

Katarzyna Person

A Link to the Past?

Poland and its Memory in the Lives of Holocaust Survivors in DP Camps in the American Zone of Occupied Germany

Abstract

This article focuses on particular characteristic of Polish Jews and its part of creating of the postwar DP community, looking at its two aspects: political representation and linguistic identity. This allows to examine the role played by the past in creating the future and suggest further research which will focus on the continuity in lives of the DPs, seeing their postwar lives as part of their longer life stories, rather than time completely detached from their prewar past. It argues for the need for further work on the relationship of Polish Jewish DPs with Poland, both at the institutional and private level, and thus the issue of the role of migrants for the countries from which they departed.

Among 55 million people displaced during the course of the Second World War, there were a quarter of a million Jews who after the war found themselves in the Western occupation zones of Germany. This relatively small group, heavily damaged by their war time experiences, lost in the new environment, not aligned within the clear Cold War division of postwar Europe, has to date been discussed in numerous studies.¹ In this article, I will argue for a nuanced approach, considering cultural preferences shaped by Jewish communal experiences before the Holocaust in the context of nation states. I will focus in particular on the characteristics of Polish Jews and their part in creating a postwar Displaced Person (DP) identity. This will allow me to show what role the past played in creating the future and to suggest further research which will focus on seeing their postwar lives as part of their longer life stories, rather than time completely detached from their prewar past (even if this is often how they chose to describe it themselves).²

Jews from Poland in DP Camps in the American Zone

Even though they are regarded mainly through the prism of their decision to stay in Germany, the first testimonies following liberation show clearly that in the first postwar days a large part of Jews from Poland liberated in Germany at least considered returning to their prewar homes. One of the survivors recalled it as follows: “And it was at that time then, you started thinking, now, what’s next? What’s going to happen to us? Where are we? Where’s everybody else? Who survived? Where is any-

1 See among others: Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power. Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel*, Berkeley 1998; Gerhard D. Cohen, *In War’s Wake. Europe’s Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order*, Oxford 2011.

2 This issue is further developed in: Katarzyna Person, *Dipisi. Żydzi polscy w amerykańskiej i brytyjskiej strefach okupacyjnych Niemiec, 1945–1948 [DPs. Polish Jews in the American and British Occupational Zones of Germany, 1945–1948]*, Warsaw 2019.

body? How are we going to find each other?”³ Thus in the first postwar weeks, many of those who could, began their journey: searching for family and friends. Some returned to Poland, others travelled from camp to camp in Germany, Austria, and Italy. On bombed roads and overflowing trains, without food, they moved between occupation zones, often through areas still dominated by wartime actions. They set off with the hope of finding their relatives or those who might have known something about their fate: prisoners of the same concentration or forced labour camps or ghettos.

This movement was also caused by the fact that in the first postwar months Jews from Poland, like all DPs, were classified by the Allies according to their prewar nationality. Jews from Poland were thus regarded as Poles and were placed in Polish camps or Polish blocks in international camps and, at least in theory, were to be repatriated to the postwar Polish territories. The category of Polish DPs also encompassed Polish forced labourers, former concentration and POW camp prisoners, Poles forcibly enlisted into the Wehrmacht, Polish children deported to Germany (both as forced labourers and for ‘Germanisation’), children of Poles already born in Germany, and all those, including members of the Polish underground, who for political reasons (as well as fear for their safety) did not want to return to Poland. This group also included Polish soldiers who participated in the occupation of Germany and, later, non-Jewish escapees from Poland.⁴

Unlike Jews, non-Jewish Poles who decided to remain in postwar Germany considered themselves to be above all political refugees. Their identity was based on an idealised image of prewar Poland and the uniqueness of their suffering, even if their motivations to stay in Germany varied considerably: from rejecting the new political system to the wish to build a new life outside Poland for economic reasons. When asked about returning to Poland, Polish DPs answered: “I will return when Lvov is ours again”; “Yes, but only to an independent Poland”; “Yes, when the rightful government returns to Poland”; “No – I fought for a free and independent Poland and I will only return to one like that”; “Not as long as the Bolsheviks rule Poland.”⁵ Many were (often rightly) concerned about being persecuted after returning to Poland, a fear that was exaggerated by rumours circulating around the camps, claiming among other things that all repatriates from Germany were to be sent directly to Siberia.⁶

The Polish government, supported at least initially by the occupational authorities, was in the first postwar months deeply interested in repatriating all its citizens,

3 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), RG-50.156.0058, Interview with Dora Zaidenweber, 15 August 1984.

