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Getting (Re-)Started: Jewish Migrant Livelihoods in Early Postwar Western Germany

In dem vorliegenden Artikel werden osteuropäisch-jüdische Existenzgrundlagen im westlichen Teil Deutschlands in den ersten Jahren nach dem Holocaust untersucht. Die unterschiedlichen Wege, die jüdische Displaced Persons in die Arbeitswelt genommen haben, werden skizziert: die alliierte Wirtschaft, der Schwarzmarkt, die deutsche Wirtschaft. Mit der Zeit wurde eine unternehmerische Tätigkeit in der formellen deutschen Wirtschaft zum bevorzugten Weg, einen Lebensunterhalt zu bestreiten. In den hier besprochenen Jahren konvergierten die Folgen der NS-Verfolgung jedoch mit den Überresten einer rassifizierten Wirtschaftsordnung, um jüdische Ausländer, die ein Unternehmen gründen wollten, stark zu benachteiligen.

This essay examines Eastern European Jewish livelihoods in western Germany during the first years after the Holocaust. It charts the different paths Jewish displaced persons (DPs) took into the world of work, including the Allied economy, the black market and the German economy. Over time, entrepreneurial activity in the formal Germany economy would become the main means of making a living. In the period covered here, however, the consequences of Nazi-era persecution converged with the postwar remnants of a racialized economic order to strongly disadvantage Jewish foreigners seeking to "set up shop."

When we think about Jewish survivors in early postwar western Germany, we don't often think about how they made a living. After all, most survivors were in no shape to provide for themselves immediately after the war. They relied heavily on outside assistance, especially on aid programs for "displaced persons" (DPs) established by the western occupiers. Indeed, in the American zone, the adoption of additional measures to help "persecutees" grew primarily out of the recognition that Jewish survivors needed more assistance than most DPs. But the early postwar period was also a time of work, of tentative attempts at earning money and establishing new livelihoods and with them regaining a sense of purpose and autonomy. The end point of these endeavors was as yet unclear: while most survivors from Poland, Romania and other Eastern European countries could not imagine remaining in Germany, they also had few opportunities to leave. Their efforts to make a living were thus marked by uncertainty and deep ambivalence. For most, working in postwar Germany would ultimately turn out to be a temporary phenomenon. For some, however, the livelihoods established in the early postwar period would be the beginning of a much longer working life in Germany. These would become a central, if difficult to acknowledge, reason for remaining in Germany and the main form of connection to the larger society.

This essay examines Eastern European Jewish livelihoods during the first postwar years. Focusing on the period between the end of the war and the currency reform of June 1948—a period defined by economic collapse and turmoil as well as the first efforts at reconstructing a capitalist market economy—I chart the different paths Eastern European Jews took into the labor market. I draw my evidence from the American and British occupation zones, where more than ninety-five percent of all DPs lived. For reasons both internal and external, I show, most Jewish DPs did not venture into the formal German economy.[1] They instead found jobs with the Allies, on the black market or in a small Jewish ethnic economy. After the currency reform, entrepreneurial activity in the formal economy would become the main means of making a living. In the period covered here, however, Jews encountered numerous difficulties in starting a business. The consequences of Nazi antisemitic persecution converged with the postwar remnants of a racialized economic order to disadvantage Jews, especially Jewish foreigners.

Eastern European Jewish Pathways into the Economy

During the first years after the war, the Jewish population in western Germany underwent a series of dramatic transformations. At war's end, there were roughly 50-60,000 Jews in Germany.[2] The vast majority of foreign Jews were survivors of the concentration camps. While those from countries like France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Czechoslovakia usually returned home as soon as they were able, many from Poland, Romania and Hungary hesitated to do so. By the end of 1945, moreover, a new westward movement of Jews from these regions of Eastern Europe was underway. It accelerated dramatically over the course of 1946 and into 1947. The vast majority of the new arrivals were Jews from Poland, whose efforts to rebuild their lives at home were increasingly thwarted by antisemitism and economic and political instability. In the spring of 1947, the Jewish population in western Germany reached a high of about 200,000.[3] In 1948, as opportunities for mass emigration opened up to places like the United States, the newly-founded state of Israel and Canada, Jews again began to leave. By 1955, the total number had dropped to about 42,000, about evenly split between German and Eastern European Jews.[4]

In the immediate postwar period, most Jewish DPs were not capable of providing for themselves. They relied heavily on assistance from the outside, especially the Allied military authorities and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). As their condition improved, however, and as Jews who had survived under better conditions, especially Polish Jews who had survived in the Soviet Union, began to arrive, the issue of work became more urgent. The motivations were both material and

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[1] I use the terms Eastern European Jews and Jewish DPs interchangeably here, although there was a small number of Jewish DPs from other regions.

