

## Displaced Persons, Jewish

At the end of World War II, between seven and nine million people had been uprooted from their homes by the Nazis. By the end of 1945, more than six million had returned home to begin life anew. However, many Jews who had survived forced labor camps, extermination camps, concentration camps, and death marches did not want to go home. After experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust, they wanted to leave Europe altogether and rebuild their broken lives elsewhere. Some did return home, only to leave again after finding their homes and property stolen by their former neighbors. None of these Jews had anywhere to go. Thus, they congregated in Displaced Persons' (DP) camps located within the central European areas controlled by the Allies. They organized themselves under the Hebrew name, *She'erit ha-Pletah*, a biblical term meaning "surviving remnant." The *She'erit ha-Pletah* organization existed from the end of the war until December 1950.

Those Western European Jews who survived generally returned to their countries of origin, while those from Eastern Europe flocked to DP camps in the Allied zones of Europe. Soon, thousands more Polish, Soviet, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and Romanian Jews who had tried to go home began to flee westward to the DP camps when they realized that nothing was left for them in Eastern Europe. By the end of 1946, there were approximately 250,000 Jewish DPs—185,000 in Germany, 45,000 in Austria, and 20,000 in Italy.

A year and a half earlier, in the summer of 1945, public interest in the DP camps had influenced President Harry S. Truman to send Earl G. Harrison as his personal emissary to check into the conditions of the Jewish DPs in the camps of the American zone in Germany. Harrison reported that the conditions in the DP camps were terrible. He accused the Americans of being responsible for the awful situation, and declared that the only solution was to let the Jewish DPs immigrate to Palestine. Harrison advised that the Americans work to improve the conditions in their camps, and that the British allow 100,000 DPs to move to Palestine. Most of the DPs did want to

immigrate to Palestine, but Britain, afraid of upsetting the Arabs, refused to open Palestine's doors to them.

Following Harrison's visit, conditions in the American zone DP camps improved. The Jewish DPs were put in separate camps and recognized as a special group with its own needs. They were also given the freedom to govern themselves. Each camp elected a camp committee that took responsibility for running the camp; these committees took care of sanitation, hygiene, cultural activities, education, and religious life. They were supported financially by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency.

Many groups of Palestinian Jews worked in the DP camps. The first group arrived in June 1945. Emissaries of Jewish youth movements and agricultural settlement organizations, a group of Jewish teachers from Palestine, and a Jewish Agency delegation came to help run the camps and train the DPs for life in Palestine. They also helped set up a school system, and taught the DPs how to farm in preparation for the agricultural life in Palestinian *kibbutzim*.

The Jews of the DP camps developed a culture all their own. More than 70 newspapers were published, commemoration projects were initiated, and even theaters and orchestras were established. People married and had children, and waited to begin their new lives outside of Europe.

The need for DP camps dwindled with the establishment of the State of Israel; about two-thirds of the DPs emigrated to Israel, while most of the rest moved to the United States, which had loosened its immigration quotas. The last Jewish DP camp in Germany was closed in 1953.