

# The Displaced People Of Europe<sup>1</sup>

Preliminary notes on a psychological and anthropological study

By DAVID P. BODER

A few days after the surrender of Germany, General Eisenhower, then Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, sent out a call to the editors of American newspapers which may be summarized in five words, "Come and see for yourself." It seems that this valiant soldier, preoccupied as he might have been with his unprecedented duties, has found time to reflect upon the immeasurable historical significance of preserving for posterity the impressions and emotions aroused by the picture of thousands of innocent victims dead or dying in the liberated concentration camps.

While reading about General Eisenhower's call to the editors, it occurred to me that a new historical tool had been made available right on the campus of Illinois Institute of Technology. As a teacher of the course in perceptual education, I could not help observing that while literally hundreds of thousands of feet of visual material was collected to preserve the details of the war, practically nothing was preserved for the other perceptual avenue, the avenue of hearing. The magnetic wire recorder developed by the Armour Research Foundation appeared most suitable to fill this gap.

In a memorandum on the subject dated April 30, 1945, I wrote as follows:

(1) For psychological as well as historical reasons, it appears of utmost importance that the impressions still alive in the memory of displaced persons of their sufferings in concentration camps and during their subsequent wanderings, be recorded directly not only in their own language but in their own voices.



Dr. Boder at Dachau.

(2) It seems impossible that there were or are enough newspaper correspondents knowing the language of Russian, Polish, Jewish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mongol, Dutch, Flemish and even German sufferers in concentration camps and establishments of forced labor, so that such reports could be recorded with sufficient detail and precision for contemporaries as well as posterity by the usual "paper and pencil" method of interview. These people are entitled to their own Ernie Pyle, and since that appears practically impossible, the exact recording of their tale seems the nearest and most feasible alternative.

Although the importance of such a project appeared obvious, it took more than a year to carry out the necessary formalities and to find the means for the "expedition". The aim was finally realized in the summer of 1946 as

a joint project of the Illinois Institute of Technology and the Psychological Museum. We reserve for another publication the listing of the names of members of the administration, faculty and alumni of Illinois Institute of Technology as well as of the trustees and friends of the Psychological Museum who made this expensive and in our opinion important project possible.

I arrived in Paris on Saturday, July 29, 1946. My scientific equipment consisted of a model 50 wire recorder, 200 spools of wire, and an assortment of converters and transformers. I had my visas for France, Switzerland, and Italy, and my clearance for Germany was still pending in Washington.

My first problem was to get located. With the help of some friends residing permanently in Paris I got lodging at the Grand Hotel. It soon became ob-

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vious that my choice of residence was a wise one. From the entrance of the hotel I had a reasonable chance to get a taxi, at least in the daytime. Considering that the recorder, a one-day supply of spools, and necessary accessories amounted to a load of about sixty pounds, my urgent dependence upon transportation by automobile becomes obvious. Moreover, the displaced persons were housed in villas and semi-public buildings located mostly in the outlying districts of the city and in the suburbs. Under these circumstances my bills for transportation, often at black market rates, ranged from five to twenty-seven dollars a day.

On the day of my arrival, a Saturday, I was able to make contact with several voluntary agencies managed by Americans, and the following Monday I had my first interviews. My procedure was usually thus. I would start: "We know very little in America about the things that happened to you people who were in concentration camps. If you want to help us out, by contributing information about the fate of the displaced person, tell us your personal story. Tell us what is your name, how old you are, and where you were and what happened to you when the war started."

This introduction was usually enough to start a person off on his story, and within less than five minutes he would become oblivious to the microphone before him. The interviews lasted from twenty minutes to four hours, depending upon the readiness of the individual to talk. On only one occasion, when I interviewed the representative of the student body at the international university of UNRRA in Munich, were the sessions limited to about one spool (thirty-eight minutes) per person. As is customary in psychological interviews, I would sit behind the person, so that he would not be influenced by the expression on the face of the interviewer.

