

In the Land of Limitless Opportunities: Holocaust Survivors Meet the Jerusalem of the North

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They are a generation at the end of its existence. They have been the voice of a moral authority that has had no equal. After all, they had looked over the abyss and seen an evil that was unprecedented in human history. And because they soon realized that such evil had not been destroyed, had only lost the battle but not the war, they sought to tell the world that humanity was still in danger. Perhaps the evil would not strike them again so quickly, but it could strike other groups just as easily. This evil had no preference for the color of a person's skin, nor for geographic location nor religious affiliation. It devoured any and all who wandered into its path and it would kill again and again and continues to do so to this very day.

They are the generation of Holocaust survivors, the generation that experienced the largest genocide of the twentieth century, not the first nor the last, but the most effective, the most technically advanced. That genocide destroyed a civilization, a language, and one-third of the world's Jewish population.

Those that survived the genocide, what we call the Holocaust and sometimes the Shoah, but what they called the Hurbn (the destruction), spent a half-decade or more in the Jewish Displaced Persons' camps of Germany, Austria and Italy, waiting with great impatience, but not without recreating for themselves a sense of Jewish identity and creativity, for the chance to leave the nations and the continent that was soaked with Jewish blood.

And they watched with a sense of amazement and a huge disappointment as thousands of non-Jewish Displaced Persons, many of them willing accomplices of National Socialism in its

efforts to destroy European Jewry, were granted refugee status by the United States and allowed to enter its gates. But very few of the Jewish survivors were granted the same status.

But some did come to America. On May 8, 1945, the novelist Isabella Leitner wrote about the sea voyage that made her one of the first survivors of Auschwitz to escape from one universe into another

Dr. Mengele, we are on our way to America and we are going to forget every brutal German word you forced us to learn. We are going to learn a new language. We are going to ask for bread and milk in Shakespeare's tongue. We will learn how to live speaking English and forget how people die speaking German.¹

A year later, in 1946, Ida Mae Kahn, president of Boston's Jewish Family and Children's Service received a phone call that "a group of children are being sent to Boston. We have no place to put them...they have no connections, no one to turn to. We've got to make provisions for them."²

The children were all Jewish orphans whose families had been murdered in the Holocaust. They were brought from New York, where they had landed, to a summer camp that the JFCS had recently purchased. It was called Camp Kingswood and was located in Bridgton, Maine. They may have very well been the first Holocaust survivors to arrive in Maine.

The first group of these orphans, perhaps eight of them, came to Camp Kingswood with all of the characteristics that marked the lives of survivors in the early years after their liberation. One of the staff members of the camp remembered that "one of the biggest problems we had was that the kids would steal food and bring it back to the tents. And we tried to explain to them,

¹ Isabella Leitner, *Saving the Fragments. From Auschwitz to New York*, New York, 1976. S.77ff.

² Quoted in <http://www.jfcboston.org/NewsEvents/View Article/tabid/260/smId/7>

there was a mild language problem... that there was plenty of food. They found it hard to believe. There was a perpetual hunger... They just never felt secure that there would be enough food for them.”

One of the Camp Kingwood orphans, who arrived in America in 1947, was Robert Berger, a fifteen year old survivor from Hungary. Today, he is Dr. Robert Berger, Associate Clinical Professor of Surgery, Harvard Medical School, and an internationally noted cardiac surgeon.

I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Berger a few years ago and when we compared our histories, it turned out that he had spent the first two years of his liberation from a concentration camp in the Jewish Displaced Persons camp in Landsberg, Germany and was at the camp when I was born there in 1946.

Most Holocaust survivors, those who decided to come to America, would not arrive until 1948, when the American Congress and President Harry Truman amended immigration laws to allow increased numbers of Jewish survivors to arrive on American shores. By 1953, nearly 140,000 had done so.

The great majority of survivors arrived in New York and more than sixty percent decided to remain in the New York area.³ But those that went elsewhere were usually assigned to a specific community and became the responsibility of the local Jewish Federation.

³ William B. Helmreich, *Against All Odds. Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives They Made in America*, (New York, 1992)282.

Most of the Jewish DPs spoke little or no English and traveled with all their worldly goods, the worldliest being a bedspread stuffed with goose feathers. For whatever reasons, this one item seemed to have a historical identity all its own. Immigrant group after immigrant group, Jewish and non-Jewish, seemed to believe that this possession was the one necessity they could not live without in the journey from the Old World to the New.

The term “greenhorn,” a new arrival uneducated in the ways of his surroundings, was not created for the generation of Holocaust survivors that arrived in America in the late 1940s and early 1950s. That honor belonged to the earlier group of Jews who had come to the United States between the years 1881 and 1924 in numbers that ultimately totaled more than three million. They came for economic opportunity and to leave the restrictiveness of anti-Jewish legislation that symbolized the Czarist attitude toward its Jewish populations.

They were the first greenhorns, “die griene” in Yiddish. They came to America from the hundreds of villages they had left behind, the shtetlach of the Old World. Most, but not all, came to and settled in New York City.

