Rebuilding Jewish identities in Displaced Persons Camps in Germany
1945-1957

Françoise Ouzan
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In the summer 1945, Displaced Persons camps in Germany epitomized a place of contrasts and paradoxes. DPs still languished behind barbed wires after the Allied armies had liberated the concentration camps. The military had assumed that practically all of the Displaced Persons would be sent to their countries of origin. In the spring and summer 1945, 65 000 DPs were sent back home every day and almost six million were repatriated in September 1945. Accurate statistics are impossible, yet, according to the SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces), there remained about one million DPs who refused repatriation because they feared to go back to countries under communist rule or as was the case for the Jews, they did not want to return to the countries were their families had been exterminated. The status of “Displaced Person” did not refer exclusively to Jews but to members of diverse nationalities and religions who had been uprooted as a consequence of the Second World War.

Within the groups of Poles, Ukrainians and Balts, many had been Nazi sympathisers and did not wish to go back to their countries for fear of being considered as traitors. They thus felt more at home in post-war Germany, under the mask of Displaced Persons fleeing communism. This status enabled them to co-exist with Jewish DPs until an official American report (The Harrison Report) sent to the President in August 1945 demanded that camps reserved to Jews be created. The report revealed that all the “non-repatriable” were considered as “the hard core” by the military who were not prepared to handle them. Among them were Jewish DPs whose number ranged from 50 000 to 100 000. They represented a minority who had survived the concentration camps or life in hiding and were psychologically and physically exhausted.

About 175 000 Jews had arrived in Poland by the late autumn of 1946 from the Soviet Union were they had fled during the war. However, many of them had to leave because of the rising Polish anti-Semitism. From September to December 1945, 26 “small-scale” pogroms took place there. It reached a peak

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with the Kielce pogrom on July 4, 1946 in which 42 survivors of the concentration camps had been massacred and mutilated in the most barbaric fashion. The Jews could not rebuild their lives in their native country and Kielce triggered off a new exodus\(^2\), guided by the members of the network *Bricha*, who were survivors. In order to be able to emigrate, they had to go back to occupied Germany, the country responsible for their sufferings and the destruction of their families. Because of the impact of the Harrison Report which expressed bitter criticism of the Army officials towards Jewish DPs, Jewish refugees fleeing Eastern Europe were allowed to enter the DP camps of the American zone of Germany.

Another paradox lay in the fact that those camps or “assembly centers” in Germany, Austria and Italy were meant to be temporary. Yet, if most of them were closed by IRO (International Refugee Organization) in 1951, the Jewish DP camp of Foehrenwald, 30 km South of Munich, remained open under German rule until February 1957. The list of paradoxes is not complete without mentioning that among DPs, German Jews were at first considered as enemies by allied soldiers. As a consequence, they were denied the rations given to the racial “persecutees”.

Taking into account such paradoxes and ironical situations in the aftermath of war, this paper will focus on three main questions: where did Jewish DPs find the strength to rebuild their identities on German soil and behind barbed wires? To what extent did they show auto-determination in the choice of their destinations? Considering the emergence of a national identity in DP camps, were Jewish DPs partners or pawns in the Zionist enterprise?

1. Rebuilding Jewish identities on German soil

In so far as survivors were given the legal status of “Displaced Persons”, they were allowed to receive help from the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, the agency from the United Nations. The DP camps or “assembly centers” had been established by the Allied Forces and managed by UNRRA for the return to “normal life” of the post-war refugees waiting for emigration. In the DP camp of Bergen Belsen for instance, UNRRA worked with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or Joint), the most important Jewish relief organization, the British Jewish Relief Unit (JRU), the Jewish Agency in Palestine, the Organization for Rehabilitation and Training (ORT) and the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), a leading French Jewish philanthropic organization focusing on the health needs of children. The Joint

also collaborated with Jewish chaplains and the Palestinian Jewish Brigade both of whom were very active in giving hope to the survivors.

