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## Citizenship of No Man's Land?

Jewish Refugee Relief in Zbąszyń and East-Central Europe,  
1938–1939

### Abstract

This article revisits Jewish relief efforts in the refugee settlement in Zbąszyń (Bentschen) and specifically the intensive involvement of the Polish and European offices of the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in the organisation of aid and the daily life of refugees. Thereby, it explores the nature of the no man's land and the dilemmas of Jewish welfare in the critical year 1938. The article reads the relief activities against the changing characteristics of citizenship in European nation states during the interwar period. It takes into account the growing significance of 'social citizenship' or social rights, which were either explicitly codified or implicitly expected. I here test the hypothesis that the intervention of the JDC and other Jewish relief organisations reflected and visualised the exclusion of Jewish refugees from citizenship. Can we speak, figuratively, of a citizenship in no man's land and of the relief organisations as providing services normally attributed to membership in a state? How did the JDC reflect on the revisions of citizenship and the denaturalisation of Jews in Poland and other countries in East-Central Europe, and how did this process affect its relief activities?

"FOLLOWING TERRIBLE NEWS REACHED US FROM GERMANY[.] BY ORDER ISSUED THIS MORNING ALL POLISH JEWS[.] ACCORDING [TO] OUR ESTIMATE EIGHTEENTHOUSAND BERLIN[.] SEVENTHOUSAND PROVINCES[.] WILL BE SENT BACK OVER POLISH BORDERS BY TONIGHT [...]"<sup>1</sup>

In the course of 28 October 1938, a stream of urgent telegrams alarmed the officers of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Warsaw, Paris, and New York, relaying breaking, and rapidly changing, news about the roundup of Polish Jews in Germany and their deportation to the Polish border. In anticipation of the deadline for the Polish revision of passports of Polish Jews living abroad and out of concern about being left with a large number of stateless Jews, the German authorities had ordered the deportation of all Jewish citizens of Poland living in Germany. Without any advance notice and often in the early morning, these families, who had mostly been living in Germany for decades, were handed expulsion decrees and loaded onto trains headed to the Polish border. While some would be brought over the border on trains, many were forced to march several kilometres in large groups in darkness, terrorised by SS shouts and violence. The initial Polish response was inconsistent: In the first hours, many groups were left in the no man's land between the borders, in the cold and rain, but later on, the deportees were let into Polish territory. While some were allowed to proceed into the interior, a large part (originally around 7,000) were interned in the border town of Zbąszyń (Bentschen) which turned into a large refugee settlement where many deportees eked out a living until the summer of 1939.

<sup>1</sup> Summary prepared by the JDC Paris office, March 1939, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

Zbąszyń was only one of many locations where throughout 1938 and 1939 Jewish refugees were caught in the no man's land on the borders of Nazi Germany and other states in East-Central Europe. Expulsions from Austria following the 'Anschluß', from Sudetenland following the Munich Agreement, from Slovakia following the First Vienna Award, as well as the deportations of Polish Jews from Nazi Germany to Poland all took place within a short time frame between March and December 1938 and left many Jews stranded between the borders. The physical no man's land, however, was only the most visible sign of how the sealing of borders for refugees contributed to the erosion of Jewish citizenship in the region in this brief period.<sup>2</sup>

The history of refugees in Zbąszyń has attracted more attention from historians than any other case of a refugee no man's land in East-Central Europe in and around 1938. This is not surprising due to the larger number of people stranded here as well as its longer existence.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the *Polenaktion* has been described as the "first deportation" and therefore, as a step towards the systematic deportations of German – and by extension European – Jews.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I aim to zoom in on refugee aid in Zbąszyń from a different perspective. Rather than providing a full account of the history of this refugee settlement, I will analyse the intensive involvement of the Polish and European JDC offices in the organisation of aid to and the daily life of refugees to explore the nature of the no man's land and the dilemmas of Jewish welfare in the critical year 1938.<sup>5</sup> The article reads the relief activities against the background of changing characteristics of citizenship in Europe's nation states in the interwar period. It takes into account the growing significance of "social citizenship" or social rights which were either explicitly codified or implicitly expected.<sup>6</sup> I test the hypothesis that the intervention of the JDC and other Jewish relief organisations also reflected and visualised the exclusion of Jewish refugees from citizenship. Can we speak, figuratively, about a citizenship of the no man's land and of the relief organisations as providing services normally attributed to membership in a state? How did the JDC reflect on the revisions of citizenship and the denaturalisation of Jews in Poland and other countries in East-Central Europe and how did this process affect its relief activities?

2 Michal Frankl, No Man's Land. Refugees, Moving Borders, and Shifting Citizenship in 1938 East-Central Europe, in: Dubnow Institute Yearbook 16 (2017, published 2019), 247-266.

