

1 *Displaced in the National Home*

On May 15, 1946, the Hungarian daily *Magyar Nemzet* published a letter from Gyula Gati, a Hungarian Jew who had immigrated to Palestine before World War II. In his letter, to which the newspaper gave the headline “Message from Palestine to Hungarian Jewry,” Gati urged Hungarian Jews to stay in Hungary and warned them against succumbing to the propaganda of Zionist immigration agents. Gati wrote that while British Mandatory Palestine was on the verge of a terrible Arab–Jewish bloodbath, the Hungarian government was making effective efforts to root out antisemitism and to turn the Hungarian homeland into a safe place for Jews. He thought there was no longer a Jewish problem but only a general Hungarian problem, and therefore Jews who contemplated leaving Hungary were obstructing the country’s development. At the same time he justified the position of those who wanted to leave Palestine, which had now, he claimed, become a place of grave danger for Jews. During World War II, said Gati, many Hungarian Jews in Palestine had thought of returning to Hungary, but news from home discouraged them. Now they were ready to return: “We clearly see the future and our duty . . . we impatiently look forward to the time when we can go back there. We feel it is our duty to work for the country’s reconstruction; it is our duty to participate in the creation of a free and democratic Hungarian future.”¹

Gati’s name appears on a list of Hungarian Jews who in February 1947 registered for repatriation from Palestine with the Jerusalem office of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) as part of a repatriation program initiated by the office in the summer of 1945.² The program, which lasted until UNRRA’s successor organization, IRO, closed its operations in Israel in the fall

¹ Hebrew translation of the letter in CZA/S25/2314.

² List in Archives Nationales, Paris (AN)/AJ/43/1067. On the UNRRA Jerusalem Office, see Susan Armstrong-Reid and David Murray, *Armies of Peace: Canada and the UNRRA Years* (Toronto, 2008), 145–59.

“Why Won’t They Stay Here?”

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of 1948, provoked intense discussion in the Palestinian Jewish press and was a source of conflict between the UNRRA Jerusalem Office and the Jewish Agency in Palestine. At the heart of the turmoil were the questions arising from Gati’s letter: Should Jews who had come to Palestine before or during World War II return to their European countries of origin and contribute to their postwar reconstruction, or must they stay in Palestine and participate in the Zionist nation-building project? Was Palestine a permanent homeland or a temporary shelter for Jewish refugees?

The Jewish press accused the Yishuv leadership of failing to absorb the refugees, but mostly attacked the repatriation applicants for betraying the nationalist cause. Jewish Agency officials accused UNRRA of encouraging Palestine’s Jews to return to Europe and of misinforming them as to the opportunities awaiting them there. And the chief of the UNRRA Jerusalem Office accused the Jewish Agency and other less official elements in the Yishuv of forcing Jews to stay in Palestine and of ostracizing those who registered for repatriation. Despite public denials, the accusations were true on both sides. The repatriation controversy revolved around conflicting assumptions about the role of Jewish refugees in postwar reconstruction. But the positions of the quarreling parties were based on ideological and political considerations that were detached from the predominantly personal and material issues that motivated the repatriation applicants themselves. The latter were mostly driven by issues such as climate conditions, health problems, economic distress, language hurdles, desire to reunite with family members abroad, and general feelings of estrangement. These difficulties further demonstrate that these Jewish refugees experienced Palestine as a site of displacement rather than a permanent homeland, and saw Europe as something more like home, as well as a place of postwar resettlement and rehabilitation.

“Why Won’t They Stay Here?”

UNRRA was created in November 1943 at a White House meeting of representatives of forty-four governments in order to provide aid to refugees in areas that would come under Allied control. UNRRA carried out most of its relief work in DP camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy, and among refugees in the Far East, assisting in feeding, clothing, and repatriating millions of World War II refugees. But its

first operations took place on a smaller scale in the Middle East. In April 1944, UNRRA's Middle East Office (MEO) took control of several refugee camps in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine, inhabited by both Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from various European countries.³

As a branch of MEO, the UNRRA Jerusalem Office was responsible for organizing repatriation from Palestine of persons who had found refuge in the country during the war years but aspired to go back to their original European countries at war's end. Since the vast bulk of refugees in Palestine were of Jewish origin, the mission of the UNRRA Jerusalem Office placed it at odds with the Zionist project in Palestine. At the very time that UNRRA officials were organizing the movement from Palestine to Europe, the Zionist movement was struggling to bring Jewish DPs from Europe into Palestine despite British restrictions on Jewish immigration.