The “Palestinian soldiers”, as the members of the Jewish Brigade were then called, not only gave of their own rations to the DPs, they also worked as educators and paralleled the work of the American Chaplains in combating demoralization. The soldiers of the Jewish brigade were a symbol as was confirmed by various testimonies: They were the embodiment of a new Jewish identity, they symbolized Jewish pride, dignity and self-assurance. Their insignia was a yellow star of David, but for the Jewish displaced persons it erased the humiliating symbol of the badge of shame Jews had been forced to wear under the Nazis. The message of hope they conveyed was political since in their eyes there was no hope for the Jews but in Palestine. As Yehuda Bauer analysed it, they reinforced the already powerful Zionist movement in the Jewish assembly centers by providing a positive image of Palestine Jewry. It is not surprising that the DPs should identify with the Jewish national home even when, for personal reasons they did not emigrate to Palestine.

Despite the existence of a small Bundist group in the DP camps, it was the Zionists who gave the tone among the survivors. To the majority of them, one thing was sure after what they had gone through during these years of persecution: there was no future for Jews in Europe. It was one of the basic reasons for their awareness of the relevance of Zionist ideas. But after the euphoria created by the United Nations Palestine Partition resolution of November 29 1947, the beginning of the war in Palestine engendered a wave of despair in DP camps. Moreover, it had appeared after the end of the war that very few would be able to emigrate to America, known as the “Golden land” (“the goldene medine “in Yiddish). The main obstacles were the Quota law of 1924 and the meanders of bureaucracy and the need to obtain an “affidavit” proving that the immigrant would not become a “public charge”. A lot of DPs who had relatives there applied for emigration under the Truman Directive (22 December 1945). Resuming family links was a great incentive for those whose families had been decimated. Recreating a sense of belonging was a necessity. But the Directive only became effective in May 1946 due to red tape and to the difficulty of defining who was a displaced person. Of the 3482 DPs who had entered the United States by June 20, 2551 (74%) were Jews 3... Because of the support for immigration to Palestine in DP camps, when the JDC and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) started registering candidates for immigration to America, they were met with a certain amount of hostility. Indeed, the singular situation of the DPs prompted a group awareness

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engendering sometimes unexpected attitudes. In some cases, the first immigrants leaving for the United States were called “traitors” when escorted out of the camps. In June 1948, the United States passed a law that indirectly discriminated against the Jews. As a consequence, many DP’s who had hoped to immigrate to the land of opportunities to eventually decide to settle in Israel. The discriminatory provisions were removed in June 1950 after bitter debates in Congress. Historian Leonard Dinnerstein estimates that 137,450 DPs resettled in the United States between May 1945 and December 1952, thanks to the Truman Directive and the 1948 DP law amended in 1950. But some came in under regular immigration quotas. Those who came under the 1953 Refugee Relief Act cannot easily fall into categories.

In the meantime, DP camps became waiting rooms for emigration while demoralization became a daily threat.

**Combating demoralization: the military chaplains**

The soldiers’ lack of sympathy for displaced persons, the hostility of the German civilians, the absence of work, the loss of relatives and friends, the unsatisfactory allocation of food and an uncertain future had a demoralizing effect on the survivors. Abraham J. Klausner, perhaps the most undertaking of all American chaplains in the “DP countries” (Germany, Austria, Italy) noticed that with the passage of time, the morale of the Jews kept on declining as there was a feeling of resignation. In his memoir published in 2002, he mentions that in the months following liberation, in the German hospitals at Gauting and St. Ottlien, Jewish DPs were in the hands of German doctors, but gradually his plan worked out and German doctors were replaced.

Jewish DPs in assembly centers had to confront the challenge of reconstructing themselves physically, psychologically and spiritually in a temporary society within a hostile territory governed by military forces. In other words, these were not the conditions of a “return to normal life”. Even before the liberation of the concentration camps, the survivors had started to call themselves “She’erit Hapletah”, (the surviving remnant). This biblical phrase connoted the hope of reconstruction stemming from those who remained alive. In fact these words had been used by the Yishouv leaders as they reacted to the reports they had received about the extermination of the Jews, still believing in the realization of Zionism, in spite of the destruction of a large part of European Jewry. In the year 1943 and after, the term She’erit Hapletah evoked the link

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between destruction and redemption as well as the means to ensure that redemption.