4 On Polish DPs, see among others: Laura J. Hilton, Pawns on a Chessboard? Polish DPs and Repatriation from the US Zone of Occupation of Germany, 1945–1949, in: Johannes-Dieter Steinert/Inge Weber-Newth (ed.), *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour. Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution*, Osnabrück 2005, 90-102; Wiesław Hładkiewicz, *Meandry polityki. Życie polityczne emigracji polskiej w zachodnich strefach okupacyjnych Niemiec 1945–1949. Liderzy – organizacje – poglądy [Meanders of Politics. Political Life of Polish Emigration in the Western Occupational Zones of Germany 1945–1949. Leaders – Organisations – Views]*, Zielona Góra 2011; Czesław Łuczak, *Polacy w okupowanych Niemczech 1945–1949 [Poles in Occupied Germany 1945–1949]*, Poznań 1993.

5 Instytut Polski i Muzeum im. Gen. W. Sikorskiego, London, Zespół Akt Polskiej Misji Wojskowej przy USFET. Raport kpt. Zbigniewa Czarnoty-Bojarskiego, oficera kontaktowego przy 7. Armii Amerykańskiej z 31 VIII 1945 dla Polskiej Misji Wojskowej we Frankfurcie nad Menem. Quoted in: Jolanta Chwastyk-Kowalczyk, *Obraz edukacji Polaków na obczyźnie na łamach czasopism emigracyjnych*, Kielce 2014, 112 [Sikorski Institute and Museum in London, Collection of the Polish Military Mission by USFET. Report of Zbigniew Czarnota-Bojarski, contact officer by the 7th American Army, to the Polish Military Mission in Frankfurt, 31. 8. 1945. Quoted in Jolanta Chwastyk-Kowalczyk, *Obraz edukacji Polaków na obczyźnie na łamach czasopism emigracyjnych*, Kielce 2014, 112 (Polish education abroad in emigree journals)].

6 Anna Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism. Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, Ann Arbor 2011, 83.

including Jews.⁷ Their return was encouraged among other things by increasing propaganda, focussed partially on the possibility of rebuilding Jewish life in Poland.⁸ Importantly, this propaganda was also aimed towards international public opinion. As late as June 1946, a month before the Kielce Pogrom, the press department of the Polish Military Mission organised a screening attended among others by the chief rabbi of the American army in Berlin, the leadership of the Joint, and a representative of the Jewish Agency. As the head of the department wrote to Warsaw:

“I showed them films. The greatest impression was made by the *Parade of Victory*, which included an appeal to the fallen with a call to ‘heroes of the fighting in the Warsaw Ghetto’ as well as to the ‘Heroes of the Jewish Fighting Organisation’. These words made the guests very emotional (they had tears in their eyes) and at the same time convinced them that our government is loyally disposed towards the Jewish issue. I later showed a film about the Western Provinces, which also had an appropriate effect on those gathered.”⁹

At this point, many Jews who had been liberated in Germany, who were tired out by the first months of life in the camps, managed to be convinced that they stood no chance of emigration and that returning to Poland was the only alternative to spending the rest of their lives in Germany. In some camps, they were not even informed that they had a choice and could reject repatriation. Members of the camp administration told them that if they stayed in Germany, they may never again re-establish contact with their family members in Poland. It was suggested that if they stayed, they would have no rights and would be treated by the occupational authorities as Germans. Finally, there were cases of forced repatriation.¹⁰

Even the establishment of separate Jewish camps in the American zone, following the 1946 Harrison Report,¹¹ did not cure all cases of wartime fear. Some of those who survived under a ‘non-Jewish’ identity (especially Jewish women who had been sent for forced labour to Germany) decided to return to Poland as non-Jewish Poles.¹² At the end of May 1945, an employee of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad described convincing Jewish DPs to define themselves as ‘stateless’ rather than ‘Polish’ as a constant battle.¹³ As late as the autumn of 1945, there were Jews among the inhabitants of Polish camps who for different reasons did not want to register in Jewish camps. One of them returned to his prewar Jewish name, but pretended in front of other Poles that it was Lithuanian rather than Jewish. As he explained: “As I was exposed to some antisemitism in the American army and in the DP camp, I reached the conclusion by myself that the persecution is going to start all over again. It’s just a matter of time.” Thus, he decided not to own up to his Jewish identity throughout

7 On Polish emigration policy in the postwar years, see: Dariusz Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949–1989 [A Country with No Exit? Migrations from Poland 1949–1989]*, Warsaw 2010.