3 Jerzy Tomaszewski, Auftakt zur Vernichtung, Osnabrück 2002; Karol Jonca, The Expulsion of Polish Jews from the Third Reich in 1938, in: Antony Polonsky/Jerzy Tomaszewski/Ezra Mendelsohn (ed.), Polin, Vol. 8: Jews in Independent Poland 1918–1939, London/Washington 2004, 255-281; Karol Jonca, 'Noc kryształowa' i casus Herschela Grynszpana [The 'Kristallnacht' and the Case of Herschel Grynszpan] (= Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis 1312), Wrocław 1998; Sybil Milton, The Expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany, October 1938 to July 1939. A Documentation, in: Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 29 (1984), 169-199; Bonnie M. Harris, From German Jews to Polish Refugees. Germany's 'Polenaktion' and the Zbaszyn Deportations of October 1938, in: Kwartalnik Historii Żydów 2 (2009) 230, 175-205; Gertrud Pickhan, 'Niemandland'. Die Briefe der Greta Schiffmann und das Schicksal einer jüdischen Familie, ausgewiesen aus Dortmund im Oktober 1938, in: Beiträge zur Geschichte Dortmunds und der Grafschaft Mark 91 (2000), 161-209; Alina Bothe, Refugees or Deportees? The Semantics of the First 'Polenaktion' Past and Present, in: S.I.M.O.N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 5 (2018) 2, 104-115; Alina Bothe/Gertrud Pickhan/Christine Meibeck (ed.), Ausgewiesen! Berlin, 28. October 1938. Die Geschichte der 'Polenaktion', Berlin 2018.

4 Wolf Gruner, Von der Kollektivausweisung zur Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland (1938–1945). Neue Perspektiven und Dokumente, in: Christoph Dieckmann/Birthe Kundrus/Beate Meyer (ed.), Die Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland. Pläne, Praxis, Reaktionen 1938–1945 (= Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus 20), Göttingen 2004, 21-62.

5 On the history of the JDC, see especially: Yehuda Bauer, My Brother's Keeper. A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee 1929–1939, Philadelphia 1974; Avinoam Patt/Atina Grossmann/Linda G. Levi/Maud S. Mandel (ed.), The JDC at 100. A Century of Humanitarianism, Detroit 2019.

6 T. H. Marshall, Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays, Cambridge 1950.

## Citizens until Further Notice

With the expansion of social insurance systems, the provision of public welfare became an important aspect of how citizenship was negotiated and regulated in the interwar period. After the First World War, welfare policies therefore contributed to the increasing gap between the categories of citizen and alien by linking entitlements such as health and pension insurance to citizenship.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Jewish migrants and refugees, the fear of foreigners claiming welfare services was also coupled with antisemitic imagery and vocabulary, building on tropes of the unproductive, parasitical, and criminal Jew.

Concerns that foreigners would burden national welfare systems were strengthened significantly by the world economic crisis of the 1930s. The United States curtailed its existing immigration quotas through a stricter application of the clause which allowed US consular and immigration officials to exclude those who were perceived as likely to become a public charge.<sup>8</sup> In European countries, the tolerance of the authorities towards Jewish refugees was mostly achieved through guarantees given – officially or unofficially – by Jewish relief organisations to provide for them and to cover the necessary costs.<sup>9</sup> Relief thus became an arena in which the exclusion of refugees from services granted to citizens was negotiated and visualised. Moreover, the expectation that Jewish organisations provide for Jewish refugees (and migrants) added an ethnicised element into citizenship regimes which were already strained between territorial and ethnic principles.

Poland was different in that the government, the political parties, and most of the public saw it as a country of emigration. Throughout the interwar period, the government applied a number of techniques of ethnic categorisation as a part of its emigration policies.<sup>10</sup> Instead of, or parallel to, an anti-immigration discourse, emigration plans for minorities, and in particular for Jews, gained currency throughout the 1930s. The rising antisemitism in Poland after the death of Marshal Piłsudski in 1935 translated into anti-Jewish violence, economic boycotts, exclusion at universities (‘ghetto benches’), as well as legislation (the law severely restricting the trading of kosher meat). Due to these campaigns, a growing sense of insecurity, and continuing impoverishment, Jewish and non-Jewish observers started in the second half of the 1930s to compare the situation of Polish Jews to that of their coreligionists in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

In 1938 and 1939, the ruling nationalist party, Camp of National Unity (OZON), while distancing itself from more radical antisemitic groups, strongly advocated Jewish emigration from Poland.<sup>12</sup> Polish nationalists stressed the ostensible over-

7 Dieter Gosewinkel, *Schutz und Freiheit? Staatsbürgerschaft in Europa im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2016, 231–240.

8 See, representative of larger body of research: David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls. America and the Refugee Crisis 1938–1941*, Amherst 1968.

9 See for instance: Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948. British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust*, Cambridge 2000; Kateřina Čapková/Michal Frankl, *Unsichere Zuflucht. Die Tschechoslowakei und ihre Flüchtlinge aus NS-Deutschland und Österreich 1933–1938*, Cologne 2012.

10 See for instance: Zofia Trębacz, *Nie tylko Palestyna. Polskie plany emigracyjne wobec Żydów 1935–1939* [Not only Palestine. Polish Emigration Plans Regarding Jews 1935–1939], Warsaw 2018; Wojciech Skóra, *Auswärtige Nationalitätenpolitik. Der konsularische Dienst Polens und die nationalen Minderheiten (1918–1939)*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 62 (2013) 2, 206–232.

