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NO "ZERO HOUR" AFTER THE SHOAH

Jewish Displaced Persons and the Long Road to a New Beginning

by Benedikt Putz

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Photo credit: Jewish DP children arriving in Frankfurt before emigrating to Palestine / Eretz Israel, 1946. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1074479 / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, CC0 1.0

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Immediately after the Second World War, Germany became a place of refuge for nearly 300,000 Jews. They lived like other so-called Displaced Persons (DPs) in Jewish or mixed DP camps and played a significant role in the revitalisation of European Judaism. However, few people are aware of their fate today.

When weapons fell quiet on 8 May 1945, it signified the end of six years of war in Europe and twelve years of national socialist tyranny. In the German culture of remembrance, this moment of globally historic importance has come to be known as “zero hour”. Even if this expression is contested in academic as well as public discourse, it contains an important truth: 8 May 1945 marked the end of the genocide of European Jews by the Nazis.

However, while the Federal Republic of Germany gradually became a state that enabled the development of new Jewish communities, 8 May 1945 was not a “zero hour” for every group of victims of national socialism. Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code, which was used by the Nazis to persecute homosexuals, was only amended by West Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and only definitively abolished in 1994. The Nazi genocide against the Sinti and Roma was only officially recognised in 1982, while the mass murder of the victims of “euthanasia” was not recognised until January 2025. The Jehova’s Witnesses who were persecuted as “Bible scholars” as well as “anti-social elements” and “career criminals” are barely present in the culture of remembrance, even today.

For many Jews in eastern Europe, too, 8 May 1945 did not mean the end of violence and persecution. Probably only a few people are aware that at the end of the war and in the months that followed, between 250,000 and 300,000 Jews from central and eastern Europe sought refuge in Germany. Either they did not return to their home countries when they left the camps or they fled the antisemitism

Anti-Semitism

also: Antisemitism, Anti-semitism

The term „anti-Semitism“ was initially used as a self-designation by anti-Jewish followers of Wilhelm Marr in 1879. At that time, it was used to distinguish itself from religious anti-Jewish attitudes. Today, it is often used as a collective term for various forms of anti-Jewish ideas, symbols and attitudes. This is logical because modern anti-Semitism did not replace traditional hostility towards Jews, but traditional and modern forms often occur together and reinforce each other.

that was still very widespread and that sometimes erupted violently in pogroms, for example, in 1946 in the Polish city of Kielce. They hoped to find at least temporary protection in Germany while it was occupied by the Allies.

Fleeing to the land of the perpetrators

Why did these Jews decide to escape to the very country that, a few months previously, had wanted to exterminate them? This question is relatively easy to answer: it was not an escape to Germany, but a flight to the Western allies. The Jewish refugees only had little contact with the “volk der täter” or “perpetrator nation” (Lea Rosh).
They arrived in a country that was littered with refugee hostels and camps. The general situation in occupied Germany in 1945 was extremely chaotic, and the allied authorities struggled to look after the millions of refugees who gathered there. In addition to the Jews who had survived the Holocaust and who described themselves as Schejres Haplejte

She’arit Hapleta

also: Sh'erit ha-Pletah, Surviving Remnant

The Yiddish term “Schejres Haplejte” (שארית הפליטה, English: “the remnant of the saved”) originally comes from the Tanakh. After the end of World War II, the approximately 250,000 Holocaust survivors living in displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy used the term to refer to themselves.

(“remaining survivors”), there was a large number of other refugees including forced labourers or concentration camp prisoners as well as former Nazi collaborators, for example from the Baltic States, who found themselves on German soil in 1945. The Allies referred to them collectively as Displaced Persons

Displaced Person

also: D. P., DP, Displaced Persons

After the Second World War, the Allies used the term “Displaced Person” (DP) for the approximately eleven million civilians outside their home country due to the war or persecution. These mainly included liberated concentration camp prisoners, forced laborers and deportees, prisoners of war and survivors of Nazi persecution(particularly from Central and Eastern Europe) as well as those people and their families who because of their previous experiences fled West from the renewed Soviet rule in the Baltic states. They often suffered from poor health and malnourishment. The Allies and international aid organizations made efforts to return the DPs (some of whom were temporarily housed in former concentration camps) to their home countries.

(DPs). Initially, Jews did not make up an independent DP group, but lived with others who came from similar areas, for example, with Poles or Baltic peoples.

However, this meant that some victims of Nazi terror lived cheek by jowl with perpetrators and collaborators.[1] The first specifically Jewish DP camps were established in the US occupied zone in autumn 1945. The Greater Munich area became a true centre of Jewish life in the immediate postwar period, with larger camps in Föhrenwald, Feldafing and Landsberg am Lech. In addition, there were important places in Munich itself, such as the area around Möhlstraße in Altbogenhausen or the transit camp run by the United Nations Relief and

Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) on the site of the Deutsches Museum.

