

Limbo in the “Land of the Perpetrators”

Holocaust Victims, Migration Barriers, and the Re-Establishment
of Jewish Life in West Germany

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Introduction: Jewish Survivors across Germany

For most of the world, the Holocaust ended when Allied troops successfully liberated imprisoned Jews across Europe. But for the thousands of survivors, experiences of uncertainty, abuse, and isolation continued far longer. Many Jewish victims found themselves living in Displaced Persons camps across the western zones of Germany, under the control of American, British, and French forces. The major question facing Jewish DPs in the years following the Holocaust was where to resettle and rebuild their lives. As many were left without surviving family, migration choices were motivated by political, social, and religious objectives. While some hoped to return to their countries of origin, others hoped to gain passage to Palestine. Regardless of their destination, passage out of Allied Germany proved difficult. Their ability to obtain visas was largely dependent upon the Allied sector of Germany in which they were located, their country of origin prior to the Holocaust, and international Jewish advocacy. Perhaps the most controversial option was to remain in Germany itself. Despite pressure to migrate out of Germany from global Jewish organizations and Zionist movements, there were many who remained. While some chose to do so of their own accord, others found themselves with few other options. Nevertheless, the Jewish population that remained in Germany faced ongoing antisemitism and segregation throughout the postwar period, not only from German society, but from the Allied powers and subsequently the Federal Republic of Germany. Despite such hardships, a new German-Jewish identity began to emerge, one that integrated Holocaust reconciliation and resilience. As stated by historian Michael Cohn, the Jewish population “created a new community in Germany built on the ruins of the old.”¹ The choice of Jewish survivors to remain in Germany, either deliberate or circumstantial, was thus foundational to the formation of a new Jewish identity within the FDG and played a key role in the Denazification and re-establishment of German society.

¹ Michael Cohn. *The Jews in Germany, 1945-1993: The Building of a Minority*. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1994), 2.

The Postwar Period and Displaced Persons

To understand the migration barriers facing Jewish DPs after 1945, it is important to contextualize the political and social climate of Germany in the postwar period. After defeating the Nazi regime, the Allies divided Germany into four sectors, under the control of the USA, the UK, France, and the Soviet Union. The areas controlled by the first three powers would eventually form West Germany, while the latter would form East Germany. The Jewish population of West Germany was divided into two main groups. The first were known as *Yekkes*; Jews of German origin who had returned or remerged into society following liberation.² Most of those in within this group returned to their previous communities, therefore interacting with the greater German population.³ The rest, constituting the majority, were Displaced Persons from a variety of places in Eastern Europe.⁴ Most Jewish DPs lived within Displaced Persons camps, segregated from the rest of German society. Conditions and experiences within DP camps varied by zone. While the majority of Jewish DPs lived within the American zone, DPs in any Ally-occupied sector relied upon the local military administration for support. Their livelihood, migration opportunities, and the extent of their right to self-determination were influenced accordingly. This power structure played a key role in their migration. The Allies' proposed solutions to the DP problem shaped the fate of many Jewish communities, especially those who ultimately remained in Germany.

For the greater German population under Allied control, the end of the war became known as Germany's "Zero Hour."⁵ It was a chance for Germany to completely restructure itself in the aftermath of the Nazi regime. After conflict subsided, the Allies were faced with

² Jay Howard Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945-1953*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17.

³ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 17

⁴ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 17

⁵ Peter C. Caldwell, and Karrin Hanshew. *Germany Since 1945: Politics, Culture and Society*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 13.

major problems when moving forward with control over Germany. The most prominent task to arise concerned the most suitable method of restructuring German society. The primary aim was to ensure the events of the war would never again be repeated. Denazification was a key part of this process. While this process succeeded in removing Nazi symbols and high-ranking members from positions of power, changing the attitude of the German public proved more difficult.⁶ Despite high-profile efforts such as the Nuremberg trials, comprehensive reforms remained necessary throughout German society. 8.5 million Germans had been part of the Nazi party, a daunting number to those tasked with instituting change.⁷ In the American Occupied Zone, surveys were employed to examine the percentage of Nazi sympathizers among the postwar population.⁸ Based on their responses, Germans could face restricted employment, fines, or even imprisonment.⁹ However, these methods were unsuccessful; as there was no way to tell if survey responses were truthful and there were few American officials who could read German, making progress very slow.¹⁰ The ineffectiveness denazification in the early postwar period is important to note when examining the experience of Jewish migrants across Germany. Antisemitic ideology remained widespread in German society, continuing to threaten the safety of already-devastated Holocaust victims. Given these circumstances, why did some Jewish survivors stay in or return to Germany? Were their migration patterns established by choice or circumstance? And how did those who remained re-establish themselves within a society that had been so adamant on their destruction?