8 Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (AŻIH), Warsaw, 302/298, Maria Rose, *Wspomnienia*, 124 [Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (AŻIH), Warsaw, 302/298, Maria Rose, *Memoirs*, 124].

9 Archiwum Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych (AMSZ), Warsaw, Z-6 W-105 T-1689, *Polska Misja Wojskowa przy Sojuszniczej Radzie Kontroli w Berlinie, 27.06.1946, Sprawozdanie* [Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMSZ), Warsaw, Z-6 W-105 T-1689, *Polish Military Mission by the Allied Control Council in Berlin, 27.6.1946, Report*].

10 Wiener Library (WL), London, HA6A 3/3/1, *Summary of Reports on the Position of Jews in Germany*, 5.

11 For the full text, see: Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust*, New York 1982, Annex, 292–304.

12 USHMM, RG-50.030.0859, Interview with Irena Bach, 12 December 2015.

13 WL, HA6A 1/9, *Relief Workers Reports: Jane Levenson (Braunschweig), 1945. Jews in Germany: General. Jane Levenson to Professor Bentwich, 25 May 1945.*

his stay in Germany. He emigrated to the United States as a Catholic Pole.¹⁴ The move from the 'Polish Jewish' to 'Jewish' identity as petitioned by Zionist camp leaders was thus far from smooth and sudden. It should be seen as a process taking place over time and motivated equally by inner need and conviction as by outside factors, in particular antisemitism both in the camps and in postwar Poland.

Political Representation: The Federation of Jews from Poland

There is no doubt that for the majority of Polish Jews, the creation of separate Jewish camps was a watershed moment. From that point on, the American zone became their space in Germany, allowing for the formation of a new Jewish DP identity. It also became a space where Polish Jews had to negotiate their relationship and still existing links with Poland, especially as the camps began to be populated not only by Jews who had survived in Germany, but primarily by increasing waves of refugees escaping antisemitic violence in postwar Poland.

The story of the Federation of Polish Jews can be seen as a powerful example to illustrate the role of breaking ties with Poland in the Zionist narrative coming out of the DP camps. Established in Munich in March 1946, the Federation was set up on the basis of the Komitet Żydów z Polski (Committee of Jews from Poland) established in the Feldafing DP camp in June 1945. The Committee took upon itself the registration and organisation of aid for Jews from Poland, underlining that "it will carry out its work apolitically and objectively, not forcing on anyone its will, and even more so political stance, especially when it comes to decisions regarding repatriation or emigration".¹⁵ In the strongly Zionist atmosphere of life in the camps, this statement was enough to place the Committee in opposition to the official representation of Jewish DPs. Its membership was open to anyone hailing from Poland in its pre-1939 borders and living in the American zone. The key positions in the Committee, and later the Federation, were occupied by people who had held a relatively high position in prewar Poland and attempted to play a similar role in the postwar Jewish community. The leader of the Federation was an attorney and a wartime social activist in the Warsaw Ghetto, Władysław Freidheim.¹⁶ Its press organ, *Ibergang* (Passage), was edited by Marek Liebhaber, a prewar collaborator of the Lvov-based *Chwila* (The Moment). The Federation also published books on the history of Jews from Poland, mainly linked to the history of the Holocaust.¹⁷

The aim of the Federation was to represent the interests of Jews from Poland and to "provide them with moral help".¹⁸ In November 1946, the Federation described its aims as: "establishing contacts between Polish Jews and their family members abroad; building a monument to the murdered Polish kibbutz by gathering documents and data; providing Polish Jews living in Germany with moral and material

14 USHMM, RG-50.030.0339, Interview with Joseph Kutrzeba, 6 June 1995.

15 YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, 294.2, reel 91, folder 1280, Protokół z odbytego posiedzenia Komisji Organizacyjnej Komitetu Żydów z Polski dnia 4 czerwca 1945 [Protocol of the meeting of the Committee of Jews from Poland Organising Commission, 4 June 1945].

16 Powstanie Federacji Żydów polskich [Establishment of the Federation of Polish Jews], in: DP Express, 23 March 1946. See also: Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), Jerusalem, M.20/4, Lista członków [Membership list]. Among those joining at a later date, we find among others the prominent Polish Jewish historian Filip Friedman.

