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Friedman, Herbert A. Tribute to Philip Bernstein. 1967.

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Some time ago I was advised that Congregation B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York was planning to publish a Zeitschrift commemorating forty years of services of Philip S. Bernstein, as Rabbi of their Temple. I was invited to contribute an article to this special volume, which, incidentally, would also take note of Rabbi Bernstein's sixty-fifth birthday.

I speedily agreed to participate in the Zeitschrift.

It was easy and simple to write the letter of acceptance.

It came from an impulse, an instant rush of warm feeling, followed by a chain of memories evoked by Phil Bernstein's personality, his deeds, his public life as I have known it during the last twenty years. Memory brought alive isolated episodes, which succeeded each other quickly, kaleidoscopically, - like patches of history, often vaguely related to circumstances responsible for these episodes and to places where they occurred.

Twenty years ago, the meaning of events was not so clear and final as it is today. While great movements are afoot, they are not immediately recognized in all their importance; their significance is properly understood with the passage of time, by their ultimate results.

It is often difficult to recall events. It is incomparably harder to remember attitudes. Yet, I have vivid recollections of Rabbi Philip Bernstein in those days: an intelligent, discerning observer of the epic drama which then began to unfold in the displaced persons' camps of Central Europe and in the ghost-like towns of the East - a region soon to be known as "countries behind the Iron Curtain", - an ominous name. Without any abuse of memory, I can say that even while living through the events of 1946-47, it was clear to me that Rabbi Bernstein was not only an interpreter of aspirations and demands of our people in Europe, but a doer, a mover of reluctant forces in the Army and in its civilian branches.

These fleeting thoughts of the past, prompted by the invitation to contribute to B'rith Kodesh's Zeitschrift, were disconnected images rather than concepts. But they took me back to 1945, - the year I first met Rabbi Bernstein.

He served then as Director of the Committee for Army and Navy Religious Activities (CANRA), organized by the Jewish Welfare Board. His principle concern was the recruitment of Chaplains for the Armed Forces.

A number of young Rabbis came to New York to see him. He spoke to us about the importance of joining the Armed Forces.

Wartime speeches are usually delivered in high key, with frequent reference to heroism, sacred duty and sacrifice. All this was absent in his talks. His approach was pragmatic, practical, in essence, as follows: the youth of the country is in uniform, scattered all over the globe. Facing daily war danger and suffering from the monotony of army life, the younger element of our land is undergoing a unique experience. When the military conflict is over, the servicemen will come home, and many of the Jewish boys will join our congregations. These ex-GIs will require a period of adjustment, as they convert from soldiers to civilians. They will need the understanding of their families and skillful guidance of their Rabbis. In time, the paramount question will arise of how to relate to veterans. Those rabbis who were in uniform, who shared the military experience, who were a part of them and not apart from them, will have a far better chance.

As Rabbis and community leaders, we were greatly concerned with the future make-up of our American society. A measure of apprehension was fed to us by the writings of sociologists, psychologists,

other specialists on human behavior. They anticipated a sharp antagonism between ex-servicemen, who were "over there", leading a life of hardship, and civilians who stayed home, and "had it soft."

Rabbi Harnstein, accepting the general premises of social scientists, offered his own prognosis. He believed that the adjustment problem was most important, because of the sheer number of persons involved. By 1945, some 15 million men were drafted or enlisted in the U. S. Armed Forces. They were pressed into new and strange environments of military barracks, staying in or passing through foreign lands, enduring the rigors of frontline life. They had their own code and their own norms of behavior. But once the men were back home, normal social values would be restored, perhaps, not immediately and not in every case, but eventually and in the overwhelming majority of our ex-servicemen. We Rabbis, who had lived through the war with the troops, would be of great help to them afterwards.

He was not lecturing us, but sharing with us his thoughts on a complex issue. We were exposed to the creative work of his mind, while he was outlining for us, in precise and clear terms, the extent of the problem, considering its proper dimensions, suggesting practical solutions, and imperceptively and masterfully arriving at a concrete

conclusion, as applied to us, his younger colleagues.

His eyes were bright and warm, his smile - kind and free.

He knew we enjoyed his talk, and he was obviously pleased.