11 Alexander Kahn, *Conditions of Jews in Poland*, New York (undated). On such comparisons, see also: William A. Hagen, *Before the ‘Final Solution’. Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland*, in: *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996), 351–381.

12 Edward D. Wynot Jr., ‘A Necessary Cruelty’. The Emergence of Official Anti-Semitism in Poland, 1936–39, in: *The American Historical Review* 76 (1971) 4, 1035–1058; Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out. The Politics of Polish Jewry, 1935–1939* (= Monographs of the Hebrew Union College 19), Cincinnati 1997.

population of Poland and complained about the allegedly deleterious role of Jews in Polish economic life. On the initiative of Wiktor Tomir Drymmer, the responsibility for government policies regarding 'Jewish questions' was by the mid-1930s transferred to the Consular Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This, of course, was more than a purely administrative change: Its symbolism, as well as at least partially its practical effects, lay in the exclusion of Jews as a matter of state policy from the remit of state welfare and other internal policies. Drymmer and his colleagues were busy collecting statistics and materials concerning Jewish emigration and claimed that Poland had both the necessity and the right to export its 'surplus' Jewish population (which was made impossible by the post-war restrictions on transatlantic migration). Jews were seen as "a hindrance to the normal development of Polish national strength", as a report of the Jewish Central Information Office in Amsterdam stated.<sup>13</sup> Merely by discussing Jews as subjects of emigration, they were marked as potential non-citizens, or as citizens until further notice only.

The patterns of Jewish forced emigration from Germany led the Polish nationalist leadership to a competition of sorts: If Germany could dispose of its Jews, Poland – even if using less radical methods – should not lag behind. The Évian Conference and the establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees, followed by the development of complicated emigration scheme for German Jews, prompted the Polish government to double its efforts to catalyse Jewish emigration. Polish diplomats in Western countries repeatedly brought up the necessity to move at least a significant part of Polish Jews abroad. They made the case for a mass transfer of Polish Jews into a colonial territory and in 1937, a Polish commission went to Madagascar (with French approval) to explore the possibility of large-scale settlement there.<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, the 1938 law on the revision of Polish citizenship originated in the Consular Section. Most likely already drafted in 1937, it was quickly adopted by the Sejm after the 'Anschluß' of Austria in March 1938 as a measure to prevent the return of Polish Jewish citizens from the 'Third Reich'. It stipulated – among other provisions – the revocation of citizenship of Polish citizens who had resided abroad for five years and had lost their connection to their home country. While not referring to Jews directly, the anti-Jewish aims of the law were obvious to everyone. The revision alarmed other governments and contributed to a declining status for Polish Jews living abroad, whose residence permission was often withdrawn as a result. A decree of the Polish Ministry of the Interior ordering a systematic revision of passports, which was based on this law and dated 6 October 1938, provided Nazi Germany an impetus to launch the expulsion of Polish Jews.

### The JDC in Zbąszyń

With limited resources but an overall impressive record, the JDC and other Jewish relief organisations stepped in to provide food and shelter, to organize healthcare, and to arrange for emigration. The first aid workers who arrived in Zbąszyń from Poznań on Sunday, 30 October, and distributed food were "terrified" and frustrated by their inability to control the situation. Isaac Giterman, the head of the Warsaw office of the JDC, who had just returned from organising aid and distributing funds in Katowice

<sup>13</sup> The Jewish Question in the Polish Government Camp's Programme, Jewish Central Information Office, 28. July 1938, Wiener Library, London.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Jansen, Der Madagaskar-Plan. Die beabsichtigte Deportation der europäischen Juden nach Madagaskar, Munich 1997, 119-125; Trębacz, Nie tyłko Palestyna, 194-272.

and Chojnice, quickly set out for Zbąszyń on Sunday night. He organised a group of sixty relief workers from Warsaw and Poznań, which also included fifteen medical staff from the Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej (Society for Safeguarding the Health of the Jewish Population, TOZ), the JDC-sponsored Jewish health organisation. Their first impression was depressing – it seemed to them that “nothing could be done here” to help the desperate, impoverished, exhausted, hungry, and often sick refugees: “It is beyond all possibility to describe the situation of the thousands of expelled [...]. About 2,500 persons, many of them infirm and suffering, were standing or at best lying on the bare ground in the halls of the [railway] station building.”<sup>15</sup> Thousands of others were crowded into barracks and horse stables, many ill people among them. Like other witnesses, Giterman reported about people who were expelled from their homes in Germany in the early morning and were deported in their pyjamas, still roaming around Zbąszyń in this insufficient dress.

