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## Survivors to Nation Builders: The Story of the “New Jew”

by Zoe Zaslowsky

**A**FTER THE Holocaust, thousands of Europe’s Jews were left homeless with no possessions, family, or work. They lived in overcrowded displaced persons (DP) camps, still freshly stained with the horrors endured in the ghettos, work camps and death camps during World War II. As they struggled to find purpose in life, survivors knew their future in Europe would be dismal, and soon Eretz Yisrael (present day Israel) became their pre-eminent beacon of hope—a symbol of personal peace and happiness for Europe’s Jews.

Many Jewish survivors began their new lives in Eretz Yisrael on the kibbutz: a community with a simple way of life but an underlying complex social structure. The personal experience of surviving the Holocaust, combined with the Zionist, egalitarian and socialist principles inherent in the kibbutz, created a unique mixture of communal ideals and personal anguish that left survivors with a sense of disappointment and betrayal toward the kibbutz. This survivor generation, however, changed Jewish identity. The once overtly religious, victimized, and divided “Diaspora Jew” became the secular, rugged and united “New Jew.”<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the Holocaust survivors’ motives and expectations for immigrating to the Israeli kibbutz, as well as their lives there, galvanized an entirely different



A demonstration in support of unrestricted entry to Eretz Israel, Feldafing displaced persons camp, Germany, after May 1945. Courtesy of Yad Vashem, archival signature 170CO1.

Jewish identity never seen before. Without the “New Jew,” Israel could not have been defended and could not have prospered into the thriving nation it is today.

At the end of World War II, there were millions of displaced people in Europe. This included not only the 250,000 Jews in DP camps, but also thousands of prisoners of war and Europeans whose homes were destroyed during the war.<sup>2</sup> These DP camps were established at the sites

<sup>1</sup> Aziza Khazoom, *The Kibbutz in Immigration Narratives of Bourgeois Iraqi and Polish Jews Who Immigrated to Israel in the 1950s* (Indiana University Press, Summer 2014), 74.

<sup>2</sup> American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprises, “Displaced Persons,” Jewish Virtual Library, [https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0005\\_0\\_05258.html](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0005_0_05258.html); Even the homes of Nazi collaborators were destroyed.

of former concentration and extermination camps, as well as prisoner of war camps in Germany, Austria and Italy. Germany housed the majority of these camps, which were situated within the American, British, and French zones of the country.<sup>3</sup> Even though the war was over, Jews had no other choice but to continue living in Nazi designed torture centers - still fenced in with barbed wire.<sup>4</sup>

Displaced persons' living conditions were evocative of their imprisonment during the Holocaust. Since centers designed for 3,000 people were housing 10,000 - food, clothing and shelter were scarce. The biggest struggle for Jewish survivors, however, was cohabitating in cramped quarters with Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians and other Eastern Europeans who had enthusiastically assisted the Nazis during the war.<sup>5</sup> This problem was belatedly addressed when Jews were given their own, separate camps. David Ben-Gurion, then chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, and later Israel's first president, played a dominant role in helping Jews establish safer, isolated camps headed by Jewish leadership<sup>6</sup>. Even with Jewish oversight in the camps, however, it was difficult to secure basic supplies.

Despite such enormous difficulties, life was not all bad. Fela Warschau, who was liberated at Bergen-Belsen in 1945 and lived in an American DP camp, remembered happy times:

[What] Americans also did, is organize art schools. They brought in films. They brought in, organized our people, the survivors that were musicians and also

traveling from other camps. They were giving concerts... our own police force... They kept us busy. But the problem was, there was no future in being there. Where do we go from there?<sup>7</sup>

The Jewish resilience was apparent in the DP camps. Jews still practiced their arts, studied, and even married during those years. Yet, this flourishing of Jewish culture in the camps could not keep survivors from fearing for their future. They were without money, homeless and, often times, without family. There was no definite plan from any government on how long Europe's Jews would remain in DP camps or where they would be resettled. This uncertainty created widespread anxiety among Jews, as expressed by Warschau in the testimony above,

After news of the poorly maintained camps reached the United States, President Harry S Truman sent a personal envoy, Earl G. Harrison, to report on the conditions. As Harrison discovered, "We appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them, except that we do not exterminate them."<sup>8</sup> Even though the Red Cross and the Jewish community within the camps (and at large) worked to improve camp conditions, this was certainly not the life survivors had anticipated after leaving Hitler's notorious death-camps. Being in the presence of liberators, however, was undeniably the happiest and safest Holocaust survivors felt since Hitler's rise to power. The Holocaust survivors felt simultaneously homeless, but liberated; safe, but in danger; relieved, but anxious for the future. This strange combination of contradictory emotions was best expressed in the words of survivor Shosh Bechar who was

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3 In 1945, about 150,000 Jews lived in the American zone, 15,000 in the British, and 2,000 in the French. See Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 140.

