Health Care Services for Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Austria, 1945–1953: A Pattern of Jewish Solidarity

Ada Schein

In his book Holocaust Historiography Prof. Dan Michman articulated this following historical insight:

On the eve of the Holocaust one could hardly speak any longer of a ‘Jewish People’ as an inclusive unit in any substantive sense. Instead, there were scattered Jewish groups, some of which objected expressly to any attempt to force them to affiliate with a Jewish people.46

These weak ties among sectors of the Jewish People were challenged after the Holocaust. In the short twilight period between the catastrophe of World War II and the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state, a fascinating drama was enacted in Europe: the rehabilitation of the Jews and the Jewish communities. The fate of Holocaust survivors who were liberated on German, Austrian, and Italian soil was unique. Those who refused to return to their countries of origin were concentrated by the Allies in assembly centers, received a status of ‘displaced persons’, and cared for by the international relief organization UNRRA. This was the nucleus of she’erit hapletah (the surviving remnant).47

* This article is based on Ada Schein, Health In Temporary Conditions: Health-Care Services for Holocaust Survivors in Austria 1945–1953, Search and Research, Lectures and Papers, vol. 16 (Jerusalem: The International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, 2010). The main resources for this study are found in the Yad Vashem Archives, The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, and The Central Zionist Archives, all in Jerusalem, as well as The Pinchas Lavon Institute for the Labour Movement and the Haganah Archives, both in Tel Aviv.


47 On the double translation of the phrase she’erit hapletah as ‘saved remnants’ and ‘saving remnants’, see Zeev Mankowitz, “She’erit Hapletah: The Surviving Remnant, an Overview,” in Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities, ed. Dalia Ofer, Francoise S. Ouzan, and Judy Tydor-Baumel-Schwartz (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), 10–15. For a detailed review of the state of the art of historical research on she’erit hapletah, its historical development, the main themes, and disputes, see Dalia Ofer,”She’erit
Although historians have thoroughly researched the ideological, political, and educational aspects of this rehabilitation and have stressed the major role of the encounter between she’erit hapletah and the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine) and the State of Israel, the aspects of health care in this rehabilitation have been totally neglected.

Where the issue of the new immigrants’ health has been broadly explored, however, is in the context of the selective immigration policy in the early 1950s as a response to the waves of mass immigration into Israel. In this context the focus of historical research mainly centered on the standpoint of the absorbing establishment and its attitude toward the Jewish immigrants coming from North Africa and Asia.48

To a certain extent, historians have neglected the health care of Holocaust survivors as a group, and certainly have not investigated medical issues pertaining to them as immigrants before they came to Eretz Israel. Dr. Mark Dworzecki, a physician and himself a Holocaust survivor, wrote a few articles on the health of “survivors from Holocaust countries,” according to his definition. He played an active role in international medical conferences during the 1950s, and naturally he focused on the health condition of the individual survivor.49

The situation in Austria was unique. Whereas most of the Jewish survivors and refugees were concentrated in postwar Germany, Austria served as a transit country for Jews belonging to various groups. These divided into former concentration camp inmates who were returning to their countries of origin, mainly Hungary and Rumania; Polish and Lithuanian Jews who were smuggled across European borders in their efforts to leave the Continent and draw nearer to Eretz Israel; Rumanian Jewish refugees fleeing from severe famine and harsh living conditions; and lastly, Jews from Czechoslovakia and Hungary seeking