Zbąszyń was an unlikely place for Jewish relief action: The town’s population was less than the number of Jews who had been expelled there from Germany and – with only several local Jewish families – the Jewish community had almost no infrastructure that could be relied on. In the first two days, Giterman and his colleagues had their office literally located on the street. Moreover, the JDC suffered its first setback when a transport of refugees (mostly old, infirm people and children) about to leave Zbąszyń for the interior of Poland, already seated in the carriages with tickets paid for by the JDC, was forbidden to depart and had to return to “the dark [of] the barracks”. Faced with the necessity of caring for the refugees in Zbąszyń, the JDC-led team set up a functional relief organisation and “after two days the situation was well in hand”, at least for what was thought of as a temporary refuge. They provided emergency assistance, distributing food, cutlery, and necessary utensils and setting up a kitchen to provide warm food. Every person now had at least a straw mattress to sleep on and a warm blanket. Yet most refugees still had to sleep in dark, cold, and humid stables or in an old and decrepit mill. Giterman soon left the day-to-day coordination of the JDC activities in Zbąszyń to Shlomo Ginzburg, a teacher at a Warsaw high school, and Emanuel Ringelblum, the historian and Jewish social worker who would later be known for creating the clandestine archive of the Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>16</sup>

While not the only organization involved, the JDC proved crucial in establishing a sense of order and creating an effective relief structure. In fact, to a certain degree, it replaced the government. To achieve this, it could rely on the experience of its team, but also on the staff of the JDC-sponsored health services (TOZ), the interest-free loan organisations, and the organisation for child and orphan care (Centralne towarzystwo opieki nad sierotami i dziećmi opuszczonymi, CENTOS). The administration of the camp was staffed by JDC relief workers and operated with the involvement of about 500 refugees working under their leadership. Morris C. Troper, the head of the JDC European Council in Paris, visited Zbąszyń about two weeks later and catalogued their achievements: “Upon our arrival in Zbanszyn [sic], we found 19 telephone lines operating from the temporary J.D.C. headquarters in Zbanszyn, linked up with branches and different departments, which were organised and managed partly by the most intelligent elements of the deportees, and partly by the staff members.”<sup>17</sup>

15 Jews Exiled from Germany to Poland, report by I. Giterman, November 1938, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

16 Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?* Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive (= The Helen and Martin Schwartz Lectures in Jewish Studies), Bloomington 2007, 100–103.

17 Report on visit to Zbąszyń, 13–14 November 1938, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

In his report, Troper described the structure created and led by the JDC: The Juridical Department provided legal assistance with respect to documents required in Poland, property issues in Germany, and other problems. The Emigration Department, run in cooperation with the JEAS (the Polish branch of HICEM, the Jewish emigration organisation), helped refugees acquire visas for the United States and other countries. The Feeding Department took care of the acquisition and distribution of food as well as of dishes and other utensils. (The food deliveries were supported by Polish Jewish communities and, in what was an exception to the general disinterest of the Polish authorities and public, the Polish Red Cross helped by supplying military kitchens.) The Transportation Department used cars and trucks made available by wealthier Jews in Poland for the delivery of food and the transportation of workers and sick refugees.

An emergency room and a temporary hospital were established with equipment and medication donated by Jewish doctors and hospitals from Poland. The Polish Jewish medical personnel took shifts in the camp and, in order not to take away precious space from the refugees, many doctors and nurses simply slept on the floor. Whereas most of the adult refugees had to live in overcrowded barracks and stables, a Children's Home was established in a private home with specialised educators and nurses. The Cultural and Religious Department provided Polish and English language courses and ran an improvised synagogue. Another important institution created by the JDC was the Post Office Department – demonstrating the central importance of communication between the refugees and their family members, aid organisations, and embassies. The JDC, using refugees as improvised officers, built its own extension of the local post office, which was by itself unable to handle the large amount of outgoing and incoming correspondence.

Towards the end of 1938, the JDC returned to what it perceived as a normal mode of operation and transferred the responsibility for the administration of the camp to the General Aid Committee for Jewish Refugees from Germany in Poland led by Mojżesz Schorr, a historian and rabbi and a member of the Sejm. This committee, with the support of local Jewish aid organisations, successfully appealed to the Polish Jewish public and, in combination with some foreign donations and in-kind contributions, was able to raise enough money to sustain the refugees in Zbąszyń and other locations. By the end of March 1939, Polish Jews had collected two million zloty (roughly 400,000 US dollars).<sup>18</sup> The JDC did not use the larger part of its emergency allocation of 250,000 US dollars, which had been set aside immediately after the expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany, until the spring of 1939. By this time, however, the resources so selflessly and generously collected by Polish Jews had been largely depleted. This was due not only to the continued need for such support, but also to the pressure exerted by the Polish government for Jews to contribute large sums to the national defence fund. Finally, after the Nazi occupation of the Bohemian Lands, Polish Jewish relief was also burdened by thousands of Jewish refugees from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia as well.<sup>19</sup>

18 For an overview of the activities of the committee, see: The activity of the General Aid Committee for Jewish Refugees from Germany in Poland (I. XI. 1938–I. VII. 1939); see also numerous press appeals and reports, for instance: Akcja pomocy dla uchodźców i wysiedleńców [Aid Campaign for Refugees and Displaced Persons], in: *Nasz Przegląd* 16 (9 November 1938) 314, 9; Komunikat Ogólnego Komitetu Pomocy Uchodźcom Żydowskim z Niemiec [Announcement of the General Committee to Aid Jewish Refugees from Germany], in: *Nasz Przegląd* 16 (20 November 1938) 325, 2; Dokoła akcji pomocy uchodźcom [Concerning the Operation to Help Refugees], in: *Nasz Przegląd* 16 (1 December 1938) 336, 13.

