Henry Morgenthau Papers
Box 399
Speech B'nai B'rith Refugees in Europe
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TEXT OF ADDRESS BY HENRY MORGENTHAU, JR. AT TESTIMONIAL
DINNER GIVEN IN HIS HONOR BY B'NAI B'RITH

A few months ago a wave of horror swept the civilized world. Photographs and moving pictures were released showing the manner in which Germany treated slave labor and persecuted prisoners. Everywhere men stood amazed, enraged, horrified. These are uncomfortable sentiments to hold, but it is important that we should remember them, for it is important that we should do something promptly about those victims of the bestial system which we have overthrown. The horrors that those pictures made known to the world confirmed what we at the War Refugee Board had long known about the tragedy of those who were in Germany's power.

Many of those emaciated walking skeletons who roused our pity are still in Germany. They are the men, women and children who bore the brunt of Nazi terror and survived. For as much as six years they went through more than the torments of death for the same cause for which we in this country were fighting.

They are dying by the hundreds. Before midwinter, they will be dying by the thousands, unless our efforts on their behalf are multiplied many times over. While we have been enjoying this excellent dinner, with nothing more serious in our own lives to fret about than when we are going to get a new car, a new refrigerator, or a new pair of nylons, men have been dying of starvation and exposure. I am informed that this death rate among the displaced is so high that between now and this time tomorrow night, 50 of them will have died. And the next night, and the next.

In the cold-blooded language of diplomacy these people today are "displaced persons," and are the subject of notes, memoranda, orders and agreements, couched in the necessarily chilly prose of official documents.

"Displaced persons" is a pitifully inadequate phrase to describe this multitude of misery. They have witnessed the murder of their kinsmen and friends. They have been beaten and starved. They have been driven mercilessly at forced labor. They have been penned up amid indescribable filth. But it is hardly necessary to attempt a description of what these people have suffered. You and I know the story all too well. It has been a goad to our consciences, and I daresay that most of you have spent sleepless nights worrying over the tragedy of displaced persons, as I know I have, and as I am sure Franklin Roosevelt did and President Truman does.

When Germany collapsed there were eight million of these displaced persons in that country. By dint of really herculean efforts, the Allies have repatriated about six million of them. Our pride in that accomplishment, our relief in delivering these millions out of bondage, cannot obscure the fact that almost two million more human beings in Germany alone must look to the United Nations for life and hope. Further

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more, these constitute the most difficult group among all the displaced persons. They are the ones who are too weak to be moved. They are the ones who have no homes and no countries to which they can return. They are the hopelessly lost human debris of war. Surely, nothing that we can do to restore these derelicts to normal life can be too much trouble or too great an expense. This is a work that cannot be translated into dollars, for who is to say what a man is worth?

It seems clear to me that this work is one of the prime responsibilities of the United Nations. We all fought to liberate these people, and we have a duty to them and to ourselves. This is nothing less than the re-establishment of the displaced people in the common task of building a decent world.

This would be the true spirit of reconstruction. It is the spirit in which Franklin Roosevelt set his name to the Atlantic Charter and laid the basis for the United Nations Organization. It rests with us to carry out the obligation to make the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Organization into an active force for peace and justice, not just another couple of scraps of paper.

I have been profoundly disturbed, as I know you have, to realize that our responsibility has not been discharged any too well. The Harrison report, with its evidence that the lot of displaced persons had been little improved since liberation from Nazi rule, was a shock, but a wholesome shock. President Trument promptly forwarded a copy to General Eisenhower with strongly worded instructions to remedy the situation. The General undertook personal inspection tours, and within a few weeks reported to the President that conditions had been materially improved. We can hope that the improvement will continue.

But that is not the end of the problem. There remains the question of what to do with these people beyond the immediate task of feeding, clothing and sheltering them. So far, the burden has fallen upon the Army, aided by 300 or 400 UNRRA teams operating in Germany. Eventually the whole problem of the displaced will have to be shouldered by UNRRA, in Germany as well as elsewhere.

In recent weeks we have heard a great deal of criticism of UNRRA. No doubt some of it was justified. But a great deal of it was based on a misunderstanding of the limitations imposed by UNRRA's constitution. It cannot work in such countries as France and Holland, which pay their own way. It cannot make distribution to individuals but only to the governments with which it has entered into agreements.

But under the magnificent leadership of Governor Herbert Lehman, UNRRA has gone far to overcome the handicaps of the difficulties it had to face and the lack of appropriations. No one could have done more than Governor Lehman; I know no one who could have done as much.

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UNRRA has suffered, no doubt, from an inability to get field people of the highest type and capacity. And its avowed objective is to care for only ten per cent of the many millions in need of its services.

It is easy to criticize shortcomings in a task of such magnitude. But it is plain that our choice is not between UNRRA and something better. Our choice is between UNRRA and nothing. That was recognized by the responsible leaders of both parties in Congress during the debate on granting UNRRA the rest of our first installment on our commitment to the organization.

