

“Mir zenen do!” “We are here!”

The restoration of the Displaced Persons-literature of the Staatsbibliothek (State Archives) in Berlin/Germany

The situation in Germany

In May 1945, when Germany surrendered and the Second World in Europe came to an end, the Allies were confronted with around seven million homeless people. These were forced labourers, survivors of the concentration camps, prisoners of war and people who had been in hiding or had lived underground. They all were classified as DPs (Displaced Persons). The group of Jewish Displaced Persons was a small, but through the persecution, particularly scarred minority. Most of these Jewish survivors would not have any future in their former home country. Their families and friends had been murdered, their economic existence was lost and their congregations had been destroyed. Moreover, many Polish Jews had fled the newly increasing antisemitism in their home country and sought refuge in the American zone of Germany. The number of Jewish Displaced Persons therefore increased further. As a result, the Western occupation zones became a transition place for the roughly 250,000 Jewish refugees who were housed in quickly established shelters.

The Displaced Persons Camps

These refugees wanted to emigrate into the USA, Canada, Latin America or Palestine. However, the entry restrictions of many countries, as well as Great Britain's restrictive immigration policy for Palestine, forced them to remain in Germany, in many cases for years. They felt as if they were living in a “waiting room” as Zalman Grinberg, (first president of the Central Committee of the liberated Jews in the American zone), put it.

During this time of uncertainty, they needed to establish a day-to-day life: Kindergartens and schools, educational centres, sports clubs, music and theatre groups were founded, books and newspapers were printed. “In the fall of 1945 we rehearsed the operetta 'Im Weißen Rössl' (The White Horse Inn). Everything, from the stage design to the costumes, we made ourselves. The performance was like a healing for us and for the audience.” remembers Margot Friedlander, the patron of the restoration projects, her time in the DP-camp in Deggendorf in Bavaria.

The need for religious literature, news, political books, literature and textbooks was huge. The number of books that can be regarded as “*DP literature*” that were printed is uncertain. There is no reliable overall bibliography and to this day reprints of publications that definitely have to be counted as “*DP literature*” because of their publication date and other evidence, appear.

The collection

Since 2009 the State Archives of Berlin has systematically bought books and newspapers attributed to the DP-camps with the goal of establishing the greatest possible completeness in the collection. At the moment about 430 writings can be offered to researchers and scholars. These are mostly unremarkable books in Jiddish or Hebrew, only very few are ornate or illustrated. They are printed on poor quality paper and yet valuable, even precious, because they are the first Jewish publications in Germany after the Second World War. With a closer look at the collection, we can identify four groups according to their content.

1. Political or historical: bulletins, newsletters and magazines, as well as the first documentations about the Shoah and Memor-books (books of commemoration of extinguished Jewish congregations). For example: the newsletter for the DP-Camp in Eschwege was published under the title '*Undzer hofenung*' (Our Hope). It was written in Jiddish but printed in Latin letters because there were no Hebrew letters. This newsletter published articles about the current world events as well as news of the camp. In the column “*Mir zuchn Krojwim*”, they searched for relatives (Krojwim) that might have survived the genocide throughout the whole world.

2. Literary books: Jiddish and Hebrew classics as well as books of modern Hebrew authors like Sholem Aleykhem, Mendele Moykher-Sforim were reprinted. New books were also written. For example, Shemuel Gelbartin, in his very autobiographical book 'Dos Geto in flamen' ('The Ghetto in Flames'), related the events of his own story of survival in the ghetto of Kauen (Lithuania). Mates Olitzky published his expressive poems under the title 'In fremdn Land' (In foreign country).

3. Books of reference and textbooks: Dictionaries, workbooks for math, medicine, Hebrew and sports, advisory books for legal consultations and as preparation for the emigration to Palestine belong in this category.

4. *Religious books*: Scriptures, the Talmud, and prayer books had been destroyed and the need for new copies of these books in order to revive the religious, Jewish life, was great. These volumes constituted the largest group of the publications and mirror the different groups within Judaism. Among the Jewish holidays Pessach and Purim became most meaningful as they focus on the themes of oppression, threat and liberation. In 1946 the “Survivors Haggada“ was published for the Pessach holiday. It is the story and the instructions of the eve of the liberation for the people of Israel from the Egyptian slavery. Yosef Dov Sheynson (text) and Miklós Adler (woodcarvings) interpreted this story with their experiences in mind.

Some of the survivors took the books with them as memorabilia, others deliberately left them behind, because every reminder of past events was too burdensome. As these individuals relocated, the publications from the Jewish DP-camps were distributed around the globe, according to the fate of the survivors.

The restoration

For the longest time libraries and researchers have not recognized the value of these publications. Now, seventy years later, it is imperative to preserve these early German post World War publications. They were printed with simple means on inexpensive paper and they were read extensively and repeatedly – their condition confirms this. Copies are seen with rusty staples that kept them together. Torn and stained pages of fragile paper were patched with tape.

Margot Friedlander stresses that these publications need to be restored before they are completely destroyed. They are a testament to our strength and commitment to make a fresh start. They are a unique witness of our first time after the end of the war – Jewish life on German soil. They must be preserved, in order that what these printings represent and witness may never be forgotten.

The "Freunde der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin e. V." (Friends of the State Archives) have attended to this collection of Displaced Person literature. In total 80.000 € are needed – according to a detailed quote of a highly qualified restoration atelier. We ask for donation to

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