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## **“They are good human stock”: Refugee Resettlement in the United States after the Second World War (1948-1956)**

*This is a written version of the oral presentation given at the Fellows' Seminar of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah on January 19, 2024. It is prefaced with a brief description of the broader dissertation project.*

### **Presentation of the dissertation:**

The Displaced Persons Act, passed in June 1948 and extended and amended in 1950, followed by the Refugee Relief Program (1953-1956), were the first federally run large-scale refugee resettlement programs in the United States. They allowed for the admission of close to 700,000 refugees over eight years. These refugees were part of the million people displaced by the Second World War and its aftermath who had refused to be repatriated to their country. A fifth approximately were Jews of different nationalities who feared the antisemitism in their home country. The others were Poles, Balts and other Central and Eastern Europeans who had been forced laborers in Germany during the war, had fled the advance of the Red Army or had left after the Communist takeovers of their countries and refused to return to Communist regimes. My dissertation project analyzes the criteria and process of selection of refugees for resettlement in these two post-World War II and early Cold War programs. By focusing on the selection rationales for the resettlement of refugees to the United States, I aim to understand how a definition of the desirable and undesirable refugee emerged in the context of these programs.

These resettlement programs were passed during a period of immigration restriction spanning from the 1921 Immigration Restriction Act to the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, and at a time when refugee admissions over the previous decade had been very limited. This context of restriction compels historians to interrogate the mechanisms by which refugees were constructed as desirable immigrants by the actors of resettlement policy, from lawmakers to administrators of governmental agencies, international organizations and faith-based organizations.

My dissertation explores how the selection of refugees, both in the crafting of the laws and in the administration of the programs, articulated explicit and implicit criteria of worthiness that defined the boundaries of the desirable immigrant. The interplay between different actors at different steps of the process led to the emergence of norms and practices that defined who should and could be resettled and who could not. The dissertation explores the construction of two categories of population: the discursive category of the desirable refugee and the administrative category of the refugees actually resettled. I argue that refugees were resettled according to three main and interrelated logics of selection: humanitarian considerations, (geo)political considerations and labor considerations. These three logics of selection were often in tension, prioritized by different actors at different points of the selection process and articulated differently for different groups of refugees.

### **FMS Presentation:**

This presentation focuses on the object of my dissertation, the Displaced Persons Program, which between 1948 and 1952 authorized 400,000 refugees to be resettled in the United States. These refugees were part of the displaced persons, or “DPs,” refugees living in Germany, Austria or Italy and, by this time, under the care of the International Refugee Organization (IRO). My research focuses on the process and criteria of *selection* of these refugees for resettlement in the United States, both in the crafting of the laws and in the administration of the programs. I am not going to give an overview of the dissertation, but will instead talk about one criterion among others of how this selection worked.

### **Introduction**

I would like to start with a few quotes from when Congress debated the Displaced Persons Act in 1947-48:

*“They are sturdy, able people, most of them young. (...) And they want desperately to start work.”*

*“All responsible reports agree that the average displaced person, far from being lazy, inefficient, and irresponsible, is eager to rebuild his life through hard, constructive work, and is ready and able to accept responsibility.”*

What is notable about these statements is that they are not about any immigrants, but about refugees, coming to the United States after the war and the Holocaust.

This is, I think, an underestimated criterion – in the US context specifically – defining the desirable refugee in the postwar period: the idea that the refugees’ ability and willingness to work were crucial to their deservingness as refugees. This criterion of labor was articulated to the other criteria that are more often explored in the Displaced Persons program: humanitarian considerations, around the emerging consciousness of the Holocaust and human rights, and also political considerations of the emerging Cold War, where the resettlement of refugees who were citizens of Communist countries was a geopolitical victory for the United States.

It seems to me that acknowledging the centrality of labor in the selection of refugees is key to understanding why the Displaced Persons program was established and why it worked the way it did. The Displaced Persons Program was passed during a period of immigration restriction, between the 1920s and the 1960s, at a time when refugee admissions had previously been very limited, and when the only other large-scale federal immigration programs were labor programs, like the Bracero program for Mexican workers. As the first large-scale federal refugee resettlement program, the Displaced Persons Act was a key step in the construction of the distinction between refugee and immigrant regimes. Yet it was in large part driven by labor concerns, blurring those boundaries.

