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Introduction

The Third Reich and the Holocaust have been the subject of intense academic study since the end of the Second World War. How the Holocaust developed from prejudiced attitudes to the Final Solution, what occurred within the Nazi concentration (KZ) and death camps, and how the camps eventually came to be liberated have all been studied in great detail. However, the issue of displaced persons (DPs) in Europe in the immediate postwar period is often glossed over, or not discussed at all, in other studies and bodies of work written in English. In more general histories of Europe at this time, most texts will discuss World War II and the Holocaust up until liberation, and immediately begin discussing the post-war fallout in divided Germany in political and economic terms; rarely are the millions of DPs mentioned at all, and if they are, they are talked about in very broad terms. As well, in the few texts in English that do discuss the DP crisis in Europe, rarely is gender used as a category of analysis, nor are individual camps discussed in any great detail.

However, Ben Shephard's book *The Long Road Home: The Aftermath of the Second World War*

these women were crucial for establishing a sense of normal Jewish existence while living within the camp system through their work both in the public and private spheres of life, and how they helped to provide a foundation for life after leaving the camps.

Much of the scholarship written in English about the postwar period focusses on the political

Chapter One: Displaced Persons Camps in Political and Cultural Context

Over the course of the Second World War, up to 20 million Europeans as a result of both the war itself and the Holocaust were displaced from their homes. Most of these people were displaced to Germany from other European countries. While many were survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, in parts of Eastern Europe, both civilians and military personnel fled their home countries in fear of advancing Soviet armies. Displaced persons came from every country that had been invaded or occupied by German forces. The situation of many of the displaced persons (DPs) could be resolved by moving back to their original towns and villages; however, this was often not possible. For example, borders had sometimes changed to place the location in

locals in their community.² Pogroms of these types led to another emigration of Jewish refugees from the east back to the relative safety of the west.

organizations. Every camp in both the British and American zones had central committees of Jewish DPs, which fought for greater immigration opportunities and the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine as their main goals.

As all the displaced persons of Europe, but especially the Jewish DPs, tried desperately to emigrate to new homes and escape camp life once and for all, other countries placed restrictions on the number of refugees permitted to enter which strictly limited how many people could immigrate. The British, who had received a mandate from the League of Nations to administer Palestine and later the eventual creation of a Jewish state, severely limited Jewish immigration to Palestine due to severe Arab objections. Many countries closed their borders to displaced persons, not wanting to get involved in the growing crisis. However, despite these hurdles, many Jewish DPs still attempted to leave Europe. However, those DPs who were unable to leave to return home or be repatriated to new homes immediately were instead forced to remain in the DP camps.

Soon after liberation from the concentration camps of the Holocaust, survivors had begun to search for their families. The UNRRA established the Central Tracing Bureau to help survivors locate family members and other loved ones who had survived the Holocaust.⁵ As well, initiatives within the DP camps were taken among the DPs themselves to search for their families. For example, as is discussed in Chapter Two, Belsen published a list of the survivors in the camp to be circulated among all the DP camps in the Allied Zone of Occupation.

The attempt to reunite families went hand-in-hand with the creation of new ones; the DP camps saw many weddings and many births throughout their existence. Many of those who lost

⁵ Ted Gottfried, *Displaced Persons: The Liberation and Abuse of Holocaust Survivors*, 27.

their spouses during the Holocaust, or had been separated from their spouse, chose to remarry once they found relative comfort and safety within the DP camps. Weddings came to be a

In a political context, the DP camps were places where Zionism, the political movement among the Jewish population to return to the Jewish homeland in then British-controlled

Chapter Two: Jewish Displaced Persons at Belsen DP Camp

The Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was established in 1940 by German Nazi military authorities about eleven miles north of Celle, Germany, just south of the two small German towns of Bergen and Belsen. Up until 1943, Bergen-Belsen was used exclusively to house prisoners of war (POWs) from many countries who had been captured in battle during World War II. However, in April 1943, the *SS Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt* (SSWVHA, the SS Economic Administrative Central Office), the division that made decisions for the entire system of German concentration (KZ) camps, turned a portion of Bergen-Belsen into an *Aufenthaltslager* (civilian residence camp) and, later, a *Häftlingslager* (prisoner concentration camp). From April 1943 to April 1945, the Bergen-Belsen camp complex as a whole held Jews, POWs, political prisoners, Roma and Sinti, “asocials”, criminals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals, much like many of the other German concentration camps. Up until 1944, the conditions in the Bergen-Belsen camp were considered to be better than many of the other German concentration (KZ) camps.¹⁴

British after liberation. Because the conditions in the immediate postwar period were so chaotic, the British officials organizing the creation of the Belsen DP camp were unable to calculate the exact number of survivors they were to care for.¹⁸ However, despite the chaos, the camp was up and running very shortly after Bergen-Belsen KZ was closed.

