

'A Continual Source of Trouble'¹: The Displaced Persons Camp Bergen-Belsen (Hohne), 1945–1950

Dr. Rainer Schulze, University of Essex

Summary: Dr Schulze's essay looks at the history of Bergen-Belsen (Hohne) DP camp and discusses the unexpectedly tense relationship between the authorities who were trying to aid and relocate the refugees, and the aims and objectives of the refugees themselves. The struggle enacted at Belsen in the post-war years had far-reaching consequences for the history of the Middle East and beyond.

When British troops reached Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on the afternoon of 15 April 1945, they found more than 40,000 prisoners cooped up in the main concentration camp. Many of them were barely alive, and disease was rampant. The British Army instigated a massive rescue and relief operation. Survivors were moved as quickly as possible under the given circumstances to German *Wehrmacht* barracks, which were only a little more than a mile away and comprised modern and well equipped brick buildings. In early April, the SS had set up on these premises an overflow camp for Bergen-Belsen which held another 15,000 prisoners who were in slightly better physical shape than those uncovered in the main camp, but they, too, needed medical care and protection.

On 17 April, two days after the first troops had reached Bergen-Belsen, work began to convert buildings in the barracks complex into a hospital area. Other buildings were turned into reception areas for the non-bedridden survivors. By 19 May, when the former concentration camp was completely cleared, some 27,000 survivors had been moved to the *Wehrmacht* barracks; nearly half of them had to be admitted to the hospital area. Almost all of the barracks complex was now occupied by survivors of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, with only a small section at the northern end left for some British troops. The whole complex remained fenced off, and access was strictly controlled. In the summer of 1945, when the number of the sick was decreasing, the hospital area was gradually transformed to normal accommodation blocks.²

Due to the complexities of the relief operations, Bergen-Belsen remained under the responsibility of the British Army, who were supported in their daily work on the

ground above all by the British and Swiss Red Cross teams which had arrived shortly after the liberation. Teams of the big Jewish relief organisations such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) and the (British) Jewish Relief Unit (JRU) were not allowed into the Displaced Person (DP) camp until the summer of 1945, and it was only in the spring of 1946 that administration of the camp was handed over to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

The immediate priority was providing medical care in order to save as many lives as possible. However, it was quickly realised that it was just as important to help the survivors rebuild their lives and re-acustom them to the rules and regulations of a normal society after their years of incarceration in concentration camps. For that purpose, members of the British units and the voluntary organisations set up a wide range of recreational and educational facilities at the *Wehrmacht* barracks over the following weeks, including a library, courses in English, music and painting lessons, as well as open-air dances and cabaret programmes.

The British took great pride in their achievements in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen and the ensuing relief effort for the survivors. The survivors, fully aware that the Nazis had wanted them to die at Bergen-Belsen, were immensely grateful to their liberators. However, it seems that the British authorities expected that this gratitude would automatically ensure that their instructions with regard to the care, rehabilitation and future of the survivors would be followed without much questioning. It was quickly apparent, however, that many survivors wanted to take control of their own lives again. This often put them at odds with their liberators, and the inevitable result was increasing tensions and even outright conflict between the British on the one hand and the survivors on the other.

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Immediately after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, survivors who were physically strong enough organised camp committees, mostly on the lines of nationality. Two committees straddled nationalities: the International Camp Committee and the Jewish Committee. The British encouraged the establishment of such committees in the expectation that they would help them with the administration.³ They planned to forward their instructions to the leaders of the various committees who would then implement them within their particular group. However, some of these committees, above all those of the two largest groups, the Polish and the Jewish DPs, developed into important agents of self-representation and became almost an internal self-government of their particular group, setting up their own political organisations, schools, sports clubs and publications. The Jewish Committee even formed a separate Jewish police force and a Jewish court. The committees increasingly developed their own agenda, and this did not only lead to disagreements over everyday questions such as the provision of food, clothing, fuel, and the right of movement outside the DP camp, but also to serious conflicts with the British authorities over fundamental policy issues.

The vast majority of the survivors of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp fell legally into the category of displaced persons. The British authorities were, therefore, intent on repatriating them to the countries of their origin as quickly as possible, and they expected the hospital and reception areas in the *Wehrmacht* barracks to have a similar character to any other DP Assembly Centre and be a temporary stop-over between liberation and repatriation. For many survivors this was indeed the case. Those from countries in western and northern Europe were, with few exceptions, eager to be repatriated, and most of them had left Bergen-Belsen by the end of June. By the end of the summer of 1945 almost all survivors from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Romania had been returned to their home countries as well. Almost all of those who still remained in the *Wehrmacht* barracks in the autumn of 1945 belonged to one of two groups of survivors: (non-Jewish) Poles and Jews, the majority of them of Polish origin. Both groups

put up a bitter fight against repatriation, though for very different reasons.