It is almost unbelievable that the balance still due on our first installment is $550,000,000 ~~$550,000,000~~. It was solemnly pledged by our government in an Act of Congress passed more than a year and a half ago -- on March 28, 1944. The total United States contribution -- the same as that of every other country -- was 1 per cent of the national income. After a year and a half, the balance of that appropriation has still to pass the Senate. The commitment has been fulfilled by the House of Representatives, although tardily, somewhat grudgingly, and with imperfect understanding of what it was doing. In fixing conditions under which the American share of the funds must be spent, the House has failed to grasp the fact that it was not appropriating for an agency of the United States Government, but for an organization set up by 44 sovereign countries. UNRRA represents one of the first efforts of the United Nations to carry out a common peacetime task. For one nation's legislature to attempt to govern it even in the most laudable of aims is to disavow the principle of international cooperation.

I sincerely hope that the Senate will promptly recognize the responsibility of America to take the lead in genuine collaboration if the nations of the world are to work together as partners.

I am sure that all of us here tonight are disturbed and uneasy over the lag in meeting our commitments. The need is so urgent, the case of millions of human beings so desperate, that it comes as a painful shock to learn that while our own Congress debates an appropriation pledged a year and a half ago, other nations have appropriated their share of UNRRA's expenses for next year. Instead of being the straggler in the parade, we ought to be up front, leading it.

The fate of the displaced persons in Germany and all the rest of Europe, or at least those sections of Europe where UNRRA can operate, rests upon our action. No one knows very accurately how many of them there are. Those who are actually in assembly centers can be counted. Thus we know that there are 1,300,000 in the assembly centers in Germany alone. But tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands more are scattered through a dozen countries or more. Fifteen thousand have recently wandered from Austria and Czechoslovakia to Italy. Thousands of others have taken to the roads,

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hopelessly seeking shelter or a bit of bread. Other thousands are in hiding, fearing to return to their native lands.

All these people present many and special problems. But there is one group set apart from the rest by its sufferings and its fears. The remnants of Europe's Jews are a small minority of the displaced persons, but they are the most difficult to resettle.

The total Jewish population of Europe outside Russia is now estimated at about 1,333,000. Of these, only about 100,000 are believed to have survived in Germany and Austria. Virtually all of them have passed through the inhuman tortures of the labor camp and the concentration camp.

By the very nature of the Nazi, these 100,000 German and Austrian Jews are the ones whose sufferings stood out even among the general misery of the displaced. Few of them have any homes to which they can return. And yet they, like most of their comrades in despair, are singularly in need of aid that will go beyond the mere handing out of a few bits of clothing, a minimum relief diet and medical care. Spiritual and economic rehabilitation are equally essential. For years these people have lived abnormal lives. They have been deprived of any trace of the amenities of family, community and religious life. They have been thoroughly brutalized and regimented by the Nazis. Our obligation does not stop with feeding and clothing them. We must provide the understanding, tact and social wisdom that will permit these victims of war to enter a new environment as fit members of society.

I am convinced that there is only one solution for the homeless, stateless Jews -- the immediate admission of at least 100,000 to Palestine. For Palestine is the one refuge where they could be assured of achieving at once the status of welcome and respected citizens.

This solution is by no means a new thought. It is the one ardently desired by a great many of the displaced Jews themselves, as all competent observers have noted. Earl Harrison, in his report to the President, said:

"For some of the European Jews there is no acceptable or decent solution for their future other than Palestine."

Harvey Gibson of the American Red Cross, who made a tour of the displaced person camps at General Eisenhower's invitation, says that 95 per cent of the Jewish refugees in Europe want to emigrate to Palestine.

This was the thought, too, behind President Truman's request to Prime Minister Atlee that 100,000 Jews be admitted to Palestine. I sincerely hope that President Truman will renew his request during Mr. Atlee's visit to this country. Mr. Truman

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expressed the same thought in a letter to General Eisenhower: "I am communicating directly with the British Government in an effort to have the doors of Palestine opened to such of these displaced persons as wish to go there."

That was a thoroughly statesmanlike and a thoroughly humanitarian appeal. It should be put into effect by application of an old and cherished American principle -- the right of self-determination. The displaced Jews of Europe should have the right to decide whether they wish to remain as citizens of the countries in which they have lived or decide whether they want to go to Palestine.

The 100,000, whose need is most urgent and who have expressed a desire to emigrate, should be admitted without delay.

But the problem of the displaced Jew is not the sole concern of any single nation, nor of any small group of nations. It is the responsibility of all the peoples who fought fascism and won a new opportunity for democracy.

Therefore the whole question of the future of Palestine should be placed under the auspices of the United Nations Organization. This was the kind of procedure most people had in mind when they acclaimed the result of the San Francisco Conference as a long step toward peace. We felt that at last we had an organization big enough to do the really big jobs.

If we are to tread the paths of peace, we must get used to working with the machinery of peace. Such a resettlement as I have proposed, such a use of the right of self-determination can only be achieved by the joint determination and common efforts of all free peoples. A world problem must have behind its solution the force of a world authority. Only so can we achieve the goal of justice and freedom for which we have fought and for which we know in our hearts we must continue to fight, replacing the weapons of war with the weapons of peace.