After Bergen-Belsen KZ camp, along with the other Nazi concentration camps, was liberated, international attention began to turn towards developing the camps to house displaced persons in occupied Germany. There was a lot of reporting on the European DP issue in North American newspapers, especially in *The New York Times* (*NYT*). American news sources were integral for communicating information regarding the DP crisis to both the American population and populations in other countries, especially larger news sources such as the *NYT*; as well, these papers conveyed what the American government and economy were doing to help aid the crisis. In July 1945, the *NYT* reported that about 60% of the 2,500,000 DPs in Europe had been repatriated to their home countries, or had found new homes in countries foreign to them.¹⁹ While work was still being done to repatriate the remaining 40% of the European DPs by the Allied Control Council and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in July 1945, the work was slowing down due to an increased difficulty in accommodating the repatriates into society at their destinations, the increasingly larger number of DPs than the initial counts indicated, and the Polish DPs' (including the Polish Jewish DPs) hesitation to return to their now Soviet-occupied homes.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁹ "2,500,000 In Europe Remain Displaced: Accommodations at Home Delay Their Return—Poles Present Chief Problem," *New York Times*, July 13, 1945, accessed February 18, 2018.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The Belsen Displaced Persons camp, which was the largest DP camp in occupied Germany until its closure in 1951,²¹ initially had very poor living conditions for the DPs: the British economy had suffered significant losses as a result of the war effort, and this prevented the British Army from being able to provide anything more than the bare necessities. Conditions were so poor that in 1945, shortly after the DP camp's establishment, there was a hunger strike and demonstration against the camp's conditions led by a group of young female survivors in the camp. According to Holocaust survivor Jacob Biber, the "meager rations of canned food...kept the survivors in a state of depression."²² These conditions only began to improve once the camp's population started to decrease in summer 1946. Even though DPs who needed medical attention were repatriated to their home countries very quickly, in early September 1945, the Belsen DP

from the other DP camps in Germany, however, in that no other displaced persons camp in Germany was established on the site of a former Nazi concentration camp; as well, Belsen was unique in that all former prisoners of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp now became residents of a single DP camp.²⁴

Almost immediately after liberation, survivors began to settle into an improved camp life, one that consisted of slightly better food rations and more resources than the Nazi KZ camps; however, it still had many severe problems, such as food shortages as the number of DPs continued to grow. In these initial weeks, members of the DP camp began to organize themselves into “self-help committees” in order to represent the various interests of the DP population.²⁵ For most of the DPs living within the camp, especially those of Jewish heritage who had been forced to live in the Nazi concentration camps, their main goal was to do whatever it took to be repatriated back to their home countries as soon as possible.²⁶ However, British policy within the camps ran counter to the interests of the Jewish DPs. The committees organized by the Jewish DPs wanted physical rehabilitation for the survivors of the Holocaust, a large portion of British government funding to be put towards locating lost relatives, and fight for political rights in the Belsen DP camp. As well, the DPs were striving for a form of spiritual rehabilitation of their Jewish culture, and wanted assistance from the British government for this to happen.²⁷

²⁴ Königseder and Wetzel, 171.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The British government, in contrast, had other priorities. By 30 November 1945, under pressure from the Americans,²⁸ the British government issued a “confidential directive” that permitted Jews to be housed in separate accommodations from the other DPs in all DP camps within the British Zone. Because of this, Belsen became an almost exclusively Jewish DP camp, housing 60% of all Jewish DPs within the British Zone; the only other DPs remaining in the camp were Poles and Hungarians, as Soviet, French, Belgian, and Dutch DPs had already been relocated or repatriated back to their home countries.²⁹