I am going to focus on how these labor criteria determined *who* could be resettled as a refugee to the US and who could not. There were a number of ways that the program was designed around employment. There are several reasons for that: the threat of labor competition and unemployment in a period of demobilization of veterans, conversely, some shortages in certain industries like agriculture, and also the constant requirement made of immigrants that they be a benefit, not a burden, for the US economy, which meant not competing for jobs while at the same time being productive workers. I will not go into detail about these different reasons why the Displaced Persons program had labor criteria, but we end up with a program that is fundamentally structured around labor in certain important ways, with a focus on manual labor, particularly agriculture.

Refugees in the Displaced Persons program had to meet a number of employment criteria that differed from standard immigration procedures. Most importantly, a displaced person had to get an offer of a job from an American in order to get a visa. This was an unusual provision, usually illegal under immigration law. Under regular immigration law, obtaining a job before immigrating

was banned. The way the Displaced Persons program worked was that an employer would ask for a worker to do a certain job, and the Displaced Persons Commission or a voluntary agency (a nongovernmental organization) working on resettlement would match a refugee to the job offer. The law also contained a stringent provision that 30% of the visas allocated to displaced persons go to persons with a job offer in agriculture.

This had a lot of downstream effects on the way the program was structured. Today, I would like to focus on the effects it had on the *type of person* who could be resettled as a refugee in the United States.

## **1. Framing refugees as good workers**

### ***a. Work ability and “survival of the fittest”***

Displaced persons were defined as victims of persecution. Their deservingness as refugees was premised on humanitarian considerations. But their status as victims of persecution was seized upon as an argument against their resettlement, portraying them as weakened by the war and life in refugee camps. A senator talked about “the unavoidable moral and physical deterioration resulting from long periods of idleness and dependence on outside charitable support.” Their status as refugees therefore, by definition, disqualified them as desirable immigrants because they wouldn’t be able to work.

It is in opposition to this definition of refugees as helpless victims that advocates repeatedly emphasized that displaced persons were in fact good workers. This strategy is not obvious: they could have avoided the specificity of their status as victims of persecution, rejecting the idea that they had a special status as refugees, and portrayed them as regular immigrant workers. Instead, the debates around the Displaced Persons program saw the emergence of a new definition of refugee deservingness that articulated humanitarian considerations of victimhood and work ability.

A specific discourse developed rendering the worthiness of refugees as workers through their experience of hardship. This was best exemplified by the omnipresent notion of “survival of the fittest,” which was repeatedly brought up by advocates of the law, and was particularly important in terms of framing the Jewish refugees as desirable refugees for immigration. They

argued that what made the refugees good workers was that they had “escaped and endured what millions of their kinsmen could not survive.” Their survival through the ordeals of the war and its aftermath was the proof that they would make good immigrant workers. Representative Noah Mason, Republican of Illinois, made this point explicitly: “They are sturdy, able people, most of them young. They had to be to survive what killed so many of their fellow slave workers under the Nazis. And they want desperately to start work.” Congressman Emanuel Celler put it most explicitly: “They are the best evidence of the survival of the fittest; having gone through all those desperate events, they indicated that they have a considerable degree of mental and physical stamina. And to my mind, they would make good citizens.”

This construction of the merit of the refugees on the fact that they survived when so many others perished during the war was a recurring theme when arguing for the resettlement of Jewish survivors of the war. As Rabbi Philip Bernstein, Adviser on Jewish Affairs to the General Commander in Chief of European Command, put it when testifying to Congress: “They are good human stock. Otherwise they could not have survived nor rehabilitated themselves so quickly.” The survival of the Displaced Persons despite the hardship they endured was presented as an asset rather than a liability in terms of their ability to work.

