

Displaced Persons and the Desire for a Jewish National Homeland

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Summary: The political lobby for a Jewish homeland in Palestine was greatly assisted by the demand and campaigning of the Jewish Displaced Persons housed in the DP camps at the end of World War II, in particular those at Bergen-Belsen. Dr Brenner discusses how circumstances connected the interests of the Zionists and the Jewish survivors and refugees.

It belongs to one of the ironies of history that immediately after the end of the Second World War about a quarter of a million East European Jews found temporary shelter on German territory. There was no German State in the first post-war years, and it was the American zone of occupation into which most survivors fled in order to reach either Palestine, the United States of America, or another country far away from what they termed the blood-soaked soil of Europe. The contrast between the idealized dreams of a sovereign Jewish state and the harsh reality of having survived the death camps just to find themselves in Displaced Persons (DPs) camps and ruined cities of Germany could hardly be more extreme. Numerous illustrations point to this contrast. One striking example was the complete Talmud printed in Heidelberg in 1948/49 with a title page juxtaposing the barbed wire of the concentration camp with the palm trees of Eretz Israel (Greater Israel or Jewish homeland in Israel). Another one was the Passover Haggadah printed in Munich at the same time. Its message was clear: the only future for the Jewish survivors was to be found in their ancient homeland. Just as Moses had led the ancient Hebrews out of Egypt, the Zionist leadership was to take them out of Europe.

Not all East European Jews had been Zionists before the war. The many factions within Zionism, from the socialist *Po'alei Zion* and the *Ha-poel ha-tza'ir* to mainstream General Zionists and right-wing Revisionists formed a significant part of the politically interested pre-War Jewish population of Eastern Europe. But the Socialist *Bund* and the religious *Aguda* claimed also large parts of the Jewish population, while smaller minorities were open to assimilation into Polish or other East European societies. The Shoah (Holocaust) did not transform all Jewish survivors into active Zionists, but now the vast

majority realized that the existence of a Jewish state could have helped many to survive. The general support for a Jewish State among Jews became overwhelming in the post-war years. In all major DP camps, there were tours by Zionist politicians, first and foremost the historic visit by David Ben Gurion in the DP camps of Landsberg, Feldafing, and Zeilsheim in October 1945. The American camp commandant in Landsberg, Irving Heymont, reported on his visit there: 'To the people of the camp, he is God ... Never had we seen such energy displayed in the camp. I don't think that a visit by President Truman could cause as much excitement.'¹ The reasons for the triumph of Zionism over the other Jewish political movements was perhaps most clearly expressed by the contemporary voice of Koppel Pinson who directed the educational services of the Joint Distribution Committee in Germany in 1945/46: 'The events of 1939-1945 seemed to discredit completely those philosophies of Jewish life prevailing before the War which were not centred around Palestine. The Zionists were the only ones that had a programme that seemed to make sense after this catastrophe. The Zionists were organized, active and militant'²

Jewish communists mostly returned home to Eastern Europe, and the small group of *Bundists* who stayed in some camps like Feldafing kept a relatively low profile. Other former *Bundists* decided to join the Zionist parties of the left. Most of the press and the political parties were decidedly Zionist. They depicted Nazi anti-Semitism as the final expression of a long chain of Jew hatred reaching from antiquity to the present. Thus, Shlomo Frenkel (Shafir), the editor of the Hebrew journal *Nitzotz* wrote in the Hanuka edition of 1945: 'The period of the Maccabees shows us that Hitler was not the first to set about destroying our nation ... There was no fundamental difference between Antiochus Epiphanes and

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Adolf Hitler.³ If the Jewish experience in *galut* (exile) was basically the history of antisemitism, then the lesson to be learnt was clear: only in their own sovereign state would the Jews be safe.

