5th International Holocaust Conference in Berlin

Dr Françoise S. Ouzan

From DP camps to America: the Jewish survivors' experience

"Aus den DP-Lagern nach Amerika; Erfahrungen jüdischer Überlebender"

I would like to thank all the organizers of this 5th international conference, and in particular Thomas Kruger, Monica Stosser and Ute Alef, as well as Professor Michael Wildt for having invited me. I'm also grateful to the translators for their indispensable contribution.

I have chosen to tell you a story from different perspectives, "the DP story", a title I am borrowing from an Official American document published in Washington in 1952. This story reveals the Jewish survivors' experience from European displaced persons camps to the United States.

In the course of two decades, the archives of the American army, the United nations, the presidential libraries and the American Jewish historical society have revealed unexpected findings I wish to share with you.

First, the American experience' of Jewish survivors began much before they were admitted by law to America. Compassion from Americans—whether soldiers, Jewish chaplains, American envoys, or American musicians and actors who made a point of touring DP camps—shaped their view of America. Yet, the postwar situation was complex as the next group of American soldiers who replaced those who had liberated the camps were not as compassionate and understanding as the liberators. They were not aware of the fact that the Jewish DPs they found clad in rags and reluctant to obey orders had been exposed to forced labor, cold, and starvation. As a consequence, new recruits were prompt to mistreat survivors to the point that the issuance in November 1946 of an Army document (ARMY TALK 151) was necessary to spur more understanding of what traumatic experiences Jews had to overcome.

In spite of the numerous hurdles and intricacies of red tape of a country whose doors were only half-open after the end of World War II, sick survivors found strength to fill out a visa application.

The second point I would like to emphasize is that for the survivors whose entire families had been exterminated—and in particular for the Jews of eastern Europe, where antisemitism was still violent and bloody after the war—there was no real liberation without emigration. Such a finding was emphasized in the Harrison report, published in September

1945, which called for the allotment of certificates to Jewish DPs, thus pressing Great Britain to implement the Balfour Declaration of 1917 to enable Jews to settle in Palestine. It also motivated America to open its doors to postwar Jewish refugees. Third, although President Harry S. Truman felt that the problem of Jewish DPs was a 'world tragedy'[1], immigration policy was still restrictive and dependent on quotas that did not favor the Jews. It was only after four years of bitter debates that the immigration of refugees—Jews and non Jews alike—was perceived as 'an ideological weapon' in the fight against communism. Refugees from eastern Europe had been previously perceived as communists, Jews included. As communists, they were unwanted, while from 1948 onwards their refusal of repatriation was conceived as a failure of communism.

Last but not least, in the framework of the planned American immigration that gave preference to agricultural workers as immigrants, Jewish survivors became farmers on American soil. A question may be raised. Did they find some kind of fulfillment in farm life or did they simply adapt to the requirements of the Displaced Persons Act which translated the need of manpower in agriculture?

[1] President Harry S. Truman, Message to the Congress of the United States, 7 July 1947. Official File (OF) 127, Harry S. Truman Library (HSTL), Independence, Missouri.

I. THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE AMERICAN ENCOUNTER WITH DISPLACED PERSONS

Background elements must be recalled. The status of DP applied to members of diverse nationalities and religions who had been uprooted as a consequence of WWII and who were unable to return to their native countries without assistance or were unwilling to do so. This definition is taken from the Administrative memorandum number 39, of the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, on the 16 April 1945[2].

In the summer of 1945, there remained about one million displaced persons who refused repatriation and who languished in the DP camps in Germany, Austria and Italy[3]. The Allied army considered them as a 'hard core' as they had difficulties in handling these refugees. Most of them feared to go back to countries under communist rule. The Jews accounted for about 28 percent of that 'last million' (280,000 at the end of Nov. 1946). They refused to return to the lands where their families had been exterminated. So, the refusal to go back to countries under communist

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[2] Administrative Memorandum of the SHAEF, 16 April 1945, Box 5, (Armed Forces on the European Theatre), Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

[3] While the Allied forces had done an amazing job of helping postwar refugees return to their former homes, they met with difficulties when handling Poles, Jews, Balts, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Romanians who refused to be repatriated, and wished to be resettled in other countries. They remained in assembly centers or DP camps, some of them were former concentration camps, which was particularly painful for the Jews; the camps were first surrounded with barbed wires.

rule as well as the repudiation of a cruel Europe were 'push' factors in their decision to emigrate.