The profiles of the members of this group varied greatly, from ultra-religious to fully assimilated. But they all had experienced the destruction of their personal lives and witnessed the destruction of their belief in modern civilization. Yet, in spite of everything, they organized themselves into a creative civil society, under the control of Allied military forces.

The chaplains struggled to help the survivors in many ways. They advised them, officiated at weddings, prevented municipal authorities from taking unclaimed Jewish property, helped rebuild Jewish cemeteries, established schools and summer camps for children and above all helped reunite families. A case in point is the publication of the volumes She’erit Hapletah, under Klausner’s initiative, that are kept in the Yad Vashem Institute, in Jerusalem. The extraordinary work of Army Chaplain Rabbi Abraham Klausner is summed up in Yehuda Bauer’s words: “(he) organized lists of survivors, knowing that the basic urge of the tortured humans he met was to find out whether or not they were alone in the world... Then, he organized them to provide them with a collective identity. He helped them to recover mentally as well as physically, and enabled them to proceed to be active as autonomous human beings, Jews who again became aware of the world around them and who tried to make their wishes and hopes known in as forceful a way as they could”.

Others, like Abraham Spiro, assistant division chaplain and advisor on Jewish Affairs to the commander of the First Infantry Division, convinced the army to turn over farms to displaced persons for use as kibbutzim.

Jewish Displaced Persons often refused to work in the German DP camps, on the ground that they did not want to help rebuild the German economy. Yet, the ideal of the kibbutz, a cooperative settlement in Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel), served as a shared symbol of a meaningful life, especially among the young. The values connected to this type of life were often conveyed through movement affiliation which provided a sense of belonging. More than the unity of a shared Jewish fate, kibbutz life brought about a feeling of home, social cohesion and mutual help. The powerful attraction of these movements was linked to their records of heroic conduct during the war and their foothold in Palestine. To quote but one example, Abba Kovner, a ghetto fighter and partisan became

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6 Yehuda Bauer, Foreword to Abraham J. Klausner, *A Letter to my Children from the Edge of the Holocaust*, San Francisco, Holocaust Center of Northern California, 2002. In this memoir, the famous rabbi denounces the American military who in his eyes failed to understand quickly enough the survivors’ needs.

famous for his radical commitment to Zionist unity. The United Zionist Organization of Bavaria (UZO) and its youth movement Noham, (the United Pioneering Youth) were two organizations that sprang from a feeling of loneliness and interdependence, suggesting that most of the time, movement belonging was more a matter of psychology than ideology.

The constructive presence of kibbutzim in Germany

The kibbutzim within or near the DP camps in Europe were a means to compensate in part for what had been lost in the decimated communities. They were substitute families in which the group leader embodied the father figure. In that respect, the emissary bridged the gap between the kibbutzim in the German or Austrian DP camps and the larger movement in Palestine. As Chaim Hoffman (later Yachil), the head of the Palestinian Mission later explained:

“The cooperative training farms played an extremely important role in those days. In terms of vocational training they were not especially valuable but the very fact that they took hundreds and thousands of young people out of the soul-destroying atmosphere of the camps, brought them together with other youth, put them in touch with nature and physical labor, all these were salutary for both body and soul. In a short space of time a new kind of person came into being very different from the general run of camp inhabitants and much closer to the kind of people found in Palestine. The kibbutzei hachsharah (in preparation of agricultural life in Palestine) were, of course, the major source of illegal immigrants and the place where, in comparison to the camps, rich cultural activity developed. Here, too, the first Haganah defence units were formed.

However, there was a marked difference between the adult kibbutzim and the kibbutzei hachsharah as Michael Deshe who was in charge of these agricultural training farms noticed about the former structure: “Their social coherence is weak and unsatisfactory given that they have come together by chance. The members joined the kibbutz at an advanced age (20), some of them are married with children and, as is to be expected with this kind of human composition, there are difficulties and conflicts.” In any case, the ideal of cooperative settlements in the Land of Israel symbolized a worthy life, away from Europe which had betrayed them. The establishment of training farms was backed by UNRRA and received a precious financial help from the JDC.