In many subsequent associations with Rabbi Bernstein, I had ample opportunity to marvel at his gift with words. He used words like a skillful craftsman uses tools in giving things the wanted shape. In presenting a case on behalf of Jewish DPs, he would state, with clarity and objectivity, the issue itself, review the causes, with great care single out telling details of camp life, which often shed new light on the knotty relations between DPs, Army and the Germans. To strengthen his cause, he would make reference to the history of our country, of Germany and the Jewish people. He would bring in examples of the past, analogies,- always in the right amount, which would illuminate his cause without overburdening his expose. The Army brass, before whom he often pleaded his case, was usually uplifted by the happy mixture of scholarship, fortitude and verbal elegance. Needless to say, not always would Rabbi Bernstein win his case, but almost invariably he would "make a point" with the authorities.

Later, in the circle of friends, Phil would analyze the results of his presentation. Every case he judged on its merits

against the total job he was called to do. Ours, he once told me, is a long unpaved and zig-zaggy road replete with obstacles: the unfamiliarity of the Military Government with many aspects of the duties assigned to them; the Army way of "seeing things", often narrow, "from here to there", and doing things, stiffly, according to regulations, slowly, by orders from above. We must understand, he said, that these are just obstacles, not roadblocks. The smaller we will bypass, the important we will remove. For this we have the good will of Washington and the genuine sympathy of many generals. He felt deeply for our people, the DPs. He understood their irritation with camp life, impatience with army red tape, suspicion of MPs and the Germans. He was proud of the intelligence of their representatives, grasped the source of their restless, often volatile, energies. I had the occasion to observe for more than a year, at close range, his skills as a negotiator and interpreter of our DPs' quest for legal and political rights.

In the fall of 1945, I was stationed in Germany. The shooting was over. Like many of my colleagues, I was constantly on the go, moving from one military installation to another, organizing and conducting Sabbath and Holiday services. The Army was rapidly

dwindling. The GIs, now more homesick than ever, were "sweating out" their points, a combination of serviceman's age, length of service, overseas duty and combat credits. Those with higher scores were shipped home first.

The soldiers were troubled. Now that home was within their reach, they worried, in concrete and realistic terms, about their future. They would come to the Chaplains with questions: will home be sweet home, as the song says? Won't the discharged Joes, who beat us by their points, get on the ground floor first, pick the best jobs, marry the nicest girls, and leave the sad sacks with the dirty end of the stick?

Or they would come perturbed, urging us to check rumors, some wild, some plausible. They learned, through the barracks grapevine, that instead of going back to Uncle Sam, they were being scheduled for the Pacific. It was upsetting, and rumors would have to be tracked down in order to give reassurance and dispel fear.

My duties took me across Germany, from Bavaria to Berlin. I traveled through houseless, streetless, deformed cities,-- which often were towns in name only. The signs of the fundamental collapse of the

military machinery, political system and civil authority were fresh.

Here were the living evidences of a total defeat suffered by a country which initiated the concept and practice of a total war.

Twenty years ago surrendered Germany was not yet history, neither was it a case of social studies. It was life itself, with its daily succession of the routine and the unusual. There was the U. S. Army, my countrymen, who tried to bring some order and semblance of local government. There were the Germans, trying to extricate themselves from their past, from any notion of guilt, legal or moral. There were the prisoners of war and the forced laborers, whom the Allies were speedily sending home. Finally, there were the displaced persons, especially the Jewish DPs,- my own people.

I met them shortly after my arrival in Germany. I would not do justice to this narrative if I tried to give a running account of the circumstances of the first encounter with the DPs. I do recall the feeling of unreality which, at the start of our conversation, almost overwhelmed me. I was facing a small group of the Sheerit Hapletah, the Surviving Remnant of Destruction, who endured so much in the last five years. What I saw, what I was told about their ordeal gave me

pain, sharp physical pain. Here they sat, the legendary "kazetniks", just beginning to regain their strength. It seems to me, we talked about ordinary issues: the army rations, the crowded quarters, the zealous MPs.

The displaced persons were the responsibility of the Army. It was a new, unusual and difficult task to care for two-and-a-half million deportees, forced or recruited laborers,- all foreigners, found in Germany at the end of hostilities. The majority came from the East. The Army was unable and unprepared at the beginning to distinguish, in this sea of people, the Ukrainians, the Galicians, the Poles, the Slovaks, the Lats and the Lithuanians, some of the suspect of anti-Semitism, from a small group of Jews (30-50,000 is the best estimate of the number of Jews found alive on German soil at the war's end). If all of the nationals listed above were persecutees, their wartime experience could not compare with that of the Jews, who were singled out and marked for extinction. This difference often escaped the Army.