A number of elements aggravated the demoralization of Jewish DPs. They co-existed with populations who could not or would not be repatriated for fear of being considered as traitors, and among which were former Nazi sympathizers. These were Ukrainians, Balts, or Poles. among the refugees who could not be repatriated were Ethnic Germans or Volksdeusche whose expulsion from the countries controlled by the Reich (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia) had been decided by the Potsdam agreement in the summer of 1945[4]. But they were 'expellees' and not displaced persons that had been uprooted by the Reich. Former Nazi collaborators were found among them by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Ironically enough**,** thanks to the amendments of the DP law in 1950, 55,000 ethnic Germans would be admitted to the United States. American senators of German descent had emphasized the fact that their assimilation would be easy[5]. In addition, ethnic Germans were anti-communist. The status of Displaced Person

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[4] On the various encounters between the DPs, Germans and the Allies, see Atina Grossman, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007).

[5] Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) See also Haim Genizi, *America's Fair Share: the Admission and Resettlement of Displaced Persons*, 1945-1952 (Detroit, Wayne State University, 1993.

fleeing communism enabled former Nazi collaborators to co-exist with Jewish survivors under the mask of DP until the Harrison report presented to President Truman in August 1945 demanded that camps reserved for Jews be set up[6]. The number of Jewish DPs was not final at the end of the war. About 175,000 arrived in Poland by late Autumn of 1946 from the Soviet Union to which they had fled during the war, but many of them had to leave Poland where 'small-scale' pogroms reminded them they were still unwanted. The bloody Kielce pogrom on July 4 1946 (41 survivors were butchered and 75 wounded), triggered off a new exodus towards the so called DP countries, especially in the American zone of Germany[7]. Being in the American zone of occupation was rightly perceived as having more chance to emigrate as American Jewish welfare organizations were allowed to be there, three months after liberation. The Harrison report was extremely critical of the harsh attitude towards Jewish DPs both of some Army officials (like General Patton) and of the new replacements. Thanks to that official report initiated by Harry

[6] President Eisenhower was reluctant to set up camps for Jewish DPs. He expressed the idea that it would reproduce the discrimination implemented by the Nazis.

[7] On the Kielce pogrom and anti-Jewish violence in Poland, see David Engel, "Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944-1946", Yad Vashem Studies, Vol. XXVI, Jerusalem, 1998, pp 43-85. See also, Jan Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz*: An Essay in Historical Interpretation (New York: Random House, 2006).

Truman, Jews fleeing eastern Europe were thus allowed to enter the DP camps from 1946 onwards.

The various aspects of American compassion towards the Jews was a feeling largely shared and served as a pull factor. Auschwitz survivor Samuel Pisar, who was then 16 years old, clearly expressed, much later, the fact that—deep inside—his love for America sprang from his having been liberated by a Black American GI.

In other instances, the dedication of some American Jewish chaplains to combat demoralization in DP camps was crucial in shaping the survivors' view of America. Klausner, for instance, was one of the most innovative chaplains in the DP countries. He organized lists of survivors because he was aware of the fact that what was most urgent for survivors was to know whether they were alone in the world. American chaplains advised survivors, helped them with their emigration applications, brought them kosher food, organized and celebrated events of Jewish life, like the first and stirring Passover of 1946 which took place in Munich[8]. In short, they

[8] Alex Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame: American Jewish Chaplains and the Survivors of European Jewry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993). Françoise Ouzan, Rebuilding Jewish Identities in Displaced Persons Camps in Germany, 1945-1957, (English translation) in Bulletin du Centre de Recherche Français de Jérusalem, (CRFJ/CNRS), no.14, 2004, pp. 98-111.http://bcrfj.revues.org/269?&id=269

helped survivors not to succumb to the threat of demoralization because they were concerned by their fellow Jews[9].

Another form of expression of American compassion and of emotional recovery was conveyed by artists. For instance, Molly Picon, a star of the American Yiddish theater, went to DP camps to boost the morale of Jewish DPs and convey what she called 'a Yiddish word'[10]. It was her way to let the survivors know that the vanishing and decimated Yiddish world in Europe was still alive in America.

Among the high-profile artists who performed in the DP camps, were violinist Yehudi Menuhin, singer Emma Lazaroff Schaver, and conductor Leonard Bernstein, composer of the famous musical 'West Side Story'.

In 1946, the Anglo-American Commission of Enquiry, a bi-national commission conducted polls in DP camps to determine where Jews wished to rebuild their lives. It was the first time in immigration history. And the key hope was the Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Jewish DPs' plight drew compassion from one of the twelve members of the commission in particular. His name was Bartley Crum, a Christian

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[9] Françoise S. Ouzan, American Jewish Chaplains and the Survivors' Return to Jewish Communal Life (1945-1952), in Françoise S. Ouzan and Manfred Gerstenfeld (eds), *Postwar Jewish Displacement and Rebirth* (Leiden and Boston : Brill, 2014), 112-136.

