

The Legacy of Displaced Persons—A Personal Chronicle*

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When asked to discuss the problem of the "displaced persons" I face a problem I have rarely faced before, namely having too much material rather than too little. I realize that to many of today's workers, the years immediately after World War II sound like "antiquity," not within remembered experience.

On a recent trip to Europe I became aware of how much more than war and its aftermath are still on people's minds, and part of their daily living. In spite of the avalanche of Holocaust literature, for us safely here, somehow the memory of the war years, the underground movement, the horror of the camps, the displacement of thousands of people, the bombings and the hunger happened "over there."

A few recent personal experiences are a preface to the brief account I shall give of the Displaced Persons Camps as I saw them and worked in them from 1946 to 1959.

On my recent flight to Paris I sat near a couple who spoke, or rather screamed in an unmistakable German accent. The man was deeply upset, because he thought somebody had taken his seat. He created a scene that was embarrassing, particularly for me, since I myself have a German accent (but am not known to make scenes). After half the crew got involved some armistice was declared. When I looked again the same man, with an angelic smile was playing with another couple's baby. He must have noticed my surprised look, for he turned to me and explained "I love children, I saw so many die, but one has to stand upon one's rights. If you survived Auschwitz you are meant to survive. My wife

says I scream at the wrong occasion, but I have to."

Staying with friends in Paris they showed me that they kept a considerable amount of money in a cigar box. "We have learned during the war that you must have money at home just in case, and I remembered my husband, who always had one pair of new shoes ready, just in case one has to run."

So all of us who work with Hitler's victims really deal with people who have hidden scars, much more difficult to detect, often more difficult to heal or alleviate than open wounds.

Since our clients are the elderly it is often difficult to diagnose which of the "strange" ideas are symptoms of the aging process and which are related to the Hitler experience, which points up the value of an early and complete intake history. Only from a rather full psychosocial evaluation can we hope to arrive at an accurate diagnosis. We have to learn to listen with the "third ear" to our clients.

I go back to the year 1944 and the first D.P. camp to open, at least for Hitler victims. This camp was right here in the USA, in Oswego, New York. During the war, President Roosevelt took 1,000 refugees out of the Italian detention camps, the Italian version of the *konsentationslager*, and "invited" them to America for the duration of the war. They were promptly "put behind barbed wire" into old army barracks in Oswego. It was a "mixed salad" of people; Polish intelligentsia and Ukrainian peasants, Yugoslav farmers, German middle class, predominantly Jewish, but also White Russians; and every nationality fought every other nationality. We were three social workers of three different denominations, and we had to take histories. Even though these people had had a much easier

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time, the stories started then as they do now: "You can't understand, you were not there—." It was my first experience with camp life, but heaven knows it was not my last. The political factions, the competition about who had had the worst experience, the open and indiscreet life in the barracks, the objections of the men to working in the communal kitchen, were all a fitting *hors d'oeuvre* to work in the European camps. This group of 1,000, enriched by about 8 births, was finally admitted permanently to the U.S.A. Occasionally we find them or their descendants among our clients. My personal pride and joy is the engineer who became the creator of the garden in Kissena II and is one of my old Oswego clients.

When I eventually got all my papers cleared, an endless battle, because having been German, I was an "enemy alien" in the U.S.A. during the war. I went to Europe under the auspices of the American Joint Distribution Committee, known as the "Joint" all over Europe. It is not possible to picture this chaotic Europe where thousands of people were on the march from "nowhere to nowhere," searching for a place to live, searching for homes that did not exist, searching for husbands or wives, searching for children. Waves of homeless human beings were rolling all over Europe, not only Jews but former underground workers, political prisoners, human beings of almost all European nationalities. We here sometimes seem to think that Hitler's victims are by definition Jewish and German. We are making the world rather small. In our particular work it is of great importance to keep in mind the differences in background. The adjustment of a Jew from Salonika, Greece, to America, is basically different from that of the Jew from Austria, because political past, family structure, mores, and interpretation of religion were so basically different. The word D.P. is acceptable today, but in attempting to really understand in depth, one has to ask: D.P., yes, but from where?

