When World War II ended in Europe, about 200,000 Jews emerged from Nazi concentration camps. Physically and mentally debilitated, often far from home, they did not know who among their relatives had survived. Or, as one of them put it, what would become of them: "Where will we be taken? Where will our miserable lives lead us?"

Established in 1943, well before the United Nations itself came into existence, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration took on the daunting task of feeding, giving medical attention to, and repatriating Europe's "displaced persons," only a fraction of whom were Jews.

By turns idealistic, practical and improvisational, the UNRRA and its successor, the International Relief Organization - as Ben Shephard, the producer of the British television series "The World at War" demonstrates - had a significant impact on the lives of millions of people, and on the Cold War, international law, human rights, European Recovery, immigration policies and the founding of the State of Israel.

A splendid account of the refugee crisis, moving seamlessly from compelling personal stories to the larger historical and political context, "The Long Road Home" is remarkably - and refreshingly - candid.

UNRRA officials, Shephard reveals, expressed their prejudices freely, characterizing Jews, for example, as "demanding, arrogant," and unwilling to work. Governments in Eastern Europe bundled their "useless mouths" - old people, women and children - to refugee camps in Germany. And, lest we sentimentalize the survivors, Shephard provides ample evidence that "suffering does not always ennoble."

According to Shephard, Zionists in the British Mandate of Palestine used the refugee crisis as the "moral spearhead" of a campaign to build support for the establishment of a Jewish nation. They lobbied Jewish displaced persons, most of whom lived in camps in the American Zone in Germany, to declare to the outside world "that you only want to go to Palestine."

In a poll taken by UNRRA, 96.8% of them complied. When British Prime Minister Clement Atlee refused to implement the recommendation of an Anglo-American Commission to allow 100,000 European Jews into Palestine, pressure mounted.

Motivated by a "mixture of human sympathy and political calculation," (he needed the votes of Jewish-Americans but knew that many of his fellow citizens opposed an influx of Jews into the United States), President Harry Truman moved closer to an endorsement of the creation of the State of Israel.

By 1952 almost all of the refugees, non-Jews as well as Jews, were no longer displaced. Shephard points out that the U.S. took in 380,000 people, about 40 percent of all displaced persons in Europe, "far more than any other nation." About 45 percent of them were Catholic, 34 percent Protestant or Greek Orthodox, 20 percent Jewish.
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