

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

BY GIDEON TAYLOR, 1987 RALPH GOLDMAN FELLOW

*Executive Vice President of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc.,
New York*

I came to the Ralph Goldman Fellowship with a minimal knowledge of Jewish organizational life and a great desire to learn about it.

I grew up in a Jewish community of about 1,500 people in Dublin, Ireland, which was largely untouched by JDC or the Shoah – the event that had shaped so much of the history of JDC and the Jewish people.

I moved from a relatively simple and uncomplicated Jewish community to a Jewish world that was complex, diverse, and challenging. The Fellowship gave me a unique view not only into Jewish history but also into the varied range of Jewish life across the globe today. It gave me a chance to talk to people who looked beyond the Jewish world as it exists today and who thought about what it would and could be tomorrow.

JDC is a place that treats history seriously, and I was determined to take advantage of that. An errand to research a small point in the archives regarding an agreement from the 1980s with the Romanian Jewish community would turn into a few hours reading terse cables from the DP camps of Europe as JDC professionals struggled to handle the aftermath of the Shoah. A walk down the hall with a simple question (whether real or feigned) to the JDC veteran Herb Katzki might lead to an afternoon listening to the man who in 1939 closed the JDC office in Paris the day before the Germans arrived and raced to the last train so he could open up shop right away in Spain in the desperate effort to save at least some Jews from the impending disaster.

Yet, the Fellowship for me was also about the present and the future. It was a glimpse into the life of Soviet Jews who had just escaped from the Soviet Union (then in its last throes), a chance to meet with Jews of my own age in Hungary who were literally discovering for the first time their Jewish roots, and an opportunity to see a Jewish community in France up close as it sought to define itself while incorporating its very different Ashkenazi and Sephardic components. It was about seeing the tiny Jewish community in the Spanish enclave of Melilla as it lived with some trepidation surrounded by Morocco, and it was an opportunity to see Israel respond in heroic fashion to the massive arrival of *olim* (new immigrants) at the beginning of *glasnost*.

And then there was Ralph.

In every generation of the Jewish people, there are a few who walk a little bit taller than the rest of us. They see things, understand things, and do things in a way that is different from the rest of us. They are larger than life. Ralph is one of these people.

He looks at every problem and sees beyond it. He sees its background, its context, and its place in Jewish history. In a world that is all too often devoid of those who understand where we have come from and where we are going, Ralph has that indefinable quality that makes him one of the great Jewish leaders of our times – the gift of vision.

The Fellowship shaped my life both personally and professionally. What a privilege it was!