17 See among others: Filip Friedman, Zagłada Żydów polskich w okresie okupacji niemieckiej 1939–1945 [The Extermination of Polish Jews during the German Occupation 1939–1945], Munich 1947.

18 YVA, M.20/4, H. Pradelski and W. Freidheim to Dr. Silberschein, 12 September 1946.

help; lifting spirits and supporting those injured and depressed in rebuilding cultural life; and helping those in need.”¹⁹ The Federation fulfilled its functions by attempting to establish control over the division of all aid coming from abroad for Polish Jews in Germany.²⁰ It was also actively involved in informing Jews on the restitution options for their property left behind in Poland²¹ and carried out negotiations with the Polish authorities regarding restitution in the name of Polish Jewish DPs.²²

One of the key roles played by the Federation was its contribution to the development of the network of *landsmanshaftn*: organisations set up by groups of survivors coming from the same localities. In fact, the Federation sometimes described itself as the *landsmanshaft* of Polish Jews.²³ The phenomenon of establishing postwar *landsmanshaftn* was already visible in the first postwar months in Poland and continued abroad.²⁴ These groups were to a large degree gathered around their shared memories of prewar Poland rather than the planning of a shared future understood in the context of Zionism.

Despite this attitude, the *landsmanshaftn* set up by Polish Jews were developing in Germany extremely energetically, often becoming the centre of social life for its members. Within the first days after liberation, Jews who found themselves in Germany tended to group together with survivors from the same city or town.²⁵ While they might have had different experiences of the Holocaust, they were linked by memories of life in prewar Poland. Thus, the *landsmanshaftn* became one of the basic ways of organising life in the camps.²⁶ This is why when non-Jewish Poles named camp streets after the streets of Lvov or Vilna, the Jewish camps came to be referred to as modern shtetls. The Jewish Polish Zionist politician, Ignacy Schwarzbart, who in 1946 went on a tour of the DP camps, reported to London that entering the Landsberg DP camp in 1946 felt like entering small prewar Polish towns.²⁷ What he meant was that they were still grouped to a large extent around their prewar local identities.

Even though the Federation did not support repatriation and did not exhibit any links to the Jewish leadership in Poland, its name was enough to prove that it stood against breaking the links with the history of Jews in prewar Poland. As Tamar Lewinsky noted, the ‘Polish’ character of *landsmanshaftn* was seen by the Central Committee of Liberated Jews as endangering the unity of Jewish DPs as a

19 YVA, M.20/4, W. Freidheim to Dr. Silberschein, 18 November 1946.

20 YVA, M.20/4, Appeal, 18 November 1946.

21 Wichtike melding [Important Announcement], in: Cum Ojfbj, 20 December 1956, 12.

22 AMSZ, Z-6 W-45-704, Federation of Jews from Poland in the U.S. Occupation Zone do Ministerstwa Sprawiedliwości przez Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych; AMSZ, Z-6 W-45-704, Polska Misja Wojskowa przy Radzie Kontroli w Niemczech do Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych, Departament Polityczny, Wydział Środkowo-Europejski, 15 September 1947 [AMSZ, Z-6 W-45-704, Federation of Jews from Poland in the U.S. Occupation Zone to the Ministry of Justice via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Political Department, Central European Office, 15 September 1947].

23 YVA, M.20/4, W. Freidheim to Dr. Silberschein, 18 November 1946.

24 See: AŻIH, Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce, Wydział Ziomkostw [Central Committee of Jews in Poland, Landsmanshaft Department], 1945–1950.

25 For example, in September 1945, out of 452 Jews living in the Bismarckstraße camp in Stuttgart, 439 had lived in Radom before the war. Susanne Dietrich/Julia Schulze Wessel, Zwischen Selbstorganisation und Stigmatisierung. Die Lebenswirklichkeit jüdischer Displaced Persons und die neue Gestalt des Antisemitismus in der deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft, Stuttgart 1998, 49–50.

26 Erew Pejsach in Warsze [Erev Pessach in Warsaw], in: DP Express, 11 April 1947, 8; Achtung jidn fun pojln [Attention Polish Jews], in: DP Express, 24 January 1947, 10.