Migration Patterns: Desired Locations and Obstacles

⁶ Caldwell, *Germany Since 1945: Politics, Culture and Society*, 21

⁷ Caldwell, *Germany Since 1945: Politics, Culture and Society*, 26

⁸ Caldwell, *Germany Since 1945: Politics, Culture and Society*, 26

⁹ Caldwell, *Germany Since 1945: Politics, Culture and Society*, 26

¹⁰ Caldwell, *Germany Since 1945: Politics, Culture and Society*, 26

The postwar migration patterns of Jewish survivors in and out of Germany were not only influenced by individual choice but a variety of political and social factors. As previously mentioned, the American, British, and French zones of occupied Germany had to decide how to best resolve the DP crisis. One of their main solutions was to ensure the repatriation of DPs back to their prewar places of origin. Reactions to repatriation varied. While some survivors happily anticipated returning to their former homes, others felt differently. Some refused to leave DP camps in Germany altogether.¹¹ Within the DP camps, victims were able to build communities in which they felt secure; segregated from German society and living amongst those who understood the trauma of their experiences. The thought of leaving these communities for a “home” that had so violently persecuted them was evidently not appealing to many. Of those who did take advantage of repatriation measures, many returned to a less than ideal situation, an experience particularly prominent for Polish Jews.¹² Returning to communities where they remained outcasts amongst neighbours and without family, many returned to the occupied zones of Germany shortly afterwards. Therefore, repatriation failed to solve the DP crisis across West Germany, thereby complicating solutions for the Allies and further limiting migration options for Holocaust victims. While Germany was not the ideal location for resettlement, many were quick to realize their opportunities for migration were rapidly narrowing.

Outside of repatriation, it was much easier to enter the Allied zones of Germany than to leave. Therefore, as many Jewish survivors were able to find shelter in DP camps, these locations became more permanent than originally intended. DPs were split on their plans for migration. While many hoped to gain passage to Palestine, others wished to escape Europe for

¹¹ Feinstein, Margarete Myers. *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945-1957*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 15.

¹² Feinstein. *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany*, 14.

North America. Regardless of their goals, various barriers limited their chances of successful departure from West Germany. For those hoping to emigrate to Palestine in the early postwar period, the British government made legal entry impossible. Those who tried to enter illegally could face arrest. By August 1946, illegal immigrants were being deported to camps in Cyprus.¹³ The establishment of the State of Israel changed this situation; while conflict over Palestine remained a prominent issue, a new wave of hope emerged in 1948. For many Jewish DPs, this seemed like the light at the end of the tunnel and a wave of Zionist ideology erupted throughout their communities. Unfortunately, hope for resettlement in the homeland was shrouded by further conflict over the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. When the Israeli government called for DPs to join military ranks in their defence, appropriately 13,000 responded by migrating there by the end of 1948.¹⁴ Unfortunately, conflict did not make for ideal living conditions and many of the remaining DPs were “discouraged by the gloomy unemployment and housing shortages in Israel.”¹⁵ Some even chose to emigrate back to the Allied Zones of Germany in the face of hardship across Israel. Once again, migration out of Germany became an increasingly complicated venture for Jewish DPs, who were faced with the dilemma of remaining in camp communities across Ally occupied Germany or joining the conflict and uncertainty within Israel.

Apart from legal and political barriers, it is important to highlight the influence of international Jewish attitudes regarding postwar migration, especially in relation to Jewish resettlement within Germany. Responses from Jewish leadership greatly influenced migration patterns, as victims of the Holocaust looked towards trusted organizations to guide their decision-making process. Assemblies such as the World Jewish Congress were particularly

¹³ Feinstein. *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany*, 57.

