

## New Exhibit Shatters Myths About Jewish Life in Displaced Persons Camps

Displaced persons camps after the war featured orchestras, choruses, plays, language classes, vocational training and lectures – as life also flourished literally in the form of the highest birthrate in the world at the time



Children reading a Yiddish newspaper at a DP camp in Germany.

Credit: UN Archives



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Dolls made by children. A handmade set of Shabbat candlesticks. An announcement of an upcoming chess tournament. A poster urging survivors to submit testimonies about atrocities they had suffered or witnessed.

These are some of the artifacts at a new exhibit at the United Nations in New York about Jewish life in Europe's displaced persons camps after [the Holocaust](#). Titled "[After the End of the World: Displaced Persons and Displaced Persons Camps](#)," the exhibit is a joint endeavor of the UN Department of Global Communications and [the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research](#). It runs through February 23.

"The prompt was that we are now witnessing the greatest refugee crisis in history," says Debórah Dwork, a prominent Holocaust historian and the scholar adviser for the exhibit. "The idea was to remind visitors that at no point are refugees just sitting around waiting for handouts, and to show them how important

multinational initiatives can be in addressing the refugee situation,” says Dwork, founding director of the Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity at the City University of New York.



A Yiddish-language announcement for a dance party at a DP camp.  
Credit: Gloria Machnowski/Center for Jewish History/YIVO

Artifacts for the exhibit were supplied by YIVO, and historical documents and photographs by the United Nations.

Together, they provide testament to the resilience of Holocaust survivors. “There were more than 70 newspapers and magazine published in the DP camps,” Dwork notes. “There were theater productions, orchestras, choruses, language classes, vocational training and lectures. But at the same time, these were not easy places to negotiate. There weren't adequate washing facilities, food was scarce, and even obtaining something as basic as a hairbrush could be a challenge. But life went on, and people kept busy with the business of living.”





**A scene from a wedding at the Ainring DP camp in Bavaria, Germany, 1946.**

Credit: Janine Veazue/Center for Jewish History/YIVO

Roughly 250,000 Holocaust survivors spent time in the DP camps scattered around Germany, Austria and Italy, often several years. The first was opened immediately after the defeat of [the Nazis](#) in 1945, and the last was closed in 1957.

After emerging from hiding or being liberated from Nazi concentration camps, the survivors would often return to their hometowns only to learn that their homes had been destroyed or taken over. If they still had a home to return to, their antisemitic neighbors sometimes made life so miserable for them that they had no desire to stay.

The vast majority of survivors who spent time in DP camps were between 20 and 40, normally a time for having children. Many had lost their entire families in the Holocaust and had nowhere to go, with immigration to the United States and other Western countries still restricted. Most of them ended up in Israel, which only became a legal destination starting in May 1948 when the state was founded.







**A children's classroom at the Aschau DP camp in Bavaria, 1946 or 1947.**

Credit: Janine Veazue/Center for Jewish History/YIVO

“There were also many – and this is rarely talked about – who chose to have abortions in the DP camps because of fears and anxieties about bringing children into the world after what they had lived through.”

The exhibit also shatters the myth that Holocaust survivors were unwilling to speak about their experiences right after the war, Dwork says.

“There were posters plastered all over the DP camps, some of which are on display at the exhibition, begging survivors to submit written documentation of their experiences,” she says. “Proof of how cooperative they were is that a month after the first historical commission was established by the Central Committee of Liberated Jews, there were already 50 branches in Germany alone.”

The exhibit includes a chain of letters that eventually brought together a Jewish man who before the war had escaped to Chicago, and his only surviving son. The son, who had been interned in [the Warsaw Ghetto](#), was ultimately located at a DP camp.

“The father wrote to someone who had a bit of information, who then wrote to someone else who had some more details, and eventually, as we’re able to trace through these letters, they reconnected,” Dwork says. “I found it very touching.”