Contact with the local population was rare, as already mentioned: “according to reports by former DPs, the DP camps were veritable microcosms, separate worlds – Jewish, Polish or Ukrainian islands on the map of postwar Germany.”[2] After all, the Schejres Haplejte did not intend to stay in Germany.

Demonstration in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp against the forced repatriation of passengers from the refugee ship Exodus 1947 to Europe, 1947. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1046542 / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Gedenkstaette Bergen-Belsen, CC0 1.0

Jewish DPs eating in the main dining hall of the Landsberg DP camp, 1945. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa18548 / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Laurie Heymont Weinber, CC0 1.0

“Life in the Waiting Room”

Just a few weeks after the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the concentration camps, survivors from Buchenwald concentration camp joined forces and founded the Kibbutz

Kibbutz

also: Kibbutzim, kibbutzes

A kibbutz (Hebrew: קיבוץ, English: “gathering” or “community”) is a collective settlement in Israel. The first kibbutzim were founded in the early 20th century by Zionist pioneers. They emerged in the wake of Jewish immigration to Palestine/Eretz Israel and combined socialist ideals with the goal of building the country through collective labor. Kibbutzim played a central role in the founding of the State of Israel and the agricultural development of the country.

Buchenwald. Their objective was to prepare the Schejres Haplejte for their future life in Palestine / Eretz Israel (the name commonly used for the “Land of Israel” before the

establishment of the state of Israel).

In so doing, the Kibbutz Buchenwald drew on the Hachschara movement of the inter-war period. The Hachschara was supposed to prepare European Jews for their emigration to Palestine / Eretz Israel and life in the Kibbutzim, the agricultural cooperatives. While such Zionistic pioneer projects were still quite peripheral in European Judaism in the 1920s and 1930s, they now became a central part of DP life.

However, emigration to Palestine / Eretz Israel proved to be extremely complicated for most European Jews. The area, which had been under British administration since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the San Remo Conference

Conference of San Remo

also: San Remo conference

The San Remo Conference took place from April 19 to 26, 1920, in the Italian city of the same name. The victorious powers of World War I determined the distribution of mandates over the former Ottoman territories. Great Britain was given the mandate over Palestine and Mesopotamia (Iraq), and France was given the mandate over Syria and Lebanon. The conference also confirmed the support expressed in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 for a “national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.”

in 1920, had long been a bone of contention in international politics. In order to prevent the situation from deteriorating further, the British Mandate attempted to limit Jewish immigration. Between 1945 and 1948, the year in which the state of Israel was founded, most Jewish DPs were therefore stranded in Germany. It was a “life in the waiting room”[3].

However, these three years were not spent idly. On the contrary: alongside the centre in the Munich area, small islands of Jewish life appeared in the whole West zone (there was no DP camp for Jews in the Soviet occupation zone). Cultural creativity flourished. Plays were performed, training opportunities organised, and even sport did not come off badly. Football tournaments between the different camp teams were common.

What is particularly striking from today’s perspective is the enormous productivity of the Jewish DPs. They were represented in all areas of cultural, political and social creativity. A good example of this is the sheer number of newspapers that appeared during this time. No fewer than 300 newspapers were established during the peak of the DP press.[4] This is particularly surprising in light of the comparatively small target readership.

The newspapers are also a very valuable resource for learning more about the life of Jewish DPs. They provide insights into everyday life in the camps, their perspective on the world situation at the time and the political activities of the Schejres Haplejte. Despite their refugee status and their consequent dependence on the Allies, the Jewish DPs developed a high

degree of political autonomy. Among other things, they were able to ensure that, for the most part, they could administer their camps themselves and were able to exert international pressure in order to achieve their ultimate goal: emigration to Palestine / Eretz Israel.

Jewish DPs waiting for transport to the port of Naples, from where a ship will take them to Palestine/Eretz Israel, 1945. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1074509 / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, CC0 1.0

