Women After War:
Jewish Women as Displaced Persons in Belsen, 1945-50

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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* is useful for this thesis in that it discusses both the cultural and political aftermath of the war, and makes connections between the DP issue and the larger question of what to do with the German nation. Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzel's book *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany* is a source used throughout this thesis for its ability to contextualize the DP issue, as well as provide information about the Belsen DP camp. Finally, the body of work written by Atina Grossmann discusses women in post-war Germany, both Jewish and non-Jewish DPs, and uses a gendered lens to discuss the DP crisis. These

sources, among the other few English texts on these topics, provide a vital foundation for this thesis.

Many survivors of the Holocaust remained in the camp system for years after the Holocaust had ended, because they had nowhere else to go. Much of Europe, and Germany in particular, had been destroyed by bombing. As well, the Holocaust had ripped people from their homes, and sent them to camps often far away from their families and loved ones. Now, in unfamiliar territory, and still coming to terms with the concept of starting a life after the horrors of the Holocaust, the displaced persons of Europe, who consisted both of Europeans who had to flee their homes during the war and Jews who had been liberated from the Nazis' concentration camps, lived in displaced persons camps, and attempted to start life anew.

The displaced persons issue is complex to discuss in that there were a multitude of experiences, many of them differing vastly based on age, gender, religious views, and country of origin. As well, every DP's individual experience would have differed based on where they had been displaced to, and who was in charge of aiding their eventual return to their home, or helping them to establish a new home. While focusing in on the Belsen displaced persons camp, which was known as the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in the Nazi era, and was made famous in the decades that followed the camp's liberation by the publication of *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, who died in this camp, this essay will begin by talking about the broader, shared experiences of DP camp life in Chapter One. Chapter Two will narrow in scope to focus on the Belsen DP camp, a camp that quickly became a camp exclusively for Jews who had survived the Holocaust. Finally, this essay will discuss the issue of gender in Chapter Three by looking at the specific experiences of Jewish women as displaced persons. This chapter will illustrate how

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 and economic aspects of recovery, with few sources discussing the cultural regrowth, and even fewer sources discussing the difficult situation for those of Jewish heritage and culture. Much of the information in this thesis comes from contemporary newspaper articles, such as the *New York Times*, that discuss the DP camps and DP issues overall, photographs taken at the DP camps, and voices from the women of the camps themselves through memoirs written by those who lived in the DP camp system. This thesis is inserting itself into a historical scholarship gap in the hopes of illustrating how instrumental Jewish women in the DP camps were to building a sense of normalcy and a thriving Jewish future.

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 a new country, and some countries were under new administration with different governments in place. Within months of Germany's surrender to the Allied forces in May 1945, more than six million of these DPs were repatriated by the Allies to their home countries, but up to two million DPs remained displaced far from their homes.[1]

Many of the Jewish survivors who remained displaced, who had survived the Nazi concentration camps or had managed to survive the war in hiding, were unable (and sometimes unwilling) to return to their home countries, as many of them were from countries now under the administration of the Soviet Union. Due to both postwar antisemitism that was still present among the local populations, and the fact that many of their communities had been destroyed, returning home was often not an option. Those who did manage to return home often feared for their lives. For example, locals in Kielce, Poland initiated violent pogroms against the Jews who returned home; on 4 July 1946, 43 Jews, all of whom were Holocaust survivors, were killed by

[1] Angelika Königseder and Juliane Wetzel, *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany,* 15.

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.

The DPs who had moved westward to Germany after being liberated from the Nazi concentration camps were housed in Allied-established DP camps. These camps were established in Allied-occupied Germany, Austria, and Italy for all refugees and displaced persons who were waiting to either return home, or leave Europe altogether. Most of the Jewish DP population was housed in camps in the British and American zones of Occupied Germany, in the north and south respectively. The British established the Belsen DP camp, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, and the Americans established the camps of Feldafing, Landsberg, and Föhrenwald. These large camps, including Belsen, could hold between 4000 and 6000 people each at any given time, and some had over 10,000 people pass through them between their establishment and closure.[3]

In 1947, the peak of the DP crisis, the Jewish DP population alone reached around 250,000. At this time, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was responsible for administering all the DP camps in Europe, with the assistance of the various national governments, but the Jewish DPs themselves managed to achieve a large measure of internal autonomy. There were many active Jewish agencies in the displaced persons camps. For example, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) provided DPs with food and clothing, and the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) offered vocational training in a variety of fields.[4] Jewish DPs within the camps also formed self-governing

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[2] Ben Shephard, *The Long Road Home: the Aftermath of the Second World War,* 239.