[2] The figure of 50,000 is cited by Brenner, Michael: In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Changing Image of German Jewry after 1945, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Ina Levine Annual Lecture, January 31, 2008), p. 11.; the figure of 60,000 from Pinson, Koppel S.: Jewish Life in Liberated Germany: A Study of the Jewish DP's, in: Jewish Social Studies 9:2 (1947), pp. 101–126, here p. 103.

[3] Pinson, Jewish Life, 1947, p. 103.

[4] Robinson, Nehemiah: European Jewry ten years after the war: an account of the development and present status of the decimated Jewish communities of Europe, New York 1956, p. 128.

psychological. Although most Jewish DPs had their basic material needs met by the Allies, this was hardly enough to provide them with everything they needed after years of severe deprivation. Displaced persons received higher food rations than Germans, but their diet was limited; fresh foods, including fruits, vegetables, poultry, meat and milk, were in short supply. Many other basic goods, including clothing and shoes, were also lacking. DPs also craved a sense of purpose. As a Jewish DP furniture maker explained to a U.S. Military Government interviewer in early 1947, "a human being needs to have something to do, otherwise he'll go crazy! We weren't able to do anything for so long, now we want to do something."[5] Philipp Auerbach, the Bavarian State Commissioner for Racial, Religious and Political Persecutees, offered a similar assessment. Most Jewish DPs, he noted, "are unhappy with themselves because they don't have any occupation and life itself seems meaningless to them."[6]

The early postwar western German economy was deeply fragmented. In addition to the formal sector teetering on the brink of collapse, there was a thriving informal economy centered around black marketeering. There was also an Allied economy, a realm of economic activity organized by the occupiers to meet their own needs. Jewish migrants entered these economic realms to differing degrees, depending on both their willingness to do so and the opportunity structures they encountered.

Most Jewish and non-Jewish displaced persons with formal jobs worked for the Allies and their affiliates. They served as security guards and drivers for the military authorities and as secretaries and translators for UNRRA and its successor, the Inter-national Refugee Organization (IRO).[7] Above all, they helped run the DP camps. Most of these positions were poorly paid. Thus displaced persons working for UNRRA received a fraction of what the organization's North American and Western European employees did.[8] In many cases, they were paid in extra rations or in scrip, which gave them access to goods at military PXs.[9] In August 1947, 55 percent of employed DPs in the British zone worked in the camps; another 17 percent worked for the British authorities. In the U.S. zone, the share of DPs working in the camps was even higher: according to a count from June 1948, 66 percent of the employed population was working there.[10] Figures for Jewish employment specifically are not available, but given that Jewish DPs had generally experienced much more physical and psychological violence than other DPs, their rate of participation was most likely lower than average.[11]

In addition to working directly for the Allies, Eastern European Jews also participated in work training programs organized by Jewish aid organizations and survivors them-

[5] T-unit report, DP-Problems, February 1, 1947, 6, National Archives and Records Service, College Park, Maryland (hereafter NACP), RG 260, OMGB, ID, Box 10, 7R Refugees Problems and Conferences (Special). Emphasis in original.

[6] Memorandum, DP-Problem, January 24, 1947, NACP, RG 260, OMGB, ID, Box 10, 7R Refugees Problems and Conferences.

[7] Proudfoot, Malcolm J.: European Refugees: 1939-52: A Study in Forced Population Movement; Evanston, IL 1956, p. 257; Jacobmeyer, Wolfgang: Vom Zwangsarbeiter zum Heimatlosen Ausländer. Die Displaced Persons in Westdeutschland 1945-1951; Göttingen 1985, p. 177–8.

[8] Salvatici, Silvia: "Help the People to Help Themselves": UNRRA Relief Workers and European Displaced Persons, in: Journal of Refugee Studies 25:3 (2012), pp. 428-51, here p. 444.

[9] Lavsky, Hagit: New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945-1950, Detroit 2002, p. 148; Joseph Schwartz to Moses A. Leavitt, November 9, 1946, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 294.1, folder 128.

[10] Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter, 1985, p. 185.

