

# LIFE REBORN IN THE DISPLACED PERSONS CAMPS (1945–51) An Untold Story of Courage

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*Little research has been done on the post-Holocaust period, and so the moral courage of the 300,000 Jewish Displaced Persons is a story yet untold. In just a few months, the survivors took control of their lives, creating governing committees that transformed the Displaced Persons camps into cultural centers, with schools, newspapers, theater, musical troupes, and athletic teams. They affirmed "Forever Again" to rebirth and renewal. As Jewish communal professionals, we must strive to have Holocaust-related events include the inspiring tales of "Life Reborn."*

There are rare events that tap into our deepest emotions and collective consciousness and change us by revealing significant insights. Such an event was the conference, "Life Reborn: Jewish Displaced Persons 1945–51," held January 14–17, 2000 in Washington, D.C. It was sponsored by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in association with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which was the major American Jewish organization that assisted survivors during the post-war period.

I want to congratulate the Holocaust Memorial Museum for extending its parameters for the first time beyond 1945 and into the post-Holocaust period. This has major psychological and spiritual consequences, enabling us to move from the exclusive images of death in the concentration camps to the inspiring images of "Life Reborn" in the DP camps. Our motto must not only be "Never Again" to the Holocaust but also "Forever Again" to rebirth, renewal, and reconstruction.

## AN UNTOLD STORY OF COURAGE

If you ask even well-informed people what happened to survivors after they were liberated from the concentration camps, most would answer from the Passover Haggadah, "*M'shibud l'cherut*"—they went from slavery to freedom. But the reality was that many wound up in camps a second time: in Displaced

Persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy.

They lived in limbo, a period of uncertainty that for some lasted six years. They were a stateless people struggling to reclaim their identity and dignity in a constricted environment run by military authorities. It was a military trained to fight wars, not prepared to rehabilitate refugees.

In spite of all this, as the theme of the conference "Life Reborn" made clear, survivors almost immediately took control of their destinies. They took charge of the camp administration within six to nine months, despite opposition. With help from the United Nations, military authorities, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and other organizations, they rebuilt their lives, their families, their hopes.

Their remarkable ability to transcend this additional trauma is an untold story that we have a moral obligation to recognize and to tell.

## POST-HOLOCAUST EVENTS BEYOND THE HOLOCAUST MUSEUM'S FOCUS

Another revelation was that the Holocaust Memorial Museum's efforts had been focused on the period from 1933 to May 1945, with little attention to what happened afterward. This startled me. How could you claim you were adequately dealing with the Holocaust without examining its consequences? Perhaps my strong reaction is due to my being a Jewish

communal worker and not an academic; I just cannot grasp such a technical divide. This phenomenon is not restricted to the Museum, but manifests itself in most areas of Holocaust studies and observances.

Because of this divide, it became clear at the conference that, although there has been much research and publication on the Holocaust, this is not the case for the post-Holocaust period, which was described by one scholar as a "dark hole."

The conference was important because it brought together academics, historians, survivors, and relief workers. The publications that will ensue will be a major contribution to this field. And more must be encouraged.

### WORLD WAR II REFUGEES

When World War II ended, Germany and Austria were devastated, and the victorious countries of Europe were exhausted. In that chaos, Jewish survivors found themselves part of an estimated 7 to 11 million uprooted and homeless people of many nationalities classified as DPs, displaced persons. These were people deported to Germany as slave laborers or forced laborers for the Nazis.

The American, British, and French allies designated their armies as immediate providers of relief. In six months, between May and December, 1945, the military, together with the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), successfully completed one of the great population shifts in history, repatriating close to 6,000,000 DPs to their native lands.

How many Jews were among these DPs? Exact figures are hard to come by. The greatest historian of the Holocaust/post-Holocaust period, Yehuda Bauer of the Hebrew University and Yad Vashem, estimates that 500,000 Jews were alive in the concentration and labor camps toward the end of 1944. The terrible "death marches" that began in January 1945, as the Nazis fled with their inmates before the approaching Allied Armies, had a death rate of 60 percent. An estimated 200,000 Jews survived.

Of these, thousands attempted to return to Poland, Hungary, and Romania searching for

relatives. Others went to Czechoslovakia and Western Europe. The pogrom in Kielce, Poland on July 4, 1946 was a watershed: it meant Jews could not, even if they wanted to, go back to their homes in Poland. At that time there were 80,000 Jews in Poland. So the movement began to the Western Zone of Germany, augmented by Jews permitted to return to Poland from the Soviet Union. The total number of Jewish DPs was 300,000, mainly in occupied Germany but also in Austria and Italy. They became known as the "*Sh'erit Hapletah*"—the surviving remnant.