Many Jewish Chaplains served as a liaison between the authorities and the DPs. Together with my colleagues, I felt that a central office, empowered to deal with the army top commanders, would be of great service to all concerned. Chaplain (Major) Judah Nadich

was indeed appointed by General Eisenhower to serve in the capacity of Advisor on Jewish Affairs. He performed valuable pioneering service in that post.

Later, a civilian, Judge Simon H. Rifkind was appointed by President Truman as Advisor on Jewish Affairs. During his five-months stay in Europe, Judge Rifkind helped the Army to prepare some ground rules for dealing with Jewish DPs.

At the beginning of 1946, Judge Rifkind returned to the States. A brief period of rumors and speculations about his replacement followed. I do not remember exactly, either I read or was told that Rabbi Philip Bernstein was appointed the new Advisor. A few days later, I received a letter from Phil confirming the fact, saying that he would come to Germany shortly, and asking me to serve as his aide.

The reunion was warm. He had no illusions about his assignment. He realized that the burden placed upon him was heavy, the responsibility great, because so much was at stake, above all, the well-being of our people.

He was eager to learn about the Jewish DPs from every source available to him. He read all official reports, both published and classified and printed material, including articles in

the general and Jewish press; conferred in the States with Judge Rifkind, his predecessor, and with the leadership of the JDC, whose staff followed on the heels of Allied Armies and established the first network of welfare aid in liberated Europe, primarily in Germany. He also knew that some members of the Jewish Brigade from Palestine had reached the camps early in June and had kept in close touch with Jewish DPs.

He was filled with all this background information, and yet it was characteristic of him to sit with me, when he arrived in Europe, to ask again and seek yet another set of impressions, especially from one who had personal contact with our people who had observations, ideas and opinion on the position of Jewish DPs in Germany.

It was a rare opportunity to gather my thoughts, to give them a concise form, to sum up a year's experience, which I knew even then would never be duplicated.

I remember telling him of the unbelievable change in the physical appearance, acts and attitudes of Jewish DPs which the last twelve months had produced. In May, 1945, there were small, spearated groups of Jewish DPs scattered over Bavaria. The ravaged marks of the ghetto and concentration camps were seen on their faces and frail

bodies. Sudden freedom brought exuberance and a rapidly accelerating desire to recoup, with a quick transition from the gladness to be alive to the desire to live. But freedom also brought the gnawing feeling of aloneness. During the dark and cruel years they had lost contact with their homes and their families. They emerged from the holocaust as unattached individuals, with a kinship limited to a landsman or a fellow kuzetnik.

Many of our DPs, somewhat restored to health, went back home, hoping to find some members of their families alive or some traces of their relatives. With few exceptions, they found ruins, strangers and hostility. There were more Jews in a DP camp in Germany than in some of their native towns in Poland, Hungary or Rumania. Rootless, unwanted and resented in these countries, they returned to Bavaria and Austria to face DP life.

The more energetic and resourceful among them created a Central Committee of Liberated Jews, which established regular contact with every camp, urging Jewish DPs to create representative bodies which would deal with the Army and formulate their common needs.

The Central Committee, through its various sections, began to promote education, vocational training and cultural activities. Yet

the greatest disappointment came from the Army, which politely, but stubbornly refused to recognize the Committee and was unwilling to grant it autonomous status.

Internally, the Committee was more successful. The camps became better organized; there were classes for general education and training workshops, prayer houses and discussion clubs, camp newspapers, sports teams, police forces, dramatic groups. In short, the camps grew to possess all features of a Kehillah. Couples were married with moving and gay wedding ceremonies, the dead were buried, new boy babies were circumcised, all in a sentimental and poignant type of public community activity which covered the cycle of life. Still, all of this was not a real, but a make-believe community. It lacked the sense of permanency, for everyone knew it could not and should not endure.

Europe was not the place to start life anew. Where could they go? America was largely inaccessible; the U. S. quota system discriminated against East Europeans. Palestine was their only hope and chief desire. But how long would the scores of thousands have to wait, with the British restricting immigration to 1500 per month?

