in our nightmares. As soon as I fell asleep, the horrible tales of the skinny concentration camp survivors tormented my rest ... I was unable to sleep for night after night ... The caged-in environment forced a constant reliving of scenes from our horrible pasts»<sup>3</sup>.

In the summer of 1945, the liberated Jews were still in a desperate state. The survivors were forced to live in hurriedly erected, overfilled camps, where they were frequently exposed to the anti-Semitism of non-Jewish DPs and often lacked sufficient food and clothing. Further, their treatment by the US and the British armies was often deplorable. Reports on their situation soon began to reach the United States. On June 22, newly elected US President Truman authorized Earl G. Harrison, formerly United States commissioner of immigration and American representative to the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, to travel to Europe on behalf of the State Department. Harrison was to pay special attention to the conditions of the Jewish DPs in the camps. His critical concluding report hit Washington like a bombshell. Aside from the positive effects that the report had on the lives of the Jewish survivors, a major part of its significance lay in the higher priority given to the Jewish DP problem in general. The demand in Harrison's report for 100,000 immigration certificates for Palestine became an explosive issue in relations between the United States and Great Britain. Palestine, according to Harrison, was the only realistic solution to the Jewish DP problem:

«Most Jews want to leave Germany and Austria as soon as possible. That is their first and great expressed wish and while this report necessarily deals with other needs present in the situation, many of the people themselves fear other suggestions or plans for their benefit because of the possibility that attention might thereby be diverted from the all-important matter of evacuation from Germany ... They want to be evacuated to Palestine now, just as other national groups are being repatriated to their homes ... The Jewish Agency for Palestine has submitted to the British Government a petition that one hundred thousand

<sup>3</sup> J. BIBER, *Risen from the Ashes: A Story of the Jewish Displaced Persons in the Aftermath of World War II*, San Bernardino CA 1990, pp. 11-13.

additional immigration certificates be made available ... No other single matter is, therefore, so important from the viewpoint of Jews in Germany and Austria and those elsewhere who have known the horrors of the concentration camps as is the disposition of the Palestine question»<sup>4</sup>.

The most important long-term consequence of the Harrison Report was the recognition that Palestine had become the focus of Jewish attention and that only a relaxation of the rigid British immigration restrictions (just 1,500 certificates were being issued worldwide each month) could defuse this source of conflict. However, Britain was in no mood to relinquish the remaining bastions of its former empire and weaken its position in the Middle East, especially after its influence over India had diminished and it had been forced to grant independence to the subcontinent in January 1948. Allowing more Jews into Palestine, the British believed, would necessarily undermine Britain's influence in the Middle East and risk stirring up Arab disorders.

The US recommendation was at the heart of a long-standing British/American dispute that also manifested itself in the differential treatment accorded the Jewish DPs in each country's zone of occupation. The British wanted to draw a line between the liberated Jews who remained in Europe and the Palestine question. The cabinet therefore approved Foreign Secretary Bevin's proposal that Jewish immigration to Palestine be kept, as in the preceding months, at 1,500 persons per month. The cabinet was led to its decision by the fear of Arab attacks. British officials thought that the Jews were the weaker group and would offer less resistance. Immediately following the British decision, however, the Jews launched a series of terrorist attacks against British installations. Thus began the long and violent struggle to open the gates of Palestine to the Jews that finally ended in the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948.

The situation of the Jewish DPs changed fundamentally in 1946, the main reason being the constant movement of Jews from Eastern Europe, primarily from Poland, into Germany and Austria. The influx reached its zenith in the summer of 1946 following a pogrom in Kielce. In January 1946, there were some 36,000 Jewish DPs registered in the US Zone; in October of the same year the number swelled to 141,000. It was one of the paradoxes of history that for a brief period after the war a defeated Nazi Germany, the cause of the Jewish tragedy, became the largest and safest sanctuary for Jewish refugees waiting in DP camps for the opportunity to emigrate.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by L. DINNERSTEIN, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust*, New York 1982, pp. 295-297.

In the fall of 1945, there were some 80,000 Jews in Poland out of a prewar population of 3.3 million. Some had been liberated from the concentration camps or had survived the war in hiding; others had returned from Germany to search for relatives; and about 13,000 had come from the Soviet Union with the Polish Army. Their situation in Poland was desperate. The country was like a huge Jewish graveyard. The returnees generally turned out to be the sole survivors from their families. The once-flourishing Jewish communities had been eradicated. It was virtually impossible to think of rebuilding Jewish life in Poland. Not only were the returning Jews often unsuccessful in locating surviving family members, but many Poles refused to return Jewish property. This effectively deprived the survivors of the wherewithal to rebuild their lives. The greatest problem the Jews faced, however, was the resurgence of anti-Semitism, a threat from which the Polish government was unable to protect them. The leaders of the new regime tried their best to integrate the Jews into postwar Poland, but they lacked the support of any significant segment of Polish society and were powerless to prevent anti-Semitic outbreaks. An official government summary estimated that between November 1944, that is, after the withdrawal of the Germans, and October 1945, 351 Jews were murdered in Poland.