### DP CAMP EXPERIENCE

At the beginning these displaced Jews were placed in DP Camps where they soon came into conflict with military authorities: Passes were required, gates locked, and food rations were limited. To add to the humiliation, there were battles with anti-Semitic Poles and Balts, sometimes even with Nazi collaborators. This was because the camps were divided by nationality, in order to facilitate a policy of "repatriation" as the solution to homelessness. Ironically, even the sensitive ones in authority said, "The Nazis singled out the Jews before; we can't do the same thing to them again."

### Jewish Advocacy—An Historic Change

An occupying army's major goal is to maintain control. JDC had to get permission to send in its field personnel because the army did not want civilians around who were not under their jurisdiction. So the main avenue for assistance was through the military chaplains, who did heroic work. Significant examples are Rabbi Herschel Schacter, Rabbi Judah Nadich, Rabbi Herbert Friedman, Rabbi Meyer Abramowitz, and Rabbi Emanuel Rackman.

These chaplains were aided by sympathetic American officers and GIs who helped the Jews despite the hostile attitude of General Patton. But their efforts were not enough, and a new chapter of Jewish activism began that not only transformed Jewish life in the camps but also began the process that eventually moved American Jewry from helpless passiv-

ity to its current powerful advocacy role. American Jewry put pressure on President Truman, who in response sent the Dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Professor Earl Harrison, as his personal envoy to investigate the condition of the DP camps. Dr. Joseph Schwartz, a Yeshiva University graduate and overseas head of JDC who was, in many eyes, the greatest American Jewish communal servant of the Holocaust/post-Holocaust period, arranged for Harrison's guide to be Chaplain Abraham Klausner.

Harrison's report was devastating, stating that except for the fact that the Nazis murdered Jews, those in the DP camps were being no better treated by the U.S. Army. He recommended establishing separate Jewish camps, improving living conditions and morale, and facilitating their hopes in Palestine. He also recommended that the British accept 100,000 Jews into Palestine.

President Truman was outraged by the conditions described and sent a strong directive to General Eisenhower and his Chief of Staff, General Bedell-Smith (who had Jewish family connections that were unknown at the time). When they looked into the situation and visited the camps, they were appalled by what they found. With good will, they provided essential support. A result of the Harrison report was that Jewish DPs were put into their own separate camps, thus avoiding being mixed with non-Jews, many of whom were anti-Semites.

#### **Internal Autonomy and Self-Determination**

The most amazing phenomenon, which had long-lasting consequences, was the determination of survivors to achieve internal autonomy—to take control of their own lives. Despite the tremendous trauma, camp survivors organized themselves and created governing committees in all 45 DP Camps.

In February 1946, a Congress of the *Sh'erit Hapletah* elected the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the American Zone, which was granted a Charter of Recognition by the U.S. Army, giving it official status.

Josef Rosensaft of Bergen-Belsen was the recognized representative in the British Zone. Rosensaft had to face an overbearing and hostile British military that refused to recognize the existence of a Jewish Camp, fearing the consequent pressure to emigrate to Palestine. During one demonstration, the British threatened to shoot the Jewish DPs. Rosensaft, Sam Bloch, and other leaders responded by baring their chests and saying, "The Nazis shot us and if you want to do the same, then go ahead and shoot." Ashamed, the British officer had the guns lowered.

Where did they get the strength to return to life at such speed from death?

With the aid of UNRRA, JDC, ORT, Va'ad Hatzalah and other organizations, the Central Committee established working societies in the DP Camps to trace relatives (even at the conference there were photos and notes posted) and plan religious, educational, cultural, and sports events.

A special emphasis was placed on children. In 1946–47, the camps boasted the highest birthrate in the world. One survivor noted, "The first year it was all lonely, single people, but the second year it was everyone with a carriage." Schools were established, Yeshivot founded, and religious holidays celebrated, while youth movements provided a sense of identification and surrogate family for young people.

Despite the bleak physical conditions of the DP Camps, they became cultural and social centers and printed over 170 publications, including 36 books. Theater and musical troupes toured the camps, and athletic clubs challenged teams from other DP centers. The texture of DP life was so rich that the Central Committee's chairman was moved to state, "Let us be the ones to show the world that the bright light of the Jews will never be extinguished."

#### **SURVIVORS' TESTIMONIES**

The "Life Reborn" conference contained exciting sparks, especially when a survivor would challenge an academic: "It wasn't like that; I know, I was there." History requires a

blend of the overview of historians and the personal testimony of eyewitnesses.