Not until a substantial sample of the spools has been transcribed on paper will it be possible to formulate any scientific conclusions from the material. The following lines, therefore, should be taken simply as a travelogue, as a set of notes on the personal impressions gained from about one hun-

dred twenty hours of listening, covering the stories of about seventy people.

It was not the purpose of our expedition to gain a comprehensive picture of the whole problem of the DP's. The project was intended as a psychological and anthropological study by means of a specific tool, the wire-recorder, of the rank and file of DP's. Therefore, any additional knowledge of the general problems was gained incidentally without any inquiry into the statistics of the phenomena.

From material that was supplied to me by UNRRA, and the data gradually pieced together from the interview material, the concentration camp picture was as follows. From the advent of Hitler to power, the rights of the individual in Germany, especially the rights of protection by the courts, were suspended. There were no coroner's inquests or their equivalent, or any other formalities contingent upon the death of an inmate in a concentration camp.

The first contingent for concentration camps were German communists and socialists or people alleged to be such, as well as the outspoken liberals. \*These political prisoners speaking the same language as, and often of higher education than, the rank and file of the Gestapo men easily took over the leadership in the camps and managed to occupy nearly all the positions usually allotted to inmates in any place of imprisonment, such as managers of kitchens and warehouses, typists, draftsmen, amusement directors, and trustees in charge of supervision over their fellow-prisoners.

In time there appeared another category of concentration camp inmates, the so-called BV-er (pronounced Befauer) which means a Berufsverbrecher (professional criminal). To the latter category also belonged the sex offenders. These two categories of the concentration camp population became the elite of the lagers (camps) as soon as the other categories began to arrive.

\* Members of the Christian clergy of German nationality when accused of anti-Nazi ideologies were mostly sent to a special camp (Monthausen). The best information I have is that their number reached about the 500 mark. However, numerous clergymen of the invaded countries were interned on suspicion of connections with the anti-Nazi underground. No recognition of any kind was granted the imprisoned Jewish clergy.

First of all, the *others* were the German Jews. The Jewish radicals and Jewish criminals of German citizenship were separated from the same categories of "Aryan" extraction. Then with the approach of war a search was made for the nationality of the ancestry of the German Jew. All those of whom it could be proved that their ancestors ever arrived from Poland or any other foreign country were ordered to leave Germany as undesirable aliens even though they had lived for generations in Germany, spoke only German, and had imbibed the German culture and made valuable contributions to it. Those unable to leave on short notice were interned.

It would be proper to say at this point that from the capture of the post of chancellor in 1933 to the heaping up of mounds of unburied bodies in Bergen-Belsen in 1945, the Nazis nearly always endeavored to invest all their acts in a cloak of legality and a sort of transcendental justice.

What strikes the hearer of these concentration camp stories is the diabolic logic of events. It appears that the most sinister acts of the Gestapo were serenely planned and backed by a pragmatic justification. In following the naive tales of the DP's whose deeper thought processes seem to have been arrested for the period of concentration camp terror, one is baffled by the methodical consistency which appears to have permeated the Nazi policies.

From the beginning to the end, from the initial pogroms of 1933 to the gas chambers and crematories of Dachau, there was a struggle for the clothing of the crucified. The keynote of the arrests and deportations was loot, a motivation which was intensified by a war economy in which the production of consumer's goods and food for the civilian population was nearly paralyzed. When Austria was annexed and conscription began for the army of the Reich, it became obvious that every drafted soldier was one worker less on the production line and at the same time one more very intensive consumer of food and clothing and war gear. As soon as the Germans entered a city, they formed a Jewish Community

Council. Every so often the Community Council would get instructions to deliver to the railroad station such and such a number of Jews for deportation. Whom should they select? Well, that was for the Council to decide. Suppose they used a *criterion*. Maybe the old, maybe the well-to-do, maybe the rich, maybe the poor.

It was this corruption of the fellow citizens of non-Jewish faith, and at times of the "remaining" Jews, this bribery of the population with loot and spoils taken from the deportees that greatly eased the task of the Nazis. There were of course exceptions. Here is one. In the train from Geneva to Milan, I found myself in a compartment with seven other passengers, among them two women. I was especially attracted by the neat appearance of the older of the two, a gray-haired dowager with somewhat masculine features.