19 See for instance: Troper to Hyman, JDC New York, 1 July 1939, Status of Refugee Problems in Poland (undated), Interim Report on Refugee Problems in Poland, 8 June 1939, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

In the history of the JDC, Zbąszyń figures prominently as a watershed event. As Yehuda Bauer noted, it led to a dramatic change in the modus operandi of the relief organisation. Instead of working through local aid committees and other organisations, the members of the Polish JDC office found themselves rushing to the scene in Zbąszyń (and elsewhere) and directly setting up the relief activities on the ground.<sup>20</sup> The quick intervention of the JDC prevented a humanitarian catastrophe and demonstrated the extent of Polish and international Jewish solidarity.

A number of changes were going on in the JDC in this crucial period: It became a larger and more structured organisation and the leadership of its European Council, the essential station for distributing help in Europe, was passed from Bernhard Kahn to Morris C. Troper, thus from a highly educated intellectual to an excellent organiser and administrator.<sup>21</sup> The multiplication of the sites of persecution and refugee situations over the course of 1938 also strengthened the shift from care focused on productivisation towards emergency relief.

“Zbąszyń has become a symbol for the defenselessness of Polish Jews. Jews have been humiliated to the level of lepers, to fourth-class citizens, and as a result we are all affected by this terrible tragedy. Zbąszyń was a heavy blow to the Jewish population of Poland”, as Emanuel Ringelblum reflected on the character and function of relief work in the camp in a letter to Raphael Mahler at the beginning of December 1938.<sup>22</sup> The most intriguing thought, both for Ringelblum and for this paper, is that Jewish relief work might, by developing a separate and isolated system of Jewish welfare and in the context of Polish exclusionary measures, have contributed to the erosion of citizenship for Polish Jews. What if the selfless and efficient response to persecution had at the same time had the potential to confirm and strengthen the exclusion of Jews in Poland and beyond?

The JDC, of course, was no novice in navigating the Polish nationalist and anti-semitic political and social landscape and it appears that especially the JDC office in Warsaw from the very beginning understood well the risks of relief that would confirm denaturalisation and potentially destabilise the position of all Jews in Poland. In their reports, the relief workers repeatedly voiced their discontent over the lack of support from the Polish government and over the reluctance to dissolve the camp. In mid-November, a dispatch from Warsaw to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) summed up the failed negotiations with the Polish government, which refused to allow the Polish Jews in Zbąszyń to enter the interior of the country. The author (who was not identified, but was very likely someone from the JDC Warsaw office), complained that “these people are not accorded even the most elementary rights normally given to the internees of camps, namely, to keep them at the expense of the state”. The cost of their maintenance, which fell solely in the hands of Jewish relief organisations, reached 2,000 US dollars per day but could have been avoided if the refugees had been allowed to resettle in Poland.<sup>23</sup> In his letter cited above, Ringelblum complained: “How long can we afford this? The government is not giving us a cent. We paid in full for straw we received during the first days from the district government. The future is envisaged in desperate terms. People in the camp have received notices

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 245-246.

<sup>21</sup> Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, 250-252.

<sup>22</sup> Emanuel Ringelblum to Raphael Mahler, 6 December 1938, English translation cited in: Sybil Milton, *The Expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany, October 1938 to July 1939. A Documentation*, in: Michael Robert Marrus (ed.), *The Origins of the Holocaust (= Nazi Holocaust 2)*, Westport 1989, 544.

<sup>23</sup> Dispatch from Warsaw to George Becker of the JTA, 18 November 1938, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933-1944, file 878.

that they have lost their Polish citizenship. We are all worried about their future and how long the status quo can continue.”

As demonstrated above, the organisational and social structures created in Zbąszyń in many ways replaced the government and substituted for its responsibilities. As in other cases of refugee no man’s land at this time, the government only supervised the camp from the outside to make sure that no one left without authorisation. The involvement of the state was otherwise kept to an absolute minimum, with a focus on security and public order on the one hand and the health situation on the other.<sup>24</sup> After all, intervening in the no man’s land would defy the very meaning of borders (both the physical ones and those of citizenship) which the authorities imagined as clear, impermeable divisions and which they intended to solidify. The no man’s land was therefore characterised by the very absence of the state – a void into which the Jewish relief organisations stepped in order to provide services that were increasingly associated with the state. This figurative “citizenship of the no man’s land” was indeed no replacement for proper membership in a nation state and the protections this could offer. The aid agencies, after all, could not provide valid passports or guarantee freedom of movement. Nevertheless, the degree to which they replaced the government is also illustrated by the fact that JEAS and other agencies in fact secured much of the services related to passports and emigration on behalf of the refugees.<sup>25</sup>

The power structures in the no man’s land, or the absence thereof, also reflected this pattern. In Zbąszyń as in other cases, the spontaneous organisation of refugees seemed to play a limited role: While leaders and social structures emerged from within the refugee groups as well, the real authority was to be attributed to the power to mediate with the outside world and cross borders. The ability to bring material assistance in the form of food, clothes, or even cultural goods, or control over emigration, including the selection of the most hopeful cases, were the more substantial sources of authority. The mobility of the aid workers stood in contrast to the immobility of the refugees. The organisation of the Zbąszyń ‘camp’, with officials of the JDC and later of the General Aid Committee on the top and the refugees themselves participating on lower-level positions, demonstrates to what degree the structure of the relief work mirrored exclusion from citizenship.