Although we came to the conference well exposed to survivors' stories, instead of feeling sated, the more we heard, the more we wanted to hear. The title of Elie Wiesel's memoir, *And the Sea is Never Full*, is so apt, for the sea of survivors' stories will never be full. As is written in the Talmud, "To save one life is to save the world." Through these stories, we were privileged to enter those saved worlds.

How strong the survivors' need to tell their stories! Half of the attendees participated in the workshop on Psychological Trauma. It became a therapy session, a support group, with the central message: The trauma will never go away. What counts is what is done with it and what is built on top of it.

One story that touched me deeply was told by Cantor Gutfreund of Atlanta. He spoke about his loss of family, his loss of hope, his loss of faith. The turning point for him was when he turned down a request to conduct Yom Kippur services in his DP Camp, on the grounds that he was too flawed in deed and in faith. To which came the response: "You don't understand—we are not a Minyan of the Living, but a Minyan of the Dead, and a Minyan of the Dead has the power to exonerate. Now go and *daven*."

#### Casa Dello Studente

There is a Yiddish expression: "*A velt mit veltlach*"—"our world contains many worlds." A DP world totally unknown to me surfaced at the Conference. In 1946, JDC brought a group of sixty survivor students to Turin, Italy, housed them in a Casa Dello Studente (dormitory), and arranged for them to study for the next four years at the University. Afterward they dispersed to America and Israel. They kept in touch for over 54 years and had their first reunion dinner at the conference. What a story of achievement: The group president received his graduate degree in architecture from Yale and has a prominent practice in Houston; the dinner chairman is a surgeon in California; one of the speakers is a virologist nominated for a Nobel Prize; and another de-

signed the medical system used by NASA to monitor the first astronaut in space, a system that later became a central feature in hospital intensive care units. The chairman described Casa Dello Studente as a DP camp deluxe.

#### OTHER CRITICAL ISSUES

Three other critical issues should be addressed at a future time.

1. The impact that Zionism, with its promise of a Jewish homeland, had on the homeless DPs; how some in the camps trained with broomsticks instead of the guns they did not have; the moral encouragement stemming from Chief Rabbi Herzog's tour of the camps; the galvanizing effect of Ben-Gurion's visit on Yom Kippur, 1945, on a dispirited people; and the historic consequences of his convincing Eisenhower in October 1945 to permit free entry into the U.S. Zone of Jews fleeing from Poland. This free entry resulted in a concentration of survivors that increased pressure for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and ultimately persuaded the British to hand over the combined Palestine/DP problem to the UN.
2. The impact of the *Bricha*, the largest illegal mass movement in Europe in the past century, which brought 300,000 Jews from Eastern Europe to Central and Southern Europe in just four years. Organized by the Haganah, it created the needed critical mass and pressure of survivors. JDC provided the funding.
3. The impact of Jewish Palestine: first, the soldiers in the Jewish Brigade—the Palestinian units of the British Army, then the Haganah, Aliya Bet, and Jewish Agency emissaries. Their heroic efforts merit a separate discussion.

#### A PERSONAL NOTE

I want to close on a personal note, by sharing with you a work of art that for me captures the "Life Reborn" theme of the conference. My wife, a survivor, psychotherapist,

and artist, wove a series of large tapestries depicting her Holocaust experience. The concluding tapestry was woven on the occasion of our son's Bar Mitzvah. What was her message? At the top of this six-foot high weaving are the Ten Commandments. Instead of the usual smooth-shaped tablets, these are jagged, symbolizing their being wrenched out of the rock of Sinai: if you take your Jewishness seriously, it makes demands.

The Hebrew letters are not static, locked into the tablets, but fall out and add up to the priestly benediction: "May the Lord Bless You and Keep You." This blessing cascades over our son, who is represented at the base of the tapestry by a thick purple yarmulke, the double profile of his face bowing his head as he receives the blessing, and wearing a tallit shaped like wings to bear him up to Sinai. Her message as a survivor to her son: You stood at Sinai. Sinai is located in a desert, and the desert is a metaphor for a hostile world. It is precisely when we are most challenged that our Jewish tradition commands that we affirm

life.

### CONCLUSION

We must never separate the Holocaust from the post-Holocaust period. Critics who say that we cannot build a Judaism based on the Holocaust are right as far as they go, but they do not go far enough, for we can build on "Life Reborn," on the spiritual energy and moral courage of the DP's response. Along with "Never Again" to the Holocaust, we must reaffirm "Forever Again" to rebirth and renewal.

And to achieve that goal means giving recognition and honor to those survivors who rebuilt their lives—for they are our authentic heroes.

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