¹⁴ Abraham S, Hyman, “Displaced Persons.” *The American Jewish Yearbook* 51 (1950): 320

¹⁵ Hyman, “Displaced Persons,” 320

vocal about the Displaced Persons crisis throughout the post-Holocaust period. Founded in 1936, the WJC identified themselves as one of the only organizations willing to fight for global Jewish rights and freedoms in the face of Nazi persecution.¹⁶ Therefore, their second plenary assembly, on June 27th, 1948, focused on German accountability and postwar migration. Most notably, the press communique stated that “the Jewish people [were] never again to settle on the bloodstained soil of Germany.”¹⁷ The anti-German sentiments of this statement reflect a larger attitude shared by many postwar Jewish communities. The members of the WJC, understandably horrified by the death and suffering endured under the Nazi onslaught, felt that Germany was an unfit location for Jewish life. Congress members highlighted the importance of initiating consequences for Germany as a whole and the prospect of the denazification of the country. The Congress’s “Resolution on Germany” specifically outlined that there must be “payment of reparations by Germany in favour of the uprooted Jews to be used for their rehabilitation and resettlement, in the first place in Palestine.”¹⁸ Therefore, their overarching attitude towards Jewish settlement in Germany was negative. According to the Zionist attitudes of the Congress, the ideal home for displaced Jews across Europe was Palestine. For DPs in Germany, publications such as the WJC’s communique would have served as an important resource in making their migration choices. While the issues raised by the Congress regarding Jewish settlement in Germany were based on well-founded concerns, shared amongst many DPs, it was not enough to ensure their emigration.

While the majority of Jewish DPs did not want to continue living in Germany, it must be acknowledged that there were some who chose to do so. As previously mentioned, returning

¹⁶ “History of the World Jewish Congress.” World Jewish Congress. Accessed December 1, 2022. <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/history>.

¹⁷ “Press Communique, Second Plenary Assembly” (World Jewish Congress. Montreux Switzerland. June 27th, 1948), 84.

¹⁸ “Press Communique, Second Plenary Assembly” (World Jewish Congress. 1948), 84 – 85.

German Jews did not usually reside within DP camps but throughout German communities across the Allied zones. In June of 1949, German-Jewish leaders held a conference in Heidelberg to debate the fate of Jews within Germany.¹⁹ The argument for all Jews to abandon life in Germany was surprisingly opposed. Jewish journalist and Holocaust survivor Eugen Kogon stated “your entirely understandable position [advocating Jewish departure] means the final triumph of Hitler. What Hitler wanted to achieve would now be accomplished.”²⁰ Kogon’s wish for the re-establishment of German Jewish life was ultimately upheld. There was a sense of resilience among German Jews, who were unwilling to give Germany the satisfaction of their absence. Despite continued antisemitic treatment and criticism from the global Jewish community, the minority of holocaust survivors who chose to re-establish themselves in postwar West Germany built the foundation for future Jewish life across the country. Overall, the migration patterns of displaced Jewish communities in West Germany were complex and influenced by a variety of factors. While some understandably left at the first opportunity, others remained. Though despite their reason for living with German borders, deliberate or involuntary, these Jewish communities eventually forged a new identity that embraced their resilience as survivors.

Remaining a Minority: The Rehabilitation of German-Jewish Relations

By May of 1949, West Germany had been established. The newly formed Federal Republic of Germany was home to about 25,000 Jews.²¹ Therefore, the Nazi goal of ensuring Germany as *Judenfrei*, free of Jews, had failed. Hope prevailed throughout the Jewish community that a positive relationship with the FRG could be formed. German-Jewish relations in the early postwar years had not been positive, so there was much work to be done. German

¹⁹ Ruth, Gay. *Safe Among the Germans: Liberated Jews after World War II*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. 142

²⁰ Gay. *Safe Among the Germans*, 142

²¹ Sinn, “*Returning to Stay?*” 400

reactions to newly liberated Holocaust victims had been filled with horror and fear. While many Germans grappled with the guilt of their own complicity, survivors were unable to withhold their justifiable anger towards those they encountered. One survivor recalled that he and his fellow DPs “didn’t want to look at them because we knew, we said, that all German’s were guilty.”²² Therefore, as Germans struggled to take ownership for their actions, Jewish victims remained angry. German-Jews faced even more personal conflicts when returning to their original communities. Many Germans had profited from the expulsion of Jewish communities, taking their homes, businesses, and property. Therefore, the return of the survivors was often met with hostility and an unwillingness to return what had been stolen.²³ Ultimately, something had to be done to make amends; a seemingly impossible task in the face of such tragic loss and violence. It was not until after the establishment of the FRG that things began to change. While many Jewish DPs had emigrated by 1949, those who remained were determined to reinstitute Jewish life there.

