A Forgotten Postwar Jewish Migration: East European Jewish Refugees and Immigrants in France, 1946–1947

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East European immigration is a familiar and recurrent theme in modern French Jewish history. Following figuratively if not literally in the footsteps of almost a million of their non-Jewish compatriots who signed up to work in the mines and fields of the Nord and the Midi, tens of thousands of Jews from Poland and Rumania journeyed to France during the period of the great immigration in the three decades before World War I. Their numbers grew significantly in the 1920s and early 1930s in the wake of the growing economic crisis in Poland and the efforts by the newly-independent regime in Warsaw to 'polonize' the nation's economy and culture. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both Jews and non-Jews in eastern Europe viewed France as a place of asylum for victims of religious and political persecution and a viable alternative to the rapidly closing doors of America. Even the advent of the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s could not dim the country's image among Jews in the towns and villages of eastern Europe as the home of liberty, freedom, and equality. Indeed, if the published comments of recent arrivals in the French capital in the period directly before and after World War I can be believed, the phrases “Heureux comme Dieu en France” (Happy as God in France) and its Yiddish variant “Azoy gliklikh vi Gott in Frankraykh” were on the lips of almost every Jew seeking to escape from the religious persecution and economic tribulations in Russia, Poland, and Rumania.

Yet the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the nearly eighty thousand east European Jews to France in the period between the end of 1946 and the beginning of 1948 were markedly different from those of previous migrations. The difference, of course, had to do with the conditions under which they left their former homelands and the nature of their reception. First and foremost was the fact that they were not immigrants, at least not in the strict sense of the word. Most of those who arrived in 1946 and 1947 had not journeyed directly from their homelands. Instead, they had undergone a prolonged westward trek in a series of short and generally unplanned stages. The story of Jews returning to their homes in eastern Europe after World War II has been told many times. Unable to recover their property or locate their relatives, and facing antisemitic attack and economic immiseration, many sought refuge in the
Displaced Persons camps of occupied Germany, especially in the American zone.

Among them was a large contingent of Polish Jews who had fled to the Soviet Union after the Nazi takeover of the eastern part of the country in 1941. Though Polish Jewish refugees from Russia would soon become the major population group in DP camps, they had not actually directly suffered the ravages of the Holocaust and, at least technically, had not lost their citizenship. It was because of this distinctive situation that British authorities labeled them ‘infiltrates’ and denied them aid. While those fleeing the Soviet Union did eventually receive official status as DPs in the American zone, there was simply not enough room or money to care for them. Unable to migrate legally to Palestine or to the United States, many drifted into the small French occupied zone, which bordered the American and British zones. Harassed by French army and government officials who were mainly interested in exploiting the area for their own economic benefit and who had little interest in aiding victims of Nazism, much less other unwanted foreigners, east European Jews of all stripes crossed over into neighboring France itself.

As the wave grew, those leaving DP camps for France would be joined by a variety of other Jewish transients, including orphans, political activists, unemployed workers, and demobilized Polish Jewish soldiers arriving from the Soviet Union. In 1947 alone, local officials of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee—which was also known as the Joint or the JDC—estimated that as many as 18,000 DPs and refugees from Poland entered the country, and more were expected to arrive in the following year. Many saw France as merely a stopping-off point on the way to Palestine. Countless others were caught up in the frenzy of mass migration of millions of people all over the European continent after the war and were unsure of their final destination. While awaiting their departure to Palestine or elsewhere, they were convinced that they would find support from the local French Jewish community whom they mistakenly believed had not suffered grievously from the ravages of the Holocaust. Refugees had also heard rumors that the Joint, which had struggled to minister to their needs in camps and cities in Germany, was ramping up its activities in Paris in preparation for those who were in transit to Palestine.

The reception in France proved far more problematic, however, especially for the first wave of refugees. It was common knowledge among administrators of DP camps that many east European Jews in occupied Germany had been engaging in black marketeering in order to survive. The sudden departure of thousands of Jews from DP camps and their arrival at the French border thus occasioned xenophobic fears of moral corruption and violence on the part of officials in the French Zone that mirrored the panic that had swept over the