27 YVA, M.2/644, Ignacy Szwarzbart, Uwagi z podróży do zony amerykańskiej w Niemczech [Notes from the Journey to the American Zone in Germany].

group gathered around the common cause of Zionism.²⁸ This explains why DP newspapers commonly featured strong voices of community leaders fighting against history and tradition of life in Poland as values that could unite Polish Jews.²⁹ The criticism of the Federation grew as chances for the rebuilding of Jewish life diminished. News of antisemitic violence in Poland reached the camps almost immediately, through formal and informal channels, in letters, reports, and stories relayed by immediate witnesses of the violence and the refugees who began arriving in the camps from Poland.³⁰ The situation in Poland was only second to developments in Palestine as the most pressing topic in the Jewish DP press from its establishment onwards. The peak of this coverage undoubtedly followed the Kielce Pogrom in July 1946, which was discussed in numerous articles, reports, witness testimonies, and official statements of Jewish organisations and Polish authorities printed in the DP press. Articles in Jewish DP newspapers almost uniformly described the violence in Poland as a proof that there was no future for Jewish life in Europe and of the necessity for the establishment of a Jewish state. Rebuilding Jewish life in Poland was treated in these publications as a dangerous illusion, at best a temporary solution, with emigration depicted as the only option for Jews who still remained in Poland.

As a result, even though Jews from Poland constituted a clear majority of camp inhabitants in the American zone, they often felt that their particular experience was very much absent from the political narrative coming out of the DP camps. Ignacy Schwarzbart noted that “Polish Jews feel somehow left out”, describing the situation as follows: “Even though our brothers from Poland are in the overwhelming majority in the camps, they have a type of inferiority complex.”³¹ Indeed, the political representation of DPs in the American zone was made up almost entirely of Lithuanian Jews.³² The three most important men in the zone were Zalman Grinberg, Dovid Treger, Grinberg’s deputy and from July 1946 onward chairman of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews, and Samuel Gringauz, leader of the Camp Committee in Landsberg and chairman of the Council of Liberated Jews. All three men came from Kovno and were surrounded mainly with people from the same region. It was the voice of Lithuanian Jews which was transmitted by the most important publications controlled by the Committee and published in the American zone. The most widely read newspaper in the American zone, *Landsberg Lager Cajtung*, was published in Yiddish in the Lithuanian dialect. As reported by

28 Tamar Lewinsky, *Żydowsky uchodźcy i przesiedleńcy z Polski w okupowanych Niemczech* [Jewish Refugees and Displaced Persons from Poland in Occupied Germany], in: Feliks Tych/Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (ed.), *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2000* [The Aftermath of the Holocaust. Poland 1944–2000], Lublin 2011, 116. See also the English version: Tamar Lewinsky, *Polish-Jewish Displaced Persons in Occupied Germany*, in: Feliks Tych/Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (ed.), *Jewish Presence in Absence. The aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010*, Jerusalem 2014. On the critique of the Federation of Jews from Poland, see: *Noch a wort wegn di komitets-waln in Deggendorf* [Another Remark about the Committee Elections in Deggendorf], in: *Cum Ojfbaj*, 20 November 1947, 7.

29 R. Olewski, *Ułani ułani, chłopcy malowani ...* [Uhlans, Ulhans, the Painted Boys ...], in: *Unzer Sztyme*, 20 August 1946, 7.

30 See: Katarzyna Person, *Pogrom kielecki w prasie DP* [The Kielce Pogrom in the DP Press], in: August Grabski (ed.), *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku. Holokaust i powojnie (1939–1946)* [Pogroms of Jews in Poland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. The Holocaust and the Postwar Period (1939–1946)], Warsaw 2019, 453–465.

31 YVA, M.2/644, Ignacy Szwarzbart, *Uwagi z podróży do zony amerykańskiej w Niemczech*.

32 According to a survey carried out on 1 October 1945, out of 4,976 Jewish inhabitants of Landsberg, 75.2 per cent) came from Poland, 5.7 per cent from Hungary, and 3.3 per cent from Romania. Jewish DP Population Survey, MK 488 roll 8 frames 1032–37, Leo Schwartz Papers JIWO, quoted in: Avinoam Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland. Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Detroit 2009, 126, footnote 16.

the *Landsberg Lager Cajtung*, even newspaper employees who spoke Yiddish in the Polish dialect on a daily basis had to switch to Lithuanian dialect during working hours.³³

War of Words

The tension between the prewar Polish-Jewish identity and the new Jewish DP identity was thus also played out in the realm of language. This phenomenon was not unique to Polish Jews, but also affected Jews from other countries, yet due to the number of Polish Jews in DP camps and the legacy of Poland as a principal site of the Holocaust, it was particularly widely discussed in the DP press.