Re-establishment efforts began by contacting German officials, a relationship critical to the livelihood of Jewish communities across West Germany. Jews remaining in Germany had been left to their own devices, as international organizations such as the World Jewish Congress focused on Jews in Israel and the United States.²⁴ As a result, German Jewish leaders were quick to approach German administrators on their own. They formed organizations such as the Central Council of Jews in Germany to assist with these negotiations.²⁵ Over time, the Central Council was successful in establishing a working relationship with the West German president Theodor Heuss and his party.²⁶ Heuss proved to be the German leader most sympathetic to Jewish concerns and publicly expressed disdain towards the actions of the Nazi regime - a simple

²² Feinstein. *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany*, 34

²³ Feinstein. *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany*, 34

²⁴ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 185

²⁵ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 185

²⁶ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 185

declaration, but one rarely made by other West German officials. He also encouraged genuine reconciliation between Germans and Jews, stating that the development of mere tolerance was not acceptable.²⁷ This was a major achievement for the Jewish community who had been fighting for their rightful place within German society.

With such relationships now established, the Central Council insisted that a crucial step in reconciliation was funding for Jewish communities. Holocaust victims were struggling to re-establish themselves within West German society and could not do so without public funding. Therefore, the Council stated that as representatives of German Jewish interests they should “be granted a federal subsidy which would enable them to complete tasks independent [of foreign aid].”²⁸ The West German government ultimately accepted the request for funding, placing it under the responsibility of the cultural affairs division rather than the reparations division.²⁹ This decision was based on the notion that the funding was not a matter of making amends for past crimes, but an attempt to ensure future security for the Jewish community.³⁰ The Central Committee was able to divide funding among various groups in need, such as unemployed workers, widows, and orphans. The Jewish community across West Germany was therefore able to begin re-establishing their place in society. Their creation of representative bodies such as the Central Committee proved successful, serving as a voice for a community that Germany had been so adamant to silence. Despite continued roadblocks and strained international relationships, German Jews were unwilling to be a continually oppressed minority. Therefore, a new German Jewish identity began to emerge throughout the postwar era, one that was defined by activism and reconciliation.

²⁷ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 186

²⁸ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 258

²⁹ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 260

³⁰ Geller. *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany*, 260

Outside of financial and political compensation, the German Jewish community also attempted to bring about social reconciliation. In the early postwar era, German society was wholly unwilling to take accountability for its actions throughout the Holocaust. Historians have noted a lack of moral accountability within postwar German culture: as the average German citizen had suffered greatly during the war, they often identified themselves as victims of conflict rather than active and passive contributors to racial extermination. Some cities even repurposed synagogues as a method of overlooking the absence of a once-vibrant German Jewish community.³¹ Despite such unwillingness to confront the past, Jews across West Germany attempted to form collective memories of the Holocaust. Hans Reichmann, a representative from the London Council of Jews from Germany, proposed the creation of Holocaust memorials and museums in the locations of previously prominent Jewish communities throughout Germany.³² The Jewish Restitution Commission was also concerned with Holocaust memorialization, collecting archival documents from across Germany starting in 1947.³³ The preservation of Jewish documents and religious texts across Germany was an important part of postwar Holocaust memorialization. These documents represented the history of the Jewish communities that had once flourished throughout Germany. By collecting and displaying these documents, Germany was unable to erase their entangled history with the Jewish people. It is also important to note other forms of personal resistance from Jews across postwar Germany. Apart from official organizational efforts, each Holocaust survivor memorialized their experiences in their own way. Some wrote memoirs about their survival, published years later to contribute to German Holocaust discourse. Others felt as though their simple existence within postwar Germany was resistance in itself. One survivor, Rivkah Horowitz, summarized this sentiment by

³¹ Roemer, Nils H. *German City, Jewish Memory: The Story of Worms*. 1st ed. Hanover: Published by University Press of New England, 2010.