4 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprises, "Displaced Persons."

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

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7 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Displaced Persons: Oral History," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, accessed November 5, 2015, [http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_oi.php?ModuleId=10005462&MediaId=3283](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_oi.php?ModuleId=10005462&MediaId=3283).

8 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprises, "Displaced Persons."

liberated from Auschwitz in April 1945. When she entered a DP camp, she described the confusing emotional state of many survivors: “We were liberated but we did not find a safe place that felt like home. Problems and difficulties still faced us [but] We received good, tasty food. Once again we became human beings.”<sup>9</sup>

DP camps were not an inevitable evil, but the result of a poorly planned and poorly funded solution to the refugee problem that lasted much longer than expected.<sup>10</sup> The hopes of liberation and freedom, alive within the Jews during the war, came in striking juxtaposition with the reality of post-war Europe - their standard of living would remain virtually the same for several years. After analyzing for five weeks the most famous DP camp of Bergen-Belsen, Maurice Eigen wrote in an August 31, 1945 report to the American Joint Distribution Committee: “It is difficult for them to understand why they must remain in the camp under military regulation four months after their so-called liberation.”<sup>11</sup> He also emphasized that Eastern European Jews (rather than German Jews) experienced a more intense frustration since “they know that new havens must be found for

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them.”<sup>12</sup> As one Buchenwald concentration camp inmate wrote in her diary after liberation: “[W]here 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...”<sup>13</sup>

Holocaust survivors collectively felt betrayed by the “liberation.” Even though they knew that it was necessary and inevitable for them to leave the camps, they did not yet know where they would go (or who would welcome them). The climate of post-war Europe (the escalating Cold War), along with the uncertainty of relocation, were the two most important factors in galvanizing emigration from DP camps, but they also serve as an explanation for why it

took such a prolonged amount of time for Jews to leave. Jews leaving from Hungary, Yugoslavia and other satellite states were unsure of their countries’ future, or if their persecution would continue behind the Iron Curtain, keeping them grounded in the DP camps. Along with them, Jews with no means of travel, or family to follow, meant the DP camp was their only option.

Ultimately, the Jews became “the victims of international politics.”<sup>14</sup> There were few options for survivors to escape DP camps. For one, after the war every nation had stringent immigration quotas for refugees. The United States, the most suitable and popular destination besides Eretz Yisrael, limited its refugees, with the Truman Direc-

9 Shosh Bechar, “Women & The Holocaust—Personal Reflections,” *Holocaust Testimonies*, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.theverylongview.com/WATH/personal/potok.htm>.

10 Dan Stone, *The Liberation*, 140.

11 Maurice Eigen, “Letter from Maurice Eigen to Paris Office, August 8, 1946, National Jewish Welfare Board, 1946,” *Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee NY Offices of the years 1945 – 1954*, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, NY, accessed October 18, 2015, [http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY\\_AR\\_45-54/NY\\_AR45-54\\_Orgs/NY\\_AR45-54\\_00168/NY\\_AR45-54\\_00168\\_00390.pdf#search='maurice%20eigen'](http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY_AR_45-54/NY_AR45-54_Orgs/NY_AR45-54_00168/NY_AR45-54_00168_00390.pdf#search='maurice%20eigen').

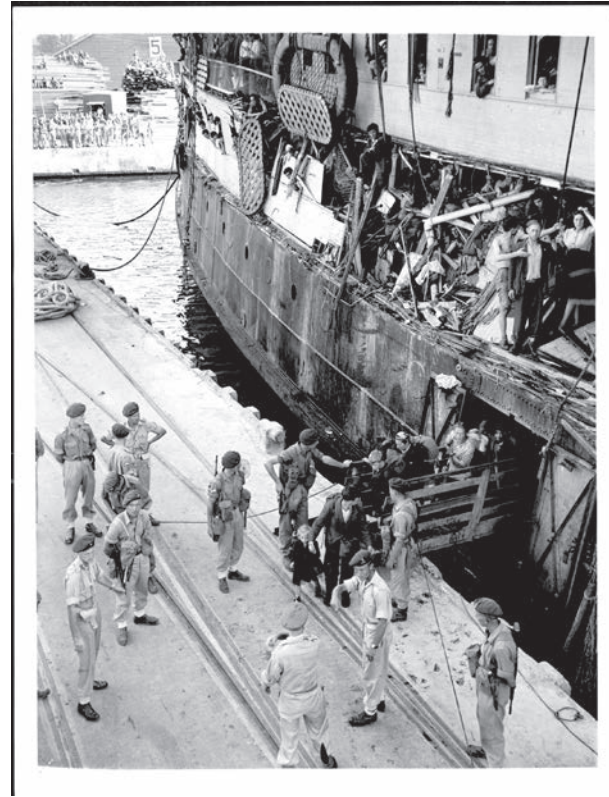
12 Ibid.