But this group of survivors came to America with a totally different set of issues, a social and psychological baggage that was not easy to understand, even for the sons and daughters of the earlier griene.

Portland, Maine’s Jewish community was no different than other communities across America who bore the responsibility for these new arrivals. Although the organizational structure for social welfare in the Jewish community was already in place, shared by the United Hebrew Charities and the National Council of Jewish

Women, the arrival of survivor families created a new challenge.⁴ Refugee resettlement was something new. Unlike larger Jewish communities, Portland did not receive large numbers of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany and Austria in the late 1930s.

The need for a unified approach to the problem of finding housing and employment for the new arrivals was underscored by Selma Black, who along with Clarice Shur headed the effort to help the Jewish DPs. Both women headed up the newly created Refugee Resettlement Committee. Agreeing with the Committee's recommendations, Portland's Federation allocated a maximum of \$10,000 and agreed to accept an initial number of twelve refugee families.⁵

By early 1950, ten DP families (called "units" in the social service jargon of the time) had arrived in Portland. Another six families, not a part of the official group of twelve, also received various forms of community assistance.

Most of the families who arrived in Portland stayed at the Ambassador Hotel where they were given information about the community and life in the United States before they moved into their own apartments.

Both Selma Black and Clarice Shur remembered in a series of interviews conducted in 1976⁶ that they personally prepared each apartment for the families, "cleaning and scrubbing the place," and arranging for a variety of used household items, including furniture, that would be home to the refugee families.

⁴ Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry. Its Growth and Development* (Portland, 1955) 96

⁵ Ibid

⁶ *Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland*, Dr. Konnilyn G. Feig, Director
Commissioned by the Jewish Community Center, 1976

The Refugee Resettlement Committee focused not only on housing for the new arrivals. It also sought to find them jobs and take care of their medical needs. The latter was especially important. As Selma Black recalled, “all of the refugees had some sickness,” whether it was physical or emotional.⁷ A Medical Committee was formed, headed by Drs. Benjamin Zolov, Gisela Davidson (herself a refugee from Nazi Austria) and Henry Pollard. The DP families received free medical care.⁸

Some of the early DP families who came to Portland were the Arons, the Brems, the Schwartz’s and relatives of Congregation Shaarey Tphilo’s well-known cantor, Samuel Zimelman.

In 1951, a new survivor family arrived in Portland. Cantor Kurt Messerschmidt his wife Sonja and daughter Eva were one of the few German Jewish families to settle in Portland (another was the Gottschalk family, Oscar and Gussy). Although they had come to America and New York in 1950, their situation was somewhat different. The Messerschmidt’s came to Portland because the recently founded Temple Beth El needed a cantor and Kurt Messerschmidt had already achieved success as a “radio” cantor in Germany, broadcasting Jewish liturgical music, joined by a Catholic choir, on American Forces Radio in Munich. Even though the family came to America as penniless and emotionally drained survivors of Auschwitz and Theresienstadt, with personal losses that words and numbers could not describe, they arrived in Portland because they were wanted and needed. That is why Sonja Messerschmidt, z”l, could

⁷ Ibid, Selma Black interview, September 30, 1976

⁸ Ibid, Dr. Benjamin Zolov interview, September 7, 1976

reflect nearly six decades later that Portland Jewry created a “warm atmosphere” and “took us in with open arms.”⁹

But what about the other survivor families that came to Portland? How were they received and how did they react to their new environment?

Portland’s Jewish community was known as “the Jerusalem of the North” because of its Orthodox hold on religious life, a position that had kept both the Conservative Movement and the Reform Movement in America Judaism, from establishing a firm foothold in the community. That was about to change with the founding of Conservative Judaism’s Temple Beth El in 1947. Beyond that, Portland Jewry was a highly interrelated one, with numerous families having established relationships through marriage and backgrounds from the same eastern European communities or regions.

Finally, although Portland Jewry had established a firm financial base for itself in the business community, and was prominent in the medical and legal professions, Jews were essentially powerless politically, maintained a 9 to 5 relationship with the White, Anglo-Saxon Christian community, were barred from country clubs and social clubs as well as numerous hotels and resorts throughout Maine,

What Portland Jews did have was a reasonably well-established communal organization with a Jewish Federation, Community Center and groups devoted to charitable undertakings. All of them worked with the notion, shared by the broader non-Jewish civic and charitable organizations, that “Jews take care of their own.”