One of the key characteristics of the prewar Polish Jewish community was its multilingualism, with Polish having played an increasingly important role in this mosaic of languages. For many Polish Jews, coming from diverse social backgrounds and having been educated and socialised in the Polish school system, part of their prewar identity was tied up with the Polish language. In interwar Poland, the choice of a Polish-language school was not necessarily led by a process of assimilation, but was rather increasingly a purely pragmatic choice, undertaken also by traditionalist parents.³⁴ Just as importantly, for poorer families and those coming from small towns and not only urban centres, who could not afford private Jewish schools, the choice of a Polish-language state school was the only one available to them.

Polish schools were spaces where many Jewish pupils first came in contact with the non-Jewish world, even if schools and especially universities increasingly excluded and alienated Jewish students throughout the 1930s, both through the nationalistically inclined educational message and the antisemitic harassment and attacks to which Jewish pupils were subjected. As the historian Natalia Aleksiu noted: “For some Jewish students universities constituted a complex cultural and political encounter with their minority status.”³⁵ Yet, irrespective of their attitude towards Poland, members of the younger generation might not have had any communicative ability in the Jewish languages – neither Hebrew nor Yiddish – and used Polish on a daily basis.³⁶ In all areas, many Jews read Polish newspapers, regardless of their national and Catholic character, and, despite the official line of their leadership, often participated to some degree in Polish cultural life. As can be clearly seen in photos from the camps, the Polish language was used just as much as Yiddish in camp signs and advertisements. Even the Zionist paramilitary organisation, Irgun, in August 1946, when preparing anti-British posters to be hung on the streets of Munich, posted slogans in Yiddish, Hungarian, and Polish.³⁷ There were also similar issues in kibbutzim, where the use of Hebrew played a particularly important role, symbolising

33 Schejris-Haplejo oder Schejrit-Hapleja? [Surviving remnant or surviving remnant], in: *Landsberg Lager Cajtung*, 25 September 1946, 2.

34 See: G. Dynner, Replenishing the “Fountain of Judaism”. Traditionalist Jewish Education in Interwar Poland, in: *Jewish History* 31 (2008), 229–261; Kamil Kijek, Between a Love of Poland, Symbolic Violence and Antisemitism. The Idiosyncratic Effects of the State Education System on Young Jews in Interwar Poland, in: *Polin* 30 (2018), 243–244.

35 Natalia Aleksiu, Together but Apart. University Experience of Jewish Students in the Second Polish Republic, in: *Acta Poloniae Historica* 109 (2014), 110.

36 On Jews who only learned Yiddish in the camp, see: Margarete Myers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957*, Cambridge 2010, 223.

37 The Office of Military Government, United States, POLAD Box 756, James R. Wilkinson, American Consul General to Ambassador Murphy, United States Political Adviser for Germany, subject: Jewish Activity in Munich, 16 August 1946.

the path to the future and a break with the past in the diaspora. Hebrew was the common language connecting kibbutzim members in Germany and Palestine. Along with the emigration of the most committed Zionists to Palestine, the kibbutzim had also seen a gradual transition from Hebrew as the language of its leaders to Yiddish, and then Polish. In March 1946, the leaders of Kibbutz Josef Kaplan in Jordanbad appealed to Palestine to send them materials in Polish, because “most of the members, despite their great commitment, do not speak Yiddish fluently”.³⁸ Moreover, reports on the activities of the kibbutz sent to Palestine from March to May 1946 were in Hebrew, in May in Yiddish, and in July in Polish.³⁹ As early as August 1946, one of the members of the kibbutz in Bad Salzschlirf wrote to the headquarters: “I would like to write more, but I know little Yiddish and I don’t want to use Polish.”⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, language as the most visible sign of links to the past in Poland became the forefront of the ideological battle taking place in the camps and, in continuity with the situation in prewar Poland, Yiddish newspapers were the key battlefield.⁴¹ The newspapers’ creation – in every camp and in almost every party and social organisation – undoubtedly proves the great need to become independent from the externally imposed camp administration, taking responsibility for oneself and one’s surroundings, and an attempt to shape communal life.⁴² These newspapers were often distributed throughout Germany and even abroad.⁴³ The majority of the Yiddish press fiercely fought the “epidemic of the Polish language”, the use of which was considered incompatible with Jewish identity. The Polish language was considered symbolic of a “weakness of character and a lack of [national] awareness”.⁴⁴ The use of Polish by young people, who were destined to become the vital core of the new Jewish nation, was particularly criticised. Thus, caricatures of young Jews aspiring to become “Polish intelligentsia” appeared in the press.⁴⁵ Mocking articles about the Polish language often depicted Jewish women speaking Polish.⁴⁶ This was especially true of women who had not received a religious education and had more often attended only primary schools or primary and secondary schools, where they had studied in Polish and acquired a Polish cultural code.⁴⁷ This again was a continuity of a discussion that had taken place in prewar Poland, where attending non-Jewish schools was seen as a first step towards assimilation and a rejection of Jewish tradition.