13 Françoise Ouzan, “Rebuilding Jewish Identities in Displaced Persons Camps in Germany 1945-1956,” *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jerusalem* no. 14 (2004), accessed May 6, 2016 <https://bcrfj.revues.org/269>.

14 Dan Stone, *The Liberation*, 140.

tive of 1945, to 16,000 displaced persons.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, British control of Palestine did not allow any refugees in Eretz Yisrael. In fact, the British attacked Jewish refugee ships before they could reach Palestine.

To retaliate against Britain's strict immigration quota, a secret Jewish military organization called Haganah, acquired an old American war ship with the goal of illegally transporting Holocaust survivors from their DP camps into Eretz Yisrael. Named *Exodus*, the ship carried 4,500 Jewish men, women, and children. En route, British destroyers surrounded *Exodus* and what ensued, including the British ramming of the refugee ship and active gunfire, left two passengers dead while "dozens suffered bullet wounds and other injuries."<sup>16</sup> The British then detained the passengers, forced them to board British ships and took them to France, where they were ordered to evacuate the vessel. When passengers refused to leave, France declined to use force to compel them to do so. French authorities decided to wait hoping that, with time, passengers would exit. Instead, the Jewish refugees on board began a hunger strike in protest. The British responded by sending the ship to Hamburg, Germany, where the passengers were forced to leave the ship and return to DP camps.<sup>17</sup> The *Exodus* episode helped show the world the necessity for a Jewish state; a notion already accepted by Europe's Jews. After enduring the Holocaust, and being homeless in the DP camps, Jews were attacked in a military setting for attempting resettlement in British Palestine. Not only was public opinion in an outrage over Britain's extreme force, but it brought the question to the world's stage: Where were the Jews going to live?



British soldiers supervising refugees from the *Exodus* in the Port of Haifa, 1947. Courtesy of ACME Photo/Yad Vashem, Gimelson, archival signature 1458/33.

The state of Israel was not created until May 1948, but this did not keep displaced Jews from illegally emigrating, en masse. The *Exodus* was only one example of attempted illegal resettlement, and it was not the only ship detained by British authorities. One Holocaust survivor, Shosh Bechar, described her illegal journey to Eretz Yisrael: "In a difficult and dangerous journey... Packed like sardines, we drifted for six days in a boat called "Hagana". When we were close to Haifa we were moved into four different detention boats. We were in jail in the heart of the sea for four weeks... After six weeks in Atlit we were fi-

15 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Refugees."

16 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Exodus 1947," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005419>.

17 Ibid.

nally set free.”<sup>18</sup> It was not until 1952 that all the Holocaust survivors left the DP camps; 80,000 refugees immigrated to the United States, 20,000 to other countries and 136,000 to Eretz Yisrael (the Homeland).<sup>19</sup>

If Jews made it into the quota, they were still subject to further tests before immigrating to a new home country. As one female Polish refugee explained, she chose to immigrate to the Israeli kibbutz simply because she was ill and feared rejection from other countries due to her failing health. The British, for example, mandated a medical evaluation with an X-ray before immigration, but the kibbutz did not have such stringent medical requirements.<sup>20</sup> The Jewish Agency did provide medical exams to those “destined for Israel,” and conducted follow-up exams once they had immigrated, but this was not a requirement for immigration.<sup>21</sup> It was an attempt to determine the strength Jewish immigrants would bring to the Homeland. This is reflected in the *giyus*’ (Jewish movement to mobilize fighters in Israel) rejection rate of immigrants being only 10%<sup>22</sup>.

However, illness was not widespread in the camps. Displaced Jews had to have been able bodied, and relatively young, to be able to survive the horrors of the Holocaust. As Eigen found in his 1945 report, “there are no Jews over the age of forty or forty-five year in [the] Belsen [camp].”<sup>23</sup>

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18 Shosh Bechar, *Women & The Holocaust*.

19 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Displaced Persons.”

20 Khazzoom, “The Kibbutz,” 86.

21 William Haber, “Letter from William Haber to World Jewish Congress, December 20, 1948, Germany, Displaced Persons, X-XII, 1948,” *Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee NY Offices of the years 1945 – 1954*, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, NY accessed November 13, 2015, [http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY\\_AR\\_45-54/NY\\_AR45-54\\_Count/NY\\_AR45-54\\_00029/NY\\_AR45-54\\_00029\\_00662.pdf](http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY_AR_45-54/NY_AR45-54_Count/NY_AR45-54_00029/NY_AR45-54_00029_00662.pdf).