"Excuse me," I said in German, "where did you get these clothes—I mean where were they made?"

The woman looked at me and then responded with a patronizing smile. "These are our old things. When we were deported, we left our better clothes and some of our jewelry with a Christian neighbor, a Czech. The agreement was that she was to wait until the war was over. If the war was lost and we did not return, the things were hers. If the Germans were driven out of Czechoslovakia and we did return, we were to get our things back. Well, she saved and returned everything. This dress and our furs were among them."

Such examples of pure, unselfish decency on the part of Christian neighbors appear time and time again on my records, not only from Czechoslovakia and France, but at times even from Germany.

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true in an overwhelming number of cases. DP's return to their cities of origin and find their homes occupied and the people refusing to restore the property to their owners. To be sure, that happens frequently in bombed-out areas, but it also happened in Paris, and the litigation for the return of such property is often complex and costly.

With Nazi rule it appeared that one step just led to another. First the Nazis drove Germany into a world war, without a single voluntary ally. The offensive against Russia led through hundreds of miles of hostile territory of Czechoslovakia and Poland. The local population was starving, as a result of destruction of resources by war and looting by invading armies. To alleviate the scarcity, the Germans conceived the monstrous idea of curtailing the population by about five million, i. e., by its Jewish components. There was, however, no technique available for mass-killings in such proportions, nor were there burial facilities available in such quantities at short notice. The slaughter must then go on according to plan and spread over a number of years. Food rations for doomed were reduced to a minimum; that of course led to a desirable high mortality. But the road to the grave by starvation is rarely a direct one. It usually goes by way of infectious disease, and that becomes a threat to the army and the rest of the population. So there occurred the idea of segregation into ghettos, from which in turn the selection was made for concentration camps. There were two kinds of camps: labor camps in the vicinity of war plants, and annihilation camps, of which the most notable were Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Bergen-Belsen. There were, however, many other camps of each category separately, or both types combined. District by district the occupied countries were made Jew-clean (*Judenrein*). The whole Jewish population had to assemble on the city square, families together in groups. A trivial reason would be given for such assemblies such as the restamping of identity cards, and people would come suspecting no harm. They would pass before the commission; the old and the sick, or mothers with small children would go to the annihilation camps. This is group 3. Of course they were not told the truth. They were told that they were being "evacuated from the war zone" or sent where there was "light work" and more food available. Men and women without children from eighteen to thirty-five would go to work camps or to camps with double facilities, annihilation or industrial

work. This is group 2. Youngsters from twelve to eighteen remain temporarily at work in local industries, forming group 1, or also join group 2.

Let us listen to a fragment of spool 138. We find there a description (in German) of a typical transport. The interviewee is Jurgen Bassfreund, about twenty years of age, a boy of German birth and education. We give a literal translation of the German text: "The word trickled through that this transport was going to Dachau. We stepped forward, we were given a plate of soup, and, accompanied by S. S., we were sent to the station and were loaded into wagons. They were in part open, in part closed cars. We thought that the closed cars were better, but later it appeared we were worse off. When we were standing at the cars, the S. S. drove us into the cars, one hundred twenty people into each car. It was an impossibility."

*Boder*: "You were in a closed car?"

*Jurgen*: "Yes, in a closed car. The doors were shut. We had no food with us, and now we tried to sit down. When eighty people sat down the others had no place to stand, and there were many people who were very tired. It was not possible, otherwise one stood over the other. We stepped on other people's fingers, and these people, of course, resisted and were striking the others, and so a panic began. It was so terrible that people went crazy during the trip, and while we were travelling there appeared among us the first man dead.

"And we did not know where to put the dead—on the floor they were taking up space—because they had to lie stretched out. And then it occurred to us—we had a blanket with us so we wrapped the dead man into this blanket, and there were two iron bars in the car, and so we tied him on above."

*Boder*: "Like in a hammock?"

