

## Digital Media Review

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*DP Camps and Hachsharot in Italy after the War.*

[http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/dp\\_camps\\_italy/index.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/dp_camps_italy/index.asp)

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On December 22, 1947, the ship *Lo Tafchidunu* (“we will not desist”) carrying 853 concentration camp survivors approached the coastal city of Haifa. The city lights twinkled in the distance, and, overcome with emotion, hundreds onboard burst out singing “Hatikvah” (The Hope), the song that would later become the national anthem of the State of Israel. The end of their long and brutal journey seemed almost within reach. Yet it was still the time of the British Mandate for Palestine (1923–1948), and immigration to what would become Israel was against the law. The survivors on the ship called themselves *ma’apilim* (from the Hebrew word, *ha’apala*, meaning “upward struggle”), but to the British, they were illegal immigrants. They had spent years in DP (displaced persons) camps throughout Italy along with tens of thousands of others and had chosen to make a clandestine run for *Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel). Within a hair’s breadth of the port, British destroyers intercepted the *Lo Tafchidunu* and sent the 853 *ma’apilim* onboard to detention camps on Cyprus, where they stayed until the end of the British Mandate. These survivors’ harrowing movements—from concentration camps, to Italian DP camps, to Cypriot detention camps—are the latest subjects of a new digital exhibition created by Yad Vashem (The Jewish Holocaust Memorial and Museum): “DP Camps and *Hachsharot* in Italy after the War.”

The present exhibition adds to Yad Vashem’s already extensive and highly ambitious project to bear witness to what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) have famously called an event without witnesses, that is, the Shoah. It augments Yad Vashem’s myriad online exhibitions with an exposition of video testimonies, archival photographs, and informative notes about the 70,000 Jewish concentration camp survivors who lived on Italian soil between 1945 and 1951. The exhibition is organized into five parts: (1) introduction, (2) survivors and soldiers from *Eretz Israel*, (3) daily life in DP camps, (4) Selvino (Bergamo province), and (5) emigration. All five parts and their respective contents are arranged on a single page. The site’s streamlined design makes for very easy navigation (via a horizontal menu bar); at first glance, the site appears minimalist, but its simplicity belies a tremendous amount of content. Each section has an expository text augmented by pull quotes along with an array of archival photos and video interviews with survivors, all of whom eventually

immigrated to Israel. These testimonies are undoubtedly the most moving part of the digital exhibition.

Jewish survivors lived among the thirty-five DP camps and associated *hachsharot* (agricultural training farms founded in the 1930s to prepare young Jews for immigration to Israel) and *kibbutzim* (collective farming communities) established throughout Italy during and after World War II (Bettin 2010, 3–4, 112–113). Some DP camps were quite large, like that of Santa Cesarea Terme near Lecce that held 1,100 people, while others were much smaller. At most of these camps, too, non-Jewish displaced persons also took refuge. One of the more unusual sites was that at Selvino, formerly a Fascist children’s colony, where soldiers from *Eretz Israel* housed 800 Jewish children who survived the war in a building called Sciesopoli. Fifty thousand survivors later immigrated to Israel while the remainder left for the United States, Australia, and Latin America. Very few remained in Italy.

While the exhibition focuses on Italy in name, it is really Britain that takes center stage. Indeed, the exhibition provides us with a study in contrasts: On the one hand, it tells the story of Jewish soldiers from Palestine in the British Army—first as volunteers, then as members of an official Jewish Infantry Brigade Group (1944–1946)—who helped survivors find their way out of Germany and Austria and south to Italy with the intention of immigrating to Israel. Several of the exhibition’s video testimonies speak to the overwhelming power of seeing the Star of David on soldiers’ uniforms and military vehicles: It brought many survivors to tears. On the other hand, the British Mandate forbade immigration to *Eretz Israel*, and Britain worked furiously to prevent survivors from getting there. British destroyers interdicted ships like the *Lo Tafchidunu* and sent thousands to detention camps. The mandate spawned an entire industry of fake passports and false identities and engendered a strain of persecution not unfamiliar to the *ma’apilim*. For example, the “Emigration” section of the exhibition trains its lens on a particularly troubling instance of British perfidy, the so-called La Spezia Affair in 1946, which involved a case of mistaken identity on the part of British and Italian authorities that led to hunger strikes and protests throughout DP camps, *hachsharot*, and *kibbutzim* in Italy. The crisis was eventually resolved; however, the British stepped up their patrols in the Mediterranean, and the *ma’apilim* doubled their efforts to reach *Eretz Israel*.