Many (non-Jewish) Polish DPs became increasingly concerned about the political situation in their home country where the communists had seized power. The majority thought it best to see how the situation developed. Despite all the pressure that the British applied, a large number of Polish survivors tried to remain in occupied Germany or obtain visas for entry to Great Britain or the United States. When the British started to evacuate Poles in May 1945 from Bergen-Belsen to Polish DP camps in their zone, they met resistance to what the Polish survivors rightly feared was the first step to enforced repatriation. One way to avoid this was to be classed as stateless, but many Polish DPs rejected this option as they wanted to remain Polish.

Jewish survivors had stressed since liberation the singular character of their persecution under the Nazis and accused the British of failing to acknowledge this. Due to the losses they sustained individually and collectively they felt entitled to preferential treatment with regard to housing, food, clothing, and provisions in general. They also demanded that they be recognized as a separate group of survivors in their own right rather than being subsumed into national groups on the basis of the nationality they had held prior to 1939. This demand went against one of the cornerstones of British DP policy, which was to recognize only nationality as a principle of group identification. The British argued that using religion or race to group DPs would amount to a continuation of the Nazi racial ideology which they had fought so hard to defeat. However, a number of pragmatic reasons were just as important for this position, not least the expectation that one-nationality DP camps would not only make the process of repatriation much easier, but that it would also contribute to a more efficient administration.

The overwhelming majority of Jewish survivors from Eastern Europe refused to be repatriated to the countries from where they had been deported. Their families and their communities had been destroyed by the Nazis, and they no longer had any home there to which they could return. A few did go back immediately after their liberation to search for relatives and friends only to find

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out that no one was left, and that all their property had been destroyed or taken over by new owners. Under these circumstances, even a return to the DP camps in occupied Germany was preferable to staying in countries where they saw no future for themselves either individually or collectively. Their reports spread quickly among the Jews in Germany. Moreover, news of anti-Semitic incidents in several Eastern European countries acted as a further deterrent to repatriation.

The British authorities rejected all proposals to set up a special Jewish camp in the British zone for those Jews who did not want to return to their former countries. Instead, they insisted on pursuing their policy of setting up one-nationality DP camps. On 6 May 1945, 1,135 Jewish men of Polish origin were transferred to a Polish DP camp in Celle. This did not meet with great resistance as Celle was only some 15 miles away from Bergen-Belsen, and there was close contact between the two sites, so close, in fact, that the Jewish section of the DP camp in Celle came to be regarded as almost an outpost of Bergen-Belsen.

The situation changed when the British military authorities ordered the transfer of Jewish Bergen-Belsen survivors of Polish origin to a DP camp in Lingen near the German-Dutch border. The Jewish Camp Committee strongly resisted this, and whilst it could not prevent the transfer of a first group, it managed to stop a second group from leaving for Lingen, when reports about the exhausting journey and the inadequate facilities and provisions at Lingen got back to Bergen-Belsen. Some of those who had been transferred to Lingen with the first transport returned to Bergen-Belsen illegally; the remainder were first transferred from Lingen to yet another DP camp and finally, in what amounted to a massive British climb-down, taken back to Bergen-Belsen in mid-July 1945. The Jewish Committee had won an important battle in its fight for the right of all Jewish survivors to remain in Bergen-Belsen, irrespective of their nationality. Josef Rosensaft, the leader of the Jewish Committee, later called the Lingen episode emphatically 'the symbol of our struggle for elementary rights.'⁴ This victory against all odds contributed greatly to increase Rosensaft's standing amongst Jewish survivors in Bergen-Belsen and beyond.

At about the same time, American DP policy began to change. Following an investigation by the US representative to the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, Earl G. Harrison, into the living conditions of the DPs in the American and British zones of Germany and Austria, the US government accepted the recommendation to set up separate camps for Jewish DPs.⁵ The Jewish Committee in Bergen-Belsen, with whom Harrison had met in the course of his investigation, considered this an important boost for its own position. However, the British government was not prepared to undertake a similar change of policy and instead confirmed officially that Jews would not be recognized as a separate group of DPs, and that there was not to be any preferential treatment of Jewish DPs.