[10] Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars, A World History of Yiddish Theater*, (New York: Harper &Row, 1977), 352.

attorney who wrote a fascinating account of that period in his book called *Behind the Silken Curtain*. The questionnaires collected by the commission in a Bavarian DP camp showed that some 90 percent of the Jews preferred the Jewish homeland in Palestine as the place where they could rebuild their lives. Some of them did so, obviously out of solidarity with those whose only hope was Eretz Israel and who had no relatives in America. Bartley Crum wrote: "If we don't clear out the DP camps in the US zone in Germany, we will have mass suicides of Jews, or they'll try to fight their way into Palestine.[11]" A number of Jewish survivors who felt too weak to emigrate to Palestine remained some four or five years in DP camps, waiting for a visa to America. Elie Wiesel once said that even after the war, America did not want to accept Jewish refugees. How to account for such a statement?

II. IMMIGRATION AND ITS OBSTACLES

Immigration to the Jewish homeland of Palestine was strictly controlled by the British and the White Paper of 1939. Jewish survivors had to resort to illegal immigration on frail ships that would sometimes capsize and were drowned. In America, since 1924, the Quota laws drastically limited immigration. America feared spies, subversive minds, poor

[11] Bartley C. Crum, *Behind the Silken Curtain: A Personal Account of Anglo-American Diplomacy in Palestine and the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947), 128.

people, Catholics, Jews, east Europeans, and—generally speaking—any immigrant who would not assimilate easily. In 1945, there were powerful isolationists and 'restrictionists' in Congress. Also, it must be kept in mind that about half of the American population exhibited anti-Jewish attitudes. As a consequence, at the end of that year President Truman issued a directive that gave preference to orphans and to "those who had suffered most". But the American bureaucrats who implemented the law had difficulty defining who was a Displaced Person, and consequently who was eligible. It had a limited impact on the Jewish Displaced Persons problem because of the intricacies of bureaucracy. Although estimates vary, as the definition of Jewish DPs was not clear, implementation of the Truman directive enabled between 17,000 Jews to 28, 000 to reach American shores. These figures included the Jewish Oswego refugees in Fort Ontario, State of New York who had been given temporary shelter by President Roosevelt and had to return to their former homelands after the end of the war, had it not been for President Truman's directive granting them permanent asylum. Briefly, the Truman directive was replaced in June 1948 by the Displaced Persons Act[12]. The problem lay in the fact that instead of facilitating the admission of DPs in America, it required new procedures resulting in a slowing up of immigration in the latter half of 1948. Immigration applicants had to start all over again the

[12] Public Law 774, 25 June 1945, United Statutes at Large, vol. 62. Harry S. Truman Library.

difficult process of applying for entry. In other words, the overlapping of these pieces of legislation was counterproductive. For instance, the DP Act of June 1948 repealed 'corporate affidavits' given by Jewish agencies and required personal affidavits which were harder to obtain. Yet, with all its restrictions and preferences, the 1948 DP law could still be considered a victory. For the first time in the history of American immigration, postwar immigration to the United States differed significantly from the traditional laissez-faire immigration policy. President Truman did not challenge the 1924 restrictive quota laws. He couldn't because of the fierce opposition of Congress to any relaxation of immigration quotas.

So, how did public opinion and Congress become more favorable to the admission of refugees? Jewish organizations lobbied for the admission to the United States of all postwar refugees, not only for the minority of Jews among them. The leaders of American Jewry took the lead in financing the Citizens Committee for Displaced Persons (CCDP) created in 1946. It was an umbrella organization which lobbied for the passage of legislation suspending immigration quotas. It was headed by Earl Harrison, the author of the report that revealed the postwar tragedy of Jewish DPs. Harrison's statements were highly respected, even if his wordings might have been exaggerated. The Citizens Committee for Displaced Persons stemmed from a concerted effort with Jewish and

Christian organizations, but representative members were WASPs such as Eleanor Roosevelt. It was the lobbying effort of the Citizens Committee for Displaced Persons through the media, radio, press, and documentary films that led to the birth of the 1948 DP Act. However, the piece of legislation was perceived by members of Jewish organizations as indirectly discriminatory against the Jews. President Truman found it discriminated against the Jews and to a lesser extent towards Catholics because it gave preference to Protestants. But he signed it reluctantly. The 1948 DP Act contained a provision attributing 40 percent of the visas to Baltic refugees (among whom there were many farmers) as well as a 30 percent "agricultural preference". Numerous UNRRA telegrams to the Allied forces which I found in the Archives of the United Nations and those of President Truman repeatedly warned against the high percentage of Nazi sympathizers among the Balts and the inefficient screening**.** A member of UNRRA stated that 80 percent of Lithuanians were found to be Nazi sympathizers. Little was done by the armies of occupation to check who was a former collaborator, as the Cold War had begun. The important quota allotted to Balts was justified by the fact that they could not be repatriated to countries under communist rule, while the agricultural preference was justified by the need of farmers. Generally speaking, Jews were then viewed by Americans as urban dwellers and as not likely to be easily assimilated in contrast to Balts.

