

Anat Kutner (JDC Archives)

RECONSTRUCTING LIVES, CREATING CITIZENS THE ROLE OF JDC IN THE REHABILITATION OF CYPRUS DETAINEES 1946-1949

During the summer of 1946 the British mandate government in Palestine were faced with an increasing number of illegal immigrants. Most of these were Holocaust survivors wishing to start a new life in a new country, but finding the gates locked. The British authority's solution was to intercept the people trying to enter illegally, and redirect them to internment camps in Cyprus. The conditions in the camps were almost impossible; they were unsuitable for the island's climate, and were not appropriate for women and children.

This situation brought the JDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) into the picture, in order to help their brothers. They received permission from the British authorities. JDC provided most of the detainees' needs, including welfare and medical aid as well as extra food rations, education and workshops. At the same time, they provided cultural and religious programs and supplies.

JDC, the largest Jewish philanthropic organization, with the reputation of being apolitical and neutral, was caught between three conflicting pressures. The first of these stemmed from the British authorities, who wanted minimal problems; the second came from Zionist organizations, who wanted to train the refugees for life in the future state. Finally yet importantly, the refugees themselves, whose self-image placed them as part of the pre-state Jewish settlement in Palestine, while their personal history dictated their need for help. On the one hand, they were refugees in need of rehabilitation; on the other hand, they self-identified as citizens in training for the difficult conditions of the nascent state.

In my lecture, I will deal with the question of how JDC, as a Jewish neutral humanitarian organization, functioned in this very complicated situation. What role did it take in the refugees' rehabilitation? What was its role vis a vis Zionist political activities?

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