The first camp I was assigned to as a

"psychiatric and rehabilitation worker" was Anicitta, outside Rome, the former center of the Italian film industry. There were thousands of people housed in barracks with family quarters separated by such things as flimsy curtains or old coats. My first night in camp a Chinese, who got there I don't know how, killed his wife. Nobody really cared, the only problem was what to do with the corpse. People cared only to survive, there was little food and less heating. It was December and it was cold. People were thin, they were ill and they were bitter. If this was "liberation" why survive? The sentence still rings in my ears "Six million Jews had to die, and you can't even give me white bread." People had kept themselves alive, barely so in the concentration camps, with the hope of going to America and Palestine. Neither the Americans nor the British in Palestine said, "Welcome." And so the endless waiting for clearance and papers began; the hopeless battle with bureaucracy. This in itself had almost insurmountable problems, working in defeated countries without sufficient housing and food or a working economy. There was a British Zone, an American Zone and a French Zone; all had different administrations. All they had in common was a mass of desperate, demanding, ever shifting humanity who felt, and perhaps rightly so, that having suffered so much to survive, the world owed them a living. But the world of 1946 had to reconstruct itself and in the American Zone the job fell to the U.S. Army, to UNRA-IRO, and the Joint.

Given the prevailing conditions these organizations did a superhuman job, but they did not earn much thanks. The displaced persons had three alternative ways to relate to authority: to distrust it, to out-manuever it, or to try to ingratiate themselves with those in power. There was an all-prevailing fear of anyone in uniform. One did not have the courage to trust even one's friends. People had survived by maneuvering, or by any method that would keep them alive, not only from day-to-day, but literally hour-to-hour. Attending carefully to their adaptation today, one

will find traces of those traumatic days in the majority of these clients. Sometimes, one can break through by recognizing with a client that those methods were necessary and acceptable in Europe, but not here. Equally often one will fail, because this mode of behavior has become obsessive.

After my "apprenticeship" in Anicitta, I was transferred to a T.B. Sanitarium in Northern Italy. I arrived on the same day as did the first transport from the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. You have all heard of the people looking like "living skeletons;" once you have seen them you can't sleep so well at night for quite some time. T.B. often attacks young people and this was one of the very rare groups of young survivors. Their being young gave one some hope. The youngest was a girl of 12, who just dimly remembered her parents, did not know how to handle a knife or fork, or how to read and write; it took months to gain her trust. The only medication at that time was streptomycin, and streptomycin could be gotten only on the black market. So you bartered for cigarettes, for coffee, for foreign currency; you bartered, invented, cheated to stay alive. You did not pay in money in those days, you paid with American cigarettes. Parenthetically, that child of 12 eventually was cured of T.B., adopted by one of the physicians, finished schooling, went to Israel, trained as a nurse and married a physician. She came to visit me last year. Superficially she is happy, but if one looks closely enough there are detectable scars of a "lost childhood" in an intense desire to grab everything life can possibly offer, and sudden depression in the realization that she can never make up for "lost time." Of the hundreds of tales that can be told, I mention two incidents as representative. A twenty-year-old boy was screaming every night because he saw his father jump to his death clutching a Torah in his arms, and the laughing S.S. watching. Another much older man told me of his constant hunger, the diet having been a watery soup and a crust of bread. Just once he managed to get potatoes and very carefully tried to bring them to his

wife, but a guard saw him, grabbed the potatoes and threw them into the mud. This story has a happy ending, the couple survived and are now living in Chicago. I am relating these incidents not to add to a collection of horror stories, but to try to relate the intensity of feelings, of hope and despair, guilt and demand, anticipation and disappointment.