Passover was another occasion for the Jewish survivors to underline the need to leave Europe and resettle in a free state of their own. In a *Pessach-Buch*, published in German in 1946, Samuel Gringauz, the chairman of the Jewish camp committee in Landsberg also pointed to the different situation when compared to historic Passover story: 'The exodus from Egypt brought the immediate freedom of the people. The end of slavery also meant the beginning of freedom ... quite different after the exodus from Nazi slavery. The end of slavery does not yet mean the beginning of freedom. The liberated remnant of the Jews finds the way to the Promised Land closed.'⁴ The same line of argument could be seen in the speech by Gringauz in 1947 entitled 'Adieu Europe'. For the surviving Jews, thus Gringauz explained at another occasion, Western civilization was not characterized by Westminster Abbey or Versailles, nor by Strasbourg Cathedral or the art treasures of Florence, but rather by the violence of the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the pogroms of Russia, and the gas chambers of Auschwitz.⁵

No wonder then that immigration to Palestine was the political topic number one in the DP camps. When in April 1946 an Anglo-American committee asked 138,320 DPs in the three Western occupied zones which country they preferred to immigrate to, 118,570 answered, 'Palestine'. This result is not to be confused with the actual desires of every single DP, but should rather be seen as a political statement. Even those who intended to go and actually went to other countries in the end, mentioned mostly Palestine, as they too favoured the establishment of a Jewish state. And they knew all too well that their opinion counted in the post-war political climate. The prevailing Zionist ideology among the leaders and the masses of the DPs made it difficult for those who preferred other destinations to make their preference public. They were seen as traitors. The Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the American Zone even refused to allow a group of orphans to accept an invitation to well-to-do homes in England and France.

After liberation, the Zionists tried to show unity. They established a United Zionist Organisation (UZO) and the youth movement *Nocham* – the United Pioneering Youth – in September 1945 in the American zone, and in early 1946 in Belsen. This ambitious attempt to overcome internal Zionist divisions was bound to fail in the face of the major ideological differences within world Zionism, and especially in Palestine. Thus, the UZO fought a losing battle and was ultimately replaced by seven political parties in the American zone. Facing the anti-Zionist policies of Britain, the efforts at unity were more successful in the British zone, which may also be due to the much smaller number of Jewish DPs living there.⁶

Demonstrations for a Jewish state among the DPs increased as the British tried to control the ban on Jewish immigration to Palestine. In this respect, there was, of course, an enormous difference between the Jewish DPs in the American and British zones of Palestine. While the former attracted more and more Jewish refugees from the East, the latter closed its doors to Jews. The Jewish DPs in the British zone were mainly those liberated in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. They were now faced with a strange paradox: they had welcomed the British as liberators from the Nazis and faced them now as bitter enemies in the struggle over Palestine.

The commitment towards the Jewish homeland was expressed on different levels. Some survivors tried to prepare for their immigration to Palestine by building agricultural training grounds. Several such *kibbutzim* were founded in post-war Germany. One of them was at the ground of the former farm of Julius Streicher, the publisher of the antisemitic newspaper *Der Stürmer*. Another one was *Kibbutz Buchenwald* formed by Buchenwald survivors and later relocated to Israel as *Kibbutz Netzer Sereni*.⁷

There was also the active participation in the illegal immigration to Israel, called *Brechah*. The *Central Committee of the Liberated Jews in Bavaria* played a major part in the *Brechah* of Jews from Eastern Europe who passed through Germany. Together with the Palestinian mission and other Jewish organizations, the leadership of the *Sh'erith Hapletah* helped thousands of Jews to leave the old world and resettle in Palestine.⁸ Another important player in the *Brechah* activities was the

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Jewish Brigade established by the British War Cabinet in September 1944. It consisted of Jews from Palestine and took part in the British invasion of Italy. By July 1945, soldiers of the Jewish Brigade had arrived in the British zone of Germany. For the survivors of Bergen-Belsen the encounter with soldiers in uniforms with a Star of David had an enormous psychological impact. After years of suffering, they were seen as emissaries of a Jewish State in the making. The soldiers devoted much of their time to educational purposes leading to immigration, such as the opening of a Hebrew high school in Belsen in December, 1945. By the time the Brigade was dissolved in 1946 its members had fulfilled an important symbolic role to restore the belief in Jewish sovereignty among the survivors. It goes without saying that its activities as well as the efforts of the political leadership among the DPs supporting the Brechah led to inevitable conflicts with the authorities in the British zone.⁹