*Jurgen*: "Yes, like in a hammock. But soon we understood that that wouldn't do, because we had more and more dead, because of the heat in the car, and the bodies began to smell. And so we were traveling, and there were German troop transports which were retreating from the front because the front was receding, and they had to retreat further. And so all the tracks

were blocked, and we had to stand for days to let the troop transports through first, and at night one could not see a thing. And one was beaten and trampled. In my case my trousers, my prisoner's trousers, were torn lengthwise and I could not wear them any more. And I remained in my underpants. And so without any nourishment, without a drop of water or a piece of bread, in spite of the fact that we yelled for water, and there was snow outside, the S. S. gave us nothing. And we—there was an insane mass of dying people in the car, and after traveling so for five days, we arrived in Regensburg. It was already night, and the S. S. opened the doors and said, 'If you throw out the dead bodies you shall get some food.' And so I and a friend removed twenty-five dead bodies from this car and laid them outside on the snow, you see? And then we were given a piece of bread and a paper beaker of soup. The Red Cross had their feeding point; so we had to line up before the cars, and each was given his ration. Car after car . . ."

*Boder:* "Was that the German Red Cross?"

*Jurgen:* "Yes, that was the German Red Cross. After we had consumed our food, we had to get back into the cars, and so I was in my underpants in the snow. I had no more socks on, and I don't know what the people there may have thought—those nurses (sisters). At any rate we traveled on."

*Boder:* "Couldn't you get yourself some other pants?"

*Jurgen:* "No, that was impossible unless I would have taken them from a dead man, but one was too exhausted from the long trip, if one hasn't eaten anything for five days and five nights. I had been standing all the time during the trip, and I saved my life only through that—that I had tied a piece of rope to the car and held on tight. It was really an utter impossibility." And when we arrived in Dachau there were more dead bodies than survivors."

Upon arrival at the concentration camps, the old, the sick, the women with children were sent immediately to the gas chambers (they thought they were going bathing), often to the tune

of an orchestra. Those fit to work were shaven wherever there was a hair on the body, and a number was tattooed on their arm; they were dressed in disinfected clothes, not their own, but just picked at random from the disinfecting chamber, and were finally assigned to barracks. It was *logical* that any semblance of order among such masses of hungry, tired and panicky people could not be achieved without recourse to extreme brutality. Murder by clubbing and improvised garroting were common events in such camps.

Meanwhile the bodies from the gas chambers were processed. Gold teeth were extracted, and women's hair was shorn off for industrial use. Then the bodies were burned. There were never enough ovens for cremation, and the bodies were burned in open pits in full view of the prisoners and the neighboring population. Never was there a stethoscope applied to the bodies before cremation, and the common belief is that the quantity of gas allowed was not always sufficient to kill. These are some "moderate" episodes taken from the wire recorder, all confirmed by unsolicited statements of DP's in camps far apart, and well substantiated by the material gathered for the Nuremberg trials. And these are their memories!

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We shall devote the rest of the allotted space to brief descriptions of some special groups of the DP's.

#### THE PIED PIPER

At Bellevue, a suburb of Paris, I found a children's colony with its Pied Piper, Miss Kuchler. This woman, a doctor of philosophy from a Polish university, managed to spend the time of German occupation as governess in the home of a Polish nobleman. She had "black" papers, i. e., forged identity papers, and the princes, appreciating her modest demands, asked no questions.

After the expulsion of the Germans from Poland, it appeared that many Polish families, as well as orphanages maintained by the Catholic convents and monasteries, were sheltering numerous Jewish children, who in this way were saved from Nazi extermination. These children were most often aban-