The youth movement kibbutzim that had been set up in Eastern Europe, among which the leftist Hashomer Hatzair, visited children’s homes, displaced

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9 Michael Deshe to Zeev Chaklai, Feb. 1947, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem CZA/S86/57
10 Hashomer Hatzair, Germany, Memorandum for the Director of the Joint in the American Zone, 24 sept. 1946, YIVO/ DPG 159.
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persons camps and agricultural training farms where young displaced persons worked. In the DP assembly centers, the kibbutzim were given separate quarters which enabled them to protect their independence. At the same time, since their members took advantage of the courses offered within the structure of the kibbutz, they wanted to get involved in the public and cultural affairs of the camp in which they often became prominent members. As a consequence, the survivor community regarded the kibbutzim highly since they combated the soul-destroying inactivity of life in prolonged internment. These structures not only answered the felt need of a family after the losses of the past, they offered a protective framework in the midst of occupied Germany which still represented a hostile world.

By May-June 1945, She’erit Hapleitah founded the Central Committee of the Liberated Jews in Bavaria, in St. Ottilien while the infrastructure of the United Zionist Organization had begun to function in Dachau and Munich, Landsberg and Feldafing. Kibbutz Buchenwald, which was the first kibbutz-hasharah (hasharah means preparation) paved the way to other models of this kind. Sixteen young survivors from the Buchenwald concentration camp came up with the idea of establishing a kibbutz in Germany that would prepare the liberated Jews to settle in what they considered their homeland, Eretz Israel. In the diary of one of the young Buchenwald inmates, one can read the following entry:

“Buchenwald, Friday, April 13, 1945

We are free but we have not left the camp. In the first place because no regime has formed outside the camp only two days have passed since the American Army entered; and secondly, where will we go, me and thousands like me? Will we return to Poland? (. . .). And more, what ties me to Poland? For some reason, I do not think that anything will lure me there. I would like to live a different kind of life than I once did, even before the war.” As Judith Tydor Baumel, the daughter of one of the survivors found out, in Buchenwald, “the majority were informally affiliated with either the pioneer-secular outlook or espoused a religious, but not necessarily Zionist worldview; But both groups were determined that if they survived the war they would settle only in Eretz Israel.” In June 1945, this first group of 16 young men reached a farm about 30 kilometers from Buchenwald and assumed responsibility for the wheat and grain fields, the sheep, goats and horses on the estate. Kibbutz Buchenwald embodied the shared dream of the survivors and bridged the gap between the losses of the past and the hopes and challenges of the future. The kibbutz structure helped restore their sense of human worth, which had been trampled by the Nazis.


The Hebrew language also had a redemptive function in that perspective: it symbolized the promise of a future as well as a dissociation from a hostile world. The teaching of Hebrew ranked among the highest priorities in all the kibbutzim. A shared language was needed to bridge the gap between Jews of different nationalities and affiliations, whether political or religious. After liberation, the very image of a bridge between a past of slavery and the hopes of a future in Eretz Israel was embodied in the ritual of Passover (Pesah in Hebrew).

Celebrating Pesah 1946: a cathartic process

In the minds of the survivors, biblical symbols tended to assume a present meaning, thus expressing the congruence of tradition with contemporary events. The first celebration of Pesah in freedom after six years of war was a cathartic event. Passover then literally meant a bridge from Europe to the land of Israel, the “Promised Land” expressed through the analogy between the Exodus from Egypt and the Exodus from Europe (Yetziat Europa in Hebrew). In one of the dining rooms of the Zeilsheim DP camp, a scene representing a traditional Jewish family seated for the Pesah celebration was painted on the hall, thus symbolizing the passage from slavery to freedom. The printing of a new Hagaddah (the book relating the exodus) was organized by chaplain Klausner who conducted the public seder in Munich on 15 and 16 April 1946. The self-conscious attempt to read the past in the light of the present was undertaken by the United Zionist Organization. In the text, traditional passages were accompanied by transpositions in which Egypt became Germany, Pharaoh was turned into Hitler and the pyramids transformed into concentration camps while redemption was achieved in Zion. Through the structure of that Hagaddah, arranged and illustrated by Y.D. Sheinson, a strong advocate of Zionist unity, the Zionist interpretation of the Shoah was cathartic. It lead to redemption on the Holy Land ¹³.