From June 1945 onwards, the Poles and Jews of the Belsen DP camp had their own designated sections. Like the Jewish DP-formed “self help committees”, the Polish section developed a camp committee the day after the concentration camp was liberated. In addition, a school was opened the following summer and was attended by up to 600 Polish children; two kindergartens were also established. This Polish camp, however, was disbanded in September 1946, and the remaining 4,500 Polish DPs were moved to other British-operated camps. Many of the Poles were still hesitant to return to Soviet-occupied eastern Poland, unlike the DPs from other countries, who generally wanted to return home.³⁰

Almost as soon as the Belsen Displaced Persons camp was established, the British authorities realized how crucial it was for the medical needs of the survivors to be taken care of. A makeshift infirmary that was established in Camp 2 of the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was expanded into a provisional hospital in order to assist with the daily needs of the DPs

²⁸ Ibid. This was fallout from the Harrison Report, written by Earl G. Harrison, that criticized conditions in the DP camps, called for better treatment of Jewish DPs, and recommended allowing them to emigrate to the United States and Palestine. Over time, the Report led to significant changes in the administration of DP camps.

²⁹ Ibid., 172.

³⁰ Ibid., 171.

happening in and around the Belsen DP camp.³⁴ As the camp began to blossom into a town filled with Jewish culture and celebrations, this section became photographic evidence that Jewish livelihood, both in cultural and economic terms, was on the rise once again in postwar Europe. Photographs would have appeared in this section of the newspaper to present a sense of a thriving Jewish existence to those outside of the camp. For example, an image that appeared in such a publication was of a group of Jewish youth learning how to transplant seedlings as part of a farming course sponsored by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.³⁵

Other literature aside from the popular newspaper was equally an important part of life in the Belsen DP camp. Like other DP camps, Belsen had its own publishing house, and it issued various books and brochures while it was in operation from 1945-1950. The first, and most important, book to appear was the list of Jewish survivors in the camp, published on 7 September 1945. This document was circulated among other DP camps inside and outside of the British Zone, and was an incredibly useful tool to help survivors locate and gain contact with their relatives and other loved ones, and allowed plans to be made for life after being repatriated to home countries, or to immigrate to new ones.³⁶

Watching movies in the camp's cinema was a common and popular pastime for many of the Jewish DPs living at Belsen. While primarily used for entertainment purposes, movies were also important for supporting adult education within the camp. Films were played, for example, to teach English to the DPs to allow them an easier transition to English-speaking countries such as

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

³⁵ "Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp Photograph," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed February 27, 2018.

³⁶ Königseder and Wetzel, 193.

the United States, should they immigrate there. The camp's movie theatre screened on average about four movies per week, with most films selling out.³⁷

Sports were another popular pastime at Belsen; by July 1947, Belsen was already home to eight different sports clubs. The camp held competitions within the camp between different teams, and even played soccer matches against clubs from other DP camps in the British, American, and French zones of occupation. These games were so popular for DPs in the camps that one game had over 2500 spectators in attendance.³⁸

With the security that came with living in an exclusively-Jewish community, there was a resurgence of Jewish religious and cultural practice within the newly established Jewish DP camps, like Belsen. Immediately after the camp's liberation, survivor rabbis at Bergen-Belsen had thousands of dead to bury, and even more prayers to say for those whom had lost their lives. Once the DP camp was established, these rabbis began to teach young boys and girls in the camp about Jewish life, culture, and religious practices. The rabbinate that was established in Belsen devoted much of their time and attention to the problem of the *agunim* and *agunot*, or the men and women who were unable to locate their missing spouses as a result of the Holocaust.³⁹ They attempted to help locate missing loved ones, and also provided emotional and religious support for those affected by this loss.

As in the large majority of the DP camps, Belsen rabbis conducted many weddings between couples of all ages in the DP populations. At Belsen, by July 1947, the rabbis had conducted a

³⁷ Ibid., 194.

³⁸ Ibid., 195.

³⁹ Ibid., 196.

Palestine remained undiminished even among those who were physically unable to train in the paramilitary, with 68.5% of the 10,783 Jewish residents at Belsen wanting to emigrate to the state of *Erets Yisrael*,⁴³ with the remaining 31.5% not wanting to emigrate, or having indifferent feelings about their location of emigration. The Jewish Agency reported in spring 1946 that it had managed to secure about 200 immigration certificates for children of the Belsen DP camp, in addition to the 800 certificates used for the earlier immigration of Jewish children from other DP camps in Germany, to Palestine.⁴⁴ While certificates were distributed to camp officials years earlier, the immigrants who were seen to be the most likely at having a successful life in Palestine did not reach Israel until 1948-49.⁴⁵