This conflict was revealed to the world by the tragic events of the refugee ship *Exodus* in 1947. This worn-out American cruise ship left the port of Marseilles in July 1947 heading for Zion, with some 5,000 Jewish DPs on board who wanted to build a new life in a Jewish State. When the ship reached the coast of Palestine, it was hit by a storm and discovered by British destroyers. After a grim struggle, the crew and the passengers were not sent to British internment camps on Cyprus, as was usually done. British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, intended to teach these refugees a special lesson and ordered them back to Germany. After a three-month odyssey they put into port at Hamburg in September 1947. Most of them had to be dragged off the ship by force. They were transferred to barracks in northern Germany. As a show of solidarity, many Jewish DPs went on a hunger strike and staged big demonstrations in their behalf.

Two months later the United Nations voted on the partition plan of Palestine. The deplorable situation of the Jewish DPs still stranded in Germany in general, and the *Exodus* affair in particular, may have had some impact on the voting, which resulted in the necessary majority in favour of partition. After the State of Israel had been founded in May, 1948, most Jewish DPs left Germany. Those who remained were seen as 'lost for the Jewish

people'. There was a profound moral condemnation of the rebuilding of Jewish life on what a resolution of the first post-war assembly of the World Jewish Congress in 1948 termed the 'blood-soaked German soil', a cemetery on which Jewish life could never blossom again. Jewish organizations worldwide regarded it as one of their foremost goals to evacuate all Jews who were stranded in the American Occupied Zone of Europe which happened to be part of that blood-soaked soil. When, in 1951, the Jewish Agency closed all its offices in Germany, it was a clear signal that those who remained were considered 'a source of danger for the entire Jewish people ... Those who are tempted by the fleshpots of Germany must not expect that Israel or the Jewish people should provide them with services of their convenience,' wrote Chaim Yahil, Israel's consul in Munich. And the American Jewish writer Ludwig Lewisohn certainly expressed the deep conviction of many observers when he predicted that those remaining Jews in Europe would live as 'outcasts, paupers, untouchables, in separate quarters of Europe' and lead 'a life without dignity, creativity, and hope.'¹⁰

In the end, the State of Israel absorbed most of the Jewish DPs, but tens of thousands among the Sh'erit ha-pletah chose other destinations, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and South America. Some moved to other European countries, such as France, Britain, or Sweden, and about 15,000 remained in Germany. A small group of Jewish DPs returned to Germany from Israel in the 1950s. It is remarkable that almost the entire political leadership of the She'erit ha-pletah in the British zone, but also a good part in the American zone did not find their way to Israel – despite their Zionist rhetoric. In this respect, the community of Jewish DPs in post-war Germany despite all its special characteristics was a reflection of general Zionist activities of other places and other times. The need for a Jewish State was generally emphasized but the actual immigration was often perceived as more relevant for others than for oneself.



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Notes:

- [1] *Among the Survivors of the Holocaust, 1945: The Landsberg DP Letters of Major Irving Heymont, US Army* (Cincinnati 1982), pp. 65-66.
- [2] Koppel Pinson, 'Jewish Life in Liberated Germany' in *Jewish Social Studies* 9 (1947), pp. 101-126., here: p. 117, quoted in Zeev W. Mankowitz, *The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge 2002), p. 70.
- [3] Ivri (Shlomo Frenkel), 'Chanukah', in *Nitzotz* 5 (30th November, 1945), p. 1, quoted in Mankowitz, *Survivors*, p. 71.
- [4] Quoted in Michael Brenner, *Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany* (Princeton 1997), p. 27
- [5] Brenner, *After the Holocaust*, p. 66.
- [6] Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginning: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945-1950* (Detroit 2002), pp. 189-203, and Mankowitz, *Life Between memory and Hope*, pp. 69-100.
- [7] Judith Tydor Baumel, *Kibbutz Buchenwald: Survivors and Pioneers* (New Brunswick, NJ 1997).
- [8] Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (New York, 1970).
- [9] Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, pp. 101-103.
- [10] Quoted in Brenner, *After the Holocaust*, p. 66

