

ARCHIVAL

OUTLOOK

March/April 2021

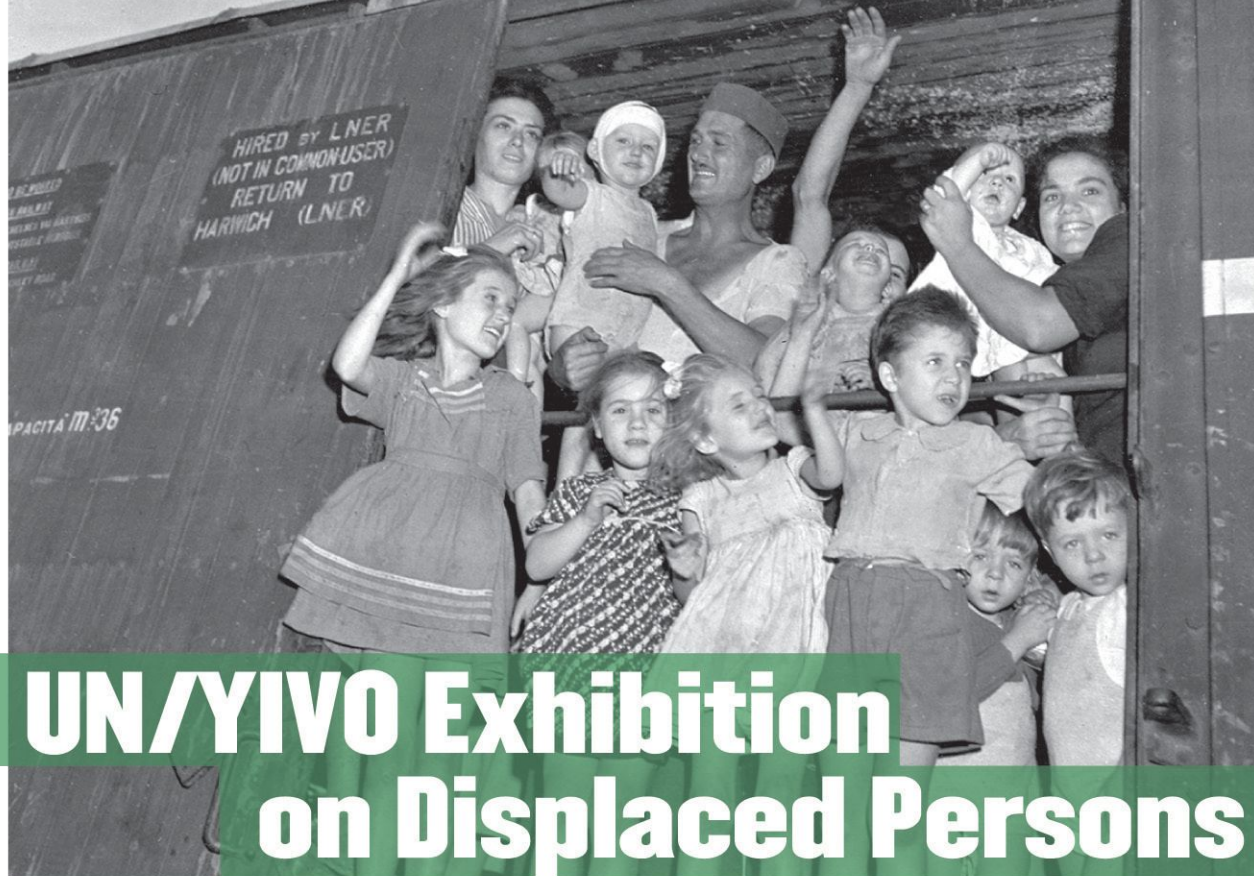
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2 Search Begins for Next
SAA Executive Director

8 A Provenance Story of Accumulators,
Maintainers, and Users

10 About the Case of *Ahmad v.*
University of Michigan



UN/YIVO Exhibition on Displaced Persons

Postponement Amid the Pandemic

Aleksandr Gelfand, United Nations Archives

Reclothed and in good health, these displaced children in Italy leave by freight train to a UNRRA camp, ca. 1945–1947. Courtesy of the United Nations Archives.

In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly designated January 27—which is the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp—as the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. To mark this event, each January the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York organizes exhibitions, lectures, concerts, and film screenings that are open to the general public.