The Zionists intensified their opposition to British policy after the election of the British Labour Party in the summer of 1945. The party had previously supported Zionism, thereby raising Zionist hopes for a change of course. But once in power, Labour leaders became convinced that British strategic goals in the Middle East still necessitated appeasement of the Arabs, and the immigration restrictions were not removed. Disappointed with Labour intransigence, in October 1945 the underground armed forces of the Yishuv – the Mapai-dominated Haganah and the more militant, right-wing Irgun and Lehi – united to launch an anti-British revolt, formally known as the Hebrew Resistance Movement. The campaign included attacks on British targets in Palestine and illegal immigration operations. The immigration operations in particular posed a serious challenge to the Mandate government, as the spectacle of British soldiers preventing Hitler's victims from reaching the Jewish homeland helped galvanize world opinion in favor of the Zionist cause, while also uniting the Yishuv in its fight against the British.

Indeed, while the Haganah disbanded the Hebrew Resistance Movement in July 1946, following the Irgun's deadly bombing of the British government's headquarters in Jerusalem's King David Hotel, the

³ Malcolm J. Proudfoot, *European Refugees: 1933–52: A Study in Forced Population Movement* (Evanston, IL, 1956), 140–3; George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration* (New York, 1950), 81–94; Robert Gregg Wilfong, "UNRRA and Displaced Persons" (PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 1966), 202–8.

clandestine immigration efforts remained the subject of broad political agreement. Such efforts were, moreover, glorified as acts of national heroism that came to symbolize the entire Zionist struggle. David Ben-Gurion, at that time chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive and the most dominant figure in the Yishuv, described the refugees trying to reach Palestine as an “entity that emerges by itself from the depths of the survival instinct of the nation.”⁴ If Jewish immigrants to Palestine were generally called *olim* (those who go up), illegal immigrants were *ma’apilim* (summit climbers) – a term implying a courageous and arduous undertaking on the part of both the refugees and the activists who helped them sail to Palestine.

It was within this atmosphere that the UNRRA Jerusalem office conducted its activities on behalf of Jews wishing to return to Europe. In June 1945, after several field surveys in the country, the office estimated that at least 30,000 Jews in Palestine would seek repatriation to such countries as Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany, and Poland. Of these, there were 720 Greek Jewish refugees who lived in the UNRRA-run Nusseirat camp near Gaza (see Figure 3), and the rest were dispersed among the Jewish communities of Palestine and were not aided by UNRRA. At this stage, repatriation was possible only to Greece and Czechoslovakia. Hungarians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Austrians, and Germans became eligible in April 1946, when UNRRA’s repatriation mandate was expanded to include ex-enemy nationals, and Polish nationals became eligible in August of the same year.⁵ In general, those able to prove their refugee status and whose nationality was confirmed by the authorities in the country to be entered were eligible. Holders of Palestinian citizenship were ineligible, as UNRRA assumed that acceptance of citizenship meant that the refugee intended to settle in Palestine. Those who were eventually included on the repatriation lists were transported by UNRRA to the embarkation point in El Shatt refugee camp near Suez in the Sinai Peninsula. From there they departed to their countries of origin.⁶

⁴ Cited in Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power*, 223.

⁵ “Jews Desiring to Leave Palestine,” report by UNRRA – Palestinian Branch, June 29, 1945, copy in CZA/S25/5213; Armstrong-Reid and Murray, *Armies of Peace*, 145; Woodbridge, *UNRRA*, 508. See also *Palestine Post*, Apr. 30, 1946 and Aug. 15, 1946.

⁶ Report on MEO camps, UN Archives, New York (UNA)/S-1021-0028-05; E. Brown to Deputy Chief, MEO, UNRRA Cairo, May 8, 1946; L. Findley to



Figure 3 Tents at the Nusseirat Camp, Gaza Strip.

Source: United Nations Archives and Records Management, UNA/S-0800-0008-0010-00018, Date: 01/01/1945–12/31/1948

The estimate of around 30,000 Jewish repatriation candidates appeared in various additional reports. Eric Mills, the Commissioner for Migration and Statistics of the Palestine Government, commented that “if freedom from persecution and want were quickly established in Europe, and if the United States quotas from Palestine permitted, the number of Jewish emigrants from Palestine might be between 20,000 and 30,000.”⁷ Some British policy-makers even hoped to use the numbers as a propaganda tool in the campaign against Jewish

Brigadier T. T. Waddington, Apr. 30, 1946, both in AN/AJ/43/1067; George Maranz, “Go-backers,” *Central European Observer*, Sept. 21, 1945, 271.

