

THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

I met the Jew when he was free.

Yet hardly a victim of the German concentration camps had permitted himself to be tantalized with the thought that some day he would be free. Observing the web of death spinning about him, he was able after his experiences in the ghetto and in the camp to time his meeting with death. Nevertheless, he played with the thought of eventual freedom as you and I play with the thought - If I were God.

"On a day unlike all others," his mind whispered to his heart, "the great Allied Might will storm the gates of the camps. Its proud bars will twist and bend and kneel before the victorious armies. Soldiers of freedom will flank the gates as the great world of Justice and Righteousness enters to bathe each victim in sympathy and warm each sufferer with admiration. Then will his heroism be extolled, his body clothed and his palate sweetened with the fruits of the earth." And he believed all he dreamed for it was pleasant to believe it.

The Armored Divisions had over run the camps, completed their missions and continued after the enemy. In the wake of the spearhead came the Medical Battalions to struggle with diseases that were to claim hundreds of lives during the weeks that were to follow. In the camp at Belsen more Jews died after the liberation than remained alive.

I close my eyes and the Jew appears. He stands listlessly in the striped camp uniform given him by his former master. Day follows day and he struggles with his freedom. He takes hold of it and it eludes him. He measures it and it is lost. The people who gave it to him grow strange. He is free, but painfully lonely in his freedom.

Senses and affections dulled through years of torture spring to life. Memories of loved ones trample recklessly through fearful thoughts that bring back to life those long given up for dead. Are they of the pitiful few to whom was given the miracle of freedom?

The thought gains momentum and drives the lonely Jew - "Go! Eternal Wanderer, seek thy dead and give them life!"

The roads are filled with human wreckage pursuing rumors to the corners of the land. One passes another on the highway and each seeks in the eyes of the other a suggestion that there is still hope and from the lips of each a new rumor is awaited. -

The Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Bavaria came into existence six weeks after the liberation while the roads were flooded with neglected survivors who were desperately seeking the meaning of the miracle given them. The Committee took offices in the bombed Deutsches Museum in Munich. Perhaps it was the irony of Destiny that was responsible for this first move since it was Hitler who shrieked that a Jew would be found only in the museum when his plan would finally be realized.

The early offices of the Committee consisted of a long bombed hall whose windows and frames had been completely destroyed. The place seemed completely uninhabitable.

In the meantime, an incident occurred at one of the camps which entirely changed the intended function of the Deutsches Museum. Thirteen hundred Jews were ordered to prepare for a movement to a camp some one hundred and fifty miles north. The Jews were tired of being moved from camp to camp. The very movement reminded them of their marches through seven and eight concentration camps during their years of persecution. Moreover, conditions did not improve as they moved about. Clothes were still wanting. Food was scarcely sufficient. The freedom they had was only a freedom from death and nothing more. This time the Jews refused to move on. Instead (with the exception of twenty four people who made the trip*) they all streamed into Munich. The leaders of the vacated camp came to Munich as a vanguard to turn the empty hall of the Deutsches Museum into a transient center. Lumber was "organized", furniture was "liberated" and rooms were put in order to receive the endless flow of misery which continues to this day.

In this hall of dank corridors where the Committee began its work, a Jew appeared one day and wrote his name on the white wall. Four months later the wall was black with the names of those who had come and gone in search of a husband or a wife. The search for children was given up very early since the war declared against the children of the Jews by the invincible Nazi was carried out with German meticulousness.

To stem the reckless flow of people over the highways and to assist in some measure in bringing the remnants of families together, the Committee began collecting and publishing lists of survivors for distribution throughout the camps in Germany. *Sharit Ha Platah*, the title under which these volumes appeared, formed the basis of a far flung tracing service which operates effectively to this day.

In addition to the reuniting of families, the specific problems facing the Committee during the first months were: the establishment of special camps for Jewish D.P.'s; recognition of the status "Stateless"; differentiation between enemy aliens and Jews of enemy countries; creation of a communication system to contact relatives abroad; organization of cultural and religious programs; supply of food and clothes; amelioration of sanitary conditions and overcrowding.

*] During the following weeks the 24 people returned as 25. They arrived at the camp only to find a large Polish staging area. There they found one Jewish woman who returned with them to Munich.