22 Ibid.

23 Eigen, “Letter from Maurice.”

Another report noted that the population inside the camps seemed comprised, of averagely healthy people and not of the emaciated Holocaust survivors one would expect to see.<sup>24</sup> This youthful vigor was essential for the future kibbutz. In fact, the Jewish Agency specifically sought out the healthy with the intention to transform them into Israeli soldiers that were needed for the escalating Jewish-Arab conflict in Eretz Yisrael.

Not surprisingly, anti-Semitism continued to flourish after the war. Though Jews were no longer being systematically murdered, Europe’s anti-Semitic feelings were still prominent. Kurt Grossman, who held the office of German and Austrian Questions at the Jewish Agency in New York at the end of WWII, reported on developments in Germany in 1948 noting that, while it was obvious those within the camps did not want to remain there, Jews living in Germany, outside of DP camps, were “anxious to leave.”<sup>25</sup> Even those with decent lives knew it to be too dangerous to remain in Europe. According to Grossman, there were four causes for the increase of anti-Semitism in Germany: the Jews were seen as scapegoats for the war; they were seen as having “special privileges” within DP camps; they were accused of running the black market; and there were “allegation[s] that Jewish DPs failed to work and are merely leaches on Germany’s economy.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, these accusations held little validity, but, certainly, the atmosphere was toxic for Jews. With Europe destroyed, and its people entering a Cold War where new

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24 Haber, “Letter from William.”

25 Kurt R. Grossman, “Report on Germany by Kurt R. Grossman, August 10, 1948, Germany, Displaced Persons, VII-IX, 1948,” *Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee NY Offices of the years 1945 – 1954*, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, NY, accessed November 13, 2015, [http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY\\_AR\\_45-54/NY\\_AR45-54\\_Count/NY\\_AR45-54\\_00029/NY\\_AR45-54\\_00029\\_00793.pdf](http://search.archives.jdc.org/multimedia/Documents/NY_AR_45-54/NY_AR45-54_Count/NY_AR45-54_00029/NY_AR45-54_00029_00793.pdf).

26 Ibid.

countries were being drawn, power reorganized and economies failing, the world surrounding DP camps was chaotic and threatening for the stateless Jews. William Haber, adviser on Jewish Affairs to the Commander-in-chief of United States forces in Germany and Austria, gave the following professional opinion to the world's Jewry in 1948:

Were we convinced that there is a practical possibility for Jewish displaced persons to establish for themselves a dignified social, cultural and economic existence in Germany, I would urge that we defend their right to remain and protect them in every way. Since I am convinced that this is not possible for this particular group, sound policy seems to encourage their emigration at the earliest possible time.<sup>27</sup>

Strict displaced persons' immigration laws were always rumored to, eventually, become more lenient, which kept the hope of relocating to the United States alive. The potential to immigrate to the United States also kept many from leaving DP camps - the thought of becoming an American citizen was enticing. Most displaced Jews saw the United States as a more attractive option than Eretz Yisrael, especially before the state of Israel was created and had proven that it could defend itself against hostile Arab nations. Many survivors also had American relatives who offered a new home in a victorious Allied Nation that seemed safer than a nation not yet officially established.

Even when Israel became a state, displaced Jews were hesitant to immediately immigrate. William Haber reported to various Jewish organizations about "a brief period of uncertainty in which the DPs wondered whether the Arab challenge to Israel would succeed"<sup>28</sup>. The

most important factor for survivors was stability in their new homes. It was not until after Israel demonstrated its strength in the Israeli War of Independence (1948 Arab-Israeli War), that Jews were resolved to immigrate immediately. As Haber said, the formation of Israel "helped to crystalize the thinking of these people as to where they had to go."<sup>29</sup> They knew if they did not relocate to Israel, they would forever be homeless people at the will of the world.

Jews specifically sought out the kibbutz life in Israel because they were following the ideology of Zionism. The Jewish Virtual Library defines Zionism as "the national movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel."<sup>30</sup> However, Zionism "was not merely defined by its end goal."<sup>31</sup> In fact, Zionism took on a more eclectic definition to survivors. For them, it was defined by the community of the kibbutz, a hopeful destination from Europe that offered the promise of education, strengthening of Jews, and opportunity for work. As Jewish identity became an "existential issue," Zionism became the answer.<sup>32</sup>

Even before the war, Zionism was a heavily youth based movement. Historian Avinom J. Patt, the Philip D. Feltman Chair in Modern Jewish History at the Univer-

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mittee, and The American Jewish Conference; Haber, "Letter from William."

29 Ibid.

30 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, "Zionism: A Definition of Zionism," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed November 4, 2015, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Zionism/zionism.html>.

31 Avinoam Patt, interviewed by Peter Ephross, August 11, 2009, "Dreams of the Displaced," *Forward*, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://forward.com/culture/111936/dreams-of-the-displaced/#ixzz3qUbdee2D>.

32 Yad Vashem, "The Return to Life in the Displaced Persons Camps, 1945-1956," The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, accessed December 1, 2015, [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/dp\\_camps/index.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/dp_camps/index.asp).