I found myself suddenly "Director of Social Service," with mostly myself to direct. It meant meeting daily needs, such as getting clothing somehow, somewhere. For example, Joint sent us lots of flowered cotton and I kept everybody up day and night sewing dresses. In a wild binge of over-identification, I also made use of those creations for myself. But somehow more than 100 women, all dressed in the same material, looked just like "women in uniform." What we did for the men I have forgotten. We needed healthy food for our patients and I spent days exchanging canned goods such as corn, which the D.P.s refused as "chicken food, not healthy," against some local produce. To promote "self government" with a client group who had not been permitted to make decisions for years and did not trust their own judgment, we encouraged formation of "committees," which almost drove me crazy. In the beginning they did not trust me because I was "from the Joint," but, much worse, my Yiddish was questionable, to say the least. Therefore, I was German, a *Yecke*, and not acceptable to the Eastern Europeans. In time, this changed and I became their lawyer and advocate, although legal services were not taught then in schools of social work. Even though I was professionally trained at a time that had just discovered the merits of psychoanalysis, to discover whether or not a client suffered from an oedipal confusion did not seem most important. I guess though, that whatever skill I may have possessed was called upon one night when I had to tell a young girl that her only surviving brother had been killed by the British in Palestine. I had not seen her for years but met her on Broadway the other day; she is married, has 2 children and is much involved with the

Lubavitcher movement. She said the Lubavitch had meant her "survival." One enterprising young man somehow got around the camp authorities and the local police, and opened a house of prostitution in the village, to make money and to immigrate to America. It flourished for some time. While there was no end to the resourcefulness of some people, there was another group that was absolutely passive, as if they felt nothing was worthwhile, not even suicide. They just lived on, following orders as they had in camp, though this was the time when some Jews were fighting for the creation of the State of their own and many survivors dreamed of, and worked for, a "Free Palestine." Our sanatorium was strategically situated. Often, the young men of the illegal Palestine army, Haganah, Bricha, etc., used us as an over-night stop. When they left us in the morning some of our D.P.s had also left with them. We literally prayed they would arrive safely. Sometimes they did and sometimes they were turned back by the British. Some "made it" to Israel and some are among our clients today. The wheel that started spinning people around during and after Hitler's time is still spinning, though much more slowly, today.

When the time came to discharge our so-called cured and arrested patients to the camps, we faced a minor revolution. Those 25 patients were unwilling to leave the security they knew for yet another camp experience. They simply went on a sit-down strike. When we managed to persuade them to go to another camp, they hired trucks and returned without permission 2 weeks later. Their beds were filled, there were no rations, and administration had to turn them back. The Italian authorities promptly arrested them and threw them into prison. They were finally released and transferred to German D.P. camps, but the whole episode must be considered a fiasco, the hate in the peoples' eye is difficult to forget. They were right, but we did not know any better.

Sometime in 1948 I was transferred to Germany, this time as administrator of two

rehabilitation Centers, another job for which I was not prepared. By 1948, years of camp life had demoralized an already disappointed population, and they had one thought, to get out by hook or crook. Names were changed, documents falsified, and if a client died who had a visa or a passport, it vanished over night. We had clients with papers running under two or three different names, with various birthdates and places. That explains why now it so often is difficult to establish a client's real age for Social Security purposes. Even worse, was the United States immigration policy that practically excluded former T.B. patients. So a lucrative business in the exchange of X-Rays was done. With the permission of our supervisory doctor, we all helped. Only when the patients whom I helped to come to the States as "cured," ask me today to certify to their "active T.B. for health claims," I balk; I could defend the first untruth when sheer survival was at stake, but that is all; one has to stop somewhere.

One of the strangest incidents happened in the German camp. As always, feeding our people posed one of the biggest problems. The D.P.s simply were not used to canned food, least of all to corn and peanut butter. When the Jewish holidays came around, the Orthodox committee, consisting of people who worked toward admission to the U.S., and the "liberals," who desired to go to Israel, for once agreed. They wanted real Jewish holiday food "like at home." Months before, I had bartered our canned goods against live chicken and geese, which we planned to fatten for the holidays. No sooner had the birds begun running around than the mayor of the village appeared with his committee, complaining that our chickens and geese were spreading T.B. in the village. It took a medical directive from Headquarters to sanction our keeping the animals alive.