Linked with this problem was the question of the status of German Jews. For the Jewish survivors, it was inconceivable that German and non-German Jews would be treated differently as they were equally victims of Nazi persecution. Legally, German Jews fell into the category of 'enemy DPs' (in contrast to 'United Nations DPs'), and it was British policy to regard them as German citizens and treat them as any other German. Those German Jews who had been liberated from a concentration camp received the same kind of care in DP hospitals as non-German concentration camp survivors, but once their health had been restored, they were released to the German communities who from that time were responsible for them. Despite protests by the Jewish Committee, this was practiced in Bergen-Belsen as well, with many German Jews evacuated from the DP camp in the course of May and June. German Jews also fell under the British non-fraternisation policy.

While the conflicts over the legal status were simmering, disturbing reports from Bergen-Belsen about anti-Semitic acts committed by Polish DPs reached the headquarters of the British Control Commission in Germany. This prompted a reorganisation of the DP camp. By the end of October, two sections were turned into Jewish camps, accommodating some 7,300 Jews and internally administered by the Jewish Committee. The two remaining sections became predominantly (non-Jewish) Polish camps, housing just over 10,000 Poles and

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internally administered by the Polish Camp Committee, although some 1,900 Jewish DPs, mainly of non-Polish origin, continued to live there. Whilst it was legally still one DP camp, this reorganisation meant that Bergen-Belsen was de facto divided into a Jewish and a Polish DP camp. The Jewish camp became a magnet for Jewish DPs elsewhere in the British zone and beyond who came to Bergen-Belsen to live in Jewish surroundings. To a lesser degree, the Polish camp likewise attracted Polish DPs from elsewhere. According to some British estimates, only 5,000 to 6,000 out of the 20,000 DPs living at Bergen-Belsen in February 1946 were actually survivors of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

The Harrison report contained another recommendation which was even less palatable than that of the establishment of separate Jewish DP camps: it proposed that irrepatriable Jews in Germany be allowed to emigrate to Palestine if that was their wish. Much to British consternation, Bergen-Belsen, with its Jewish Committee under the leadership of Josef Rosensaft, had been at the centre of the agitation for the right of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust to emigrate to Palestine almost since liberation, and it was this question which formed the most unbridgeable divide between the two sides.

The first congress of the *She'erit Hapletah* (Surviving Remnant, or the 'liberated Jews', as British records usually referred to them), was held at Bergen-Belsen from 25 to 27 September 1945. It was attended by more than 200 delegates from all camps and Jewish communities in the British zone plus a few representatives from the other zones of occupation as well as representatives of British and American Jewish organisations, brought Jewish survivors and British authorities on an open collision course over the issue of Palestine. The delegates passed a resolution confirming the Jewish request to designate Palestine as a Jewish State in order to end the homelessness and statelessness of the Jewish people which had made the extermination of millions of Jews possible. For the first time Jewish survivors publicly linked the Holocaust, British DP policy and the Palestine question in a damning criticism of the British authorities. As a final act of defiance, delegates elected a Central Jewish Committee of the Liberated Jews in Germany.

This committee, with Josef Rosensaft as its chairman, was based in Bergen-Belsen, replacing the provisional Jewish Camp Committee, but it laid claim to speak for all liberated Jews in the British and American zones.

When the Central Jewish Committee in Bergen-Belsen called a strike of all Jewish employees for 16 November as a day of protest against the British decision to keep the restrictions on immigration to Palestine in place, and a number of very critical articles appeared in the American press about conditions in the 'notorious Belsen Camp in the British',⁶ both the British government in London and the British Control Commission in Germany considered once again removing all Jews from Bergen-Belsen Camp in order to disconnect the evocative word Bergen-Belsen from the agitation of Jewish DPs to emigrate to Palestine. However, the large number of DPs living at the *Wehrmacht* barracks and the political power of the Jewish Central Committee made any early closure impossible. Instead the British authorities increased their efforts to cut the link between the concentration camp and the DP Camp, and insisted on calling the DP camp in the *Wehrmacht* barracks Hohne (or Höhne)⁷ rather than Bergen-Belsen, or Belsen. They argued that Bergen-Belsen did not exist any more, and that the name Bergen-Belsen was discredited by the Nazis and pointed only to the past, whereas the name Hohne expressed the new beginning after liberation. The survivors, by contrast, insisted on retaining the name Bergen-Belsen, or Belsen, for the DP camp because they wanted to keep this very continuity alive in public perception and to make clear that they were only at this place because they had been incarcerated in the concentration camp.