The background of the Displaced Persons was deployed to argue in favor of their ability to work in another way, which was the focus on the status of many of them as former forced laborers in Nazi Germany. Here’s a quote from an American officer:

*“They are above all else working people. That is because the Nazi Labor Office which accompanied the German Armies was interested in bringing into Germany only those people who were capable of working in the factories and on the farms. Therefore, they selected for deportation to Germany primarily persons in the younger age groups and those physically qualified to do manual labor. It is noteworthy that in the average DP camp one will find relatively few old people or physically handicapped people. Further, it was hard for one without great moral and physical stamina to survive the experiences they went through. They had to have it. As working people in their own countries, they were accustomed to long hours of toil. In German labor camps they worked long hours on short rations.”*

In a surprising rhetorical turn, their selection for forced labor by the Nazis was portrayed as a form of pre-selection for emigration to the United States.

The bodies of refugees as capable of manual labor were repeatedly focused on. This was particularly the case for Jewish refugees, whose experience of immense physical hardship in the camps was instrumentalized by opponents as denoting inability to work. Rabbi Bernstein noted that

*“this situation would have been enough to crush almost any group of human beings. But not these. With the help primarily of the American Army they made a quick physical comeback. Flesh was restored to living skeletons. Vitality surged through their blood again.”*

Here’s Juda Nadler, a Polish Jew who was deported to Auschwitz, quoted in a narrative written by the IRO: “I don’t know how I survived. Probably, I owe my life to my strong frame and the fact that I was then 26 years old.” The physical strength of the refugees was often remarked upon by documents prepared by the IRO for publication in the American press. It echoed a congressman saying: “Now we have our chance to get some of the strong backs, good brains, and energy that Hitler kept from us.”

#### ***b. Willingness to work as a moral virtue***

The displaced persons were frequently characterized as unwilling to work by opponents, specifically because they were refugees. Senator Revercomb declared: “These persons are, for the most part, penniless and do not desire to work, but expect to be cared for, and complain when things are not as well done as they think they should be.” The situation of the displaced persons, living in refugee camps and therefore relying on charitable support, created an image of idleness.

The portrayal of the displaced persons as not simply unable to work because of their years as refugees, but *unwilling* to work, explains the great pains taken by advocates to emphasize their willingness to work in the United States. The IRO and the DP Commission put together short narrative biographies of thousands of displaced persons selected for resettlement to the United States, to send them to local news outlet in the town or region where they were set to be resettled. These stories were a place for the IRO to focus on the willingness to work of the refugees, often attributing that sentiment to the refugees themselves.

Refugees were portrayed as willing to work despite downward professional and social mobility. This downward mobility was presented as positive by resettlement agencies because it embodied the moral virtue of the refugees who did not look down upon manual labor and who were grateful to the US. The story of Karolin Pongracz opens this way: “A pretty, blond Hungarian

countess is now on her way (...) to a waitress' job in Washington, D.C. (...) Twenty-year old Karolin Pongracz will make the transformation from countess to waitressing soon after she arrives". About another displaced person, the IRO writes: "His changeover from professional work to manual labour does not concern Adolfes. 'I shall happily do any kind of work in order to free myself and my family from the fear of communism'". As Representative Emanuel Celler noted: "these folks would be glad to accept that choice, because they are anxious to work. They are willing to accept their lot. They are not ambitious about what they do. (...)."

## **2. "Healthy, muscular labourers": the corpus of the resettled refugees**

This rhetoric over the labor these refugees could offer reflected how the law was administered and shaped the corpus of refugees actually resettled to the United States. I will give a few short examples.

### *a. Health, strength and disability: the "hard core"*

Because of the focus on physical ability to work, the program brought with it implicit exclusion criteria based on age and physical health. Many refugees were denied admission to the US due to a medical examination that considered that they would not be able to work by determining their "percentage disability for manual labor". This happened even though they had already been granted a visa to the United States, meaning that they had already secured an offer of employment. Despite their proven ability to secure employment, their physical "disability for manual labor" prevented them from being admitted to the United States.

For the actors of resettlement to the United States, there was a two-way relationship between work and physical "rehabilitation," a notion that is omnipresent in this period. Hard work would restore and rediscipline the bodies of refugees, rebuilding their strength and stamina after the grueling experience of the war. Resettlement would enable "rehabilitation", particularly for the "hard core" of refugees, the hardest refugees to resettle, who were defined primarily by their inability to work. For instance, the Displaced Persons program included a program for disabled refugees to be sent to "rehabilitation centers" which would rehabilitate them and place them in jobs. The overcoming of disability in order to be able to work was necessary to resettlement.