[11] On this issue, see Pinson: Jewish Life, 1947, p. 110.

selves. Based in Jewish DP camps, they included vocational programs to teach trades such as carpentry, metal machining and automobile repair; workshops to produce clothing and other goods in short supply; and farms that grew food and provided agricultural training.[12] These projects were geared towards meeting displaced persons' immediate needs and providing practical training opportunities, with an eye towards preparing survivors for a new life elsewhere. They spoke to a strong desire to make up for lost time.[13] Considerably younger on average than German Jews, Eastern European Jews were more likely to have been deprived of opportunities to train and gain work experience. Speaking to the Military Government in early 1947, a Polish Jewish man with a radio repair shop in Garmisch-Partenkirchen suggested that "seventy-five percent of Jewish DPs have not learned a trade because they were pulled out of school and sent to the concentration camps."[14]

Although the Allies and their affiliates provided DPs with many jobs, there were still many people without work. In August 1947, 41 percent of DPs in the British zone considered capable of working were unemployed.[15] The number was similar in the U.S. zone: 38 percent as of July 1947.[16] The main problem was a general shortage of work. Indeed, the problem grew worse over time. Even as the Allies increasingly pressured DPs to work, citing the dangers of "idleness," the progressive withdrawal of Allied troops, coupled with the transition from the well-funded UNRRA to the more bare-boned IRO, meant jobs grew scarcer. By June 1948, the number of DPs in the American zone viewed as capable of working but unemployed had risen to 60 percent.[17]

Importantly, however, the numbers cited above do not include work in the informal economy, which at this juncture mainly meant black marketeering. The informal sector often serves as an entry point into the economy for disadvantaged groups, especially migrants and minorities. Many work in the formal and informal sectors simultaneously, supplementing insufficient earnings in the former with occasional or regular work in the latter.[18] Freighted with negative connotations, the black market of the early postwar period is rarely discussed in these terms. It certainly does not appear in employment statistics. Nonetheless, it served as a key source of employment and earnings, or at least earning supplements, for many people.

Although the black market was a general early postwar phenomenon, individuals participated in it in different ways based on their place in the social order. Displaced persons occupied an intermediate social position. Their privileged relationship with the Allies—including jobs that paid in rations or scrip—gave them superior access to desirable rationed goods such as coffee, tea, soap and, most importantly, cigarettes, the real currency of the first postwar years. At the same time, the standard of care to which they

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[12] Future release of Philip S. Bernstein, Report to the Secretary of the Army, October 20, 1947, NACP, RG 260, OMGUS, AG File 1947, AG 383.7 UNDP Vol. VI, Box 283.

[13] Eder, Angelika: Displaced Persons/"Heimatlose Ausländer" als Arbeitskräfte in Westdeutschland; in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 42 (2002), pp. 1-17, here p. 4.

[14] T-unit report, DP-Problems, 1947, 7.

[15] Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter, 1985, p. 184.

[16] Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter, 1985, p. 188.

[17] Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter, 1985, p. 188.

[18] The literature on the informal economy is vast. For an introduction, see Mokyr, Joel: Black Markets, Underground Economies, and the Informal Sector, in: Mokyr, Joel (ed.): Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History, Band I, Oxford 2003.

were entitled, while quantitatively higher, was qualitatively deficient. As noted earlier, fresh foods and many other basic goods were lacking. Meanwhile, although Germans received lower food rations, they had better access to fresh foods through their stronger connections to the countryside. And unlike DPs, they usually still had homes filled with potentially sellable objects: cameras, silverware or china. Transactions between DPs and Germans thus typically involved the former bartering or selling rationed or otherwise scarce goods for fresh foods and objects from German households.

But working on the black market was not only about meeting basic material needs: it was also about the desire to engage in purposeful activity. It served as a stand-in for the good jobs unavailable to Jewish DPs—indeed, to many people—in postwar Germany. As the owner of a leather goods store in Mittenwald said, "People accuse us Jews of black marketeering—but is there any other good work for them?"[19] Similarly, a Polish Jewish survivor interviewed by an American Jewish observer explained that the black market was like a drug:

> "And there's no work you can get?" I persisted. "Have you got a trade?"
> "Of course I have. I am a skilled leather worker. In Poland I had a good job before the war. If I could get a machine, or a place in a factory…"
> He stopped, and looked wistfully into some past where there had been work, a wife, and a child. Then the anger returned. "What's the use; there's no machine; there's no visa. You want me to choke here with the calories [i.e., DP rations]—you innocent people."[20]

As this encounter suggests, the black market responded, however inadequately, to both the material and psychological dimensions of work: it was a means of procuring supplements to the dreary, calorie-measured DP diet *and* a means of escaping from what otherwise seemed like a purposeless existence.