Matters came to a head on the eve of the first anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. The consecration of a permanent Jewish memorial next to the mass graves turned into a massive demonstration against the British. Norbert Wollheim, vice-chairman of the Central Jewish Committee, caused British outrage when he declared that Britain had allowed the murder of millions of Jews to happen and now prolonged the suffering of the survivors because they were not allowed to emigrate to Palestine and were instead kept cooped up at a DP camp next to where so many of them had been incarcerated by the Nazis.

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An additional problem facing the British authorities in Germany, and which in their mind became closely associated with Bergen-Belsen, was that of the so-called illegal Jewish infiltrees. From late 1945 onwards, increasing numbers of Jews who had remained in eastern European countries after the end of World War II were fleeing westwards trying to escape economic hardship, but above all wanting to leave an environment which they regarded as hostile and anti-Semitic. The refugees hoped that they would eventually find a way to get to Palestine, the United States or other Western countries.⁸ The majority of these Jewish refugees entered the American zones of Germany and Austria, in particular after the United States had decided to grant them DP status. In contrast, the British government maintained that these refugees ought to be sent back as they had entered their zone illegally. They came to see the whole issue of the illegal Jewish infiltrees as yet another move to force them to change their policy with regard to Palestine. Due to the size of the camp and the reputation of its Jewish Committee, Bergen-Belsen became a magnet for those Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who managed to get into the British zone. The British authorities saw their credibility on the line again, and they decided to withhold food rations for those who lived at the DP Camp without official authorisation. Inevitably, this turned into another power struggle with Josef Rosensaft and his Jewish Committee, with the number of infiltrees at Bergen-Belsen reaching some 3,000 by the end of 1946. The conflict ended with a tacit understanding that the Jewish Committee would supply accurate figures of the genuine DPs living at Bergen-Belsen, and the British authorities in return would provide German rations (which were lower than the DP rations) for the Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. By that time the influx of Eastern European Jews into Germany had receded considerably, so that the issue had lost much of its erstwhile controversy.

Despite their separation into different sections of the camp, the tension and friction between Polish and Jewish DPs at Bergen-Belsen continued to cause such problems that in the early summer of 1946 British military government finally decided to transfer the remaining non-Jewish DPs to other DP camps. They denied that this move meant the

recognition of Jews as a separate group of DPs, but insisted that it was only made in order to facilitate the repatriation of those Polish DPs who were seen as 'repatriable'. On 22 August 1946, representatives of the Polish Camp Committee handed the keys to 'their' headquarters over to a member of the Jewish Central Committee, and with this formal act the Polish DP camp ceased to exist at Bergen-Belsen.⁹

Bergen-Belsen had now de facto become a Jewish DP camp, initially accommodating between 10,000 and 12,000 people. It was the largest Jewish DP camp in post-war Germany,¹⁰ and it also constituted the largest Jewish community that had ever existed in the region of Lower Saxony. However, in contrast to other areas, very few of these Jewish DPs set up businesses and tried to gain a foothold in the local and regional economy. A small number of Jewish DPs worked for British military government, UNRRA or one of the voluntary Jewish aid organisations inside the DP camp, but the large majority remained completely dependent on the provisions they received from the various agencies. Bergen-Belsen, therefore, always remained not only legally, but also economically and socially, something like an extra-territorial island detached from its vicinity.

This contributed to the fact that the DP camp was regarded by the outside world with distrust and suspicion. The longer it existed, the name Bergen-Belsen (or Hohne, as the British insisted on calling it) became notorious in particular for the role which its residents allegedly played in the widespread phenomenon of barter and black market activities. Jewish DPs were generally better placed than other DPs to engage in this illegal trading as, in addition to their normal DP rations supplied by UNRRA, they also received regular supplements from international welfare organisations and individual relief parcels from abroad. This included such sought-after goods as coffee and cigarettes, which were used to obtain those goods which the DPs lacked in their temporary surroundings at the camp. They found more than willing partners in members of the German population who often travelled from afar in order to obtain goods at Bergen-Belsen which they were unable to obtain anywhere else. Not surprisingly, crimes closely connected with barter and black market

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activities, such as illegal currency transactions, dealing with stolen goods, armed robberies and various other forms of violent crime increased in the area of Bergen-Belsen and became quickly associated as a problem which originated from the DP camp. In March 1949, the alleged role of Bergen-Belsen as a safe haven for criminals even became the subject of a parliamentary question in the House of Commons. However, there can be little doubt that Bergen-Belsen was also used as an easy target and blamed for widespread problems everywhere which the British (and the German) police were unable to curtail. There is another, more sinister aspect to this: brandishing Jews as black marketeers, profiteers and racketeers fed into long existing anti-semitic stereotypes, and it seems fair to say that this is an important reason why the view of the DP camp as a centre of organised criminal activities stuck so successfully.