Due in part to the efforts of the Committee, the legal status of the term "Stateless" was finally recognized. Separate camps were established and Jews of enemy countries were treated as Allied D.P.'s. Contact was made for the Jewish DPs. with their relatives abroad through the Yiddish newspapers published in America and also through the thousands of letters which were sent to Jewish organizations for transmittal.

Food, clothing and shelter presented the major problems during the months which followed. It was during this second period that the American Joint Distribution Committee arrived to work with the Central Committee and to supplement its program. It was also during this period that a great number of visitors arrived to study the situation and make recommendations. A report on the situation revealed that the three large camps with a capacity of ten thousand bulged with fifteen thousand individuals. Halls, cellars and attics were used for sleeping space. Food was supplied through the Red Cross parcel. The diet was too starchy and monotonous and did not consist of more than 2000 calories. The source of clothing still remains a complete mystery.

During the past months a new and most serious problem has confronted the Committee. A mass immigration of Polish and other Eastern European Jews to the American Zone in Germany is underway. The few Jews returning to Poland from years of horror in the concentration camps and the numbered Jewish partisans coming out of the woods after their heroic escapades are met by waves of anti-semitic pogroms. As more and more Jews are killed by Polish terrorists, the panic-stricken remnant seek protection by escaping to the only available area - the American Zone in Germany.

Thousands have arrived. They come by foot, by car and by train. They come as a driven people. This week three hundred arrived in box cars in which they had been travelling four weeks. Thirty five kilometers outside of Munich the transport was halted. The cars were taken to a siding and remained there for two days. From time to time the occupants received some black bread. Two children were born in the train, and a dead child was taken off the train.

The news of the transport was brought to the Committee. A representative was sent to the town. Through repeated pleas permission was granted to have the children and the sick removed to one of our hospitals. Following discussions with military personnel, the remainder of the group was sent on to Munich some twelve hours later. In Munich they were again met by the Committee and members of the American Joint who had them taken to the Deutsches Museum.

Miserable creatures, huddled in rags, frightened by the sounds and thoughts of the strangers about them, waiting daily for a place to rest until the world decides their fate.

Dirty creatures, all of them, they had to be bathed. The Health Department of the Committee arranged for their mass bath and the Supply Department produced

all the soap and underwear it could muster. It was Chanukah that day and so those who had already suffered prepared a gift for the children of those who are being trained in suffering.

Normal channels did not produce the underwear and soap that was needed for this transport. Being neglected by the large organized supply responsibilities, the Committee turned to the American Jewish soldier for help. A G.I. project produced a great number of articles. Packages have been pouring in bringing soaps, clothes and religious articles. This small, informal project can, however, meet only a fraction of the desperate needs.

The Committee grew in influence on the political front. Having accepted the British offer of having all children moved to England for an indefinite stay prior to their movement to Palestine, the Committee rejected the proposal after England declared her stand on the movement of the Jews in Germany to Palestine.

This week the tenth issue of "Unzer Weg" appeared. "Unzer Weg" is the Committee's weekly which miraculously appears each Friday. It began with an old case of type found in a printing shop. From that case new letters were made. With the few pounds of type eight men went to work in a damp room and regularly produce in addition to the Yiddish weekly, a Hebrew bi-weekly, Ha Nizoz, for the Mercaz Ha Zioni.

The story of the Committee is still the story of those men who came to Munich during the first days of liberation to serve as best they could. Their corner in the museum was a wooden bank; unpalatable food at irregular intervals did not deter them from their work. From fifteen the personnel of the Committee has grown to one hundred and thirteen. Yet it has managed to preserve the democratic, representative bases upon which it was founded.

Each activity was important in its time and dramatic in its performance. The work with the hospitals cannot be compared as a parallel activity with the organization of "Unzer Weg" or the value of the Tracing Bureau to the individual cannot be compared to the newly organized Historical Commission. Nevertheless, each activity shares in the full story of the Central Committee.

The story in all its details told in the dramatic fashion it deserves will have to wait. These cursory notes are intended only as a tribute to the members and workers who gave of themselves so that the day of freedom would be hastened for the liberated Jew of Europe.

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Munich, Germany
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