Most Jewish DPs, like most other people, participated in the black market on a small scale. Some, however, turned black marketeering into a full-time occupation. They specialized in large quantities of rationed goods or, more commonly, operated as jacks-of-all-trade.[21] Describing himself as an "entrepreneur," the Polish Jewish survivor Jack Oltuski, who arrived in Germany after the war to search for loved ones, says that he dealt in whatever came his way, be it shoes, cars, diamonds or currency. "People knew there were Jewish traders living [in the DP camp] and asked around, 'Who would buy this? Who would sell that?' Everyone said, 'Go to Jack.'"[22]

The fact that the German authorities had limited authority over DPs and persecutees, and limited access to the DP camps, offered a degree of protection. Still, there is no reason to think DPs participated in the black market more than anyone else. Likewise, there is little evidence Jewish DPs participated more than other DPs. From the German perspective, however, displaced persons were the real black marketeers. During the

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[19] T-unit report, DP-Problems, 1947, 10.
[20] Syrkin, Marie: I Meet a Black Marketeer, in: Jewish Frontier 14:8 (1947), pp. 12-14, here 14.
[21] Greenstein Harry/Hyman, Abraham S., Report on Certain Aspects of Jewish DP Problems in the U.S. Zone, Germany and Austria, September 15, 1948, NACP, RG 260, OMGUS, AG File 1948, 383.7 United Nations Displaced Persons Vol. VI, box 471.
[22] Oltuski Jack, with Oltuski, Romy: How a BMW and a Truck Full of Leather Shoes Helped Me Get to America, in: The New York Times Magazine, June 9, 2020, https://nyti.ms/3f2OBKI [17.06.2020].

period discussed here, Jewish and non-Jewish DPs seem to have been equally identified with economic criminality.[23] After the currency reform, Jewish DPs would become the main focus. Drawing on an older antisemitic discourse about "Eastern Jews," many Germans argued that Jewish DPs posed a serious threat to the economy.[24] The central issue was no longer the black market: it was the entry of Jewish DPs into the formal German economy as business owners. Nonetheless, the language of "black trade (*Schwarzhandel*)" played a central role here, suggesting that *all* Eastern European Jewish economic activity was inherently suspicious.[25]

Few Eastern European Jews worked in the formal German economy during the period discussed here. Most were opposed to doing so. As Koppel Pinson noted in 1947,

> On one point there is universal agreement—that Jews must not in any way contribute to the rehabilitation of the German economy. "We have slaved for the Germans enough," they say, "and we will not contribute to the recovery of the nation that is responsible for the mass slaughter of our people."[26]

Eastern European Jews also associated working in the German economy with putting down roots in Germany, something most could not imagine. As Hendrik George van Dam put it, "there was no desire to integrate."[27] But there were also structural reasons for low participation. Working in the German economy was financially unattractive. As in the Allied economy, wages were low, but there was the further disadvantage of payment in Reichsmarks, a currency with little value. Jewish DPs were also poorly placed to compete for work in this realm. They had numerous occupational handicaps. They often lacked training, experience and a good knowledge of German. Their predominantly commercial and artisanal skills were a poor match for the agricultural nature of most available jobs. A strong antisemitic bias against Eastern European Jews also limited job opportunities; many Germans simply refused to hire them.

Allied policies also discouraged DPs from working in the German economy. With the mandate of repatriating as many displaced Europeans as possible, the Allies generally sought to segregate them both socially and spatially. Allowing them to work for German employers threatened to complicate matters by creating incentives to stay.[28] Even as the Allies increasingly worried about the consequences of a *lack* of work among DPs, they could not decide whether encouraging work in the German economy was advisable. The structure of the Allied DP program also posed a problem. Most DP camps were located in places where there was at best agricultural work. Moving outside the camp for work was risky, as one could thereby be defined as integrated into German society and lose one's DP benefits.[29] And trying to live in a camp while working outside of it was difficult because

[23] Mörchen, Stefan: "Echte Kriminelle" und "zeitbedingte Rechtsbrecher." Schwarzer Markt und Konstruktionen des Kriminellen in der Nachkriegszeit; in: *WerkstattGeschichte* 42 (2006), pp. 57-76.

[24] Greenstein/Hyman, Report on Certain Aspects, 1948. See also Berkowitz, Michael: The Crime of My Very Existence: Nazism and the Myth of Jewish Criminality, Berkeley 2007.