[3] Mark Wyman, *Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951,* 49.

[4] Shephard, 109.

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

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[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 frequent occurrence across the board in the DP camps, especially among the Jewish populations, as they symbolized a continuity of Jewish life and culture.

Schools in the primarily Jewish DP camps also came to symbolize a resurgence of Jewish cultural livelihood, as they illustrated a young Jewish population becoming educated in their religious and cultural roots. Soon after the camps were opened, schools for children of various ages were established. Initially, teachers came from Israel, the United States, and Britain to teach the DP children; however, once a sense of structure and stability came to the camps, teachers from the DP ranks were invited to teach in the schools.[6] Many of these teachers were women who had been teachers before the war, while some were also women with a higher level of education who could be trained to become educational instructors. There was also a rebirth of Orthodox Judaism as religious schools were founded in several camps, including Belsen, Föhrenwald, and Feldafing. In all these camps, Jewish religious holidays became major occasions for gatherings and celebrations.

The DPs themselves helped transform the displaced persons camps into active cultural and social centres. Despite the often bleak conditions of the DP camps, social and occupational organizations were soon created in large numbers. For example, journalism sprang to life with more than 170 publications across all the DP camps in Occupied Germany; numerous theatre and musical troupes toured the camps, the most popular of which came from the Belsen DP camp; and athletic clubs from various DP camps challenged each other in different sporting events.

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[6] Königseder and Wetzel, 182.

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 Palestine, grew to be what could be considered the most important movement of the Jewish DP era. From 1945 to 1948, Jewish survivors in increasing numbers chose British-controlled Palestine as their most desired emigration destination,[7] due to their nationalism being heightened by both their lack of overall autonomy in the DP camps, as well as having limited options for emigration with many countries closing their borders, or limiting the numbers of refugees they were able to accept. The Zionist cause was heavily influenced by the DPs, as was the political debate about the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, as the DPs condemned British barriers to open immigration to Palestine.

In order to prepare the Jewish DPs for an eventual emigration to Palestine and a transition into a pioneering-style life, agricultural training farms and communes were established in the DP camps. Zionist youth groups in the various DP camps fostered an excitement for Israel among the DPs' young population. David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Jewish community in Palestine, visited the larger German DP camps several times in 1945 and 1946.[8] His visits helped to raise DP morale, and enlisted their support of a Jewish state. The Jewish Agency in Palestine and Jewish soldiers from the British Army's Jewish Brigade further strengthened the bonds between the DPs and the Zionists in Palestine, often assisting in illegal immigration attempts to Palestine. In addition, mass protests and demonstrations against British policy regarding Palestine became regular occurrences in the DP camps.

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[7] Shephard, 192.

[8] Ibid., 191.

In terms of emigration, the Allies deliberated and procrastinated for years after the Nazi concentration camps were liberated before coming to any sort of plan to resolve the crisis, even though some Allied officials had proposed solutions to solve it in the first few months after liberation. For example, Earl Harrison in his August 1945 "Harrison Report" to American President Harry Truman, recommended a mass transfer of the Jewish DP population from Europe to British-controlled Palestine or the United States. The report was successful in that it influenced Truman to give preference to DPs, especially widows and children without parents, in US immigration quotas.[9] However, Great Britain claimed that the US did not have the right to control British policy regarding the immigration of Jews to Palestine, and did not change its immigration quotas.

While Truman could not raise the restrictive US and British immigration quotas on his own, he did succeed in pressuring Britain into funding the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, the bi-national delegation that gave advice on the DP crisis in Europe. It suggested that Britain allow the admission of 100,000 Jewish DPs to Palestine.[10] The fact that Britain was actively against the immediate immigration of Jews to Palestine, and the fact that it rejected the Harrison Report, made the Jewish DPs' desire to reach Palestine stronger, and many made it past British patrols and illegally into Palestine.