For our kitchen we had a religious overseer, whose principal mission seemed to be to declare the food which we had gotten with so much trouble, "unclean." When the holidays came the birds were slaughtered in the

prescribed way, but our German cook used a chemical to pluck their feathers and boiled water to rinse the birds. This made the blood curdle, the overseer cried *trefe*, and all hell broke loose in camp. It is only to be expected that people who have been deprived of all physical and psychological comfort are apt to over-estimate the importance of food, and this was the first Jewish holiday celebrated in so-called freedom; celebrated with plenty of tears and sorrow. My committee could not agree. The Israeli liberals wanted to eat the birds, the Orthodox raised cain, and I was asked to contact a rabbi for a Solomonic judgment. The rabbi whom I called in said he did not feel equipped to decide so weighty a question and told me to consult a "miracle rabbi." The closest one was in a camp in Austria. To phone Austria I needed clearance from General Clay's office in Heidelberg. The sergeant to whom I talked thought I was out of my mind, and, honestly, he was not quite wrong, for the military government my problem was really "chicken feed." I finally got clearance, called the camp in Austria, contacted the miracle rabbi and got this Talmudic answer! "If the water in which the birds were washed was so hot that you could not bathe a new-born baby in it then the chicken and geese are not kosher." Luckily we had a young couple with a baby at the camp. The baby had taken a bath in the same water, and so the chicken and geese were eaten. This is one of the few humorous incidents I remember. Mostly, it was a daily struggle to help people in a German camp, surrounded by former enemies, feeling discriminated against by the Allies, feeling forgotten by fate, and doing everything possible to make their voice heard.

At the risk of destroying a well-known cliché, I affirm that suffering does not make people any better, it often brings out the worst in them. At times all of us who worked directly in the camps were bitterly discouraged. We did our best to make living conditions bearable, but living in a camp year after year, after having survived Hitler, simply is not human.

Our clients could not understand that we ourselves were helpless in making bureaucracy move faster. I think what united us was the one wish to see the camps dissolved and to see the day when thousands of homeless people would be given a chance to build a home again. They used the waiting period to find new life partners, marriages were rushed and so were babies. There was an all-consuming desire and obligation felt by the remnants of European Jewry, an almost holy commitment that the Jewish people must continue. In the constant repetition of their story of survival, they hoped to alleviate the feeling of guilt around the eternal question, "Why do I live, why were they killed" and to keep alive their memories. Among today's clients how many have told us, "If I only knew one language well enough, I would write a book." This constant repetition seems to be part of a catharsis. I am not surprised that the hastily performed marriages are causing no end of problems.

And now for some of my personal thoughts: I cannot summon up, much as I would like, a recipe *a la* cook book, titled "How to deal with Survivors." It is the strength of social work to individualize, within generalizations. Perhaps we practitioners must begin with the challenge to *know thy self*. We have to admit that due to their experiences as well as those of their forebears, our clients can be annoying, exasperating, and mentally unbalanced. It is understandable that we become impatient and frustrated, but we must not judge them morally; there are simply too many unknowns in the picture. We also have come to terms with the frustrating fact that in spite of our best intentions, and well-developed skills, we will frequently fail. We have to recognize that part of the survivor's mechanism of survival and dealing with guilt is to cling to his misery; try to take it away and we may get a complete breakdown. What we can do however, is soften the pattern, by alleviating some of the pain through listening, by carefully pointing out: "you are not alone," by using concrete and tangible services not only to make life

easier but also as a demonstration that we care, and to move with the client's pace and rhythm of development, slow and zigzagging as it may be. Our aging clients, or, as the French put it, our "third life" clients have in many ways the familiar problems of most aging people, only more of them. The escape of so many elderly into pleasant memories is a thorny road for them and the closer we come to the generation whose adult memories are only of Hitler, the more disturbance we will see.

I have some conviction in the profession of social work, and that we will develop new skills as time goes on. Certainly we have to come to terms with the social worker's conceit that, in W.H. Auden's words, one "can help all." We can but offer a variety of ways to be of assistance, it is up to the client to experience

how much he can take, how much he must reject. I would not be I, if I would neglect one other fact: Ours is *not* the only group of survivors, the only group of people humanity has sinned against by being unbelievably inhuman. We only have to think of the survivors of Hiroshima, or more recently the Vietnam boat people. I believe it behooves us to be action-minded, and in whichever garden we labour, to try to do a little bit toward making this world a place where the Hiroshimas and the Holocaust are less likely. Perhaps this is a pipe dream, but as we know, dreams also have a healing quality. I close with my favorite quotation from Santayana:

It is not wisdom to be worldly wise
And to the inner vision close the eye
But is wisdom
To believe the heart