[25] I discuss this issue in depth in my forthcoming book, "Setting Up Shop in the House of the Hangman: Jewish Economic Life in Postwar Germany."

[26] Pinson, Jewish Life, 1947, p. 113.

[27] Dam, Henrik George van: Die Juden in Deutschland nach 1945, in: Böhm, Franz/Dirks, Walter/Gottschalk, Walter (eds.): Judentum: Schicksal, Wesen und Gegenwart, Wiesbaden 1965, p. 895.

[28] Eder, Displaced Persons, 2002, p. 3.

[29] Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter, 1985, p. 185; Eder: Displaced Persons, 2002, p. 5.

food rations were tied to the camp. Thus a group of young Jewish men who worked for a German master went hungry during the day because they relied on the camp for meals.[30] In August 1947, only 27 percent of all employed DPs in the British zone were employed by Germans. In the U.S. zone, where segregation was more pronounced, the number was much lower: in June 1948, only three percent of employed DPs were employed by Germans.[31] Given the issues discussed above, the Jewish share in both of these numbers was likely very low.[32]

Thus far, I have mainly discussed livelihoods in terms of wage labor. But there was also self-employment. This option is common among disadvantaged groups, though the connection between disadvantage and self-employment is by no means straight-forward.[33] Members of disadvantaged groups often go into business in the in-formal sector because they lack the skills and resources—or, as we shall see shortly, per-mission—to participate in the formal economy. In the early postwar period, this meant a business on the black market. Jakob Oltuski was thus right to describe himself as an entrepreneur. But Eastern European Jews also pursued more sanctioned forms of self-employment. Some opened small businesses oriented towards a Jewish clientele. These businesses represented the beginnings of an ethnic economy in that they catered towards the needs of the Jewish community. Most were located in DP camps and were thus closely intertwined with the Allied economy. "Walking through the streets of Belsen," Hagit Lavsky writes, "one could find hairdressing services being offered for men and women, dry cleaning, shoe repairs, printing, and chauffeuring."[34] Outside the camps as well, Jewish DPs opened a small number of businesses in places where Jews tended to congregate. Here the ethnic economy began to merge into the formal German economy. In Munich, for example, some of the earliest Jewish DP businesses were located in and around the Möhlstrasse, the center of Eastern European Jewish life. They included kosher butcher shops and kosher restaurants. By January 1947, they had become enough of a phenomenon for the Jewish DP press to comment on them.[35]

Some Eastern European Jews also opened or took over businesses catering to a more general clientele. Salomea (Liesa) Weissberg, born in Katowice, Poland in 1920, had guided her three brothers through the war years, first in the ghetto and later in hiding. After the war, the family initially remained in Poland. Arriving in Munich in March 1946, Weissberg got a license to sell groceries from an American. She already had relevant experience, having worked in her family's grocery store and in other businesses. Together with her siblings, she set up shop in a provisional building constructed for them at one of Munich's busiest intersections.[36]

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[30] T-unit report, DP-Problems, 1947, 5-6.

[31] Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter, 1985, p. 188.

[32] Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter, 1985, p. 185.

[33] Light, Ivan: Disadvantaged Minorities in Self-Employment, in: International Journal of Comparative Sociology 20:1-2 (1979), pp. 31-45; Raijman, Rebeca/Tienda, Marta: Immigrants' Pathways to Business Ownership: A Comparative Ethnic Perspective, in: International Migration Review 34:3 (2000), pp. 682-706.

[34] Lavsky: New Beginnings, 2002, p. 148.

[35] Men zukht farvaylungen, in: Undzer veg, January 3, 1947.

[36] Samuel Wajsberg, interview with author, August 3, 2018; Ausweiskarte Salomea Weissberg, Samuel Wajsberg Private Collection; Liesa (Weissberg) Mandelbaum, IRO Application for Assistance, October 28, 1949, Arolsen Archives, ITS Digital Archive (hereafter AA), 3.2.1/ 79445376.