⁹ Sonja and Cantor Kurt Messerschmidt interview, December 16, 2009, [The Oral History Project of Documenting Maine Jewry](#)

Jerry Slivka, who with his wife Rochelle, came to Portland in 1953, after first settling in Boston, found it “difficult to be accepted” by Portland’s Jewish community.¹⁰ Clarice Shur remembered that a prevailing question among Portland’s Jewish community vis a vis the survivor families was “what special rights should these people coming out of the camps have?”¹¹ Selma Black was adamant in her feeling that “all of us (Portland’s Jews) had a sense of guilt about not doing more to save Jews in Europe. Anyone who tells you otherwise is a liar.”¹²

Yet, according to Selma Black, none of the survivor families made “unreasonable demands” on the community.¹³ One of the reasons that those charged with helping the families worked well with them was due to the advice and involvement of Jules Krems, who headed Portland’s Jewish Federation from 1948 to 1961 and its Jewish Home for the Aged from 1961 to 1981. Clarice Shur remembered an incident in which one of the families did not like their dining room furniture and chopped it into firewood. Not knowing how to react, she asked Krems to intervene. Krems spoke a fluent Yiddish (which none of the other social service workers did) and was a trained social worker. He was instrumental in giving dedicated staff and volunteers, including Shur and Black, the necessary training to understand, as best as they could, the emotional turmoil that accompanied the lives of these survivors in the early years after the Holocaust.¹⁴

¹⁰ Portraits of the Past , Jerry Slivka, interview, August 26, 1976

¹¹ Portraits of the Past .ClariceShur interview, Sept.10, 1976

¹² Portraits of the Past. Selma Black interview

¹³ Ibid, Selman Black interview

¹⁴ Portraits of the Past Clarice Shur interview

And it because of this emotional turmoil, what the Jewish educator Koppel Pinson described as one of constant movement...Not all the motion is purposeful motion. Very much of it is emotional restlessness that arises from the situation in which these people find themselves, that we cannot end this paper on an entirely positive note.¹⁵ Part of the problem lay in the truth of another of Pinson's observations about the survivors, that "for the Jewish DPs the war has not yet ended, nor has liberation in the true sense really come as yet. Their problems still unsolved, their future not in their own hands, they still consider themselves at war with the world and the world at war with them..."¹⁶ For many survivor families, I am certain, that war never ended until their final moments on earth. That was how their children learned about the suffering of their families and why their parents sought to teach them about a world that had murdered their loved ones and their history. Germany was the architect of that murder, and Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Estonians and others had been their work crew. But if anything allowed their parents to leave that war for even a short time, it was their love and concern for their children, the "carrier of our legacy," the "miracle babies" who would grow to make certain that the memory of the Holocaust would never cease to be heard

We know from various sources, that some of the survivors sought, in those first months and years in America, to bear witness, to tell their Jewish sponsors and beyond what they had seen as they looked over the abyss. What they found, was another kind of exile, another kind of prison. People welcomed them with tears and jobs when they stepped off the boats, then turned away.

¹⁵ Koppel S. Pinson, "Jewish Life in Liberated Germany. A Study of the Jewish DPs", in: *Jewish Social Studies* 9.2 (1947), S. 110

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

Why was it that no one wanted to listen? Was that why officials from the Jewish community were only interested in how survivor families had spent the money they had been given so that they might have food and shelter? And when they found work, they would no longer have to assume responsibility for the survivor family and mark them “Case Closed?”¹⁷

We do not know if such a set of circumstances existed in Portland. Most of the more than 65 Jewish DPs, adults and children, who came to the city in the early 1950s are either no longer living in Portland, are no longer alive, or were too young to remember how and why their parents may have expressed such feelings.

But what we do know is that after nearly three decades of being peripheral to the growth of American Jewish life, survivors and their children entered that life in a dramatic fashion. They became part of a willingness to remember the Holocaust and its “lessons” that reflected a kind of collective memory which transcended national boundaries and the guilt or innocence of those who were active participants in the slaughter of millions. Survivors and their families are no longer told to forget the past.

It was not only that the day of Holocaust remembrance, Yom Hashoah, was commemorated by every state in America; it was not only that nearly every American state had at least one Holocaust museum or center; it was not only that an entire museum devoted to the history of the Holocaust stood in the midst of American sacred space and memory. It is not only that the United Nations designated January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, as an International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

It was more. The traditional discourse about the Holocaust has become part of an international collective memory. Nation states whose hands and history were bloodied between the years 1933-1945 now became active participants in a call for a collective political action and mobilization

¹⁷ Beth B. Cohen, *Case Closed. Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America* (New Brunswick 2007).

The 1980s became “the decade of the survivor and his/her children.” Survivors knew that they would soon be only voices on a tape recording or an image on a video screen. That is why in those years they embarked upon an unprecedented effort to tell their stories of suffering and heroism. They spoke to thousands in classrooms and into the cassette and video recorders of numerous history projects.

The survivors and their children, the Second Generation, were instrumental in helping to create Holocaust museums and centers in nearly every American state, including Maine. The Holocaust and Humanity Center of Maine was founded in 1985 and continues to reach out to the entire State of Maine with its message of remembrance and the need for social and human change. Maine’s Holocaust survivors, and a number of the families who arrived in Portland in the early 1950s, are among those who have borne witness both in the classroom and on the screen.

It has been over six decades since the first families of the greatest tragedy to befall the Jewish people met those members of the Portland Jewish community who undertook to give them a new beginning and to help them create new lives. Both survivors and their Portland benefactors have shown that Jews are a people of memory and a people of caring for those unable to care for themselves. May those memories and that caring continue to define us in the future.