Emigration and New Beginnings

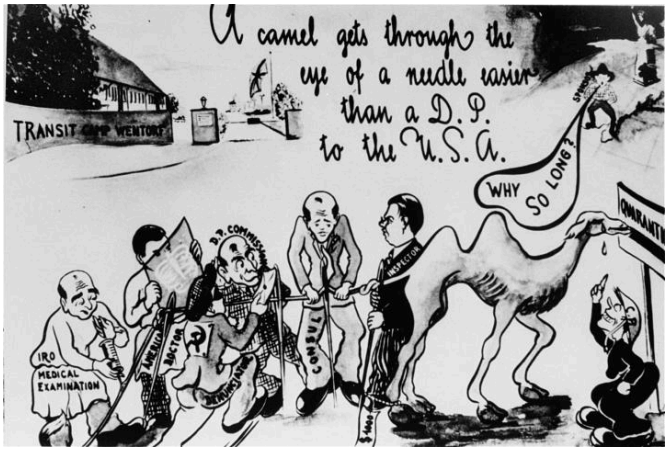
The founding of the state of Israel on 14 May 1948 brought this goal within reach for many Jewish DPs. Immigration limits were abolished and in the following months more than 100,000 of them emigrated to the newly founded Jewish state. This was around two thirds of the total number of Jewish DPs who had remained in Germany. The Schejres Haplejte, a geopolitical factor that had a significant influence on the international recognition of Israel, could now take part in the creation of this new country and find a new home.

Together with emigration to Israel, another possibility opened up during the course of 1948. With the adoption of the Displaced Persons Act the United States opened its borders to 200,000 DPs from Europe. Between then and 1952, when this law expired, almost 400,000 DPs travelled from Europe to the US. More than 80,000 of them were Jews. Other popular destinations for Jewish DPs were Canada, Australia, Argentina and Brasil, were they could

usually join existing Jewish communities.[5]

Although the Schejres Haplejte who left Germany from 1948 onwards found refuge in other places, they were not always welcomed with open arms. In Israel they quickly had to adapt to the situation on the ground, which often meant a break with their own traditions. For example, the mother tongue of most Schejres Haplejte was Yiddish, which was not welcomed in Israel. Nor was life easy in the US or in other countries to which they emigrated. It was only with the Eichmann trial in the 1960s that the first attempts were made to come to terms with the Holocaust. It was decades before the experiences of the Holocaust survivors were truly acknowledged.

DPs of various nationalities, who are allowed to enter the USA under the Displaced Persons Act, line the decks of the USS General Black as it leaves the port of Bremerhaven in 1948. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa21861 / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, CC0 1.0



A political cartoon illustrating the obstacles to DP emigration to the US, 1946. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1046580 / United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Norbert Wollheim, CC0 1.0

Remaining in Germany

But not all of the Jews who fled to Germany left the country in 1948. It is often hard to say whether this was because of a voluntary decision or a lack of prospects overseas. As in most cases where people have fled, been displaced or migrated, here too there were a multitude of motives that played a role in the decision of whether to go or stay. In any event, the significance of the Schejres Haplejte for the reconstruction of Jewish communities in postwar Germany should not be underestimated.

There are examples of this all over Germany. For example, in 1957 the Jewish inhabitants of

the DP camp in Föhrenwald were divided between nine German cities. Most of the around 800 DPs went to Munich, where they contributed significantly to the Jewish life of the city. For example, Rachel Salamander, the founder of the “Literaturhandlung” bookshop specialising in Jewish literature, was born in the DP camp at Deggendorf and grew up in Föhrenwald before moving to Munich with her family. They left traces in other cities too. In 2019 an exhibition by Initiative 9. November e. V. was dedicated to the biographies of the Schejres Haplejte who went from Föhrenwald to Frankfurt am Main.

The journey of the Schejres Haplejte to a new home was thus long and arduous. It was marked by hope and trust, following the misery that had recently been experienced, but also by many obstacles and phases of uncertainty. The fate of Jewish DPs is still largely absent from our culture of remembrance, although they played an important role in the survival of European Judaism. An examination of the Schejres Haplejte’s search for a new home is essential for understanding the development of Jewish life in Germany and many other countries after 1945.

English translation: Gwen Clayton ↗

Footnotes

1. Juliane Wetzel, „Jüdische Displaced Persons: Holocaustüberlebende zwischen Flucht und Neubeginn“, Deutschland Archiv, 2017, www.bpb.de/255388. ↥
2. Katarzyna Person, Jüdische DPs aus Polen in der amerikanischen und der britischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands, 1945-1948, übers. von Anna Labentz, Interdisciplinary Polish Studies 12 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2023), 103. ↥
3. Angelika Königseder, und Juliane Wetzel, Lebensmut im Wartesaal: Die jüdischen DPs (Displaced Persons) im Nachkriegsdeutschland (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994). ↥
4. Hans-Peter Föhrding, und Heinz Verfürth, Als die Juden nach Deutschland flohen: Ein vergessenes Kapitel der Nachkriegsgeschichte (Köln: Kiepenheuer ↥
5. Displaced Persons“, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Zugriff am 12. März 2025, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/displaced-persons. ↥