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27 Haber, "Letter from William."

28 The World Jewish Congress, American Joint Distribution Committee, The Jewish Agency for Palestine, American Jewish Com-

sity of Hartford, investigated the role of Zionism after the Holocaust and explained the emergence of Zionism in the Jewish youth as a shift “to the broader Jewish public... [the Zionist youth] realize[d] that they have to stand up and take this leadership role—both because a lot of the Jewish leadership either leaves Poland or is executed very quickly at the beginning of the war, [and because] those people are focused to participate on Jewish councils.”<sup>33</sup> The Zionist youth became a symbol of a new Jew; a fighting and heroic force of resistance to the Holocaust in the wake of the absence of the old leadership.

The first armed Jewish resistance formed in the Vilna Ghetto in 1942. In their manifesto, they called to all of the ghetto’s Jews to take up arms in defense. They instructed the public: “Support the revolt!... For our ancestors! For our murdered children!... Long live liberty! Long live armed resistance! Death to the assassins!”<sup>34</sup> The Zionist Youth did not focus on the Jew as a victim but as a powerful agent; this translated well to life in the kibbutz. The same ghetto fighters and partisan groups met again in the kibbutz not as grief stricken survivors but as heroes of the war. Membership in the kibbutz, for resistance leaders as well as for all other survivors, meant a “collective heroic identity”<sup>35</sup>. The Kibbutz and Zionism became interchange-

able for the ideas they represented.

The kibbutz was a utopia and a new life; it was socialist Zionism on the ground “committed to... rationalist, anti-clerical ideology.”<sup>36</sup> However, the kibbutz was not an establishment created for, or by, Holocaust survivors. In fact, the first kibbutzniks settled in Eretz Yisrael in 1910.<sup>37</sup> One earlier kibbutznik emigrated from Hungary to Eretz Yisrael in 1939.<sup>38</sup> Her name was Hannah Senesh, and the kibbutz transformed her into the premier example of the “New Jew.”

Feeling the hostilities of anti-Semitism in Hungary, Hannah joined a Zionist movement and immigrated to Israel at age eighteen, leaving her brother and mother behind. After living four years in Eretz Yisrael, she enlisted in the British Army in 1943 and volunteered to parachute behind enemy lines to rescue Jews - also with the hope of rescuing her mother.<sup>39</sup> She landed in Yugoslavia in March 1944, but as she crossed the border into Hungary a few months later, the Hungarian police detained her. Hannah was severely tortured for several months and her mother’s life was threatened, but she would not speak about her mission. She was sentenced to death by firing squad and refused to be blindfolded, “staring squarely at her executors and



Hannah Senesh dressing up in costume as a Hungarian soldier. Copyright American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise - Reprinted with permission ([www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org)).

33 Patt, interviewed by Peter Ephross.

34 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Resistance in the Ghettos,” *Resistance in the Holocaust*, 17, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20000831-resistance-bklt.pdf>.

35 Patt, interviewed by Peter Ephross.

36 Pierre L. Van der Berghe, “Huttenites and Kibbutzniks: A Tale of Nepotistic Communism,” *Man New Series* 23, no. 3 (Sep. 1988): 525.

37 *Ibid.*, 525.

38 American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprises, “Hannah Senesh,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed November 7, 2015, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/biography/szenes.html>.

39 *Ibid.*



her fate.”<sup>40</sup> The twenty-three year old martyr is a national hero of Israel. Though her life was tragically cut short, her time spent in Eretz Yisrael was documented in her now published diary and revealed much about why Zionist Jews felt a call to the kibbutz and how it changed their Jewish identity.

“ THE ZIONIST YOUTH BECAME A SYMBOL OF A NEW JEW; A FIGHTING AND HEROIC FORCE OF RESISTANCE TO THE HOLOCAUST IN THE WAKE OF THE ABSENCE OF THE OLD LEADERSHIP.

Once in Eretz Yisrael, Hannah explored various kibbutzim. She was a firm believer in the kibbutz. “Zionism and socialism were instinctive with me,” she explained, “even before I was aware of them. The foundation was a part of my very being, and my consciousness merely reinforced my instinctive beliefs before I knew their designations or had the means of expressing them.”<sup>41</sup> She was fully committed to the kibbutz even though she bashfully admitted some frustrations with her life there: she felt alone, somewhat lost, and incredibly guilty for abandoning her family. In the midst of her unhappiness, Hannah made an important distinction between her and the other members who were also unhappy with the kibbutz, she was ideologically connected to the kibbutz and they were not. As she explained: “Their ties consist of a love for the place, personal friendships, or simply the fact that they like it here - all factors that are, at times, more apt to bind one

to a settlement than any ideology.” In this entry, she identified two different types of kibbutzniks: one trying to establish a new life for him/herself, and the other one trying to establish a new life for Jews. Hannah recognized herself as the latter. Welcoming self-sacrifice, she knew her new life must have a bigger purpose: the same thought propelling the “New Jew” to the kibbutz.