¹³ Jewish DP camp of Zeilsheim, 6 April 1946, UNRRA 3197, Archives of the United Nations, New York. Mankovitz, Life between Memory and Hope, op. cit. p. 84-86.
II. Autodetermination or manipulation of She’erit Hapleitah?

In this light, the Zionist feelings of She’erit Haplatah were more complex than if they had come from an elaborate ideology. They merged with their traumatic experiences, thus engendering a commitment that sprung from the “lessons” of the past, sometimes tinted with biblical overtones. This phenomenon was well analysed in October 1945 by Meir Gavronsky, the editor of a newspaper in Yiddish, *Dos Fraye Vort (The Free Word)*, which served as the common organ of expression of Zionists, Bundist and Agudat Israel in the Feldafing DP camp: “Eretz Israel is no longer a question that only concerns Zionists. Today, all Jews, be they religious, socialist and even communist, are concerned with this problem.”

In another article the following year, Gavronsky presented a diagnosis of the problems related to Jewish identity in unequivocal terms: “The Jewish people is sick” (…) the best specialists have presented us with a diagnosis: statelessness. The cure is our own soil, our own home, our own state.”

Yet, as historian Koppel Pinson who worked for the educational programs of the JDC pointed out, in 1947 Zionism did not achieve pre-eminence only by default:

“(…) the events of 1939-45 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 program that seemed to make sense after the catastrophe… Without Palestine there seemed to be no future for them. Anti-Zionism or even a neutral attitude toward Zionism came to mean for them a threat to the most fundamental stakes in their future.”

Samuel Gringauz, a prominent leader of She’erit Hapleita wrote in an article in *Commentary* that the Zionist program embodied the aspirations of those who had been exterminated: “Life in the Diaspora for the Jewish DPs is synonymous with recurrence. No sociological argument can obliterate from their minds what experience has stamped on it… The Sherit Hapleita (sic) therefore undertakes the prophetic mission of warning the Jews of the unaffected countries. Neither equality of rights, nor a constitution, nor patriotism is security against persecution… One cannot escape one’s Jewishness, either by assimilation, baptism or mixed marriage…And they say to the Jews of countries untouched by catastrophe: “it can happen again. And therefore we demand of you to build up Palestine not only for us but as an ultimate place of refuge (for the Jewish people as a whole).”

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She’erit Hapletah to both pre-war Europe and the Yishuv, the pre-state Jewish community. On the other hand, the survivors also sensed a recurrence or a continuity in Jewish history that corroborated the choice of Palestine as a Jewish home.

Working with DP’s for the JDC, the doctor Leo Srole noticed that for those deprived of a family, the most powerful need was “to find refuge in the Jewish nation”, which must be understood as the Jewish family extended. Hence they thought of Palestine in family terms as “home” and their settlement as a “return home”.

In her report of 15 November 1945 about the displaced persons camp of Foehrenwald, Mrs Warburg who worked in the hospital of the camp, accounted for Bevin’s refusal to grant 100 000 certificates to DP’s: “Today was a day of mourning as I have never witnessed before. Bevin’s Palestine Declaration came as a terrible blow to our Jews. A strike was the immediate answer. Food was refused, work was abandoned. A protest meeting took place in the afternoon when 3000 people gathered in the big hall. Speeches were made, people were crying and clinging to each other. Resolutions were read out handed to UNRRA to pass on to the authorities. (...) In the evening, the people from the kibbutzim came to see me and cried; “Have we been spared from the extermination camps if the way to Palestine is barred to us? What sense has life for us now?” I wished the investigation Commission set up by Great Britain and the United States had been here today. Then they would have had no more doubts as to the wishes of the Jews in Germany”.