On May 14, 1948, the United States formally recognized the state of Israel, and the US Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act in 1948, which allowed 200,000 DPs from Europe to enter the United States.[11] The law at first encouraged the emigration of DPs of non-Jewish

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[9] Ibid., 372.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

descent, but Congress introduced an amendment to the bill with the DP Act of 1950 to make immigration quotas not racially or culturally based.[12] A *New York Times* article, published on April 14, 1951, described "Europe's 'surplus' population" as being easy to settle in the United States because resettling the DP population would cost "not more than $301.50 [US] a person,"[13] negating any arguments regarding the high cost of allowing refugees to settle in foreign countries. By 1952, over 80,000 Jewish DPs had immigrated to the United States.

With over 136,000 Jewish DPs in the newly established Jewish state of Israel, and another 100,000 in nations such as Canada and the United States, the DP emigration crisis came to an end. All the DP camps were closed by 1952, and the Jewish DPs began new lives around the world. But before that was able to happen, the Jewish DPs had to continue living in camps, such as the Belsen DP camp, for upwards of five years after liberation.

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[12] Ibid., 382.

[13] "Cost of Resettling D.P.'s Seen As Low: Kingsley Tells I.R.O. Refugees Can Be Sent Where Needed for $301.50 a Person," *New York Times,* April 14, 1954, accessed January 4, 2018.

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-Verwaltungshauptam* (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]

During its existence, approximately 50,000 people died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, including Anne Frank and her sister Margot. Anne's story of hiding in a secret annex in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, from 1942 to 1944 with her family before her eventual deportation to Auschwitz, and later Bergen-Belsen, was made famous when her personal journal was published by her father once the war ended. Her story resonated with many people in the postwar years, especially with younger children, and brought more attention to the horrors that occurred at Bergen-Belsen. Both Anne and Margot died in the camp in March 1945, only a month before

[14] Königseder and Wetzel, 167.

the camp was liberated by the Allied forces. Most of those liberated from the camp were Jews, or people the Nazi regime considered to be "Jewish".

When the Allied and Soviet forces advanced into Germany in late 1944, Bergen-Belsen quickly filled with thousands of Jewish prisoners who were forced to march from camps in the East that were closer to the warfront. This only overwhelmed the meagre resources the camp had access to, and the camp came to be a "dumping ground" of prisoners.[15] From 1 February to 1 April 1945, the camp saw a population increase from 22,000 to 43,042.[16] By the time the camp was liberated by British forces on 15 April 1945, there were over 60,000 people being housed on the camp's soil. Additionally, in the last six months prior to liberation, the camp saw a large influx in the number of female prisoners. Because of this, the SS had dissolved the northern section of the camp that was being used to house POWs, and established a *Grosses Frauenlager* (large women's camp) in January 1945.

When the British military arrived to liberate the camp, most of the 60,000 prisoners they found were seriously ill, and thousands of corpses laid unburied on the premises. In the two years prior to liberation, over 36,000 prisoners had died in the camp, with an additional 13,000 dying after liberation. Shortly after the camp was evacuated, the British forces burned down most of the camp's buildings to prevent the spread of typhus.[17] The Belsen DP camp, which was located in former German army barracks on the soil of the former concentration camp, was established shortly thereafter in 1945 to house the over 12,000 survivors who could not immediately return home. These army barracks were some of the only buildings that were not burned down by the

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 168.

[17] Ibid.

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]

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[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 camp still held more than 25,000 survivors, consisting mostly of gentile Poles (about 15,000) and Jews (about 11,000), many of whom were also from Poland.

The Nazis' Bergen-Belsen concentration camp had been divided into four areas, and the Belsen DP Camp was set up on the grounds of Camps 2-4. The camp consisted of pre-existing concrete barracks with beds, mattresses, running water, and electricity. Because conditions were so poor immediately after liberation, hundreds of survivors died every day for some time after liberation. This was unlike the conditions at the Föhrenwald DP camp, for example, a camp located in the American zone of occupation near Munich that was of a similar size to the Belsen DP camp. Since this camp was established in the fall of 1945, months after Belsen and many other camps were established, conditions were better initially at this camp.[23] Belsen was different

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[21] Königseder and Wetzel, 167.