For 2021, the UN partnered with YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, the largest repository of materials on Eastern European Jewish civilization in the world, to curate an exhibition on displaced persons (DP) and camps for them in Europe following the end of World War II. Titled “After the End of the World: Displaced Persons and Displaced Persons Camps,” the exhibit has undergone several changes of plans since the initial idea, yet slowly and steadily, we’ve adapted other projects and the tools we do have to keep plans moving forward.

The UN Archives had plenty of materials to choose from. Two years before the founding of the United Nations in 1945,

44 allied nations created the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). In addition to providing food, clothing, medicine, and other essential goods to meet the immediate needs of nations invaded by the Axis powers, UNRRA was also deeply involved in the refugee crisis throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. With the scope of the exhibit focusing on the experience of Jewish displaced persons in Europe, this part of UNRRA’s operations was the most pertinent to the project.

The Stories the Records Tell

Initially working under allied military authorities in 1944–1945, UNRRA personnel eventually took over the operation of many DP camps in Italy and the British, French, and American occupation zones of Germany and Austria. UNRRA’s mandate was to care for DPs only long enough to enable them to be repatriated; however, this was not possible in all cases. In the face of ongoing anti-Semitic violence against Holocaust survivors, as well as the trauma they experienced, many Jewish survivors either could not or did not want to return to their

countries of origin. This meant that there was a need for longer-term DP camps than originally envisioned. In managing these camps, UNRRA aimed to help and empower DPs by leaving most of the day-to-day operations of the camps to the residents themselves.

Frequent interactions with small UNRRA teams, which included welfare personnel working in these camps, presents a picture of how survivors managed their trauma as they looked to the future. For instance, a report from a camp in Austria notes that there were an average of three to five marriages a week, with the brides usually only 16 or 17 years old. The purported cause was that the women were afraid to be alone and therefore married earlier than they normally would have. The report goes on to mention that due to a lack of kosher food, dozens of individuals staged a protest and refused to eat, emphasizing the importance of their faith even if that meant that they had to continue exposing themselves to deprivation.

In addition to camp management, UNRRA made a major effort to reunite unaccompanied children and separated

adults with their families. A flood of letters soon followed from those looking for news and attempting to establish a line of communication with their loved ones: a Connecticut man trying to reunite with his fiancé; a New Yorker trying to get in touch with his wife to tell her that their only son had been killed in the Battle of Iwo Jima; a Bolivian trying to locate his nephew, the only survivor in his family from Dachau Concentration Camp, in order to adopt him; and from Texas, Congressman Lyndon B. Johnson, the future US president, writing on behalf of a Jewish constituent looking for his cousin.

In 1948, with the liquidation of UNRRA, records from hundreds of offices around the world, including many that dealt with DP operations, were transferred to the United States and donated to the neonate United Nations Archives. Estimated at more than 50 million pages at the time of transfer, the archives spent the following decades working on the massive collection, finally opening it to the public in the 1970s. It has since remained the most popular collection and is frequently consulted by researchers from around the world.

Curating in Quarantine

At the start of 2020, exhibition team members from the United Nations and YIVO had a chance to meet twice to plan the exhibit before COVID-19 forced people into quarantine. Once in lockdown, the group met via Zoom and Microsoft Teams to discuss how the project might still proceed. Luckily, a decade-long project with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, which saw the digitization of approximately 750,000 pages of UNRRA records, had recently been completed and were made available via the UN Archives' public catalog. Many of these records were particularly relevant to the exhibit, giving us a way forward. Similarly, YIVO had a large quantity of pertinent materials digitally available. Exhibition planning for January 2021 could proceed, with the hope that a physical exhibit might be possible.

We created a folder on Google Drive for the exhibit and team members from both UN and YIVO began uploading items of potential interest. Months were spent going through the textual records with the appropriate items selected. Unfortunately, only a fraction of the 10,000 UNRRA

photographs had been digitized, making the trip to the office a necessity at some point. Since a large amount of descriptive metadata on the photographs was being cleaned-up while working from home, we were able to note photos of particular interest for the exhibition. In May 2020, when the worst point of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York passed, we began making excursions into the office to digitize photographs that could be selected for the exhibit. By fall, the exhibit planning was well advanced with goals for wall dimensions and panel placement being prepared.

Even the Best-Laid Plans . . .

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has made a physical exhibit still unsafe in early 2021. We decided to postpone the exhibit until January 2022, carrying over our plans into the next year. Although the exhibition is not opening when we expected, this experience demonstrates what can be accomplished using the resources and technology on hand that allow us to remain connected and working. This year certainly has taught us the value of taking each month at a time and the strategy of building flexibility into our plans. ■

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