In her diary dated 20 December 1945, Mrs Warburg explained that she and her team were asked to make complete lists containing the names of all the children in the camp, the names and addresses of their relatives abroad and the place to which they wanted to go. She related that the non-Jewish welfare officer of UNRRA “was simply baffled by the result”. She thus explained: ‘Quite a number of children had relatives in England and the United States, but very few named these countries as the places to which they wanted to emigrate. Almost every child declared that he (or she) wanted to go to Palestine and nowhere else. One boy whose father and brother live in England said “Even if my father were the king of England, I would rather go and work in Palestine.”

However, emigration to “the Jewish national homeland” was not always related to a Jewish individual identity or to a Jewish national identity. Chance also played a part. To answer the complex question of the choice of destinations, a sociological study is required. It would permit to compare factors such as age,
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health, religious affiliation, country of origin, socio-economic status and how the war years were spent. It is also necessary to know if the displaced persons were positively influenced by Zionist ideas before the war. Among older displaced persons, the decision to go to Palestine sometimes came from a lack of choice and from a yearning to get out of the DP camps. Although there were survivors who wanted to emigrate to Palestine, they realized that they were simply too exhausted to undergo such a journey and face difficult conditions in Eretz-Israel. The desire to emigrate elsewhere, and in particular to the United States, often corresponded to the need to join a parent and to resume family links after the losses of the war. However, the major institutions of She’erit Hapleitah, which came into being on the very morrow of liberation thanks to the formation of the Central Committee of the Liberated Jews in Bavaria helped rebuild individual and collective Jewish identity in DP camps. Indeed, both the United Zionist Organisation and the first kibbutz hachshara in Buchenwald played an important role in this process.

III The emergence of a national identity in DP camps

A new Jewish national identity emerged from life in DP camps as a result both of the harsh living conditions and the public life which reinforced cohesion among DPs. The process of shaping of this new identity was started through their mutual experiences, before the war, during the war and after the war. As the birth rate was exceptionally high in DP camps, children were an essential element in the process of rebuilding identities, both individual and collective. Establishing a family after the loss of relatives was vital for physical and mental rehabilitation. Raising children combined the individual and collective aspects of life in the camp. Indeed, the whole social, cultural and educational system was built around them. In the DP camp of Bergen-Belsen, in the British zone of occupied Germany, the Central Committee of the Liberated Jews, lead by Auschwitz survivor Yossele Rosensaft, worked with the JDC, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the British Jewish Relief Unit (JRU), the Jewish Agency in Palestine, the Organization for Rehabilitation (ORT) and the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), while collaborating with Jewish chaplains and members of the Palestinian Jewish Brigade.

Numerous photographs from the JDC archives illustrate its educational programmes in its kindergarten and study classes in which educators from the JDC worked closely with representatives of the Jewish Agency, the DPs and the Jewish Brigade. Hebrew classes, folk singing and dancing reinforced a collective national identity. Among the 300 photographs pertaining to the displaced persons camp of Bergen-Belsen from the archives of the American Joint Distribution Committee, there are pictures of children of all ages in the
pages of the Zippy Orlin album. Those young DPs can be seen acting in biblical plays for Hanukah in December 1948, singing, celebrating religious holidays and preparing for emigration while Zippy Orlin’s captions show faith in the children’s future.

The Blankenese children’s home album, now at the Ghetto Fighters Museum in Israel (Kibbutz Loghame Hagetaot) reveals the opening of a children’s home for forty orphans in Blankenese on the estate of Max Warburg. He was a member of the JDC board of directors and the estate had been confiscated by the Nazis when the family fled Germany in 1938. The Allied troops returned it after the war. What is interesting to point out is that the first teachers recruited to work there were either DPs or soldiers from the Palestinian Jewish Brigade. In that case, there is no doubt about the image of Eretz Israel which they conveyed as well as about the impact of he “national Jewish homeland” on the Jewish identity of the youth. They ranged in age from five to twenty, most of them being between twelve and eighteen years old and came mostly from Poland, Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia.