When Hannah decided to return to Europe to aid the war effort, she left a letter for her brother in which she wrote: “I wonder will you understand...will you believe that it is more than a childish wish for adventure, more than youthful romanticism that attracted me...there are times which one’s life becomes unimportant...when one is commanded to do something even at the price of one’s life.”<sup>42</sup> While in Eretz Yisrael, Hannah had an epiphany; no one would rescue the Jews, the Jews must rescue themselves. Though it is difficult to imagine such a young girl contemplating such decisions, it was this thought within the youth that helped create the first generation of the “New Jew.” To the Holocaust survivor youth, life was still viewed as fragile, but they certainly had witnessed enough death and destruction to find a cause to die for and to feel they were fully capable of making that decision. Hannah serves as a preeminent example of this new Jewish identity - one that embraced sacrificing personal happiness, and even life, to secure a Jewish state by way of the kibbutz life. Without the kibbutz, Hannah would not have realized her purpose: to secure a Jewish state.

Some kibbutzniks, like Hannah Senesh, hoped to, eventually, live on a kibbutz even before the war (fueled by the Zionist Youth Movement), while others were recruited from DP camps. The biggest handicap for Jews was that they did not represent a centralized community, because they were scattered across Europe and shared dif-

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40 Ibid.

41 Hannah Senesh, Marge Piercy, and Roberta Grossman, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary, the First Complete Edition* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007), 162.

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42 Ibid.,164.

ferent identities depending on their home country. German Jews and Polish Jews, for example, were disparate. They did not share the same language, culture, political ideas, or living standards, which made it impossible to unite them. Because Jewish disunity was a monumental handicap for resistance during World War II, Zionism sought to end it. After the war, the longer the Jewish population of Eretz Yisrael remained low, the less likely Jews were to be able to obtain and defend their own state. A kibbutz population was vital to secure, since it would be living within the future borders of Israel.<sup>43</sup> Unity had to be established; the kibbutzim began to recruit.

Kibbutz movement leaders came to DP camps offering food, room and board, and stories of kibbutz life. They were looking for the youth, especially young couples, who would help bring a larger Jewish presence to the area.<sup>44</sup> They even began establishing kibbutzim in Europe to prepare the immigrants for their relocation to Eretz Yisrael.

The kibbutz was promising a unique destiny to survivors. They would not return to their lives before the war; they would be building their own nation - a state where their countrymen could not persecute them, as they had continuously done throughout history, because their countrymen would now all be Jews. In fact, the kibbutz was integral in changing the Jewish story; it created the "New Jew."<sup>45</sup> The "dependent, religious Diaspora Jew"<sup>46</sup> was transformed into the secular, rigid, hard working, and united Jew of the kibbutz. As Chaim Hoffman, the head of the Palestinian Mission, poignantly explained:

They took... young people out of the soul-destroying atmosphere of the camps,

43 Khazzoom, "*The Kibbutz*," 74.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 72.

46 Ibid.

brought them together with other youth, put them in touch with nature and physical labor.... 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.<sup>47</sup>

To recruit, the movement made promises of education - a priority in Judaism. One Polish woman in a DPC camp refused to join the kibbutz until they promised she would have allotted time to complete her education.<sup>48</sup> In reality, the kibbutz was interested in specifically teaching Hebrew.<sup>49</sup> More than 90% of immigrants were Ashkenazi Jews, meaning they were of Eastern European heritage.<sup>50</sup> Of those, virtually none knew Hebrew and were often fluent only in their home country's language. A common language was necessary to form a cohesive national identity, which made learning Hebrew a requirement to live on the kibbutz. Those in search of a university education felt deceived by what was offered. As one Polish woman refugee, who immigrated to the kibbutz, remembered: "We started to criticize... it wasn't what they promised us, lots of years of education - education was very important to us, there was almost no one who didn't study... They gave us Hebrew, hardly even Israeli history, and called that learning."<sup>51</sup>

Hannah Senesh also lamented the lack of education within the kibbutz. As she wrote in her diary: "I'm ashamed of myself for complaining, but I can't rid myself of the belief that precious years are being wasted, years that should be devoted to study and self-improvement."<sup>52</sup>

47 Ouzan, "Rebuilding Jewish Identities."

48 Khazzoom, "*The Kibbutz*," 82.

49 Ouzan, "Rebuilding Jewish Identities."

50 Van der Berghe, "Huttenites and Kibbutzniks," 526.

51 Khazzoom, "*The Kibbutz*," 83.

52 Senesh, *Hannah Senesh*, 155.



Kids and their parents in kibbutz Ruhama, between 1940-1950. Courtesy of the Israel Internet Association/Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0.