***b. “Work butterflies, or worse, all Jews”: Antisemitic tropes around Labor***

Framing the desirability of prospective immigrants around their ability and willingness to work was used as a proxy for desirability on other grounds as well, most notably ethnic and religious. Beyond the obvious antisemitic provisions of the program, particularly regarding the dates of eligibility which prompted President Truman to consider vetoing the law, other measures, including those relating to labor, worked against the Jewish displaced persons. Senator Revercomb put it most bluntly when he declared on the Senate floor: “Certain of them – notably the Balts – show a willingness and desire for work; others, including the Jews, do not want to work.” The antisemitic trope of Jews being unwilling to work, especially as manual laborers, was used to cast Jewish refugees as undesirable immigrants.

An internal IRO report remarked on the process of matching displaced persons with job assurances this way: “if the more desirable applicants move quickly, it will be easier to identify and work on the residual hard core that much sooner”. It noted a concern that there were less job offers in the US because of reports that “refugees switch jobs repeatedly and are “work butterflies”, or worse “all Jews”.” The “desirable applicants” were clearly identified as non-Jewish refugees, and this was linked to the perceived ability and willingness of Jews to work. In this antisemitic context, promoting the emigration of “more desirable refugees” implied promoting the emigration of non-Jewish refugees. The design of the resettlement scheme around the wishes of employers baked in antisemitic employment discrimination into the process of selection.

***c. Women as dependents***

An immigration plan that was designed around manpower also favored men of working age over the young, the elderly and women. In the United States, a visa was issued to a head of household as well as his or her dependents. Under the Displaced Persons Act, dependents were defined as a spouse and minor unmarried children. Other adult relatives – children over the age of 18, parents, siblings – were classified as single adults, and had to obtain their own sponsorship with an offer of a job. This could be a difficulty of older adults: even when emigrating with their adult children who had secured an offer of a job, they themselves had to be employable.

Actors of the Displaced Persons program overwhelmingly matched a job assurance with the skills of the husband in a family group, who could then emigrate with his dependents. This subordinated women to the role of dependents of the men who were recruited for a job. One of the



reasons for that was that women were most likely to get a job in service work in private households. In private domestic service in particular, sponsors were more likely to want an employee who was emigrating without dependents. This represented an additional hurdle for married women, or single women with children.

On the other hand, the prevalence in this period of jobs in domestic service that came with accommodation inside of the employer's home provided a specific opportunity for single women who might otherwise have had trouble finding a job offer that could enable their emigration. One example is that of Regina Kolpaczyk, who was 66 at the time she emigrated to the United States, an age at which a woman could have trouble finding employment. However, she and her daughter were sponsored by an American man of Polish descent who wanted a live-in "good Polish cook".

The quota of agricultural laborers also served to exclude women from obtaining for themselves a job assurance and resettlement. In many cases, women who had been farmers before the war had to obtain an offer of a different job if they were emigrating without a spouse.

The provisions of the law defined the contours of the group of people who were admitted to be resettled in the United States in terms of their labor profile, and therefore also in terms of their gender.

#### *d. Intellectuals and specialists*

Constructing refugee desirability around manual labor excluded many groups who were considered inapt to such work, like those classified as "intellectuals and specialists". They were categorized as part of the "hard core" of displaced persons because they made less desirable immigrant workers. The categorization of displaced persons occurred primarily through the desirability of their labor for countries of emigration, and for intellectuals, that placed them at the bottom of the hierarchy.

## **Conclusion**

The Displaced Persons program defined which refugees were worthy of resettlement based, in large part, on their ability and willingness to work, especially as manual laborers. The centrality of this criterion was baked into the program through both its design and its implementation. While the Displaced Persons program is primarily viewed through the lens of the emergence of refugee

resettlement premised on humanitarian considerations in the postwar context and geopolitical imperatives in the Cold War context, these considerations were often articulated with and subordinated to a focus on selecting immigrants on the basis of their labor. Focusing on this aspect allows us to treat the American resettlement program alongside the historiography on refugee resettlement schemes in other countries which have a more explicit focus on labor: the UK, France and Belgium which were explicitly worker programs, but also the historiography on settlement in Israel which is increasingly turning its attention to labor.