Within the first days of the refugee ordeal in Zbąszyń, the JDC had already initiated the formation of *landsmanshaftn*, associations of refugees linked by their origins to communities in Poland. This form of organisation was nothing new. The JDC had already attempted during the First World War to draw on the resources of US-based *landsmanshaftn* to collect funds for European Jewish communities.<sup>26</sup> It is moreover possible that some of the refugees before their deportation might have been members of such *landsmanshaftn* in Germany. Yet, for the refugees in Zbąszyń, this organisation might have appeared counterintuitive: In their correspondence and recollections, they typically referred to their home towns in Germany and enumerated their former neighbours who had been deported with them. Their reorganisation based on their origins in Poland (which sometimes dated back before the

24 Archiwum akt nowych [Archives of contemporary documents], Warsaw, Ministerstwo opieki społecznej [Ministry of Welfare], call no. 964; Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute], Warsaw, Spuścizna Bernarda Marka [Bernard Mark Papers], call no. S/333/227.

25 See for instance: Summary Report on an Inspection Tour to Zbaszyn on July 17, 1939, by Mr. Leon Alter, director of the JEAS, Warsaw, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

26 Jaelyn Granick, Waging Relief. The Politics and Logistics of American Jewish War Relief in Europe and the Near East (1914–1918), in: *First World War Studies* 5 (2014) 1, 59–60.



First World War) was certainly inspired by pragmatism: The rediscovered landmen could appeal for help to these communities as well as to the *landsmanshaftn* abroad, in particular in the United States. The New York office of the JDC called on the *landsmanshaftn* in the country and had refugees in Zbąszyń make desperate direct requests to their US landmen. Yet this can also be seen as a statement of their belonging to Poland, a gesture re-enacting their Polish citizenship.

### Against a Refugee Camp

From the very beginning, the JDC, the General Aid Committee, and other Jewish Polish bodies struggled for the ‘camp’ in Zbąszyń to be closed as soon as possible and repeatedly petitioned the Polish government to allow the refugees to move to the interior of the country. A report dated 10 November (note the concurrent unfolding of the pogrom in Germany) exclaimed: “The worst would be if the Polish Government were to consider the establishment of concentration camps for these refugees. There are many signs of this as for instance the laying of electricity in the barracks. This would be too terrible.”<sup>27</sup> For the Polish JDC, the only feasible solution was absorbing the German refugees in the same way as the 2,000 refugees from the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk) had been integrated into Polish society in 1938 and 1939.<sup>28</sup>

Only in response to the refusal of the government, and bearing in mind the suffering of the refugees and the nearing Polish winter, did the JDC decide to create more permanent structures in Zbąszyń and to turn emergency assistance into a longer-term effort. In other words, it unwillingly accepted the necessity of creating a refugee camp in Zbąszyń. The prolonged interment also had a negative effect on the frame of mind of the refugees and changed their relationship to the aid workers: Whereas in the first weeks, in hope of a quick release, they had praised the humanitarian response, later – the improvement of their material conditions notwithstanding – they began to express their depressive mood and complaints multiplied. Finally, in the atmosphere of the upcoming conflict with Nazi Germany, the Polish authorities slowly allowed refugees to leave the camp, which was about to be ‘liquidated’ at the end of September 1939. Yet, in the summer of 1939, some 2,000 refugees were still living in Zbąszyń, expecting their emigration or release into Poland.

The pressure to dissolve the Zbąszyń camp, as described above, seemed to be a sensible practical reaction, yet for the JDC, it also stood in marked contrast to the growing appreciation of the refugee camp as an instrument of the refugee policy of European nation states (or what the JDC would call “refugee countries”). In the internal documents of the JDC, refugee camps of different types were increasingly attributed an important role in keeping borders open. States understood as countries of transmigration, or of temporary refuge, were believed to allow the influx of refugees only as long as they did not integrate into society and guarantees would be provided of their separation and eventual further emigration.<sup>29</sup> Such views were strongly expressed during the confidential conference of the European offices of the JDC, HICEM, and JDC-supported European relief organisations held in Paris in December 1938 (which was devoted mainly to the emigration of German Jews in response

<sup>27</sup> Report by Mr. Hellman, 10 November 1938, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

<sup>28</sup> I. Giterman to JDC Paris, 27 March 1939, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance: Frank Caestecker/Bob Moore, *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, New York 2010, 290–291.

to the *Polenaktion* and the November Pogrom) and a larger emigration conference held in Paris in August 1939, only a week before the outbreak of war.<sup>30</sup>