While most Eastern European Jews entered the formal German economy through businesses they themselves established, some gained access to extant businesses through the denazification process. In some cases, the arrangements seem to have been improvised. In the summer of 1945, for example, the Łódź-born, Hamburg-based hair stylist Baila Boness received space in the salon of Nazi Party member Hans Thiede, who was called upon to help Boness "in the context of reparations [*im Rahmen der Wiedergutmachung*]." With the assistance of a lawyer and the local hair stylists' association, Boness received three fully-equipped stands in Thiede's salon. Additionally, during the first three months, Thiede was only allowed to charge her for water and electricity, "so that Ms. Boness can first settle in." Boness and Thiede thus now had a "joint venture."[37] One can only imagine the difficulties this posed for the Jewish partner. Like sharing living space with compromised Germans, sharing work space was a decidedly mixed blessing, putting Jews in uncomfortably close proximity to the Nazi regime's most loyal adherents.

More formal denazification efforts also provided some Eastern European Jews with access to businesses. Under the Allied system of property control, businesses owned by the Nazi regime and its leading members and supporters were confiscated and turned over to trustworthy custodians until a final determination on their future was made.[38] Thus the Polish Jewish butcher Sigmund Benkel, who remained in Germany after being liberated from Dachau, became the custodian of a butcher shop in Munich owned by a former local party official. Like the ad hoc arrangement between hair stylists Boness and Thiede, formal custodianship could be a mixed blessing: Jewish custodians were often harassed by the businesses' Nazi owners, and the temporary nature of the arrangements made it difficult to plan for the future. Thus, two and a half years after taking over the above-mentioned butcher shop, Benkel found himself tyrannized by the now-released owner, who accused him of financial improprieties and showed up at the shop to threaten him and his customers. In what can only be read as an echo of the 1933 Nazi boycott of Jewish firms, the owner demanded of a (as it happens, Jewish) customer, "Why in the world are you buying from this Jew, there are plenty of German stores!" As a result of this harassment, Benkel told Military Government in September 1948, "I feel that my livelihood is constantly threatened."[39]

Indeed, Jewish business owners regularly faced harassment and acts of vandalism. Businesses in the Jewish ethnic economy were the most vulnerable, as they could more readily be identified as Jewish. In February 1948, for example, a kosher butcher shop and a Jewish-owned restaurant in a Munich neighborhood associated with Jewish DPs were vandalized.[40] Such acts only confirmed many Eastern European Jews in their belief that remaining in Germany was impossible.

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[37] Agreement between Hans Thiede and Alfons and Baila Boness, July 21, 1945, Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 522-2/1292. See also Friseur-Innung Hamburg to Hilfsgemeinschaft der Juden und Halbjuden in Hamburg, June 27, 1945 in same folder.

[38] Office of Military Government for Germany (U.S.): Property Control in the U.S. Occupied Zone of Germany, 1945-1949: Special Report of the Military Governor (July 1949).

[39] Sigmund Benkel to Military Government, September 1, 1948, NACP, RG 260, OMGB, CAD, General Records PW & DP Branch, Box 19, Pub. Welfare: (d1) Refugees, Expellees, DP.s.

[40] Daytshn oysgehakt shoybn in yidishe gesheftn, in: Undzer Veg, February 10, 1948.

Jewish Businesses and the Persistence of the Nazi Racial Order

As the above examples suggest, Jews who sought to open or run businesses sometimes faced intense antisemitism. This was part of a larger set of problems they encountered. On the one hand, they had to deal with the enduring consequences of Nazi-era persecution: the loss of capital, businesses and business networks; the loss of opportunities to train and gain business experience; physical and psychological injuries. On the other hand, they had to contend with a host of new difficulties: the slow and uneven development of compensation legislation; difficult-to-satisfy requirements; the indifference and hostility of government authorities, business organizations and non-Jewish business owners. If they were newcomers, as Eastern European Jews almost always were, they also had to contend with the usual difficulties of setting up in an unfamiliar environment—and the strong hostility directed against them as both Jews and foreigners. In the American zone, Jews and other persecutees were supposed to enjoy priority in business licensing, but in practice this was often not the case. Indeed, throughout western Germany during the first postwar years, the economic realm continued to be structured along the lines of the Nazi racial community. "Aryans" continued to be favored.