On 27 January 1949, the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs finally granted DPs living in

Chapter Three: The Multi-Faceted Role of Female Jewish DPs in Belsen

Within the confines of the displaced persons camps, the Jewish survivors began to rebuild a communal Jewish life, and often work towards a future in Palestine and other countries around the world. The Jews of the DP camps, specifically those in Occupied Germany, saw themselves as the key to a prosperous Jewish future.⁴⁹ These Jews were determined to reclaim their Jewish heritage, strove to preserve their prewar and wartime pasts, and create a vibrant Jewish community after the horrors experienced in the Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. In striving for all of these goals, women played a significant and important role, despite the relatively low profiles they tended to keep in the public political sphere; this differed from their male counterparts, who were often at the forefront of movements and initiatives in the public sphere of camp life. Women sought to achieve community goals by using their traditional, feminine roles as mothers, teachers, and seamstresses, while simultaneously actively participating in the reconstruction of Jewish society within the DP camps to create a future beyond them. Jewish women as displaced persons contributed to the normalization of Jewish life after the Holocaust in three ways: through their maternal, cultural, and economic activities.

It can be argued that the first necessary step towards a renewal of a recognizably Jewish life was the recreation of Jewish family life. Even before the implementation of the Final Solution,

Motherhood, a desirable consequence of sexual relations and marriage between DPs, largely shaped the experiences of women in the camps. Unlike German women, who restricted their fertility in the unstable environment of postwar Germany and started to resist the imposed traditional gender roles, Jewish women in the DP camps consciously chose to become mothers. It could be argued that the difference stems from a German sense of victimization in contrast to a Jewish emphasis on survival, perseverance, and liberation, and of not seeing themselves solely as victims.⁵³ Samuel Bak, a Holocaust survivor who spent some time in the DP camp system, said that giving birth to a Jewish child was “a form of retaliation against the brutal cruelty of the recent past.”⁵⁴ Reproduction was seen by the Jewish DPs as a political act, a victory over the Nazis, and a form of “biological revenge.”⁵⁵ In this sense, reproduction was no longer a private matter, but instead a central concern of the Jewish DP community and its dreams for the future.⁵⁶ One female DP, whose name is unknown, recollected that, “the young adults who survived had great hopes of building a new and better world,” and that in order to “accomplish this goal they had to produce a new generation, and so having children was one of their immediate goals.”⁵⁷ Jacob Biber recounts in his memoir his excitement of having his son as the first child born in the Föhrenwald DP camp, as well as the general excitement of the camp as a whole surrounding the birth: “The birth of our son,” he said, “marked a new era and was a symbol of our life to be, of

⁵³ Feinstein, 73.

⁵⁴ Feinstein, 73.

⁵⁵ Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*, 232.

⁵⁶ Feinstein, 74.

⁵⁷ Feinstein, 74.

DP camp, and the fact that these births were occurring while the Jewish DPs were still struggling to deal with the burdens of surviving Nazi concentration and death camps.

Mothers in the DP camps were occupied most of the time by the demands of daily life, which often interfered with their ability to take on other roles, such as leadership positions in camp organizations. The often poor conditions at the Belsen DP camp, especially in the first year of

leaders, often women, were aware of the historical significance of the Holocaust and the survivors' experiences, and saw how important it was to preserve these memories. An oral history project was established within the Central Historical Commission of the Central Committee of the Liberated Jews in the US Zone, and interviews from this provided recorded commemoration and remembering of those who had not survived, as well as created a record of potential witnesses for future war crimes trials.⁶⁵ The different historical commissions also gathered and publicized the survivors' cultural expressions and interpretations of the Holocaust, including poems and artwork, much of which was organized and contributed to by women. Women took an active role in preserving the memories of those around them, and helped to transmit these memories to both their contemporaries and to future generations.⁶⁶

The camps' cultural programs were an extremely popular way for Jewish DPs to spend their time, and the camp theatre was a favourite for many of the survivors across the camps. Many women were involved within the theatre scene as active members. Jewish DP theatre troupes

whom were in charge of the Belsen Central Committee's Cultural Department.⁶⁸ This theatre