⁷ Cited in Sir John Shaw, Chief Secretary of the Palestine Government, Jerusalem to J. M. Martin, Colonial Office, London, Oct. 7, 1945, TNA/CO/733/493/1. In the same file, see also Secretary of State for Colonies, London to Field Marshal Viscount Gort, Jerusalem, Oct. 4, 1945. In addition see Rory Miller, *Divided against Zion: Anti-Zionist Opposition to the Creation of a Jewish State in Palestine, 1945–1948* (London, 2000), 139–40. The American quota for Palestine was 500–600 a year. C. G. Grimwood, Chief Secretary’s Office, Jerusalem to Trafford Smith, Colonial Office, Apr. 25, 1947, TNA/CO/733/493/1.

immigration to Palestine.⁸ Zionist representatives in the United States, on the other hand, cited these figures in a worried letter to their counterparts in Palestine.⁹ Yet closer scrutiny of the sources suggests that there were around 8,000 recorded and reported cases of Jews who applied to UNRRA or IRO for repatriation in this period.¹⁰ Of these, only about 2,500 were eventually repatriated: around 400 returned to Greece, 600 to Poland, 1,000 to Czechoslovakia, and 500 to Austria.¹¹

There were also approximately 700 Jewish refugees who registered for return to Germany, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria, but most of them were eventually refused entry – normally because the competent authorities of their desired country of destination did not certify their nationality or saw them as incapable of contributing to the reconstruction of the respective country.¹² Rejected applicants also included those deemed ineligible for assistance by UNRRA. Among them were people who applied for resettlement in a new country rather than

⁸ Secretary of State for Colonies, London, to Sir A. Cunningham, June 12, 1947; J. D. Higham, Colonial Office, to Commander W. Evershed, July 4, 1947, TNA/CO/733/493/1.

⁹ Martin Rosenbluth, United Palestine Appeal, New York to the JA Immigration Department, Oct. 1, 1945, CZA/S6/1066.

¹⁰ “Number of refugees in Palestine classified by nationality,” report from commissioner’s office, Government of Palestine, Department of Immigration and Statistics (signed E. Mills), Feb. 8, 1945; “The Polish group in Palestine,” report by UNRRA, Balkan Mission, Division of Displaced Persons, Feb. 27, 1945; “Survey in Palestine, Jan. 30–Feb. 27 1945,” copy of report by Elizabeth Brown submitted to Balkan Mission, Division of Displaced Persons, UNRRA, Mar. 8, 1945. These reports are in UNA/S-1313-0000-0018. See also MEO, Monthly Narrative Reports – vol. II 1944–49, UNA/S-1313-0000-0004 and vol. III, UNA/S-1313-0000-000. In addition see reports and lists in AN/AJ/43/1057, AN/AJ/43/1068, and AN/AJ/43/1067.

¹¹ On Greece, “Background on Registration in Palestine,” Brown to Chief of MEO, Cairo, Oct. 23, 1945, UNA/S-1313-0000-0018A, and *Yediote Aharonot*, Aug. 27, 1945, *Hatzofeh*, Aug. 27, 1945, *Hamashkif*, Aug. 28, 1945, *Davar*, Sept. 4, 1945; on Poland, see report from a meeting with the Polish Consul, M. Zilan to Yitzhak Greunbaum, May 20, 1947, CZA/S25/2314 and *Davar*, Feb. 13, 1948. On Czechoslovakia, see lists in UNA/S-1326-0000-0044, as well as George Maranz, “Go-backers,” 271; on Austria, lists in AN/AJ/43/1067 and Director of Migration to Chief Secretary, Government of Palestine, Sept. 13, 1947, ISA/RG 2.0 M/399/25.

¹² UNRRA London to Allied Control Commissions in Budapest, Bucharest, and Sofia, Sept. 25, 1946, AN/AJ/43/1068; UNRRA MEO, “Twentieth Narrative Report of the Chief of the MEO Office,” Apr. 1–30, UNA/S-1021-0028-08.1947; on Germany, see “Lists der am 28 Apr. 1947 aus Palestina Heimgekehrten,” CZA/S25/2314, and nominal rolls in AN/AJ/43/1057.

return to their country of origin, those requesting repatriation to a country not included in UNRRA's mandate, persons not qualified as war refugees, and others.¹³ One UNRRA official testified that in order to determine eligibility for repatriation, agency personnel had to "listen to histories of when and why people have come . . . and to be sure that we are not being duped by a 'story.'"¹⁴ These screening processes provide at least a partial explanation for the gap between the initial estimates and the number who actually repatriated.