In June 1939, Nazi Germany again began expelling hundreds of Jews to the Polish border, where they were turned back by the Polish guards and had to linger in the no man's land. Reporting from Paris to New York, Troper voiced the dilemma of Jewish relief in this situation: "The problem of the moment with respect to the border cases is whether or not to build barracks in these no man's lands. Again general considerations of relief and assistance are clouded by political issues, and we as a foreign organization must be careful in determining our course in this situation." While he was dictating his report, Giterman called from Warsaw and informed him that the General Aid Committee had decided against building refugee barracks in the no man's land "on the grounds that these people are Polish citizens and as such are entitled to enter the country."<sup>31</sup> Yet at roughly the same moment, the Katowice Jewish community, in response to the government steps to expel Czech Jews who had escaped to Poland (allegedly in response to the second series of expulsions of Polish Jews from Germany), suggested opening a refugee camp and pledged to maintain the internees.<sup>32</sup>

The contrast between the general and growing acceptance of the refugee camp and the categorical refusal to support such a solution in Zbąszyń and in other cases of no man's land for Polish Jews expelled from Germany testifies to the strong awareness on the part of the JDC and especially its Warsaw office of the connection between the physical no man's land and denaturalisation, as well as to the fear that the revision of citizenship of Jewish refugees would pave the way to a wide-ranging erosion of the position of all Jews in Poland. As such, it appears that Polish Jewish organisations were more alarmed than those in Czechoslovakia where, in response to the Jewish refugee-citizens caught between the new lines after the Munich Agreement and the First Vienna Award, Jewish communities helped to establish improvised camps (for instance in Ivančice/Eibenschütz or on the outskirts of Bratislava). This difference can be partially explained by the fact that these refugees, although they were mostly Czechoslovak citizens, lacked the right of domicile within the diminished territory of the state and because the 'camp' made it possible to save them from lingering outside, between the lines and without any shelter. Yet the Polish case was also specific with regard to the way the government used Zbąszyń to promote its program of Jewish emigration.

Whereas in the first weeks of the existence of the Zbąszyń camp, the Polish press was prohibited from reporting on the situation of these refugees, starting with the end of 1938, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed Polish journalists to use the camp as an argument for the urgency of Jewish emigration from Poland.<sup>33</sup> The government was keen to develop a scheme akin to the emerging agreement on Jewish emigration between Nazi Germany and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (ICR, the Rublee-Schacht plan) established as a follow-up to the Évian Conference. As in the German case, Polish Jewish emigration was supposed to be financed by Jewish organisations abroad and Jewish property in Poland would be invested into a special fund used to support Polish emigration. Jewish organisations were as-

30 JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, files 363, 367. See also: Bernard Wasserstein, *The Ambiguity of Virtue. Gertrude van Tijn and the Fate of the Dutch Jews*, Cambridge, MA 2014, 65–68.

31 Troper to Hyman, JDC New York, 1 July 1939, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

32 Statement from Paris by Smolar to JTA, 9 June 1938, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 878.

33 Situation of Jews in Poland, report by Boris Smolar, 29 November 1938, JDC Archives, NY Office, 1933–1944, file 793; Jansen, *Der Madagaskar-Plan*; Trębacz, *Nie tylko Palestyna*, 335–339.

signed an important role in realizing this plan: The Polish government, acting through Drymmer's Consular Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, forced the Jewish community in Poland – divided as it was – to establish a Jewish Emigration and Colonisation Committee led by Mojżesz Schorr. Its members were forced to collect money, to present the emigration scheme to the public, and to negotiate with foreign governments and organisations.<sup>34</sup> The personal overlap with the General Aid Committee, which was also led by Schorr, should have been a warning sign: Care for refugees in Zbąszyń and elsewhere in the country was linked to the expectation that Jews leave Poland.

The role of this committee appears to have been well understood by the JDC. Boris Smolar, who had spent a long time in Poland working for the JTA and cooperated closely with the JDC, reported in no uncertain terms that Jewish organisations were forced to build this emigration committee by order of the authorities and to feign its voluntary character and their endorsement of the governmental programme of Jewish emigration. Jewish leaders were forced by Polish officials to send out cables to Jewish organisations abroad exalting the humane treatment of Jews by the Polish government.<sup>35</sup> When the members of the committee travelled to Paris and London to press their case for Jewish emigration from Poland, they were met with a cautious response from Jewish representatives as well as from governments (which, while considering the emigration of Jews from Germany a forgone conclusion and a manageable problem, feared the emigration of the much larger Jewish community in Poland and other countries in Eastern Europe). The delegation in London demanded, among other issues, that Polish Jews expelled from Germany be included in the authority of the ICR. While this made sense from the perspective of international relief work and recognised Nazi Germany as responsible for their fate, it also included the risk of de facto voiding their Polish citizenship. Given the sensitivity of their task (and also the links of Schorr and some other members to the World Jewish Congress, with its concept of Jewish nationalism), Troper diplomatically prevented the delegation from continuing to the United States.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, if the refugee camp is understood as a visual and structural representation of statelessness, then that is exactly what the JDC and Polish relief organisations still wanted to avoid in 1938/1939. Yet the opposition to the refugee camp was not motivated only by concerns over the revocation of citizenship. Bringing the refugees into the interior was also driven by practical reasons. The JDC could rely not only on the support of families and local Jewish communities, but could also capitalise on the existing networks of organisations providing free loans and healthcare, running schools, and taking care of orphans. These institutions proved essential to Polish Jewry as it was confronted with growing antisemitism and exclusion throughout the 1930s. While not explicitly formulated, it appears that this insistence on 'productive' care (characteristic of the JDC generally) was also a form of recognition of participation (political as well as economic) as an important parameter of citizenship regimes.<sup>37</sup> The welfare provided by the JDC, even if 'sectarian', was designed not to separate refugees from society and to confirm Jewish citizenship in Poland.