“DP Camps and *Hachsharot* in Italy after the War” provides much empirical data for scholars interested in the history of the Shoah in Italy, and more importantly, it offers a touch-point for the study of the critical entanglements between the Shoah, irredentism, and decolonization in the context of modern Italy and the wider Mediterranean. Such scholarly inquiry is still very much in its infancy but ripe for further research (Ballinger 2007, 2016; Ben-Ghiat and Hom 2016;

Choate 2008). In any future study, it would be vital to situate the movements of the Jewish survivors profiled in this exhibition within the broader network of mass movements of people that characterized post–World War II Europe. So many of these people, too, were traumatized and war worn.

Take, for example, the Istrian exodus (1943–1953) in which up to 350,000 ethnic Italians left what is today Croatia after Italy surrendered what was arguably its most symbolic irredentist territory (Ballinger 2003). What’s more, Istrian Italians fled after a long period of persecution by Yugoslav forces, which culminated in the infamous Foibe massacres, and many of them ended up in DP camps alongside Jewish concentration camp survivors. Unlike the survivors, however, Istrian Italians had no *Eretz Israel*. After years in the DP camps, many resettled in and around Trieste while others emigrated abroad. Race car driver Mario Andretti is perhaps one of the most famous members of the Istrian diaspora. Forced out of Montona (today Motovun) in 1948, he spent seven years in a camp near Lucca before immigrating to the United States.

The early 1940s also marked the beginning of the mass repatriation of European colonists from Africa and Asia. Andrea Smith (2003, 9) has deemed these estimated five to seven million people “Europe’s invisible migrants,” and she argues that their return “represents Europe’s first important shift in the twentieth century from a site of net population exportation to one of immigration.” Their collective return forced governments in France and Italy, for example, to deal with a flood of people who were considered simultaneously citizens, migrants, and refugees. In Italy, returning colonists (known as *rimpatriati*, or repatriates) acquired the juridical status of *profughi nazionali* (national refugees), and like the members of the Istrian exodus they were housed in camps established throughout Italy. Pamela Ballinger (2016, 33) notes: “Although supposedly coming home, these former settlers often appeared strange to many Italians in the metropole, who might label the new neighbour repatriated from Libya or Ethiopia ‘*l’afriicano*’ (the African).” The fates of these national refugees in Italy remain acutely understudied; however, they are a critical link in the chain of mass movements that beleaguered post–World War II Europe.

Yad Vashem has pioneered the ways in which to give witness to the Shoah and digital exhibitions like “DP Camps and *Hachsharot* in Italy after the War” offer us an excellent model for documenting the entwined mass movements of people and the spaces they inhabit. As a spatial practice, the camp forms the connective tissue between seemingly disparate companies. Jewish survivors, Istrian Italians, and colonial repatriates all touched down here, sometimes even sharing the same camp space. And if Auschwitz was the ne plus ultra of the camp (what Giorgio Agamben [1998, 118] has called the “biopolitical paradigm of the modern”) then a study of its afterlife proves crucial to teasing out heretofore latent moral and epistemological connections, particularly the

ways in which it mutates like a virus in places such as Italian DP camps or, more pressingly, refugee camps today.

The virtual can be a powerful tool to reveal the haunting of one space by another, for example, at Fossoli di Carpi, once a prisoner of war camp turned Jewish concentration camp in the province of Modena. Primo Levi was detained here and described this infamous camp (1989, 5) as “*un vasto campo di internamento, già destinato ai prigionieri di guerra inglesi e americani*” (a vast internment camp, already destined for English and American prisoners of war). In 1954, it was transformed into a “village” for ethnic Italian refugees from Istria and Dalmatia, part of the aforementioned exodus (Molinari 2006). For fifteen years, the Villaggio San Marco housed these refugees in the selfsame barracks that once held Italian Jews awaiting transfer to Auschwitz. Thus, the camp at Fossoli is a fraught *lieu de mémoire* (place of memories) where experiences of trauma and movement accrete, a complicated space that begs for further reflection. And herein lies the potential of the digital humanities to connect past and present in politically engaged and widely relevant ways such as that realized by the online exhibitions of Yad Vashem.

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