doned at the door steps of good-hearted Christians by previous arrangement, sometimes with money or jewelry in payment for their future keep, sometimes just with a note pleading to take the child, "who had been baptised." This latter statement was made often by agreement with prospective foster parents or orphanages to prevent actual baptism of these children. There were also cases where members of the otherwise dreaded Polish militia or even Nazi soldiers would carry out in their knapsacks abandoned infants from the burning ghettos. The Catholic nuns and monks would accept these waifs without questioning and bring them up with the rest of the numerous orphans of war. Now once the enemy was expelled, a revaluation of the future of these children was begun. In rare cases the children were claimed by a surviving parent or relatives. Identification was made by birth marks, pieces of clothing, copies of letters and the like. I possess a wire recording of the story of a woman who identified her child in the fashion of a romantic melodrama, by a gold medallion on the neck of the child from which a fragment was missing, the mother being in possession of that fragment. She carried it on her person, through a string of concentration camps at the risk of her life, since the possession of jewelry and valuables was most severely punished. In many cases the Jewish community began to demand the return of these children; in other cases the convents did not find it proper to force upon children a religion different from that of their parents. The fact that the male foundlings were circumcised may also have affected the decision.

Well, Miss Kuchler found about ten educated men and women of reasonably good health and courage (mostly partisans and not concentration camp victims). She then collected about fifty-three stray children, about twenty of them under six years of age, and the others up to about the age of fourteen. They managed to "steal" the Polish border into Czechoslovakia, and from there were taken on American-made UNRRA trucks to France. Hardly any of these children know

anything about relations living; at least that is the claim. Where are they expected to go? The answer is one word "Eretz" which translates: "The Land," and means *Palestine*.

#### BUCHENWALD CHILDREN

A group by itself is the so-called "Buchenwald children." Buchenwald was a large concentration camp near Weimar, the city of Goethe and the birthplace of the Weimar Republic. Here the Germans concentrated prisoners evacuated from other camps who managed to survive the death marches in the winter blizzards of 1944-1945. When the American tanks entered Buchenwald, they found among the many thousand prisoners of all nations and creeds, an estimated one thousand youngsters in their teens emaciated from starvation, ridden with disease, and covered with lice. Blood transfusions, continuous feeding, medical care, and encouraging friendly companionship of the army chaplains, Red Cross and UNRRA personnel nursed many of them back to life. Many of them died after liberation.

Switzerland agreed to accept a number of them. Others were taken to France. Some of them distrusted everybody and went roaming through the countryside, begging and stealing, attaching themselves to American and English military units. Some of these youngsters barely knew their given names. Some of them know that there is an Uncle Charley in Detroit and an Uncle Jake in California, but what are their last names? These youngsters are being trained in modern trade schools organized by charity organizations such as the ORT or the OSE, the funds for which come from all North and South America, France, South Africa, and local sources. These are modern schools with modern equipment and teachers of the highest technical and pedagogical standings.

#### DP'S OF CHRISTIAN FAITHS

By the middle of September I got my clearance for Germany under the auspices of the UNRRA, with complete freedom of movement, unrestricted selection of human samples, and no attempt at censorship of the collected material. Only here did I

obtain a broad view of the problem of the displaced persons. According to latest reports, there are in the American Zone about 500,000 DP's of whom only about 125,000 are Jews. The rest are Letts, Latvians, Estonians, Balkans, and Poles. There are also a few thousand Mennonites who came from the Russian Ukraine.

#### THE BALTICS

These are the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. After the short-lived Russo-German agreement, Soviet Russia acquired the right to construct bases in the Baltic states. With this there began a movement for the re-incorporation of the Baltic states into Russia, from which they were separated after World War I. Then the Germans came and "liberated" the Baltic states. My interviewees tell me that before the arrival of the Germans, many Letts were forcibly evacuated into Russia, and many fearing the Germans fled voluntarily with the retreating Russians. A part of the remainder received the Germans as their liberators, took active part in rounding up of the communists, often cooperated in tracking down and exterminating the Jews, and adapted themselves to the Nazi order. Then again in 1944 the Russians started pressing at the borders, and now the Germans forcibly evacuated anybody fit for work. Those Letts who actively collaborated with the Germans fled voluntarily with the German Armies. They enjoyed reasonable freedom of movement and in general were not considered enemies.