Engaging in study was considered an important first step in becoming a learned professional, which meant financial stability. Money did not mean assured protection for the Jews, but their history of persecution had taught them it was better to be as self-reliant as possible when living in a Christian world. Senesh contemplated if her work in the kibbutz, instead of investing in her education, was her purpose in life, uneasiness she shared with “tens of thousands of young Jews”<sup>53</sup>. She continued to suggest that, although she felt a lack of direction, personal sacrifice was integral for kibbutz life.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the betrayal they felt from the unfulfilled promises of education and community in the kibbutz, Holocaust survivors were not always enthusiastically wel-

comed to their new home. Those who were already living on the kibbutz were somewhat elitist. It was considered an exclusive organization, and permanent members made it obvious that it was not a way of life for all.<sup>55</sup> Permanent members were most commonly criticized for valuing the immigrants’ worth based solely on their ability to work.<sup>56</sup> Work consumed every day of the immigrants’ lives just as it had years before in the work camps; Auschwitz’s own gates read “Arbeit Macht Frei” or “Work will make you free.” Technically, that was the same thought of work in the kibbutz: it would make one free - free of victim status. Of course, labor was being done under two vastly different conditions, the kibbutz being the only consenting work. Permanent kibbutz members bellowed, in Hebrew, at confused survivors to work more efficiently, just as, years before, the Schutzstaffel (SS) had shouted at them to continue working or die. One Polish immigrant, designated as R205 in a study, reflected on

her disdain of the work-obsessed kibbutzniks explaining that they “couldn’t understand that these were children that went through so much. They themselves had children the same age, and they had built houses ... These days someone has an experience, they immediately give them a psychologist...not a soul understood me, they thought I just didn’t want to work...”<sup>57</sup>

Another Polish survivor added that “...there was no caring, they simply did not understand us... they didn’t know what our lives were like in the concentration camps.”<sup>58</sup> R205 further explained that she assumed the

55 Marlilyn Garber, review of *The Kibbutz: Awakening From Utopia*, by Daniel Gavron in *Utopian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2001), 85.

56 Khazzoom, “The Kibbutz,” 83.

57 Ibid., 87.

58 Ibid., 88.

53 Ibid., 144.

54 Ibid., 141.

leader of the kibbutz, who recruited her from her DP camp in Poland, would be representative of the rest of the kibbutz's members in Israel. She described him as warm and welcoming and assumed kibbutz life would be evocative of his spirit - a kibbutz community enthusiastic to receive her. She felt a strong sense of belonging, community, and family within the recruiting group, but "all that ended when I got to the kibbutz."<sup>59</sup> A great number of Holocaust survivors had the same optimistic expectations before being faced with the harsh reality in the kibbutz.

Jewish survivors did not seek psychiatric care during their time in the DP camps and after moving to Israel. Instead, the kibbutz gave them an outlet for their haunting visions from the Holocaust - not in the form of a venue to discuss their memories and feelings -but by arming them and making them soldiers. A sociological study of 25 families of Holocaust survivors living in a kibbutz found that the strong, militaristic, and work-centered environment of the kibbutz helped some cope with the trauma they had previously endured. One interviewee recalled how Germans murdered children by throwing them against a wall. Though he felt entirely helpless at the time, he compared how he felt in that moment to how he felt as a fighter in Israel's War of Independence: "When I fought for the first time with a gun in my hands during the war, I thought - what a pity I did not have a gun then."<sup>60</sup> Many others echoed this new sense of empowerment through military involvement.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>60</sup> Louis Miller, ed., *Mental Health in Rapid Social Change* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1973), 303.

The kibbutz was a haven to the emotionally repressed survivors in many different ways. One survivor, Ruth, felt safer within the kibbutz community's security system,<sup>61</sup> while others found refuge by simply being able to once again provide for their families through work on the kibbutz. In the kibbutz, in other words, Holocaust survivors found alternative forms of therapy.

Within the same study, researchers investigated the implications of the kibbutz's communally run homes for raising children: the children's house. Encompassing the ideas of socialism and egalitarianism, the kibbutz translated these philosophies into a communal home for raising children for the first six months of their lives. It was also common for the children to sleep in these houses, away from their parents, until they became teenagers. The children's house was monitored by members of the kibbutz in shifts (both men and women) and operated with an intercom to tend to the infants' needs. This was mainly due to the somewhat equal status of men and women: both were working on the kibbutz all day and neither had time to care for a newborn. It was also deemed necessary because the kibbutz put more emphasis on the importance of the community as a whole rather than the nuclear family, and certainly not the individual.

Sociologists had interesting insights into the parent-child relationship within the kibbutz. They found that, although there was separation anxieties felt by the children, mothers felt an ease that they were not responsible for rearing their children. It was common for parents to

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 307.