At any rate, the mere notion of Jewish return from Palestine to Europe was anathema to Zionist goals and beliefs. Yishuv newspapers of various ideological orientations reacted to the phenomenon with miscomprehension, anger, and contempt. In September 1945, one writer in the religious Zionist paper *Hatzofeh* wondered how, under such historical circumstances, Jews could go "from the Land of Israel back into the lion's den":

At a time when tens of thousands of slim, gaunt hands – whose every vein bespeaks the torment of their owners – bang on this country's locked gates, there are Jews in this country who go down to the ships to return to the countries of the diaspora. They go back to Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria. Just now a hundred Jews returned to Greece. They came here escaping from the murderer. They found refuge in this country. Now they are returning to the lands of slaughter. Why won't they stay here?¹⁵

The writer found it "painful and insulting" that Jews willingly returned to exile while other Jews were desperately trying to obtain Palestinian immigration certificates in spite of British restrictions. In cases where the repatriates themselves were certificate holders, they were censured in the press as selfish and exploitative. *Hamashkif*, the ultra-nationalist Zionist-Revisionist paper, addressed the issue in an article in the same month about a group of Romanian would-be repatriates. The paper argued that this was a group of wealthy individuals who had

¹³ For such cases, see Elizabeth Brown to Abram Bloch, Haifa, Nov. 6, 1945; Elizabeth Brown to N. J. Faruggia, Haifa, Sept. 24, 1945; Elizabeth Brown to T. R. Danon, Tel Aviv, Sept. 14, 1945; T. T. Waddington to director of El Shat camp, Aug. 16, 1946; Elizabeth Brown to chief secretary, Palestine government, Jerusalem, Sept. 24, 1945; Elizabeth Brown to chief secretary's office, Palestine government, Sept. 13, 1945, all in UNA/S-1313-0000-0018.

¹⁴ "Background on Registration in Palestine," Oct. 23, 1945, UNA/S-1313-0000-0018A.

¹⁵ *Hatzofeh*, Sept. 5, 1945.

purchased immigration certificates from Zionist delegates in Bucharest only to use Palestine as a night shelter, and thereby “plundered loyal and honest Zionists whose only sin was that they could not pay for the ride.”¹⁶ A few weeks later, *Hamashkif* returned to the issue, charging that “a person who received an immigration certificate instead of another Jew, whose soul had perished in poisonous gas and other kinds of deaths, may not be permitted to do as his filthy soul wishes and act against his people’s national interests.”¹⁷

Such statements had deeper roots than the practical problem of obtaining a certificate. They were guided by the concept of rejection of exile, which was reinforced by the experience of Jewish helplessness during World War II, and had a bearing on the approach toward return to Europe after the war. A letter to the editor of *Haboker*, organ of the liberal General Zionist Party, explained that the reason for desiring to return should be sought in the exilic mental features of the migrants. As human material produced in exile, they had no self-respect and acted out of blindness and delusion. The writer saw them as the symbolic descendants of Jewish victims of Nazi extermination, who were led astray by the lure of exile instead of joining Zionism before World War II.¹⁸ A columnist in *Hatzofeh* wrote in July 1945 that the failure to turn the wandering diaspora Jew into a rooted individual was the source of all the Yishuv’s problems: the internal decay, the lack of national discipline, the contempt toward the national language, the life of profligacy and licentiousness – all resulted from the sense of temporary dwelling and the yearning for wandering.¹⁹ One observer suggested that people sought repatriation because they remained in exile within the Land of Israel. Some of them did not speak a word of Hebrew, felt alienated from the Yishuv, or saw Palestine as a temporary place of refuge, just like refugees of other nations. Jewish repatriation was seen as evidence of the existence within the Land of Israel of “islands of assimilated Jews and lovers of foreign languages,”²⁰ that is, the kind of people who rejected the Zionist ethos of national revival and were considered adversaries of Zionism in European Jewish communities. Some accused the

¹⁶ *Hamashkif*, Sept. 25, 1945. See also *Ha’aretz*, June, 18, 1945; *Hamashkif*, June 18, 1945; *Hamashkif*, July 10, 1945; *Ha’aretz*, July, 26, 1945; *Hamashkif*, July 30, 1945; *Ha’aretz*, July 30, 1945.

¹⁷ *Hamashkif*, Nov. 11, 1945. ¹⁸ *Haboker*, Nov. 23, 1947.