[22] Jacob Biber, *Risen from the Ashes: A Survivor's Continuing Story of the Holocaust*, 27.

[23] Königseder and Wetzel, 96.

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 that 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]

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[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

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[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.

in the camp. As patients in the hospital began recovering, the nearby Glyn Hughes Hospital, built in 1937 to serve the needs of Nazi Germany but renamed after Brigadier Glynn Hughes who was important in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, became the regular DP hospital, as it was better staffed by German doctors and nurses and had resources available to address the more complex medical issues of the survivor population.[31] Departments at this hospital were established to meet the specific needs of the Jewish survivors, including the Tuberculosis outbreak within the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp before liberation and several different dental diseases that survivors had acquired due to understandably poor oral hygiene, as well as the needs of the other DPs of the Belsen camp.

The British authorities, surprisingly, allowed German doctors to practice on the Jewish DPs who were being treated in the camp's hospital. These doctors were forbidden to practice on German patients outside the camp, but were allowed to practice on the Jewish and Polish camp population instead. As well, the majority of the nurses working in the camp's hospital were German.[32] While the British were not entirely keen on allowing German doctors and nurses to practice medicine on the Jewish survivors they were working to protect, there was such a shortage of British, American, and French doctors in the Occupied Zone, and so many Holocaust survivors who needed medical attention, that they had no choice.

As the population of the camp began to grow steadily, the Belsen DP camp quickly developed into a small town of sorts. When the Jewish DPs realized that they would not be able to be repatriated back to their home countries as quickly as DPs of other nationalities were able to be,

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[31] Ibid., 179.

[32] Ibid.

a sense of a normal daily life had to be established within the camp's boundaries. In order for a "normal" Jewish existence at Belsen to be possible, the DPs needed to speak up about their desires in the camp until they were able to be repatriated to a more permanent home.

The Jewish community in Belsen was very vocal about their wants and needs in the postwar period, and the camp saw the first Jewish newspaper in postwar Germany begin publication in the camp. Shortly after the DP camp was established and until the autumn of 1945, Belsen's *Unzer Szytme*, or "Our Voice," was the only newspaper in occupied Germany written exclusively by and for displaced persons of Jewish culture and heritage.[33] The newspaper was published by the Central Jewish Committee in Bergen-Belsen, the chapter of the committee that represented the survivors of the Bergen-Belsen KZ camp living in the Belsen DP camp. It appeared entirely in Yiddish.

In September 1945, the Central Jewish Committee established a Cultural Department that was given full responsibility over the newspaper. The Cultural Committee was keen on using the paper to address the needs of the Jewish survivor population, most of whom were struggling to locate relatives and loved ones displaced by the war. By New Year's Day in 1946, a new section in the paper called "We're Searching for Our Relatives" became a recurring addition to the newspaper in the years to come. This section was used by Jewish DPs both within and outside of Belsen, and became one of the most important newspaper sections. The newspaper can be used by historians to identify what issues were most concerning to the Jewish DPs of Belsen, and to chart how these issues and interests changed over time. For example, a new section appeared in July 1946 titled "Our Life in Pictures," which offered a way for the camp to share what was

[33] Ibid., 190.

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

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[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

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[37] Ibid., 194.

[38] Ibid., 195.

[39] Ibid., 196.

total of 1070 weddings in the camp.[40] Many marriages occurred between young Jews who had both lost their families, and wanted the security of someone else to be there for them. As one young male survivor said in 1946, "I was lonely; she was lonely. Perhaps together we will be half as lonely."