Some 200,000 Polish Jews who had sought refuge in the Soviet Union at the outbreak of the war and had survived in Russia were unaware of these anti-Semitic outrages. The Soviet and Polish governments had been negotiating since the summer of 1945 over the repatriation of Poles living in the USSR. At the beginning of 1946, the two sides agreed that Polish citizens would be allowed to decide whether they wished to remain in Russia or return to Poland. Of the 200,000, an estimated 175,000 – that is, the great majority – chose to return to Poland. After having spent long years in forced-labor camps and undergone severe privations, as a result of which many had died, the Jewish repatriates hoped to find their families, recover their possessions, and begin new lives in Poland. Then came the shock. They faced the same atmosphere of gloom, the same problems in trying to recover their property, and the same virulent anti-Semitism that was making life difficult, if not impossible, for the Jews who were already living in Poland.

The campaigns against the Jews culminated in the well-known pogrom of Kielce in July 1946, where a ritual murder story had caused a massacre, in which 42 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered. The Polish government stood helpless in the face of the violence. Nor could the Jews expect assistance from the Church, which had failed to offer a sharp and explicit condemnation of the pogrom. Polish Jewry reacted swiftly. Nothing

could prevent them now from leaving Poland; a mass exodus was the only answer. The flow of Holocaust survivors was directed by Brichah (Hebrew «flight»), a Jewish organization that helped Jews get out of Eastern Europe. The name applied both to the organization itself and to the mass movement of refugees. Soon after their liberation in 1944, survivors in Poland had begun to establish contact with one another. Given the hopelessness of their situation in Eastern Europe, their natural destination after liberation was Palestine. However, the prospects of an individual reaching the Promised Land by himself or herself in war-ravaged Europe were not good and the chances of doing so legally were virtually nil. For this reason, the survivors established an underground refugee service organization whose job it was to secure means of transportation and, most important but also most difficult, find ways, mainly illegal, to cross national borders. For this purpose, Brichah groups were smuggled into railway junctions and other places where Jews had assembled to effect their escape. Their task was to provide safe passage and accommodations for the refugees during their often long journeys across Europe.

Until August 1945, Brichah had sought to bring Jewish survivors to Italy, from whose coasts they hoped the prospective emigrants could embark for Palestine. However, Italian authorities soon realized that they were unable to control the situation created by the large influx of DPs, so they clamped down on illegal border crossings. By the end of the year, Brichah had no choice but to put the Jewish refugees up in Allied-occupied Germany and Austria. The political aims of Brichah became increasingly evident during 1946: the more Jews brought into the US Zone of Occupation and the more pressure put on the Americans to feed and house the refugees, the more the United States would urge Britain to relax its restrictions on emigration to Palestine. At the same time, Brichah continued to transport Jews illegally by ship to the Promised Land.

In 1946, Brichah operated two main routes for Jews fleeing Eastern Europe – one via Nachod, Bratislava, Vienna, Linz, and Salzburg to the DP camps in the US Zone and the other leading from Stettin to the American Sector of Berlin. Most chose the first route, since the one to Berlin required them to cross the Soviet Zone of Occupation, where the refugees could expect little sympathy and where Soviet soldiers might steal their belongings when they crossed the border. There were also a number of other routes. Frequently they had to be changed at short notice or new routes opened up because part of an established route had been discovered and it no longer seemed safe to cross the border at that point. The success of Brichah operations depended largely on the attitude of the American occupation authorities



toward the huge flow of refugees. If American officials had not kept their zone boundaries open, Brichah's undertakings would have had little prospect of success.

The refugees who arrived in the fall of 1945 and the early summer of 1946 were put up in existing DP camps. However, the mass influx that came in the summer of 1946 completely overwhelmed the capacity of the already overcrowded camps. After some initial hesitation, the US Army set up 38 new assembly centers in its zone. Britain refused to adopt the liberal American attitude toward the problem. Any willingness on Britain's part to accept refugees and so provide even indirect support for Brichah ran counter to London's policy of preventing the immigration of Jews to Palestine. The British dismissed reports of the Jews' plight in Poland, anti-Semitic outbreaks, and discrimination as nothing more than Zionist atrocity propaganda used by Brichah to frighten Holocaust survivors into leaving the country and moving to Palestine. Although it is true that Brichah propagandized the cause of Zionism and that all its members were Zionists who were prepared to sacrifice their lives for the dream of a Jewish state in Palestine, the organization could never have contrived to persuade over 100,000 people to flee once again if they had not felt seriously threatened. Moreover, the anti-Semitic outrages were not a figment of people's imaginations; they were a bitter reality. Brichah did everything in its power to engender enthusiasm among the refugees for emigrating to Palestine; however, Brichah could never have been as successful as it was if the survivors had not also genuinely believed in a Jewish state. No Jew would have fled from Eastern Europe to Germany after the war solely because of Zionist propaganda.