¹⁹ *Hatzofeh*, July 15, 1945. ²⁰ *Hatzofeh*, Sept. 5, 1945.

repatriates of failing to internalize the Zionist lessons of the Holocaust, namely that Palestine was the final destination of the Jewish people, and that “the Jewish people would either be Zionist or would not be at all.”²¹ A writer for the daily *Yediot Aharonot* described the behavior of Jewish repatriates to Poland in June 1947 as “piggish.” He called them eternal refugees, “miserable Jews who seek happiness in a graveyard.”²²

There were other voices as well, such as Joseph Yambor in the socialist Zionist daily *Mishmar*. Yambor thought that all nations in all periods had a layer of people who pursued a life of wandering. Jewish repatriation from Palestine was therefore an unfortunate but nevertheless almost normal phenomenon. He understood the return to Europe as a tragedy of individuals whose worlds had collapsed, but thought it should not be perceived as a catastrophe on a national scale.²³ A columnist in liberal *Ha'aretz* similarly noted that return migration was a common occurrence in countries of immigration, as not every person can firmly acclimatize and strike root in a new environment.²⁴

Most commentators adopted a harsher approach. Writers in *Ha'aretz*, *Hamashkif*, *Haboker*, and other papers condemned repatriation as opportunistic, selfish, and grotesque, and accused repatriates of “escaping like mice” from the Land of Israel and of “carrying the dangerous virus of Jewish self-hatred.”²⁵ One writer for *Davar*, mouthpiece of the dominant Labor Zionist movement, described those who had left as collaborators in the attempts to destroy the Yishuv: “All those – who in the most bitter of trials for our people . . . are scattered among the nations that ostracize us – they betray us, betray our very existence and the development of our homeland.”²⁶

“Go Home, Austrian”

The Zionist position vis-à-vis return to Europe manifested itself not only in denunciation of repatriates but also in attempts to stop the movement. An early sign of that tendency was a statement by Leo

²¹ *Hamashkif*, Sept. 25, 1945. ²² *Yediot Aharonot*, June 15, 1947.

²³ *Mishmar*, June 23, 1946. ²⁴ *Ha'aretz*, Aug. 13, 1947.

²⁵ *Hamashkif*, Nov. 11, 1945; *Ha'aretz*, May 29, 1946; *Amudim*, May 4, 1947; *Haboker*, Nov. 23, 1947.

²⁶ *Davar*, June 11, 1947.

Herrmann of the Palestine Foundation Fund (a leading Zionist financial body), who upon learning about UNRRA’s program in Palestine in February 1945, declared that Zionist institutions would fight against repatriation with all the means at their disposal.²⁷ He did not specify what means he had in mind, but other sources point to a combination of methods.

Following the departure of refugees to Greece in September 1945, G. Christodoulou, the Greek consul in Palestine, reported that Greek representatives in Palestine had received warnings from “nationalist Jews” that “reprisals will be taken if the flow of repatriated persons is not stopped.”²⁸ The consular authorities of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia had received similar threats, which compelled them to publish official announcements in the press denying that any of their nationals had been subjected to coerced repatriation. Christodoulou published similar announcements but went further, proposing that the Greek government should repatriate Greek Jews from Palestine as Greek citizens located abroad rather than as refugees: this would require the repatriates to arrange and pay for the transport themselves, a burden he thought was beyond their means. Such a tactic, he believed, would reduce the number of Jewish repatriates and would dispel any objections on the part of Jewish organizations in Palestine. The policy remained unchanged, but the very proposal suggests that the threats were taken seriously.²⁹

Christodoulou also mentioned false rumors that circulated widely in Palestine for several days during August 1945 about the sinking of the French vessel *Eridan*, which was carrying a large number of repatriated Greek citizens, including approximately 200 Jews. Christodoulou was convinced that the rumors, which caused anxiety to the passengers’ relatives in Palestine, had been spread by extreme nationalist Jews in order to deter further departures.³⁰

²⁷ Leo Herrmann to M. Shertok, E. Kaplan, E. Dubkin, M. Shapira, Y. Gruenbaum, A. Katznelson, Feb. 9, 1945, CZA/S25/S213.

²⁸ G. Christodoulou, Consul in charge for Palestine and Trans-Jordan, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sept. 6, 1945, in Photini Constantopoulou and Thanos Veremies, eds., *Documents on the History of the Greek Jews: Records from the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (Athens, 1999), 334–5.

²⁹ Christodoulou to Foreign Ministry, Sept. 6, 1945, 335–6.

³⁰ Ibid. See press reports about the vessel: *Yediot Abaronot*, Aug. 27, 1945; *Hatzofeh*, Aug. 27, 1945; *Hamashkif*, Aug. 28, 1945.