38 Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland*, 307, footnote 83.

39 Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland*, 133.

40 Hakibbutz Ha’arzi Archives (HHA) (1).9.13.2, Report of Bnei Midbar in Bad Salzschlirf, HHA/(1).9.13.2, HHA (2).8.13.2. Kibbutz Hashomer Hatzair “Ma’apilim” to the leadership of the movement in Munich (August 1946), quoted in: Zeev W. Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope. The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany*, New York 2002, 150.

41 See: Jacqueline Giere, *Eine Brücke zwischen Gestern und Morgen. Die jüdische DP Presse in der amerikanischen Zone Deutschlands*, in: Anne-Katrin Henkel/Thomas Rahe (ed.), *Publizistik in jüdischen Displaced-Persons-Camps im Nachkriegsdeutschland. Charakteristika, Medientypen und bibliothekarische Überlieferung*, Frankfurt am Main 2014, 67.

42 Ruth Gay, *Safe among the Germans. Liberated Jews after World War II*, New Haven 2002, 62.

43 Jacqueline Giere, *Wir sind unterwegs, aber nicht in der Wüste. Erziehung und Kultur in den jüdischen Displaced-Persons-Lagern der Amerikanischen Zone im Nachkriegsdeutschland 1945–1949*, Frankfurt am Main 1993, 254.

44 L. Rudnick, *Fraye tribune. Noch wegn der frage pojilisz-rejdn [Free Tribune. Still Regarding the Question of Speaking Polish]*, in: *Jidisze Cajtung*, 22 November 1946, 9.

45 See: T. Shaykovitsh, *Fraye tribune. Vider vegn yidish in Unzer veg, [Free Tribune. Again about Yiddish in Unzer veg]*, in: *Jidisze Cajtung*, 25 November 1947, quoted in: Tamar Lewinsky, *Displaced Poets. Jiddische Schriftsteller im Nachkriegsdeutschland, 1945–1951*, Göttingen 2008, 179.

46 See: Lewinsky, *Displaced Poets*, 179.

47 Aleksiu, *Together but Apart*, 116.

Despite the fact that articles in DP newspapers seemed to repeat the key points of the interwar 'language wars', there were also other aspects to this battle, ones which were unique to the DP community. With regard to the Federation of Polish Jews, the fight against the Polish language was another aspect of the game played out in the American zone between the Jews of Poland and the Jews of Lithuania, who were fighting not only over political representation, but also the shape of social and cultural life.⁴⁸ Commenting on this, the journalist M. Lustig wrote:

"People who have no idea about the history of the Jews in Poland, people who unilaterally perceive this issue through the prism of their own interests, or as a result of small-town chauvinism, take the floor on this matter. Even the very way of approaching this matter, the ironic tone and the unskilful and pale wit, clearly shows us who dares to talk about it."

Carrying on with the narrative typical of assimilated Jewish circles in prewar Poland, Lustig in the next part of his article referred to Ber Meiseles and Berek Joselewicz, two key Jewish participants in the Polish fight for independence in the nineteenth century, thus underling the place of Jews in the Polish romantic tradition and communal mythology of heroism. He also discussed the issue in class terms as a struggle between the prewar educated elite and those rising to the position of prominence in the chaos of the postwar months: users of Yiddish were understood here as inferior to users of Polish in terms of cultural achievement. He thus went on to write:

"Why is the Polish language boycotted so by a certain group of people? Why is Hungarian and Russian not so offensive? And is German directly favoured? Is it just a sentiment? Is it simply the sound of the Polish language that is so unpleasant? No! A completely different factor comes into play. Polish Jews predominate in this area. Jews who have been educated at Polish universities and acquired their knowledge in Polish. They were brought up in the historical tradition of their ancestors, a history which stretches back seven centuries, the history of the Meizels and Joselewicz families. Polish Jews gave the world some of the most famous scientists, musicians, political activists, and writers. The culture of Polish Jews is dangerous for little people. Too much competition. But how to overcome it? By taking away the language in which all their knowledge has been acquired, they will be rendered helpless."⁴⁹

Obviously, Lustig's claim is contradicted by the fact that Yiddish was as much the language of the DP community in the British zone (where the leadership was composed mainly of Jews from Poland) as in the American zone. During the first Congress of Liberated Jews in the British zone, in which the vast majority of representatives came from Poland, the official languages were already Yiddish and German, with a few speeches in Hungarian and English, but none in Polish.⁵⁰ In time, Chopin's funeral march, with which the proceedings were supposed to be launched, was also removed from the programme. Instead, the participants recited the prayer *El maleh rachamim* (Merciful God).⁵¹

The discussion on language taking place in the DP camps was much more than a discussion about the dangers of assimilation. There is no doubt that in the context of

48 Giere, *Wir sind unterwegs, aber nicht in der Wüste*, 177.

49 M. Lustig, *Mowa nie stanowi o wartości człowieka* [Speech Does Not Constitute Human Worth], in: *DP Express*, 5 March 1947, 3.

50 National Archive, London, (NA), FO 1052/283, Jewish Congress: Hühne Camp (Belsen). Report on "Jewish Congress" at Hühne Camp 25/27 Sep. [1945].

51 NA, FO 1052/283, Jewish Congress: Hühne Camp (Belsen). Report on "Jewish Congress" at Hühne Camp 25/27 Sep. [1945]. Appendix A.; HQ 21 Army Group (Mil Gov), Jewish Conference at Belsen, 30 July 1945.

the DP camps, the fight over the use of Polish was very much linked to the bitter memory of Polish antisemitism both during the war and in the immediate postwar period and disappointment with the postwar state. There was no more place for the prewar ambivalence in attitudes towards Polish culture. In the historical narrative of the DP leadership, Poland was a hostile space, any links with which should be severed, including linguistic ones. Postwar Jewish identity as understood in the DP community could not be based on any Polish cultural values, including the language.

Conclusion

For a large part of Polish Jews, the camps were a liminal space: suspended between prewar communal Jewish life in Poland, to which there was no return, and an uncertain future after emigration. It is therefore important to ascertain what role memories of Poland and still existing links to Poland played in the context of the strong Zionist impulse taking place in the camps, in particular if we see it not only as imposed from the outside by representatives of the Yishuv, but to a large degree, as Avinoam J. Patt wrote, as “a unique, home-grown conclusion to wartime and postwar experiences, thereby revealing the tremendous agency of the DPs themselves in reconstructing political and cultural life in the aftermath of the destruction”.⁵² It is thus also a case study in the discussion on how violence (here seen in terms of Polish violence towards Jews during and in the aftermath of the Holocaust) reshapes the identities of those involved.⁵³

The aim of my article was to show how the survivor community imagined its future and thought about its past. I argue for a transnational approach to research on survivors, one that also includes the question of continuities in discourse about the future and the shape of Jewish culture. Despite the ever-growing academic literature on the subject, research into the Jewish DPs which places them firmly in their specific historical contexts, based on documents in their own languages and the resources of local archives, is only just emerging. Only such research will make it possible to commence larger scale comparative studies between the groups which formed the national melting pot of postwar Germany. The history of DPs clearly shows how their choices, fears, and hopes were shaped by what they had experienced before the war and by the networks to which they belonged.

Katarzyna Person works in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and is currently a MSCA fellow at the LMU in Munich. She has published over 20 peer-reviewed articles and three books dealing with the Holocaust and its aftermath in occupied Poland. Her most recent book is *Warsaw Ghetto Police. The Jewish Order Service during the Nazi Occupation* (Cornell University Press 2021).

E-Mail: kpersion@jhi.pl

52 Avinoam Patt, Stateless Citizens of Israel. Jewish Displaced Persons and Zionism in Post-War Germany, in: Jessica Reinisch/Elizabeth White (ed.), *The Disentanglement of Populations. Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Post-War Europe, 1944–1949*, London 2011, 163.

53 See: Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force. Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*, Ithaca/London 2016, 312-315.

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