In an article entitled *Admitting Pogromists and Excluding Their Victims* which he published in 1948, Abraham Duker, an American professor and historian who had worked in the Nuremberg trial commission, was among the few who voiced criticism of the 1948 DP law. Not only did Jewish survivors have to co-exist with collaborationists in DP camps but American law gave preference to former Nazi collaborators. The Balts and Ukrainians "guided SS men, searched the ghettos, beat the people, assembled and drove them to the places of slaughter[13]." But the consensus was to accept a law that would be a compromise.

It took two years to have the DP law amended in 1950. The amended Act extended application of the law until 30 June 1951 and allotted 4,000 visas to the refugees from Shanghai. Following Anshluss, at the end of 1939, some 17 ,000 Jews from Germany and Austria were refugees in Shanghai, as it was the only place in the world requiring no visa for entry.

The 1948 DP law was to be a four-year program which entailed a new and close partnership between governmental and voluntary agencies. Pragmatically, these agencies strove to develop special skills in working with immigrants, helping them with the technicalities of migration from the DP camps in Europe to the American ports. Social workers aided

[13] Abraham Duker, "Admitting Pogromists and Excluding their Victims", the *Reconstructionist*, 1 October, 1948, 21-27.

preliminary adjustment. However, this assistance was much more concentrated in certain areas than others.

Most of the 41,000 postwar refugees who came to America in 1949 after the passage of the DP law had shown a sense of strong determination by overcoming bureaucratic hurdles. By the end of July 1949, Jewish newcomers had been resettled in forty-three states. They received help either through HIAS (Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society), founded as early as 1902, or USNA (United Service for New Americans), formed in 1946 by a merger of the National Refugee Service and the National Service to the Foreign Born of the National Council for Jewish Women (NCJW). The appellation 'New Americans' applied to Jews was intended to erase the stigma of refugees, with the intention of integrating them as soon as possible. The USNA took on the most difficult cases, but sometimes the support of the agency had to end and cases of maladjustment could not be dealt with.

While the American Jewish Distribution Committee (known simply as Joint) took care of the DPs right from the DP camps and continued when they reached American shores, HIAS and USNA only helped them adapt to the new country. The support of these organizations was multi-faceted and involved professionals and volunteers. They spoke many languages, the most frequent being Yiddish. They also had to be constantly available

as ships arrived at all hours of the day, since the sea voyage lasted between eleven to fourteen days.

Aid agencies were urged to encourage them to settle outside the crowded city of New York. All in all, of the 140,000 DPs who immigrated to the United States after World War II, about 65 percent remained in the New York area while the remainder resettled rather successfully in 341 different communities[14].

However, the intricacies of red tape to reach America deterred a number of survivors. As a consequence, most of them found new homes in Israel by 1950, the year when the 1948 DP Act was amended.

What were the most frequent reasons to start anew in America? The most common motivations included the necessity to renew ties with one or more family members who had emigrated before the war. The appeal of the American dream, together with the image of tolerance, weighed heavily in their determination to go through the long application process for entry that required affidavits to prevent the newcomers from becoming a public burden. Among those who chose America were survivors who had no Zionist background or inclinations, as well as Orthodox Jews who yearned for the established Orthodox institutions in

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[14] Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust,* op. cit. See also William Helmreich , (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1992).

New York. However, testimonies and interviews point to a recurrent feeling of guilt on the part of survivors who 'found the easy way out' by not choosing to immigrate to the Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Were survivors generally welcomed by the American Jewish communities? Oral history and in-depth interviews affirm the ambivalent reception by Jewish communities. Some American Jews feared that many survivors concentrating into the major cities would trigger anti-Jewish sentiments. However, the spectrum of responses to the newcomers was varied as some communities or individuals were more supportive than others.

