Introduction—Diverging Groups of Jewish Displaced Persons

Manfred Gerstenfeld and Françoise S. Ouzan

The immediate postwar era has witnessed almost a century of displacement of populations, forced or voluntary, and has initiated the development of a policy on refugees.¹ This volume offers insights into the major Jewish migration movements and the rebuilding of European Jewish communities in the mid-twentieth century. Its articles illustrate many facets of these people’s often traumatic experiences. They include the rehabilitation of individuals who had to find their way again in their countries of origin or who had to start from scratch in a new land. They follow their experiences and hardships which vary from country to country and from one community of migrants to another.

For the sake of comparison, this book also addresses the mass exodus of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries. Such a perspective provides a broader insight into how those challenges were met. These two migrations were a result of persecution, or well-justified fear thereof, as well as discrimination. As a consequence, similarities and differences between Holocaust survivors and migrants from Muslim countries complement our understanding of the issues at stake in Jewish migration. The resurgence of antisemitism continued in the war’s aftermath in some eastern European countries and also became more prevalent in Muslim countries.² Thus antisemitism led to further emigration. Both the Jews who survived the Shoah and those who emigrated from hostile Muslim countries had to find their place in societies which functioned without them. Holocaust survivors who returned to their European countries of origin had to make major efforts to reintegrate.³

In many places, various individuals and groups had amassed belongings by looting or acquiring Jewish possessions at cut-rate prices. The Jews often had to fight to get part of their possessions back and many times did not succeed. Having survived terrible conditions, they lacked the physical and spiritual stamina to fight against insensitive bureaucracy and its intricacies. Survivors’ homes and workplaces had also been taken over by others. According to estimates, only 20 percent of pre-war Jewish possessions have been returned.⁴

We should bear in mind that already during the Second World War several leaders in exile of occupied countries had expressed their reservations about the return of Jews to their lands of origin. In this book, essays on countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia refer to this. As a consequence also of their post-war experiences, for many Jews the question of migration became an important issue. For Jewish concentration camp survivors who found themselves in Germany at the end of the war, the answer to this question was almost always in the affirmative. For Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) who came from eastern Europe, the issue of returning to their countries of origin was a major one in view of the postwar situation there. Often, they lived their lives in temporary conditions, waiting for an immigration certificate for Palestine or languishing for years in a DP camp in the hope of obtaining a visa to America or elsewhere.

For survivors who returned to western Europe or emerged from hiding, the existential question was posed thus: should one try to rebuild one’s life in a place that was directly associated with the memories of murdered family members and friends, or should one go live elsewhere—and if so, in which country? Other diverse and complex situations arose in the aftermath of the war: many Jews who dwelt under Communist regimes would later realize that they had chosen the wrong country. Subsequent waves of emigration would lead to a further substantial reduction in the number of Jews residing in these countries. Survivors who migrated to other countries came to communities in which all jobs were already taken and where they faced a number of handicaps. The same is true for those who fled or left Muslim countries, either for Israel or elsewhere.

These moves frequently involved identity crises. Survivors and refugees often had to reshape their identities in different ways. Moreover, the societies

---