Belsen schools quickly emerged as the only institutions that were equipped to provide an adapted education that addressed the special needs of Jewish children, such as Jewish religious education; there were even a number of religious schools in Belsen in addition to the secondary school that focussed solely on Jewish practices and traditions, and passing them onto the younger generation. The curriculum in both the religious and secondary schools focused on Jewish

of school organizer Rivka Horowitz. On a Sabbath afternoon, Horowitz addressed an assembly of Orthodox survivors:

After four months, we still don't have a kosher kitchen in Belsen. We have, thank God, rabbis and scholars in our midst, we have capable *shochatim* [ritual slaughterers]. Why should we not be provided with kosher food? We hereby make this public declaration: our girls will not touch any cooked food of any kind until we are provided with kosher food, so help us God.⁷⁸

These women, acting as activists for their own desires and the wants shared by many in the camp, refused to bend even to rabbinic authority, and succeeded in pressuring the camp committee and British military to provide kosher food for the Jews in the camp who wanted it. With the aid of the camp's rabbi, on August 21, 1945, a kosher kitchen was established in Belsen. The kosher kitchen became an important meeting point for Orthodox as well as other traditionally observant Jews in the camp. It was such an important place that many Orthodox survivors speak of couples who met there and married soon after.⁷⁹

In October 1946, the Belsen camp administration recognized the need for a kindergarten and a nursery because of the population surge in newborns the camp was seeing. Founded by a well-educated woman of the DP camp whose name is unknown, the kindergarten, as a school for young children, was arguably the most visible sign of a revival of Jewish life, as one could see

after them for a short period of time. However, the nursery was shut down soon after it was

work within the internal camp economy that helped them to validate themselves by serving the community.

Women with an education and who came from families with more money were often eligible for work positions in the military or UNRRA offices, as language and typing skills were seen as useful to the understaffed authorities. For example, the British military at the Belsen DP camp employed Lucille Eichengreen, a young German-Jewish woman who survived Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Holocaust, for her language skills. While the pay was low, the work offered her a distraction from both her dismal surroundings at the Belsen DP camp, and the trauma of her past in the Nazi concentration camps.⁸⁵ Eventually, after she emigrated to the United States in late 1946, she helped identify German war criminals even though the memories of these crimes were painful for her to recall. She felt a sense of duty to those who had died because of these criminals and a commitment to the ideals of justice. Regardless of how difficult this task was for her, she felt a sense of fulfillment in being able to use her language skills learned at Belsen to do good for the Jewish community.

The traditional nature of women's activities has tended to obscure their significance in the postwar German displaced persons camps; however, the camps were a very non-traditional environment. In the camps, women's reproductive and childrearing roles, cultural endeavours, and economic and political pursuits were essential to the revival of a “normal” Jewish life after the Holocaust. Jewish women as displaced persons shared their pasts with a new generation, cared for the wellbeing of the DP community, and worked toward a Jewish future around the

⁸⁵ Lucille Eichengreen, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*, San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994, 134.

world. The renewal of the surviving Jewish culture after the Holocaust thus depended on the multitude of roles played by Jewish women in the DP camps.

Conclusion

The experiences of displaced persons in displaced persons camps in Germany in the immediate postwar period were not all the same. There were a plethora of factors that shaped what those individuals faced. The experiences of Jewish DPs looked very different from those of non-Jewish DPs, as the Jews remained DPs for a much longer period of time, and most were living in the DP camps after having already suffered in the Nazi concentration camps of the Holocaust. The experiences of the DPs also varied from camp to camp, based on UNRRA funding, and what resources were available to them. This thesis, however, chose to focus on the gendered experiences of the Jewish women living in the DP camps, and to look at how their unique role in the camps as mothers and activists allowed them to establish a new sense of a “normal” life for those in the camp. As well, they provided the foundation and the building blocks to ensure a thriving Jewish existence in the new Jewish state in Palestine and across the globe. In order to provide context for this specific narrative of survival and prosperity in the years following the Holocaust, this thesis also looked at the general experiences of the majority of Jewish displaced persons, as well as a context for the specific circumstances at the Belsen DP camp.

The narratives about displaced persons at the Belsen DP camp illustrate how a group of people, who collectively have been through something more horrible than one could begin to imagine, can come together and try and find peace among one another. So many Jews were married and so many babies were born in such a short window of time that it is hard to argue that a sense of Jewish livelihood was not present in the European postwar era. And while everyone had a unique role to play in order for this to occur, it was the women in particular who fostered a

sense of home through their actions both in the private areas of their houses and in the public sectors of DP camp life.

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