The Orthodox Jews living at Belsen DP camp, however, saw a lack of religious education available in the camp, as well as an absence of religious practice in daily life amongst the Jewish population. The Orthodox Jews at Belsen believed that the majority of the Jews in the camp were straying from their religious roots, and needed strict guidelines to ensure a Jewish faith was being practiced. By contrast, many Belsen DPs saw the Orthodox Jews' strict observance of the Sabbath as a nuisance, as there were other parts of life and culture that they wanted to immerse themselves in after years of suffering during the Holocaust. Regardless, the rabbinate, who served both the Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews at Belsen, was a great service to the Jewish communities in helping them to observe religious laws and traditions in the camps, and continue these traditions after the dissolution of the DP camps. Without the rabbinate in the camps, there would likely have been no Jewish religious life in post-camp Europe.[41]

Many of the Jewish DPs of the Belsen camp saw their cultural practices, both religious and otherwise, as being necessary for a successful emigration to the newly developed Jewish State of Israel. After the United Nations approved a partition of Palestine and agreed to establish an official Jewish state, the Belsen DP camp began training many Jewish survivors living in the camp to join the Israeli paramilitary on 29 November 1947.[42] Enthusiasm among the DPs for

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 198.

[42] Ibid., 204.

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 Belsen and other camps in the British zone of occupation freedom to leave the camps. After 1947, various agencies arranged for the immigration of small refugee groups to many different countries. For example, 300 Jewish and an additional 200 non-Jewish tailors in the British zone were chosen to immigrate to Canada.[46] The Belsen DP camp was scheduled to close on 1 April 1950. However, violent resistance by some (mostly male, though some female) DPs in the camp forced the camp's closure to be pushed back three months. These DPs were resisting the closure of the camp because they were what the British authorities termed "hard-core cases," meaning Jewish DPs with medical problems that gave them limited opportunities for resettlement, or those DPs who did not want to give up the home they had created for themselves over the past

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[43] Ibid., 205.

[44] Ibid., 206.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 207.

six years.[47] Finally, on 10 July 1950, the final thousand DPs left Belsen, and the gates to the camp were closed. According to a *New York Times* article titled "Belsen Camp is Closed.: 30,000 Jews Were Killed by Nazis at Spot in Germany," published on 11 July 1950, 100,000 Jews were registered and processed through the camp in the five years it was open, and about 20,000 of them emigrated to Israel and other countries, while the rest were moved to other DP camps or began new lives in West Germany.[48] For the British authorities, the camp's closure marked the end of the immediate repercussions of the Holocaust, and allowed them to take steps towards concentrating their efforts on the future of West Germany. For many of the DPs who lived there, the closure of the camp was bittersweet.

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[47] Ibid., 208.

[48] "Belsen Camp is Closed.: 30,000 Jews Were Killed by Nazis at Spot in Germany," *New York Times,* July 11, 1950, accessed February 16, 2018.

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 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, Nazi racial policies had undermined the structure of Jewish families. Before World War II began, Jewish families in Germany were very often organized along patriarchal lines, and anti-Jewish legislation in the Third Reich destroyed the ability of Jewish men to support their families. This increased the burden on Jewish women as mothers to provide materially and economically for

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[49] Margarete Myers Feinstein, "Jewish Women Survivors in the Displaced Persons Camps of Occupied Germany: Transmitters of the Past, Caretakers of the Present, and Builders of the Future," 68.

their families, while also working to maintain their home life.[50] Some Jewish men fled their homes to seek safety elsewhere, leaving their wives and children behind to care for themselves, while others remained at home but stayed in hiding, as initially, many believed that Jewish women and children had less to fear from Nazi persecution.[51] Aside from the disintegration and changes in family relationships, the dehumanizing conditions of the ghettos and concentration camps undermined normal social interactions between families and friends. Because of this, the steps taken by both male and female survivors to establish romantic relationships and families in the postwar era mark an important step in the restoration of the Jewish society.

After the Nazi concentration camps were closed and the survivors were liberated by the Allied forces, the survivors could finally devote their energies to things other than survival. As the realization sank in that finding lost family members would often be impossible, DPs began to long for romantic connections. The common desire among DPs to feel a sense of "belonging" prompted many into courtship and marriage.[52] Aside from not wanting to be alone, intimate romantic relationships were also a sign of liberation and rejuvenation, as they were something the survivors could choose for themselves. As previously discussed in Chapter One, weddings were a common occurrence across the board in the DP camps among the Jewish DP population. Despite the unusual circumstances of the DP camps, these marriage unions represented a return to personal freedom and the beginning of the renewal for both individuals and the Jewish community as a whole.