The main way in which the persistence of a racialized economy confronted Jews during the first postwar years was in the restrictions on opening a business. These restrictions controlled entry into commercial and craft occupations on the basis of three main criteria: necessity, mastery and personal reliability.[41] Progressively introduced over the course of the early twentieth century and developed into an elaborate system after 1933, the primary objectives of these restrictions were to protect small and medium-sized businesses from competition and to promote an efficient allocation of resources within the economy as a whole.[42] Although they were not explicitly antisemitic, they embodied a protectionist middle-class politics with strong antisemitic overtones. Indeed, they included provisions that could be and often were put to antisemitic ends during the Nazi era.[43]

Maintained by the Allies after 1945 in order to not further destabilize the economy, and interpreted in a highly restrictive manner, the laws on opening a business made it very difficult for newcomers to enter the field.[44] Jews were at a particular disadvantage. Both past and present discrimination played a role here. On the one hand, having been pushed to the very margins of the economy during the Nazi era, Jews had a very difficult time meeting the formal requirements of the laws. On the other, the postwar gatekeepers in the licensing process, including government ministries and business associations, were largely indifferent or hostile to Jews and unwilling to give them special

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[41] For a good introduction, see Scheybani, Abdolreza: Handwerk und Kleinhandel in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Sozialökonomischer Wandel und Mittelstandspolitik 1949–1961, Munich 1996, pp. 238–9.

[42] Scheybani, Handwerk und Kleinhandel, 1996, p. 240; Boyer, Christoph: "Deutsche Handwerksordnung" oder "zügellose Gewerbefreiheit." Das Handwerk zwischen Kriegswirtschaft und Wirtschaftswunder; in: Broszat, Martin/Henke, Klaus-Dietmar/Woller, Hans (eds.): Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland, Munich 1988, p. 429.

[43] Rappl, Marian: "Arisierung" in München. Die Verdrängung der jüdischen Gewerbetreibenden aus dem Wirtschaftsleben der Stadt 1933-1939, in: Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte 63:1/2 (2000), pp. 123–84.

[44] Boyer: "Deutsche Handwerksordnung", pp. 448–9; Scheybani: Handwerk und Kleinhandel, pp. 241–2.

consideration.[45] Even when policies were put into place to give Jews priority, as was the case in the American zone, they were often cancelled out by a restrictive reading of Nazi legislation. Thus, an October 1947 circular from the Bavarian Ministry of Economics instructed all parties involved in the licensing process to make sure they were not treating persecutees (read: Jews) too leniently. Noting the "significant oversaturation in all branches of industry," it called on them to remain vigilant and not let themselves be influenced in their decisions "by administrative agencies offering aid to certain groups," most likely a reference to the Bavarian commissariat for persecutees.[46] The American authorities were well aware of this problem. As a Military Government report from June 1949 noted, "It rarely happens that former Nazi Party members encounter such difficulties [with licensing], and certain government officials use the strongest interpretation of licensing regulations in order to justify rejection of applicants who are refugees or former persecutees."[47]

The greatest hurdles in the licensing process were posed by the regulations on necessity and mastery. The criterion of need meant that individuals seeking a license had to be able to demonstrate that the market could bear the entry of an additional business. In the economic climate of the early postwar period, it was easy for government agencies and business associations to reject an application on the grounds of market saturation. In theory, the need requirement worked against all new entrants equally. In practice, however, it made things especially difficult for entrants with weak or non-existent ties to the local community. As both newcomers and racial outsiders, Eastern European Jews were doubly disadvantaged. Thus the mayor of Mittenwald, discussing the situation of DPs, noted that there was a total lack of economic space for new commerce in his town. "From the Jews I have no less than ten applications to open a business," he stated. "We can't grant them, otherwise we'll deprive our own people [*unsern Einheimischen*] of the possibility of making a living." The same, he noted, was the case with the artisan trades. He was not unsympathetic to the applicants, but his focus on the native population amounted to continued discrimination against Jews.[48]

In addition to demonstrating need, prospective business owners often also had to demonstrate mastery. This was especially relevant in the artisan trades, where a title as master craftsman was generally required, but it also applied to the world of commerce. Given their wartime experiences, many Jews not surprisingly had difficulty meeting this requirement. Jewish newcomers faced additional challenges. They may have learned their craft in a country that did not require a title of mastery, or their foreign credentials were not recognized by the German authorities or their language skills were not good enough to pass a German mastery exam. Thus a Jewish DP furniture maker noted the impossibility of setting up his own workshop, in part because of the need to take the master

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[45] Goschler, Constantin: Wiedergutmachung. Westdeutschland und die Verfolgten des Nationalsozialismus 1945-1954, Berlin 1992, p. 86; Bergmann, Werner: "Wir haben Sie nicht gerufen". Reaktionen auf jüdische Remigranten in der Bevölkerung und Öffentlichkeit der frühen Bundesrepublik, in: Lühe, Irmela von der/Schildt, Axel/Schüler-Springorum, Stefanie (eds.): "Auch in Deutschland waren wir nicht wirklich zu Hause". Jüdische Remigration nach 1945, Göttingen 2008.
[46] Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Wirtschaft memorandum, October 21, 1947, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, MWi 27340.
[47] Cited in Boyer, "Deutsche Handwerksordnung", 1988, p. 453.
[48] T-unit report, DP-Problems, 1947, 20.