They live now in displaced persons' camps. Their morale is that of voluntary exiles from their country, which they consider invaded by an enemy. Not having been submitted, at least in systematic fashion, to concentration camp regime they are in better health than the Jewish DP's. Convinced (or capitalizing on the assumption) that the war was fought for high ideals of liberty and the Atlantic Charter, many of them expect from day to day a clash between the western powers and Soviet Russia, for the primary purpose of restoring freedom to the smaller and now oppressed nations such as the Baltics and the Poles.

A camp of the Baltics, such as Lohengruen Camp, in Munich, impresses one by its organized self-government. There are schools from kindergarten to high school and junior college (equivalent to the Russian or German Gymnasium); there are a conservatory of music, a school of art, theaters, a library, and other cultural facilities. There are improvised churches of Greek Orthodox and Lutheran faiths. A number of their young people (summer 1946) attend the UNRRA university located in the remnants of the German Museum of Munich. As to their living conditions, there is no separation of the sexes, no separation by family units. Several families live in one room—often with one broad bed for a family. Where the bunks are double-leveled, there is often one couple, sometimes with a child, in the lower level, and another in the upper. Captain Bob Zepack, for instance, who for sixteen years ran Standard Oil tankers along the American east coast and worked as a watchman in fashionable golf clubs in Pennsylvania, tells on the wire recorder: "In our rooms we are visually separated, but with our ears we all live together."

#### THE BALKAN DP'S

Like the Letts most of the Balkan DP's did not come to Germany voluntarily, at least not the civilians. They were conscripted by the Germans as laborers, or forcibly evacuated, or fled with the retreating Germans to avoid prosecution as alleged collaborationists. Part of the Balkan DP's are so called "white" Russians, former Tsarist officers who offered armed resistance to the advent of the Soviets in 1917 and 1918. When the forces of Baron Wrangel were beaten, part of the survivors escaped to Romania and Yugoslavia. They were "evacuated" by the retreating Germans.

#### THE POLES

Among the DP's are also the so called Anders Poles, variously estimated to exceed 50,000. These are mostly members of Polish combat units who fought on the side of the Allies, and refuse to return to Poland while the present regime is in power.

#### THE MENNONITES

The Mennonites are a Protestant sect consisting of mild-mannered, soft-spoken people, who left Holland about two hundred years ago, ostensibly to avoid religious persecution and partly because of the shortage of farm land. On the invitation of the Russian Tsars they colonized some fertile tracts of southern Russia and were guaranteed freedom from compulsion to bear arms. In exchange for the latter privilege the Mennonite males had to serve in the forestry service of the Russian government.

Through all the years their language remained a kind of corrupted Dutch, while the church services still continue in German. The fifth column work of the Nazis caused the Russian security police to become suspicious of the Mennonites. The suspicions were nursed by the resentment of the Mennonites against the religious policies of the Soviets, and their opposition to

the alleged efforts on the part of the Russians to force them into active military service. They admit that they saw in the advent of the Germans an opportunity for their liberation. They followed the retreating Germans into the present American zone. They were not interned by the Germans in concentration camps but were given work assignments and ration cards. And now they live in UNRRA barracks waiting for deliverance by their brothers in faith who reside at present in Canada, in the U. S. A., and in Latin America.

All together there are at present nearly a million people (not counting displaced Germans) who have been forcibly uprooted by the war and roam foreign lands in search of a place they can call their own. What they want most is a return to the simple requirements of cultured living. They crave some privacy. They want their own kitchens, their civilian types of

clothes, they want little things which make life personal and which are the indispensable attributes of human life above the purely organic level. We must learn to understand that the DP's, in spite of their depredations, are not riff-raff, not the scum of humanity, not the poor devils who suffer because they don't know their rights, not idlers who think "that the world owes them a living," but people composed of all classes of society, comprising farmers, industrial workers, teachers, lawyers, artists, and the like, who have been dislocated by a world catastrophe.

If the atomic scientists have found themselves duty-bound to shout from the house tops about the social implications of atomic research, far more should the social scientist seize the opportunity to call for sympathetic understanding and dynamic assistance to a mass of humanity catastrophically submerged into a state of unprecedented suffering.