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[50] Feinstein, 71.

[51] Feinstein, 71.

[52] Feinstein, 72.

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

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[53] Feinstein, 73.

[54] Feinstein, 73.

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

[56] Feinstein, 74.

[57] Feinstein, 74.

our continuation."[58] Births in the DP camps represented not only the successful continuation of a single Jewish family line, but of the future of the entire Jewish people.

In 1946, the occupied German state saw a Jewish birthrate that was estimated to be higher than that of any other country or population in the world, while the German birthrate was declining due to a higher number of suicides, infant and child mortality, and abortions.[59] Both in response to and in defiance of their Holocaust experiences, it was heard repeatedly from women across the camps that "all [they] wanted right away was a baby. This was the only hope for [them]."[60] Population statistics at this time were shifting and unreliable in regards to the total number of Jewish DPs in Occupied Germany, but all of them spoke to an unprecedented rise in the Jewish birthrate. Whatever the various nature of the experiences of different individuals, there is no doubt that for most of the DPs themselves, the surge in marriages, pregnancies, and babies born represented a collective conscious affirmation of Jewish life, as well as definitive material evidence of survival.[61]

Belsen DP camp, like the majority of the other DP camps in the Allied Occupied Zone, saw a large spike in the number of births of Jewish children. By 1947, Belsen was seeing about 15 babies born in the camp per week; by early February the following year, the camp was celebrating the birth of its thousandth baby.[62] In the five years the camp was open as a DP camp, over two thousand children were born before the camp closed. This number is considerable when taking into account both the number of couples who only met and were married within Belsen

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[58] Biber, 48.

[59] Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies,* 184.

[60] Ibid., 188.

[61] Ibid., 189.

[62] Königseder and Wetzel, 181.

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 operation, meant that household chores took much time and energy, and childcare remained the responsibility of the mother. The demands of housekeeping and child rearing also meant that mothers abandoned other activities, such as attaining an education.[63] Given these demands, it is easy to assume that women played no significant public role. However, some women chose to restrict their fertility in order to have an active public life; this parallels the experiences of many German women, who chose to restrict their own fertility to seek public advancement, so as not to begin raising children in an occupied country.[64] Other Jewish DPs managed to both raise children and maintain an active public life despite the hardships of living in the DP camps.

While it was uncommon in the DP camps for women to be involved in the political sphere, women were members of the Belsen DP Camp Committee. These women fought for the DPs' political, social, and cultural goals, which included their right to emigrate to British-controlled Palestine. Yet aside from this one instance, it was uncommon for women to be involved in Belsen's various Camp Committees, so most women were active members in camp cultural ventures instead. One of the first was the formation of historical commissions that attempted to document the prewar and wartime experiences of the survivors within the camps. Cultural

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[63] Feinstein, 75.

[64] Ibid., 73.

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 understood that more was at stake in their performances than just their integrity as artists; they were also waging a battle to reclaim their Jewish heritage, to revive the Jewish sense of pride, and to project an image of the Jewish future.[67]

The Belsen DP camp had two main theatre groups: the Kazet-Theatre group and the Jidsze Arbeter-Bine group. The Kazet-Theatre group was the more popular and more well-known of the two, and was established in early July 1945 by Samy Feder and Sonia Baczkowska, both of

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[65] Ibid., 76.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 79.

whom were in charge of the Belsen Central Committee's Cultural Department.[68] This theatre troupe was comprised of 16 women and 14 men, making the theatre troupe more or less equal in terms of gender representation, with the female actors being as important as the male actors. Feder said of the group's first performance:

> Despite all the difficulties and improvisations, it was all right on the night, as it always is with good actors…When we gave, as our last item, the famous song 'Think not you travel to despair again,' the thousand people in the hall rose to their feet and sang with us.[69]