Now, what environmental factors helped them succeed in rebuilding lives on American soil? To answer this question I will briefly mention resettlement on farms that continued for the most part until the 1960s, when industrialization made it difficult for small farmers to prosper. The archives of the Baron de Hirsch Fund and of the Jewish Agricultural Society (founded in 1900) reveal a little known fact: some 2,000 Holocaust survivors became farmers. What initiatives did survivors take to root themselves in the various rural settlements? They read the monthly magazine founded in 1908, *The Jewish Farmer*, first published only in Yiddish and then becoming bilingual in 1959, by the time survivors were acculturated. It gave survivors a sense of belonging which

facilitated their integration into the community of Jewish farmers in various regions of America[15]. Also, the immigration of refugees from Germany in the thirties and early forties had paved the way for the resettlement of DPs after World War II. In order to make the transition to farming easier for German refugees who looked for a refuge in farming. As early as 1942, the Jewish Agricultural Society created a refugee training farm in New Jersey.

A question arises. How did Jewish Displaced Persons succeed in being accepted as farmers in the framework of the Administration's agricultural preference? The members of the Displaced Persons Commission instituted by President Truman to implement the 1948 law and to plan immigration interpreted the phrase "agricultural pursuits" in a broad sense. It approved for admission to the United States DPs engaged in trades that were only remotely linked to agriculture.

The independence and self-reliance they had developed to escape the fate of most Jews during World War II served them in good stead once again in this new environment. What they had gone through imparted to them a strong dislike for being given orders or working for others, and a farmer

[15] Françoise S. Ouzan, New Roots for the Uprooted, Holocaust Survivors as Farmers in America, in *Holocaust Survivors in their countries of Resettlement: Space, Memories and Identities*, New York, Berghahn Books, edited by Dalia Ofer, Françoise S. Ouzan, Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, 2012, . 233-257).

is his own master. A second advantage was that language difficulties likely to handicap any immigrant in a retail business or in any other independent enterprise were of much less consequence on the farm. The DPs who resettled on American farms came from almost every European country, the majority from Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Germany. They turned to the offices of the Jewish Agricultural Society for help.

In 1949, Jewish farmers obtained loans from the Jewish Agricultural Society that enabled both the growth of existing Jewish farm communities and permitted the establishment of new ones, such as the community of Danielson in Connecticut or that of Dorothy in New Jersey.

An interesting aspect of this type of resettlement is the link between chicken farms and community life. Survivors expressed their need for a type of community life and social environment **to** which they were conditioned by their European background and experience. For instance, the community of Fontana, California was the most successful Jewish farm settlement, and it had been almost entirely developed by the Jewish Agricultural Society after 1945. Also, community life was likely to help Holocaust survivors cope with the psychological aftermath of trauma. The first Jewish farming community in California to attract survivors was

the northern town of Petaluma because of its tradition of hospitality. They expressed Yiddish culture through language, songs, and traditions.

Eastern European DPs also identified to a certain extent with members of collective settlements in Israel called 'kibbutzim'. The redemptive quality of working the soil and seeing its fruit, as well as being in harmony with the cycles of nature was an asset. It helped them fight the traumatic memories of work as a means of dehumanization.

The survivors' integration into the agricultural American milieu was made easier by the bridge they built to connect their former European cultural structures to the new environment. In Vineland, New Jersey, for instance, they created free loan associations that bore Yiddish names and were modeled on those of the Old World, combining the precepts of Judaism with the concept of self-help. To complete this microcosm of Jewish life modeled on Europe and its *Yiddishkeit*, they built synagogues and schools to transmit Jewish values, through classes in Hebrew and religious education, as was the case in Danielson, Connecticut, the community built up by survivors.

To conclude, survivors raised the level of Jewish consciousness within American Jewry by taking initiatives to commemorate the genocide of the Jews, almost from the time they arrived in America. This remark applies not only to farmers but all over America, according to new research work.

Survivors kept an emotional link with their homelands, but patriotism and deep gratitude to the United States became central elements in their identities.

To put it in a nutshell, the international displaced persons problem had far-reaching consequences on the American immigration policy. President Truman's directive in December 1945 led congress to admit a limited number of Jewish and non Jewish displaced persons. The arguments he presented were mostly humanitarian. It was then followed by the 1948 displaced person act amended in 1950. But in 1948, in spite of the powerful opponents to any liberalization of immigration laws, the admission of displaced persons and refugees from communist countries was perceived as an ideological weapon in the cold war. One single sentence from senator Wiley from Wisconsin will suffice: "It will be an ideological weapon in our ideological war against the forces of darkness, the forces of communist tyranny.[16]" The humanitarian factor played a large role in the debates, yet foreign policy considerations prevailed.

[16] Quoted in Gil Loesher and John Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness, Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945–Present* (New York/London, 1986), p. 24.