Apart from this particular aspect, relations between the British authorities and the Jewish DPs at Bergen-Belsen improved considerably from 1947 onwards and reached a kind of *modus vivendi*, with the British side accepting that Rosensaft's position was all but unassailable. Even the *Exodus* affair did not change this. Some demonstrations in the British zone against the British decision to transport the more than 2,000 passengers back to France and then to Hamburg bordered on the verge of violence. Protests staged at Bergen-Belsen on 7 September 1947 passed in a more or less orderly manner – much to the relief of the British authorities.

The improved relations were not least the result of a programme of legal immigration of Jewish DPs from the British zone to Palestine with the code name 'Grand National' which the British government had drafted in late 1946. Residents of Bergen-Belsen were given high priority, and this had a positive effect on morale amongst the DPs at Bergen-Belsen. However, the number of Jews who benefited from this programme was small compared to the overall number of Jewish DPs, and equally small was the number of Jewish DPs from Bergen-Belsen who were taken in by several European and non-European countries in this period. By early 1948, there were still some 8,000 to 9,000 Jews living at Bergen-Belsen. Large-scale emigration only became possible from mid-1948

onwards. The proclamation of the State of Israel in May 1948 meant that the restrictions on immigration to Palestine imposed by the Mandatory power Great Britain were annulled. Following the Displaced Persons Act of 1949, the United States increased the number of their entry visas for displaced persons from occupied Germany. As a result, the number of DPs at Bergen-Belsen fell to 4,000 by July 1949.

The British authorities regarded this as the right moment to close the camp altogether, thus finally ridding themselves of a camp which had caused them so much trouble and embarrassment for such a long time, but just as importantly, they wanted to use the excellent facilities of the barracks complex themselves. However, it took longer than expected to find adequate replacement accommodation for the remaining DPs, who resisted any move. Despite demonstrations and even a hunger strike, all remaining DPs were eventually transferred to Camp Utjever close to the Dutch border, the last group, among them Josef Rosensaft, leaving Bergen-Belsen in May 1950. The DP Camp Bergen-Belsen was closed for good. After extensive renovation work the whole barracks complex, renamed Hohne Garrison, was taken over by the British Army.



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Further reading:

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Notes:

- [1] Comment by Commander 43 (W) Division about Josef Rosensaft, the leader of the Jewish Committee Bergen-Belsen; TNA FO 1052/282: Note to DP Branch 30 Corps District, 8 Mar 1946.
- [2] By summer 1945, the British differentiated between five camps at Bergen-Belsen: *Camp 1* was the former (main) concentration camp, although this had been completely cleared and the wooden huts torched. *Camp 2* was originally the hospital area, and later, when the hospital area had been turned into a normal residential camp, it was the southern half of the former hospital complex. *Camp 3* was the first evacuation camp next to the hospital area set up in April, *Camp 4* the former German Officers' quarter, and *Camp 5* was the northern part of the hospital area which was the first section of the original hospital area to be transformed into an ordinary evacuation camp.
- [3] Liberated prisoners comprised members of all groups persecuted by the Nazis and more than twenty nationalities.
- [4] Josef Rosensaft, 'Our Belsen', in *Belsen*. Published by Irgun Sheerit Hapleita Me'Haezor Habriti Israel (London, 1957), p. 27.
- [5] Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York, 1982), pp. 39–71 and 291–305 (text of the report).
- [6] *New York Times*, 20 November 1945.
- [7] Hohne was the name of the small village which was dismantled when the barracks complex was built on its lands in the late 1930s. In the British records, it is often wrongly spelt with an *Umlaut*, i.e. Höhne (or Hoehne) instead of Hohne, for no apparent reason other than that it might have looked more German and thus more authentic to an English speaker.
- [8] For more, see Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Bricah* (New York, 1970); Arieh J Kochavi, *Post-Holocaust Politics: Britain, the United States and Jewish Refugees, 1945–1948*. (Chapel Hill NC, 2001), esp. chapters 2 and 7.
- [9] Karl Liedke, 'Das polnische DP-Camp Bergen-Belsen: Strukturen, Institutionen und Ereignisse.' Unpublished paper given at a conference held at Bergen-Belsen 4 to 6 Nov 2002. The last Polish DPs – 120 sick people – left Bergen-Belsen on 15 September 1946.
- [10] Altogether, the US zone accommodated more Jewish DPs than the British zone, but none of the Jewish DP camps in the US zone had the size of Bergen-Belsen.