³² Roemer, *German City, Jewish Memory*, 149

³³ Roemer, *German City, Jewish Memory*, 151

stating “God has chosen us to live. Why us? We don’t know, but we know that we were chosen, chosen to continue the chain of Jewish heritage.”³⁴ Regardless of their approach to Holocaust commemoration, through interactions with Germans, official restitution efforts, or personal memorialization, Jewish communities rejected the silence that echoed across West German society in the postwar era. Ultimately, German Jews forged a new place within society through active engagement, using their tragic experiences as a reason to fight for permanent change.

Drawing Conclusions: The New Generation and Jewish Identity

As discussed thus far, the re-establishment of Jewish communities across postwar Germany was the result of complex migration decisions, political turmoil, and personal resistance. Despite such hardships, the actions of survivors in West Germany built the foundation for future generations of Jews across the country. The impact of their efforts is most clearly seen through the actions and attitudes of their children. For many survivors, raising a family served as another method of ensuring the future of Jewish culture. Their children were therefore raised in an environment steeped in Jewish heritage and Holocaust awareness- yet also deeply engrained in Germany society. Almost 70% of the “second generation” married non-Jewish Germans, therefore experiencing a fused German-Jewish identity.³⁵ For those born and raised within the German Federal Republic, the language, people, and culture were definitors in the way they chose to live as adults. Due to this immersion, they absorbed into German society, through marriage and otherwise, in a manner their parents had not. While many identified themselves as Germans, they also did so with an awareness of the past. Mortimer Ostow, psychoanalyst, stated that many Jews of the second generation felt as though they “were not in a position to forgive, as they were not victims, but were also not in a position to forget.”³⁶ They reconciled this

³⁴ Feinstein. *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany*, 69

³⁵ Gay. *Safe Among the Germans*, 256

³⁶ Gay. *Safe Among the Germans*, 260

conflicting narrative through continued activism and public debate. German Jews wrote plays, books, and essays about their identities within Germany and the greater Jewish community. They also attempted to further reconcile with Germans by addressing ongoing tension. One German-Jewish paper published a list of “Tips” for Germans regarding Jewish culture and relations. The list included statements such as “it is quite permissible to say ‘Jew,’ the word is not insulting” and “we are not all rich, riches among Jews are as unevenly distributed as they are among the rest of the population.”³⁷ Therefore, due to the second generation’s greater integration within German society, they felt comfortable enough to directly address Jewish stereotypes. Overall, the status and identity of the second generation was a direct result of the determination of holocaust survivors who built a life for themselves in the face of trauma and discrimination. Their attempts at reconciliation with German officials and greater society set the stage for future generations, forming identities based on Jewish resilience.

In conclusion, the experiences of Holocaust survivors in postwar Germany resulted in the formation of a new Jewish identity. Beginning as Displaced Persons across the Allied occupied Western zones, survivors were faced with the impossible decision of where to re-establish their lives. This choice was influenced not only by their prewar origins but by their familial situations, political conflicts, and economic opportunity. While some chose to remain in Germany as a method of rejecting the Nazi goal of eliminating Jewish life, a decision criticized by global Jewish communities, others remained due to a lack of other options. While Zionist movements encouraged DPs to migrate to Israel, the living conditions there were poor. Attempts to repatriate DPs to their countries of origin were also often unsuccessful as victims failed to find surviving family and continued to experience antisemitic treatment. Regardless of their reasons for remaining in Germany, the population of Jewish survivors who worked to rebuild their lives

³⁷ Gay. *Safe Among the Germans*, 297

throughout the country that had so brutally persecuted them deserves admiration. It is important to acknowledge the unique position facing Holocaust survivors in postwar Germany. Unlike survivors in other nations, those who remained were forced to face their trauma head-on. They were also largely ignored by the global Jewish community, who remained more concerned about Jewish settlement outside of Germany than about those who were left behind. With few advocates outside of their own communities, German Jewish survivors became self-sustaining, living amongst their previous persecutors and raising families in the rubble of previously flourishing Jewish centres. Their determination contributed to German Holocaust accountability, both politically and socially. Therefore, for the community of Holocaust victims that rebuilt their lives in West Germany, the postwar period was full of failures and triumphs. Due to their unwavering resolve, Jewish life in Germany was reinstated. Through efforts of political activism, Holocaust commemoration, and attempts to reconstruct Jewish culture across West Germany, survivors laid the foundation for the next generation of German Jews. Thus, a new era of Judaism emerged; one that was not defined but empowered by the horrifying experiences under the Nazi regime.

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