craftsman exam. "I love my craft, and I'm happy about every piece I myself make, but I don't see any possibilities for myself," he said.[49]

In some cases, people managed to get around the mastery requirement by hiring someone with the requisite credentials. For example, the 22-year old Polish Jewish concentration camp survivor Abram Rotmensz was allowed to open a kosher butcher shop in Frankfurt in early 1947 even though he did not have the proper credentials. Because the Frankfurt Jewish community desperately needed a kosher butcher, Rotmensz was allowed to hire a non-Jewish master butcher to work for him.[50] Other people sought to demonstrate that they had the requisite credentials even if they did not have the requisite documentation. Thus the Polish-born furrier Lazar Haller found someone who could swear to having seen a diploma of mastery hanging on the wall of his workshop in the Silesian city of Bytom in summer 1945.[51] However, the authorities were not convinced, and Haller was obliged to take the German mastery exam. As his son relates,

> On his first try he failed. Either he did not understand the questions correctly because his German was not good enough or the knowledge required of a furrier in Poland was entirely different than [it was] in Germany. Only on the second try one year later did he pass the exam and could proudly display his German title of mastery in his fur store.[52]

To be sure, Jews were not the only ones affected by restrictive policies. When the Americans announced in late 1948 that they were lifting the restrictions, the general response was overwhelmingly positive. In strictly numerical terms, German refugees and expellees were by far the largest disadvantaged group.[53] Unlike displaced Germans, however, displaced Jews were not viewed as even nominal members of the German national community. On the contrary, they were considered doubly alien.

Conclusion

Even under the best of circumstances, the early postwar economy offered few opportunities for a stable and secure livelihood. But the disadvantages Eastern European Jews faced were exceptional. They were foreigners and newcomers. They were more likely than German Jewish survivors in Germany to have experienced internment in ghettos and concentration camps and other forms of severe violence. Even if they had managed to escape the Nazis, as had Polish Jews who fled or were deported to the Soviet Union, they had lived through difficult years in which opportunities to train and gain work experience were few. Physical injuries and psychological trauma made it impossible for many to work in a sustained manner. And all of these disadvantages were compounded by the indifference and hostility of German officials and business owners and of the general

[49] T-unit report, DP-Problems, 1947, 6.

[50] Jüdische Gemeinde Frankfurt to Handwerkskammer, December 3, 1946; Handwerkskammer to Jüdische Gemeinde Frankfurt, January 13, 1947; L. Thorn to Handwerkskammer, January 13, 1947; Jüdische Gemeinde Frankfurt to Handwerkskammer, January 14, 1947, Institut für Stadtgeschichte, Frankfurt am Main, Magistratsakten 7.544; Rotmensz DP Registration Record, AA, 3.1.1/68848921.

[51] Versicherung an Eidesstatt, May 2, 1947, AA, 3.2.1/ 79161925.

[52] Roman Haller, email message to author, August 24, 2020.

[53] Scheybani: Handwerk und Kleinhandel, 1996, p. 242.

public. Nonetheless, for many Jews, work was materially and psychologically vital. It made it possible to better meet their material needs, and it gave a sense of purpose and autonomy after many "lost" years.

The situation in which Eastern European Jews in Germany found themselves changed dramatically in 1948. Opportunities for mass emigration opened up. Simultaneously, the currency reform ushered in a new period in western Germany's postwar history. A capitalist market economy was reestablished as the glut of Reichsmarks was eliminated and new controls over the money supply introduced. Rationing and price controls were progressively withdrawn, and participation in the economy was liberalized. A *Gründungswelle*, or wave of business foundings, followed.

Most Eastern European Jews soon left. Some, however, took advantage of the changed circumstances to go into business—or legalize businesses started earlier. They did not necessarily intend to stay. Most still could not imagine a future in Germany, and they faced intense pressure from within, from other Jews, and from without, from antisemitic Germans, to leave. Nonetheless, the businesses they built after the currency reform became the fragile economic backbone of the Jewish community as well as the key source of connection to the German population. They were thus central to the long and painful process by which Jews built new lives and livelihoods in Germany after the Holocaust, a process just getting started during the period discussed here.

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