Nearly all the Jewish DPs agreed that after the Holocaust, Zionism was the only political movement that held any meaning for them. After liberation, they differed only over details in the Zionist program. These differences were reflected in the various political parties. However, nearly all shared a fundamental belief in Zionism. There are several reasons for this. The Zionists were the only group to become politically active immediately after liberation. They conducted a propaganda campaign in the camps that was directed at a highly receptive audience, for Zionism gave new hope to the desperate Jewish survivors of Nazism. Further, the majority of Jews in the DP camps came from Eastern Europe, where Zionism had been much more influential than among the assimilated Jews of Central and Western Europe, who viewed the Zionist movement as a threat to the social emancipation they had recently achieved. Nor did the Eastern European Jews have any sympathy for the desire of some German Jews to build a new

life in their former homeland after the war. Zionism looked to the future and offered a ray of hope to those living in the depressing surroundings of the DP camps.

Even if many DPs did not choose Erets Yisrael as the land in which they wished to settle, the majority still agreed on the need for the Jews to have a state of their own. The survivors could not understand how the world could deny them their own state after the disaster that had befallen the Jewish people. Was not this the least that they could expect?

So, when David Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence on May 14, 1948 in Tel Aviv, the announcement was greeted with wild enthusiasm in the Jewish DP camps. After all the years of waiting marked by hopelessness and despair, the survivors suddenly had a new homeland. Even those who did not intend to immigrate to Israel were fired up by the enthusiasm. Now if their plans fell through, there was another option open to them.

In the weeks following the announcement of independence, 70% of the Jewish DPs registered to immigrate to the Jewish state. It should be noted, that until May 1948, some 69,000 Jews had risked their lives on ships bringing illegal immigrants to Palestine, most of whom were arrested by the British before the ships landed, only to be deported to Cyprus. You all remember the famous «Exodus affair», which took place in summer 1947. The Exodus was one of those 65 illegal ships, which was attacked by the British fleet just a few miles outside the territorial waters of Palestine. Britain sent the desperate passengers back to Germany. The disembarkation in Hamburg's harbor on September 8 was at least a propagandistic success for the refugees; they were supported by a press corps that was almost unanimously on their side. Nevertheless, the Jews realized more than ever that there was no real hope of immigrating to Palestine in the near future. The Exodus affair gave rise to a deep sense of despair among the survivors of the Holocaust. The opening of Leon Uris' novel *Exodus*, later made into a motion picture, was a dramatic tribute to these immigrants and one that moved millions of readers.

A month later, the Haganah, the underground military organization of the majority of the Jewish population in Palestine, had begun to recruit and train volunteers to serve in the war against the Arabs in Palestine. Since November 1947, when the United Nations approved of the partition of Palestine and agreed to the establishment of a Jewish state in part of it, the Haganah had been conducting paramilitary training in the DP camps. Although it still had to work underground, the organization nevertheless received unofficial support from the Jewish relief organizations and

was more or less tolerated by the military governments in the occupied zone.

Despite the British political position, the US Army refused to prevent illegal emigration from the DP camps to Palestine. In compliance with a UN resolution passed because of the Arab-Israeli war, the army issued a directive in August 1948 prohibiting DPs of draft age from leaving the camps to fight in Israel's War of Independence, but it never actually implemented the policy. Despite the intense fighting associated with Israel's first war with the Arabs, 28,224 Jews left Germany for the Holy Land between May 15 and December 31, 1948; in 1949 the number rose to 35,476 and in 1950 it plummeted to 1938. In all, 65,638 DPs immigrated to Israel after the founding of the Jewish state. At the same time, the United States, Canada, and Australia relaxed their restrictions on immigration.

With the mass exodus from Germany, the number of Jewish DPs diminished so rapidly that one camp after another was shut down. By June 1950, anyone who wanted to emigrate and was physically able to do so had left the country. In January 1949, there were 64,269 Jews in 48 camps in the US Zone; by November that number had shrunk to 15,000 in nine camps. Those who stayed behind were the sick and the weak; with the emigration of the physically and mentally able displaced persons, whose idealism and optimism had so profoundly influenced and sustained life in the camps, the internal structure of the DP camps changed radically. In past years the camps had radiated a sense of hope and become a center of postwar Jewish culture. Now they seemed dreary if not grim. The last Jewish DPs left the last Jewish Camp Föhrenwald on February 28, 1957, some twelve years after it had been established. With the closing of Föhrenwald, the story of the Jewish DPs in Germany had come to an end.