In the JDC archives, pictures about emigration preparation to Eretz Israel are numerous. They raise the question of the actual impact of the social workers from the Joint on the children’s decision-making process. In April 1946, for instance, Selma Bendremer (later Sally Wideroff), an American social worker from the JDC, escorted 105 orphans by train to the port of Marseilles, where the group she took care of met with contingents from other DP camps to celebrate Pesah. In a symbolical way, they left shortly after, on April 17, on board of the Champollion, the first legally operated ship to leave for Palestine. Collective and national identity continued to be reinforced during the trip: matzoth, Hebrew songs and horas, the traditional Jewish dance from the Yishuv.

As in all the DP camps, the cultural and social life of the Jewish groups integrated both aspects of the traditional Jewish culture and the Zionist-nationalistic aspects. As a result, a new Jewish nationalistic culture emerged both from the memory of the Shoah and from nationalistic “lessons” rooted in the Jewish biblical tradition.

Combined with a tough British policy, these trends and rehabilitation mechanisms led to the gradual building of a new Jewish identity inscribed in a continuity with the past of the decimated European Jewry. As historian Hagit Lavsky put it, “The Jews related their struggle to improve their living conditions (and their demand to be released from their new trap) to a more general Jewish.

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21 JDC Photo collection Lot 25, 31, 243, 249, 310, 368, 372, 379, 390. The JDC Archives in New York contain 10 000 photos which are mostly from the 1946-1949 period.
struggle for recognition. And recognition, both individually and collectively speaking was essential in the process of rebuilding identities after these years under Nazi rule during which they had been deprived of their identity.

In sum, the numerous obstacles imposed by the British on the road to Palestine have reinforced the Zionist feelings of She’erit Hapleitah. This new experience of rejection echoed previous experiences during the war and reinforced their determination while the rest of the world kept their doors closed to any en masse immigration of the Jews. With this unique conjunction of circumstances, the Zionist stance enabled DPs to find again a sense of worthiness although they lacked an absorption society. It is precisely this feeling of worthiness, the impression that somewhere they were wanted that received encouragement from the numerous Jewish organizations that shared a pro-zionist consensus, even though, like the JDC they were a-political.

In this light, the survivors who described themselves as “liberated but not free” were not pawns in the Zionist struggle but partners. The young DPs engaged in agricultural work in the farming communities were the pride of She’erit Hapleitah. In early 1947, there were 3000 youngsters in the kibbutzim in Germany and Austria. Therefore, in the aftermath of World War II there was not only a unique conjunction of circumstances but also a unique confluence of needs: those of the Zionist movement to create a viable state and the urgent need for the DPs to rebuild their lives away from Europe and the post-war killings, as well as the need to gain a new citizenship of which they would never be deprived again.

Education and politics turned out to be closely interwoven in the DP camps. The interactions between the various institutions in charge of education also shaped the collective identity of the survivors. The Jewish Agency emissaries were of course active in the farming communities in preparation for Jewish life in Palestine. In fact, whether displaced persons emigrated or not to Palestine/Israel, they could start compensating for the loss of their individual identities so characteristic of their history. Their rehabilitation process was closely linked to the struggle for the emergence of a new Jewish state. The extraordinary birth-rate in DP camps has made this rebirth possible in spite of the scars of the past. Indeed, this birth-rate has been one of the highest in the world in the years 1945-1948. As a survivor put it, people who “under normal circumstances would never have married” were united. Perhaps the most moving testimony of the

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strength of women survivors is expressed in those words told by the journalist Ruth Gruber “My life is wrecked, but I am going to live so that no Jewish children will ever be sent to gas chambers again”.

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26 Oral testimony by Ruth Gruber, *The Long Way Home*, Moriah Films, the Jack and Pearl Resnick Film Division of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, 116 mn, written and directed by Mark Jonathan Harris, produced by Rabbi Marvin Hier and Richard Trank.