

Press Release

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“Where should We have gone after the liberation?”

Only few Germans have to this very day been aware of how Nazi persecutees, forced laborers and former concentration camp inmates continued their lives in transit camps after 1945. With the exhibit “Where should We have gone after the liberation?” the International Tracing Service (ITS) shows in Frankfurt am Main for the first time a detailed and multiplex contemporary portrait of that time. Moreover, the exhibit is of particular interest, too, because currently as many people in the world are fleeing or uprooted as after 1945.

70 years ago, on 18 November 1944, the Allies determined in a policy paper how the survivors of the Nazi terror should be treated; how they could be provided for and then repatriated. They coined a term for these people, namely “Displaced Persons (DPs)”, and were still unsuspecting of how many DPs they would actually be confronted with in Central Europe. Neither did they anticipate how long it would take them to provide for these DPs, to search for family members, to repatriate them or help them with their emigration. The exhibit «“Where should We have gone after the liberation?” Transit Stations: Displaced Persons after 1945» is dedicated to this period of time. It is staged by the ITS at the Anne Frank Educational Center in Frankfurt am Main and sponsored with funds of the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future.

A world of its own in parallel to the period of reconstruction

The exhibit illustrates the many facets of life in the DP camps, a life most Germans did not want to know anything about at that time; and it is appalling that they still know very little about it today. Dr. Susanne Urban, Head of the Research and Education Branch at the ITS and curator of the exhibit, says: “There was hardly any empathy for the survivors, although this country had been responsible for their displacement. Most Germans were concerned with their own interests and needs – there was little room for DPs in post-war society and history.” However, right before their eyes, facilities for DPs had been set up in roughly 2,000 localities in the Western German Occupation Zones, among them very large camps for up to 3,000 people, where survivors of Nazi persecution, Holocaust and forced labor found shelter

for the moment and the existential supply of food as well as urgently necessary medical care. Eva Lux from Czechoslovakia, 18 years old at that time, remembered the moment of her liberation in Concentration Camp Salzwedel with the following words: "When I heard that we would finally be free, I was also very afraid. What would we come upon out there? ... How should we behave in a normal world? ... What should we do? ... We needed someone to take care of us."

The Allies took up this challenge for many years until, in 1957, the last DP camp, the Jewish Camp Föhrenwald, was closed. "Providing for the survivors was existential – and the bureaucratic procedures were relevant for this: forms had to be completed and lists to be written. Only those who had been registered as DPs were provided for by the UNRRA. I consider it important to show that this was a 'good', humanitarian bureaucracy. In the archives of the ITS, we also keep the opposite, the deadly bureaucracy of the National Socialists, with the lists of victims from the concentration camps and of the death marches," Dr. Susanne Urban calls attention to the administrative accomplishment as a central aspect of DP history.

Longing for normalcy

The lives the people in the DP camps had formerly led were ruined, but their desire to live was impressive, as was their courage to start a self-determined life again. The children could go to kindergarten and school; they had training facilities, even universities. DPs set up self-administrations, political parties, theaters, orchestras and even satirical shows trying to come to terms with what they had experienced in the concentration camps in this manner as well. The exhibit shows pictures of various sports clubs, of specific camp newspapers and of cultural highlights as, for example, the visit of the composer Leonard Bernstein who expressed his sympathy and solidarity like several other famous musicians - among them Yehudi Menuhin and Benjamin Britton - by performing in DP camps. And can there be a better proof of their desire to live a normal life than the numerous weddings and births in DP camps: Especially the Jewish camps had a baby boom, documented for example by a historical photo showing a camp-own manufacture of baby carriages. The exhibit also gives a voice to these children allowing them to tell about their parents' DP lives and their own search for their roots.

Biographies, DP history and Allied strategies

What is outstanding in this exhibit is, according to Susanne Urban, its diversity and openness to the most different aspects of DP history. It does neither want to predetermine any interpretations nor mislead into drawing conclusions that are too simple. DP history is not devoid of failures: not everybody was successful in starting a second life. Moreover, in later years, Allied aid workers - who did not experience the liberation of the concentration camps firsthand - sometimes displayed anti-Semitism and resentments against people from Eastern Europe. On the other hand, there also were collaborators disguised as DPs who partly succeeded in escaping punishment this way. The exhibit complements, consolidates and accompanies current research that has so far been chiefly focused on individual camps or single groups of survivors.

Taking a look at history and at contemporary events

Considering the fact that today for the first time since the post-war era as many people in the world are fleeing or uprooted as immediately after 1945, the exhibit is tragically related to these current events: "Nowadays, Yazidis, Christians and other religious minorities are fleeing from brutal Islamist terror. Jews in Europe are afraid of anti-Semitism and, for this reason, French Jews, for example, are emigrating to Israel. I am absolutely convinced that

the exhibit also has the function of occasioning visitors by taking a look at history to focus their attention on contemporary events, too," Dr. Susanne Urban underlines the topicality of the issue. "All the more when I read that Germany has just been reprimanded by UNICEF, because the concerns of migrant children are ignored too often by German politics, society and administration."