In October, 1945, Ben-Gurion visited the camps. He told the DPs that the Yishuv wanted them, needed them and was ready and happy to welcome

them home. Ben-Gurion's talks injected a will, a determination to reach home.

I do not know how long it took me to tell all this to Phil. He was a serious, attentive and an encouraging listener. At the end of my recital, he said that my description of the DP position confirmed much of the information and opinions obtained from other sources. It made his plans for action clearer. He would have to concentrate on the problem of recognition for the Central Committee. It was essential for our DPs to have a central authority, not only acting as their spokesman, but learning the art of self-government.

To achieve it, we would need time. The legal status of our DPs would improve gradually, by phases. We would make progress by eliminating the false notion that the Army brass was antagonistic to the DPs and by keeping the verbal fireworks of our friends at a minimum. We would see to it that the Central Committee would act as responsibly as possible, upholding and defending the interest of the people, and working as their government. We would seek to remove the often paralyzing caution from Frankfurt (the seat of the U. S. Army Headquarters in Germany), making the Army more receptive to creative

and practical suggestions from the DPs themselves.

This, in essence, is an "inventory" of Rabbi Bernstein's first set of plans and accomplishments. His broad, sweeping views of the political situation in Europe combined with a mature, well-developed realism, permitted him to gauge his actions, according to the needs of the moment and to their immediate feasibility. To defend the rights of our people was the cause of his adult life. He was an experienced combatant who used persuasion as a reliable weapon.

The Advisor's first joint meeting with the Central Committee and the Army took place on June 6, 1946 in Munich. The Committee men recited their twelve-months-long frustrating attempts to gain recognition from the Army. The Army representatives stuck to the old negative line of reasoning. Bernstein closed the meeting with a brief statement: the demands of the Central Committee were justified, its legalization was a necessity which would be beneficial to both sides and he was going to recommend it to General McNarney, - the Commander of U. S. Forces in Europe, - the final authority in the matter of recognition.

Three months later, on September 7, the same participants

met again in the I. G. Farben Building in Frankfurt, which served as Army Headquarters, to sign an important document: the Army granted legal recognition to the Central Committee.

Rabbi Bernstein's leading role and tactful guidance were readily acknowledged by both the Army and the Central Committee. Today, twenty years later, events of 1946 emerge as fixed records, and issues of those days are morsels of written history. Because of the perspective in time, Bernstein's functions and accomplishments are better understood now, than two decades ago: He was the advisor to the Military on Jewish needs and rights; at the same time, he was the constant patient counselor to our people on Army procedures, psychology and motivations. He brought the two sides to an agreement by persuading them not to contest their stand, but to negotiate practical, useful issues. Part of his skill derived from the fact that he was an approachable wise man, warm and modest.

He was perturbed with the news from Eastern Europe.

The Jewish population in our camps in Germany and Austria was growing steadily through the daily "transports" of infiltrates from Poland, Czechoslovakia and Rumania. Eyewitness reports revealed a state of mounting tension between the local population in those countries and

the Jews. In Poland, the mood was menacing, and only the uncertainty about police reaction kept the Poles from ugly acts. But how long?

The answer came in Summer, 1946. On July 4, the ill-controlled, badly-concealed hatred toward Jews erupted into a pogrom in Kielce, during which 44 of our people were killed.

The shock was great. What kind of Europe was it that only fourteen months after V-E day,- when the entire world stood in painful sorrow over the disclosure that six million Jews perished in the holocaust,- demonstrated again a lust for blood, an urge to kill? How could our people live there, amidst hostility and hate? Bernstein wanted to find the answer to these questions at the place of the trouble.

On July 23, he and I arrived in Warsaw. There were many chilling signs of wartime destruction, and little was done to remove them even from the center of the Polish capital. Some streets did not have beginnings or ends. They ran between two hills of rubbish, discolored and peculiarly shaped bricks, blocks of concrete and marble which, one guessed, originally served as stairs. We visited the site of the Ghetto, one square mile, levelled to an even plateau of rubble, bits of broken iron sticking up through the bricks, silent, silent, and we wept silently, trying hard to control our emotions.

The Advisor wanted to have a composite picture of Poland.

