

## BERLIN AS A CENTER OF OPERATIONS

Berlin, with a total pre-war population of approximately 4 000 000, at one time had over 200 000 Jews. It was thus the largest Jewish Community in Germany. More important than this, however, was its significance as a center of communication. It was the capital of the nazi government and focal point for most organizations in Germany. All executions and deportations were ordered from this city. Under the occupation it became even more important from the search and tracing standpoint. As an island in the Russian Zone, it was not only the sole point from which communication could be initiated with the cities of Eastern Germany, such as Leipzig, Dresden, Chemnitz and Erfurt, but it was the only point from which one might attempt to establish contact with what had been the huge Jewish Communities of Poland, Lithuania and even Russia.

The American Joint Distribution Committee started its official operations in Berlin on November 10th, 1945. Mr. Philip Skorneck came to Berlin on October 15th and began preparations for relief work. Berlin, which is governed by the Four Big Powers — United States, France, Britain and USSR — is divided into four sectors. The City of Berlin, as stated previously, is within the Russian Zone of Germany. Although no difficulties were encountered by the AJDC in acting within the US sector, a special request had to be placed through UNRRA with the Allied Kommandatura to receive permission for activities in the Russian sector. One of the main reasons for this special permission was that the Jewish community house and most of the Jewish institutions were located in the Russian sector. The Tracing Office had to be at all times in close contact with the Berlin Jewish Community (Gemeinde). The Commanding General US Sector of Berlin, Maj. Gen. Barker, granted special approval to the AJDC tracing

activities outside of Berlin, because the systems employed by our Tracing Office were different from those systems used by UNRRA and the Army Repatriation Teams.

The actual search and tracing work started earlier than the official beginning of AJDC activities. The writer left the 80th US Division in Czechoslovakia and came to Berlin in September 1945. Very soon the need for a search and tracing center was recognized, and a small room was set aside at the Jewish Chaplain's office in Berlin, operated by the writer and two American Jewish soldiers. The work consisted mainly of transmitting mail. Soldiers of different nationalities and German Jews brought an average of 300 letters a day to be sent to relatives abroad or to survivors in Germany. In this very office we occasionally saw German Jewish fathers meeting their sons as British or American officers. The mail received by the Jewish Chaplain's office was in most cases a request for tracing and not only for the City of Berlin, but for Poland, Hungary, Austria, Lithuania, and other countries. The two American soldiers were still attached to their units and could not devote as much time as they would have liked to tracing, but they spent all their time off sitting through nights with the writer sorting, bundling and dispatching mail to the USA, England, France and Palestine.

Very soon the amount of mail became so large that it could not be handled on this basis. We sought the help of the Berlin Jewish Community (Gemeinde) which had started to reorganize. The mail was transferred to the AJDC building at Berlin-Zehlendorf, Kronprinzenallee 247, where on September 17th, 1945 the Tracing Office started to work as a separate unit under the writer of this.

# THE FATE OF BERLIN JEWS



