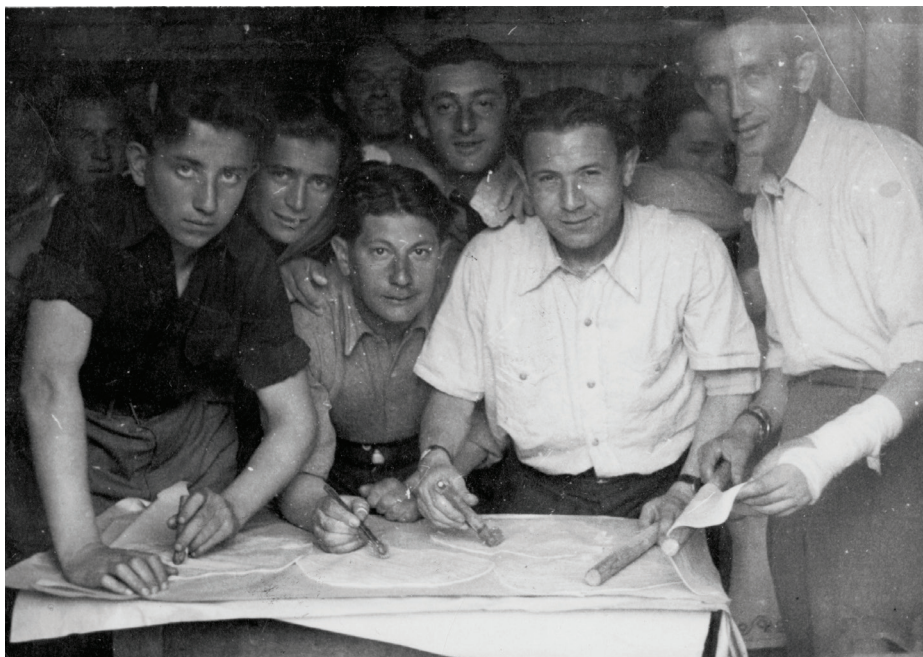


THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Left: matzah-baking in the Bad Gastein DP Camp, Austria, 1946; Below: a family seder in a DP Camp in Hallein, Austria, 1947. The Hallein camp was erected on the former site of a work camp that was part of Dachau concentration camp

PASSOVER IN THE DISPLACED PERSONS CAMPS

At the end of World War II, hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors were housed in Displaced Persons camps across Europe. **Stefanie Halpern** uncovers a Passover seder plate from one such camp which illuminates how these survivors tried to rebuild their lives

As the world marks the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz this year, it's worth reflecting on what happened to the camp survivors. At the end of World War II, there were nearly 10 million refugees inside the borders of Germany, Austria and Italy who had been forced from their native countries during the war. Approximately 50,000 of these were Jewish survivors who had been liberated from Nazi concentration camps and forced labour units. Though many of the millions of refugees were repatriated to their country of origin, most Jews refused to return to the countries from which they were deported.

The Displaced Persons, as they were called, found a home in one of the hundreds of Displaced Persons camps that were setup and administered first by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency and then by the International Refugee Organization between 1945 and the mid-1950s. By February 1947, with an influx of Jewish survivors from Poland who were fleeing continued Polish antisemitism and increasingly violent pogroms, there

were nearly 250,000 Jewish Displaced Persons living in the DP camps in Europe.

Life in the DP camps took on, in many ways, the same rhythm that had been disrupted during the war: schools and libraries were established; theatre troupes and musical groups held performances; sports teams competed; newspapers in Yiddish and Hebrew were published; political parties and youth groups were organised; synagogues, mikvehs and yeshivas were built; Jewish holidays were celebrated; rabbis officiated marriages and granted divorces; funeral services were arranged and babies were born.

This renewal of Jewish communal life is exemplified in a simple seder plate manufactured under the auspices of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) for Passover 1948. The JDC granted financial support to the DP camps, administered

many communal aid programmes, and even provided Jewish DPs with matzah, wine, and other Passover supplies. The plates, which were glazed in either blue or green, were manufactured in workshops established by the JDC to teach Holocaust survivors new skills. The back of each plate is stamped with 'she'arit hapletah,' Hebrew for 'the surviving remnant'. This biblical moniker, which Jewish DPs used to refer to themselves, occurs in the following verses of II Kings (19:30-31): And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root below and bear fruit above. For a remnant will go forth from Jerusalem, and survivors from Mount Zion.

These verses speak of the renewal of the nation after Israel's destruction by the Assyrians, a story whose parallels were obvious to survivors. In reference to the verse, the survivors working in the camps often marked materials they produced with the sign of a felled tree stump, with a single remaining branch bearing a newly unfurled leaf stretching to the sky.

The rim of the plate contains two contrasting scenes: on one side, slave labourers toil as their backs are whipped by a taskmaster, an Egyptian pyramid in the background; on the other sits a calm and idyllic biblical Jerusalem. Between the two scenes 'From slavery to freedom' is written in Hebrew, a declaration most especially fitting for a Passover seder in the aftermath of the war. Written below is a prayer of hope: "This year in Jerusalem" – a reference to the phrase "Next year in Jerusalem", traditionally chanted at the end of the seder. By 1951, nearly 200,000 DPs had immigrated to the new State of Israel.

In an effort to collect archival material on the Holocaust and the post-war revival of Jewish life, YIVO issued appeals to DPs in the camps and organised committees to gather as many items as possible. This seder plate, along with thousands of other documents, objects, posters and photographs attesting to life in the DP camps, was collected by YIVO between 1945 and 1952. These objects are housed at YIVO and bear witness to the rebirth of the surviving remnant of Europe's Jews. ■

Visit yivo.org for more. **Stefanie Halpern** is Director of the YIVO Archives.