During the ten days we stayed there, we met with representatives of all factions and trends of the Jewish population in Warsaw, Lodz and Lower Silesia. We conferred with the American Ambassador to Poland, Arthur Bliss Lane. We interviewed Edward B. Osobka-Morawski, the Polish Premier. We had long talks with Oscar Lange, a leading economist, who gave up teaching at the University of Chicago, renounced American citizenship, to become Polish Ambassador to the United States. Our "tours-des-visites" included Cardinal Hlond, the leading church personality in Poland. Every moment free from official calls we spent with local rabbis and Jewish repatriates from Russia, with JDC staff in Warsaw and ORT students in Wroclaw (Breslau).

On our way back to Frankfurt, he summarized the findings:

Poland was not only the graveyard of the once vital and most populous Jewish community of Europe. Post-war Poland was like an arctic tundra,- nothing specifically Jewish would grow there above the immediate surface. To be sure, the regime was against pogroms and favored equality for all citizens. But, at the same time, there was a deep-rooted antisemitism somewhere in the soul of the people which could not be extirpated and erupted in violence, which no post-Hitler Jew could

witness without going mad with rage and frustration.

It did not seem that Kielce was a mere accident. Kielce rather reminded us that old customs and stark ignorance, nurtured by stubborn prejudices, do not yield to political declarations of a new regime, no matter how well-intentioned these may be. The irate population, dissatisfied with the hardships of life, again had turned its hostility against the Jews, the traditional scapegoat. The leaders of the new state may have deplored this and made plans for a better future, but there was a long way to go. Meanwhile, there was tension, and the Jews would be victims either of sporadic explosions of physical abuse, or of lasting social hostility and political discrimination.

It was Rabbi Bernstein's conclusion, stated in writing in his official report, that there would be a flow of migration to the U. S. zones of Germany and Austria. He estimated that of the 160,000 Jews then in Poland, some 100,000 would "take to the roads" and would come to Austria and Germany within the next twelve months. He recommended that the Army maintain an open border so that these new refugees could find haven.

He distributed his official report in all circles - War Department, State Department, determined to share his findings with

Washington, with our people in the States and with the Army. He felt he must persuade the military not to interfere with the movement of Jewish infiltrees from the East. Knowing that the crowded camps would soon be jammed with new refugees, he called for the establishment of new camps. The Army and UNRRA and JDC would have to see to it that every newcomer from the East was lodged and fed. The Central Committee would have to educate and orient the people to their future. Jewish Agency personnel would have to be brought from Palestine in even larger numbers to care for morale and training.

Bernstein was deeply convinced that the DP camps would not last. They were a staging area, a transit point. Every movement for freedom must have a final goal. For unwanted, resented and persecuted people, the goal is a destination, a place to live. For our people - the place was Palestine. To survive, they must migrate.

The DPs understand this intuitively. In growing numbers they pushed toward Palestine,- disregarding detention in Cyprus and the British blockade.

Through constant personal contacts with the top military command, official demarches in Washington, above all a visit with President Harry S. Truman, Rabbi Bernstein was able to reveal how

tragic was the lot of Jewish survivors in Europe. He contributed greatly to the Army's decision to keep the "entrance door" to Germany open to Jewish infiltrees from the East. The Jewish Agency representatives, the members of the Jewish Brigade, the Bricha and Aliyah Bet found secret passages to the "exit door" from Europe.

It was a turning point in modern Jewish history: displaced, uprooted Jews fought for their right to have a home. The Yishuv, sensing the approach of the final hour, struggled resolutely for the right to give them this home. For those who were deeply involved in the cause of our people, every passing day brought evidence that the great moment of decision was within sight and reach. The men in Jerusalem, living in the center of events, knew by the beginning of 1947 that the contest between the mandatory power and the Jewish settlement in Palestine had entered into a last stage.

The leaders of the Yishuv, as well as their associates and co-workers in Europe and in the United States, were soberly aware that they would succeed, because the living force of Jewish men and women determinately pressing for an immediate answer to their demand - to have a haven, a land, a state - could no longer be denied.

Two decades ago, these events were parts of an epic, an active drama, with an approximate and general concept, but without a written script and prepared plan. Many acts of the epic were conceived and produced "on the spot", by men of political vision and intuition. Philip Bernstein belonged to this remarkable group. I learned much from him and gladly acknowledge my debt. To be counted as his friend is a status I cherish.

