

1947: Discrimination Against Shoah Survivors, and the Need for Zionism

Posted At : April 19, 2012 11:55 AM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

Related Categories: J-Vault, israel, acculturation, history, genocide, refugees, holidays, social issues, zionism, holocaust



Today we remember between five and six million Jews whom the Nazis murdered, and look to the survivors still among us to bear witness to what they saw.

Of course, concentration camp survivors (and others who ended up in DP camps following the war) were not always accorded such honor and reverence as they often are today. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the image of the DP in sectors of the American public was too often an image of the pitiful victim, the uncivilized wretch, or the sneaky criminal. Today's installment of the J-Vault provides a glimpse into this larger topic, among numerous others.

Special J-Vault for Yom HaShoah: *The Psychology of Jewish Displaced Persons* (1947)

The title to this article is a bit deceptive. Its primary resonances today are less in relation to the human psyche, and more in relation to group issues of socioeconomic classes, race relations, and the need for Zionism.

American Jewry today has little or no understanding of the Jewish Displaced Person. By and large, our ideas of the Jewish "D.P." are built up entirely on descriptions of horror and hunger portrayed by fund raising appeals or on the contrasting stories of "black marketeering," "continual demanding," and "unwillingness to work" in blanket generalizations by newspapermen who often have interviewed some official who himself has little understanding of the Jewish Displaced Person or of what makes him act as he does.

It is easy to understand the point of view of the American, British or French army or UNRRA official who condemns the Jewish Displaced Person. Usually that official is an ordinary citizen who is part of the stream of thought and philosophy of his country, and he measures those he meets by the standards of this background... He tends to forget the fact that some people were more discriminated against than others, and being more deprived, may exhibit the results of the more difficult lives they have experienced, in behavior which will not make for peaceful living, quiet, and cleanliness. It is difficult for such an official to understand (and emotionally accept the idea) that those who exhibit such negative behavior are those who need the most patience and help. More often, instead, the Jewish Displaced Person is characterized as ungrateful, unclean, lazy or unambitious...

It must be understood that that which may have helped a person survive

concentration camp does not necessarily help him in his future adjustments after liberation. By and large, these abilities may retard his after liberation adjustment. The Jewish group attitude, except in occasional instances, was opposed to the "law and order" of the Nazis. "Law and order"—after liberation—continued for many to be something to oppose. It is difficult, for example, for the Jewish Displaced-Person who is so close to hunger, to realize that it was good for him to black market and do anything else that would oppose authority (under the Nazis) but that now, under an Allied power, he is to accept freely whatever limitations they see fit to set on him...

Another aspect of the Jewish ex-concentration camp inmate's attitude is his resentment of the general population in the nearby and surrounding towns in Germany and Austria. Most of the general population represent to the Jews their oppressors and supporters of the oppression against them. That they should be treated theoretically on an equal plane with the general population after their years of suffering only adds to their resentment of the authority which imposes this policy. It is difficult for them to see why people who have had full rations, their families complete, their household furnishings, their positions and comparative security, should be given equal treatment with those who have lost everything. That the Jews should be restricted in movement when the non-Jews are not is also a basis for resentment. In general, the Jews from concentration camps do not look to the Allied or local authorities with any great degree of acceptance...

The British point of view is the most difficult for the Jew to understand. His attitude of treating all persons alike (an antithesis of the Nazi philosophy) has often been referred to by Jewish intellectuals as "pseudo liberalism." The Jews feel that it is naive to treat emaciated, harassed victims with the same amounts of food, clothing and other materials as their oppressors. The British attitude is reminiscent of the Abraham Lincoln story of the wife who came upon the scene of her husband in life and death struggle with a huge bear. The wife, feeling she had to do something, said "Go it husband! Go it bear!" The Jew and anti-Nazi similarly want to know on whose side Britain is — the former Nazis or those who were their victims...

The longer Jews have to remain in lands where they can plan no future, the sooner will all Jewish behavior in these lands become more more uniformly aggressive and difficult to work with. As time goes on without a bold and decisive plan, more and more insecurity will develop, and with it can be expected hostilities between native residents and Jews, selfishness, rivalry, suspicion and all the behavior expected in cases of severe dependency. With these, and aggravating these conditions, will be the daily increase of ill health, unsanitary conditions, ignorance due to lack of educational facilities, and unemployment with all its depressive characteristics...

Actually, even if all of the possible facilities for social adjustment of Jewish Displaced Persons were available in the occupied zones, (and this would be difficult to secure so long as Allied political aims dictate the general national internal policies), adjustment of the group in the occupied zones would be doomed to failure. There the D.P. is unwanted by the

populace, and he faces daily risks of having physical harm done him, when and if the Allied forces are withdrawn. There he daily faces open and veiled discrimination in finding a job, getting a place to live, getting a business license, or even a telephone. Few, if any, of even the highest authorities are interested in seeing that he gets equal opportunity to build an individual economic and social existence. The recent measures of leniency to Nazis, loans to Germany and Austria, and granting of greater autonomy to local governments by the Allies are pretty clear indications of the future of the Jew in these countries...

In work with most of the small handful of immigrants who have already arrived in the United States, the same problems which displaced persons have exhibited in Europe have been found, but in aggravated form. The same techniques which they developed in the process of self-preservation in the concentration camps are often their main "standbys" of behavior in the new environment. Since these techniques have little or no application to life in America, they become useless appendages which do not help to "make friends and influence people."... His seething hostility against a Nazi government (tied up with a general resentment based on his deprivations) is transferred to the new world about him. The Americans, in turn, cannot understand him. They are indifferent to the problems of Nazism, which they prefer to consider distant and of the past...

America and other lands are reluctant to open their doors to such a group. To sit idly by and philosophize on the sensibility or justice of this or that plan is only to draw out the daily growing problem. The greatest number of the group have expressed the wish to be resettled in Palestine. They have learned of the failure of colonization projects in forgotten and little populated parts of the world. They fear the growing anti-Semitism of lands such as Argentina.

Their behavior continually voices the question, "whom can we trust?" They have been able to trust few in the past, except for people who have seen and understood the meaning of their experiences. They want to be among their own, and instinctively express the feeling that only in Palestine will they have people to come to, who will receive them and want them and give them security. In Palestine, the readjustment of the Jew is within the realm of possibility. In the occupied zones, it is not. Here the Jewish Displaced Person can build and work for the future and feel that it is permanent. In the cooperative farms and groups, he gains a feeling of group belonging, so akin to the need for family life and security. Here, he can find understanding of the problems and experiences he has faced, because many of the Jews of Palestine are themselves refugees from the concentration camps and seek the adjustment of the new refugees as an ideological goal... Here too, he can work out his need for authoritarian leadership learned in the concentration camp, and gradually learn participation and democratic methods within the working group...

Never before in the history of social work has it been necessary to plan for so large a group of disturbed people. Only by introduction of wholesome group life can any progress be expected. As it stands now, every day away from such a therapeutic atmosphere is a day of further regression.

Eventually, and not too far in the future, it will be too late.

More information...

Download directly...