In the weeks that followed, the group gave ten performances of the three different plays in their repertoire, all which were met with support from the British officials and the other DPs within the camp. Through the Belsen DP camp's Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) programs, that supported the theatre's productions, women also frequently contributed as active members contributing to the theatre troupe's success by sewing costumes and building sets.[70]

This theatre troupe grew in popularity, and began performing more shows around the camp, adding more plays to their repertoire. On 19 February 1947, the ensemble sent out invitations to the premiere of its production of Sholem Aleichem's *Dos Groyse Gevins (The Jackpot)* in the camp's tent theatre. They established such a name for themselves that, in the tradition of the Yiddish theatre, the men and women of the theatre troupe took themselves on the road and became a travelling theatre company. Over the next few months, the group was even granted

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[68] Königseder and Wetzel, 188.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., 188-89.

permission to travel to various DP camps and hospitals in the British zone, and had successful runs of their shows in Belgium and France. The Belgian government was so appreciative of the work the Kazet-Theatre group was doing that on 27 June 1947, they offered the members of the troupe Belgian residents permits, and most of the group remained in Belgium before eventually immigrating to Palestine a few years later.[71] Those women involved in the theatre troupe who were also mothers, and who had families back at the Belsen camp were able to immigrate with their families to Belgium, and start a new life as a family unit.

Although these two theatre groups became more or less established at the Belsen DP camp and throughout Western Europe to different extents, by contrast, residents of Belsen DP camp rarely had the opportunity to attend plays or concerts outside of the camp. It was not until 5-6 June 1946 that the first major event featuring guest performers from outside the camp was held at Belsen, in the camp's movie theatre.[72]

Alongside such cultural endeavours like becoming involved in the local camp theatre scene, becoming teachers in the DP camps also allowed women to transmit their Jewish heritage to children, the next generation of the Jewish community. While some women had teaching experience and training, many simply had completed secondary school, and had a desire to work with children. Some of the DPs saw women as having a unique role to play in both educating and raising children. Female DPs were strongly urged by their peers "to assist actively in solving the educational problem…[.] With every word, with every gesture and each interaction, they must instil good behaviour in the youth."[73]

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[71] Ibid., 189.

[72] Ibid., 190.

[73] Feinstein, 77.

At Belsen, education was a main focus of the British administration as well as the Jewish DPs themselves. In July 1945, shortly after the camp's establishment, a Jewish elementary school was opened and named in honour of Dr. Jacob Edelstein, a Czechoslovak Zionist, social democrat, and the first Jewish Elder in the Theresienstadt ghetto. By September that same year, the school was teaching 92 children, and the principal was a woman named Sarah Lewkowicz, a Jewish woman appointed to the position by the Jewish Brigade, the Palestinian Jewish unit of the British Army who fought with the British during the Second World War. The first teachers in the school were also members of the Jewish Brigade, but later they came from the DP ranks, and many of them were women.

In 1945, the Central Committee made full-time education mandatory for all individuals in the DP camps up to age eighteen. On 17 December 1945, the Belsen camp authorities opened the Jewish Brigade Hebrew Secondary School in old German army barracks on the camp site;[74] this school was run by Dr. Helen Wrubel, a former teacher at the Belsen elementary school and Holocaust survivor of the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp itself, who helped to establish the school with the aid of soldiers from the Jewish Brigade.[75] At this school, and others within the other major DP camps, there was constant movement of teachers between positions; as people began to emigrate from the camp, at times it was often hard to find replacements immediately, as there were often limited numbers of teachers, mostly women, who were trained well enough to teach children skills needed to eventually continue their educations in schools outside the camps.

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Hagit Lavsky, "A Community of Survivors: Bergen-Belsen as a Jewish Centre after 1945" in *Belsen in History and Memory*, 173.

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 history, the geography and culture of Palestine, and learning Hebrew; this reflected the political Zionist priorities of the DP community at Belsen, as well as strengthened Jewish ties between the generations of survivors.[76] 46 girls received a specifically Jewish education at the camp's two Beth Jacob schools during the first six months of 1947; one school was for girls aged 8-16, the other for girls aged 16-20.