Jews dancing in Hasenecke, Germany, after the UN decision for the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel, Nov. 1947. Courtesy of Yad Vashem/תעודת ההצלה הישראלית Munich, archival signature 1486/302.

recount some of their stories of survival to their children at this time, which the children interpreted as heroic adventures and helped solidify each child's connection to Israel, and especially to the kibbutz which had saved their parents. While Holocaust survivors had spent most of their adolescence as prisoners seeing unimaginable horrors, their children's adolescence was marked by "intense activity, burgeoning responsibility and increasing independence. This ideology makes it possible for the children to compensate for their parents' bypassed adolescence."<sup>62</sup> In turn, Holocaust survivors felt indebted to the kibbutz as a haven for their children - for shielding their family from the horrors they endured.

Noam Shpancer, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor,, was raised in the children's house and recounted

her time growing up on the kibbutz: "We would visit our parents every afternoon between 4pm and 8pm...Our Jewish mothers never cooked us a meal, never washed our clothes or sang us a lullaby. The kibbutz system sought to limit private intimacies in case they diverted members' energy from the communal project."<sup>63</sup> She also revealed that the kibbutz prohibited individuality and competition, and strictly suppressed emotional expression in children. According to her, because of her time on the kibbutz, she had been unable to cry since age ten. Children were socialized "to be strong and sunny, simple and similar."<sup>64</sup> This socialization was the direct result of kibbutz ideology and the Holocaust survivors' experience. The kibbutz was breed-

<sup>63</sup> Noam Shpancer, "Child of the Collective," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2011, accessed October 13, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/feb/19/kibbutz-child-noam-shpancer>.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 310

ing soldiers and had to neglect the individual, especially the individual's emotional state, to do so.

Although survivors' expectations were not met, Historian Avinom J. Patt has argued against suggestions of a deceitful Zionist agenda. According to him, Eretz Yisrael was not exploiting the state of the survivors when recruiters convinced them to immigrate. Though they were described as "hopeless and apathetic and weak," Patt believed that survivors were "a resilient, energetic and active group" and dismissed the claim that later immigration of Jews from Israel to the United States had been a failure of Zionism.<sup>65</sup> Patt was correct, Zionism did not fail, and even though Jews were not told the full extent of what their lives would be like on the kibbutz, these recruitment lies ultimately solidified a thriving Jewish state. Jewish survivors were guided to a life that would be the only solution for the definite preservation of all Jews. Getting the Jews to Israel was necessary, and it was not solely the result of kibbutz recruiters' lies or the survivors' supposed hopeless state that accounted for the massive 136,000 immigrants. The majority of survivors did not have to be "convinced" that Israel was their only destination. No countries allowed their immigration before, or during, WWII and as a consequence of being trapped in Europe, 67% of their population was extinguished.<sup>66</sup> Even after the war, no countries were eager to accept them as refugees. If Jews were going to be attacked in the future, regardless of the continent, they were going to have a country for shelter, a government to protect them, and countrymen working together to preserve the Jewish nation.

It is obvious that kibbutz life was not designed for the Holocaust survivors; it was designed to protect the world's Jewry from ever having to endure the horrors of the Holocaust again. William Haber said it best when he

explained the attitude toward Israel within the DP camps: "...all the DPs, whether they are personally interested in emigration to Israel or not recognize that they have a stake in the fate of that country and that their present status and their future are affected...by what happens to the Jewish community in Israel."<sup>67</sup>

In conclusion, Holocaust survivors hoped the kibbutz life to be similar, or better, than the life they had led before the Holocaust, but the communal experience did not leave room for the individual to prosper. Searching for closure and an escape from the DP camps, survivors were welcomed to the kibbutz with little enthusiasm. Though many felt betrayed by the kibbutz life, it served the larger purpose of redefining Jewish identity. The disunited Jews of Europe found community and structure in the kibbutz; they were received as wartime heroes, not victims. This did not bode well with many. Expecting a consolable family from the kibbutz, the survivors instead felt marginalized and unable to properly grieve the Holocaust. The move to the kibbutz, however, did create the "New Jew" which was "manifested in everything from the rural nature of the work, to the shepherd sandals, direct, unadorned speech, wild, uncovered (i.e., nonreligious) hair, and women who worked in the fields rather than being burdened by traditional roles."<sup>68</sup> The kibbutz helped redefine the Jewish people into Israelis. They could never be vulnerable again; they needed a unified Jewish community, and the kibbutz was the seedling for that community. Ultimately, the Holocaust survivors were transformed by the experience of the kibbutz; they abandoned their identity as victim and successfully armed themselves as nation builders.

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65 Patt, interviewed by Peter Ephross.

66 Ibid.

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67 Haber, "Letter from William Haber."

68 Khazzoom, "*The Kibbutz*," 74.