34 Wiktor Tomir Drymmer, *W służbie Polsce. Wspomnienia żołnierza i państwowca z lat 1914–1947* [In the Service of Poland. Memoirs of a Soldier and State Citizen from 1914–1947], Krakow/Warsaw 2014, 207–208.

35 Situation of Jews in Poland.

36 Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper*, 248–249.

37 For current research on citizenship, see for instance: Igor Štiks, *Nations and Citizens in Yugoslavia and the Post-Yugoslav States. One Hundred Years of Citizenship*, London/Oxford/New York 2016, 4–11.

## Conclusion: 'Citizenship of the No Man's Land'

The reports of the JDC officers from 1938 and 1939 make apparent not just their extraordinary and selfless effort, but also a sense of the nexus between relief and citizenship. The aid organisations did not have the ability to replace state-issued passports and the rights that came with membership in a nation state. However, the JDC seemed to be well aware of the double-edged nature of the relief work: In an era of an ever-expanding catalogue of rights and entitlements, social care was one of the fields on which the nature of citizenship was put on display and tested.

Zbąszyń exposed the limits of humanitarian organisations when confronted with an exclusionary state. Since leaving Jewish refugees in need without assistance and starving was not an option, the JDC and other Jewish relief organisations were forced to participate in the ethnic fragmentation of citizenship and de facto creation of the 'citizenship of the no man's land'. This tension was encoded in most of the Jewish humanitarian work in the interwar period and the JDC was in principle ready to underwrite the costs of refugee maintenance. Yet Zbąszyń differed exactly because the beneficiaries of this help were citizens whose citizenship was being revoked and due to the symbolism of a 'camp' visually separating the refugees from the rest of citizens.

While reflecting the specifics of the crisis of the late 1930s, the JDC management of the Zbąszyń 'camp' sheds light on more general questions of how humanitarian work structures and negotiates citizenship. The unavoidable implication of humanitarian efforts in exclusionary policies remains relevant to this day, for instance with regard to the current discussions about the negative effects of prolonged stays in refugee camps and the diversion of attention from the need to integrate refugees into host societies.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, current critical approaches analyse the 'industry' of humanitarianism as a form of deterritorialised, 'mobile' sovereignty imposing its procedures and control over the refugees.<sup>39</sup> While its involvement in Zbąszyń differed in scope and techniques from today's large international NGOs and their expert staff, the JDC also struggled with how aid related to sovereignty and how it shifted the meaning of citizenship.

While refugee camps can be understood as a visual and spatial manifestation of statelessness, the implications differed according to context. By the end of the war, the connection between relief and citizenship had changed dramatically, even for the JDC. In striking contrast to the Zbąszyń case and in view of the ethnic homogenisation and political transformation in East-Central Europe as well as the unwillingness of many Polish survivors to stay in Poland, the displaced persons camps became a symbol of de jure and de facto Jewish statelessness. Yet such statelessness could be embraced by the refugees as well as by aid organisations as a resource, a precondition for moving forward and integration into a new country. The 'citizenship of the no

38 See for instance: James Milner/Gil Loescher, *Responding to Protracted Refugee Situations. Lessons from a Decade of Discussion*, Oxford 2011; Romola Sanyal, *Refugees: The Work of Exile. Protracted Refugee Situations and the New Palestinian Normal*, in: Daniel Bertrand Monk/Jacob Mundy (ed.), *The Post-Conflict Environment*, Ann Arbor 2014, 135-157; Paul Collier/Alexander Betts, *Refuge. Transforming a Broken Refugee System*, London 2017.

39 Mariella Pandolfi, *Contract of Mutual (In)Difference. Governance and the Humanitarian Apparatus in Contemporary Albania and Kosovo*, in: *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 10 (2003) 1, 369-381; Laurence McFalls, *Benevolent Dictatorship. The Formal Logic of Humanitarian Government*, in: Didier Fassin/Mariella Pandolfi (ed.), *Contemporary States of Emergency. The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Inventions*, New York 2013, 317-333; Elizabeth C. Dunn, *No Path Home. Humanitarian Camps and the Grief of Displacement*, Ithaca 2018.

man's land', or more broadly speaking humanitarian citizenship, was accepted when of temporary duration and coupled with prospects to resolve the refugee condition, but abhorred, as in the Zbąszyń case, when it was a form of exclusion and revocation of rights.

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