The Beth Jacob schools were focussed on educating female survivors in Orthodox Jewish ways, and on providing a more wholesome, female-only environment for their students than the other secondary schools in the Belsen DP camp. These schools saw their mission in terms of public education and of working towards a Jewish future in Palestine.

An instance of Beth Jacob activism involved the efforts to establish a kosher kitchen in the Belsen DP camp. The students were frustrated by the priorities of the secular camp committee and the apparent ineffectiveness of the rabbis, so the Beth Jacob teachers and girls began a hunger strike: they refused to eat cooked food prepared in the non-kosher kitchen, and they refused to eat the food even after one of the rabbis attempted to persuade them that the food was permissible under Jewish law.[77] A former member of this group, Pearl Benisch, recalls the words

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[76] Feinstein, 76-7.

[77] Henri Lustiger Thaler, "History and Memory: The Orthodox Experience in the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp," 42.

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 newborns and young children growing up in a society where their Jewish culture and religious practices were not only celebrated but also encouraged. The nursery, established at the same time as the kindergarten, could look after ten to twelve children under the age of five at any given time, and was intended for the care of young children whose mothers were sick or unable to look

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

after them for a short period of time. However, the nursery was shut down soon after it was established because of the growing success and popularity of the kindergarten, and the kindergarten established a childcare centre for the younger children as a compromise. Two women, Betty Adler of the JDC[80] and Reuma Schwarz of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, were in charge of the children's home, the school, and the physical education program in the kindergarten school; while not DPs of the Belsen DP camp, these two women helped to organize female DPs in the camp, and provided job placements in the education sector for them.[81]

As discussed in Chapter One, the need for Jewish medical personnel in the DP camps was great, since survivors had an understandable distrust of German doctors and nurses after the experiences in the Nazi concentration camps. It was common for Jewish women in the DP camps to be employed as nurses, alongside the German nurses who were brought in to address the severe medical needs of the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. These nurses were tasked with helping to lift the spirits of their patients, and to create for them a sense of Jewish community and independence outside of the German community. Aside from being nurses, Jewish women who had been trained as doctors before the Holocaust often assumed positions in the fields in which they had originally practiced. For example, a Romanian Jewish woman physician, whose name is unknown, initially ran the Maternity Hospital at the Belsen DP camp, and worked alongside Muriel Knox Doherty, an Australian nurse who came to aid the Maternity Hospital

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[80] Formerly called "The Joint Distribution Committee of American Funds for the Relief of Jewish War Sufferers," established by the United States in 1914 to aid Jewish refugees around the world.

[81] Königseder and Wetzel, 185.

after joining the UNRRA.[82] The demand for caregivers in the camp was so great that anyone who had a higher level of education was urged to begin training to become a nurse.

As not all DPs had the education levels to become nurses or teachers in the Belsen DP camp, the UNRRA and Jewish relief agencies began to emphasize ORT programs, and new positions and training opportunities were created for those who wanted to become skilled artisans. Most of the female DPs who had practiced a trade prior to the war were seamstresses. Dependent on DPs to fill instructors' positions, vocational schools in the camps solidified the participation of women in the domestic arts. Women in these positions not only trained in sewing and knitting, but also learned necessary skills to assist in various office settings in the camp. Most of the women saw the skill itself as less important than the awakening sense of self worth that came with learning a new skill;[83] however, the skills were important tools in preparing for future immigration and a potential new life in Palestine and the rest of the world. As well, work provided women with more opportunities for socializing and making connections within the DP camps, and the chance to earn additional rations and items such as candy bars and cigarettes, which could be traded on the camp's black market. Hilda Mantelmacher, a woman living at the Belsen DP camp, stated that she "got extra food if [she] worked."[84] The emphasis on productivity also helped to normalize Jewish life in the DP camps, marking an end to aimless existence and the beginning of a renewed interest in life. While economic necessity was also a strong motivator in bringing Jewish women into the DP workforce, many women found a sense of purpose in their

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[82] Muriel Knox Doherty, letter dated July 29, 1945, in Judith Cornell and R. Lynette Russell, eds., *Letters from Belsen 1945: An Australian Nurse's Experiences with the Survivors of War*, 65.

[83] Feinstein, 83.

[84] Ibid.

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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