

Beraha

(Heb.; "flight, escape"), the post-World War II movement of about 250,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors, mainly from Eastern Europe, to displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy and to the West; the name applies both to the organization that directed the flow and to the mass movement that often outgrew the organization. The avowed aim was to reach the coasts, from which the wanderers could embark for Palestine.

The organized Beraha began with groups of Jewish partisan survivors in the Vilna, Rovno, and Chernovtsy areas that initially had no contact with one another. They felt that they could not carry on life in their former homes, which had become Jewish graveyards. Many of the survivors had belonged to Zionist youth movements before the war, and their Zionist convictions had been strengthened by disillusionment with the Soviet regime; consequently, their natural path after the liberation was emigration to Palestine. They had heard that it could best be reached by way of Romania, and they therefore tried, each group separately at first, to make their way over the Romanian border. The groups coalesced, but their attempt to reach Romania failed, and they concentrated in Lublin, which had been liberated by the Red Army in July 1944. Here they were joined by a sizable group of their prewar comrades who had spent the war years as refugees in the USSR, mainly in Central Asia; in January 1945, when Warsaw was liberated, the remnants of the ghetto rebels from Warsaw joined the group.

An incipient formal structure was created under Abba Kovner, partisan and poet, and the leadership group made its way to Romania in March. Illegal transit points were established on the Polish border with Czechoslovakia and Romania, and by May about two thousand persons had reached Romania. On April 26, 1945, Kovner established the Organization of Eastern European Survivors, a semipolitical organization that was to unite the Jewish people beyond their party and political allegiances and help create a Jewish state that would be the last refuge for a nation for whom another Holocaust was

predicted. The new group was soon to disintegrate, however, after contact with the lively and argumentative democracy of Palestine Jewry. It turned out that no immigration from Romania to Palestine was feasible, and the group turned west to Italy, where the Jewish Palestinian units of the British army (the Jewish brigade group and others) were stationed. The soldiers had established a central organization for looking after Jewish survivors (Merkaz la-Gola, or Diaspora Center), led by an all-party coalition under Mordechai Surkis, Yehiel Duvdevani, and Aharon Hoter-Yishai.

As a result of the unification of the two elements in July 1945, the Beriha in Poland, now led by Moshe Meiri and Mordechai Rosman, directed the flow to Italy, by way of Budapest and Graz. By August 1945, roughly fifteen thousand Jews had reached Italy. However, there were only very limited ("illegal") opportunities for reaching Palestine at that time, and the difficult decision was reached to direct the increasing flow of survivors and returnees from the USSR to Poland, and from there to Germany, where, under United States Army rule, Jews were accepted into displaced persons camps, housed, and fed. Transit to Italy from Germany and Austria all but ceased, and the soldiers took over some of the central positions, receiving the flow of people directed by the Polish Beriha.

In September and October 1945, the first emissaries sent by the Hagana (the Jewish underground in Palestine) arrived in Europe. Isser Ben-Zvi, Zvi Netzer, and Yohanan Cohen, among others, reached Poland and other places and integrated themselves into the loosely organized and illegal Beriha structure. The stream moved through various control points by way of the Polish-Slovak Mountains, through Upper Silesia into the Naachod area in Bohemia, or by way of Szczecin into Berlin. Those who entered Czechoslovakia went either through Prague and then to Bavaria, or by way of Bratislava to Vienna, then to Salzburg, and on to either Germany or Italy. The Beriha activists were not paid, and necessary expenses were covered, often unwittingly but eventually with full knowledge, by the American joint distribution committee as "transit" expenses for transport, food, and basic lodging. The small amount of property

in the refugees' possession was scrupulously guarded, brought over the border by the Beriha workers, and delivered to the owners. Beriha had no central hierarchy; a coordination office in Bratislava - run by Levi Argov, an emissary from Palestine, more or less at his own initiative - worked out schedules for transports from Poland westward. Parallel points were set up in Hungary and Slovakia, again in coordination with Argov. In Austria another emissary, Arthur (Asher) Ben-Nathan, received the flow from Czechoslovakia and distributed it by way of Salzburg and Innsbruck.

The Soviets, whose control over eastern Europe was tightening, permitted the illegal flow in a halfhearted manner, although sometimes they suddenly pounced on the refugees and organizers and arrested them (some spent years in the Gulag, and a few were killed); but usually they turned a blind eye. The attitude of the British was predictably hostile, while the United States army, after some initial troubles, accepted the Beriha flow because it was wary of a scandal with the administration and the public at home; in any case, it could not order soldiers to shoot at Jewish refugees, which was the only way it could have stopped them from coming.

Between August 1945 and the end of June 1946, Beriha figures show 48,106 refugees as having left Poland by means of the organization. If adding the unknown number who came across without the help of Beriha, as well as similar movements of refugees from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, a figure of some 60,000 to 65,000 transients is reached. The flight from Poland was mainly motivated by the murderous anti-semitism there, exacerbated by the political struggle between the Communist regime and the strong opposition to it. The anti-Jewish action reached its climax on July 4, 1946, in the pogrom of Kielce, following a ritual-murder accusation, with forty-two fatalities and a large number of injured. In the wake of the pogrom, 90,000 to 95,000 Jews fled from Poland between July and September 1946. Some of this flow was so sudden that the Beriha organization could not cope with it, and many fled across borders without any organized help. Later in that year the flow abated, and by early 1947 it became a trickle. During the summer and autumn of that

year, the cooperation of the Polish and Czechoslovak governments in enabling the refugees to cross the borders was obtained, probably for a mixture of political and genuinely humanitarian reasons.

As the Beriha movements decreased in early 1947 - a brief revival occurred from March through July, when some nineteen thousand Romanian Jews fled to Vienna by means of the Beriha to escape from a combination of hunger and political constriction - Beriha became hierarchically organized. Ephraim Dekel of the Hagana in Palestine became the organization's European leader, subject to the aliya bet immigration organization, headed by Shaul Avigur in Paris. But the transit points were slowly dismantled as activists moved to the coasts themselves, and in 1948, after the establishment of Israel, immigration became legal. Nevertheless, for countries from which no legal exit was possible, Beriha continued to maintain a skeleton framework under Meir Sapir in 1949.

The approximately 250,000 Jews who used the Beriha routes made it the largest organized illegal mass movement in modern times. No literature or propaganda of any kind was ever published by Beriha. It never needed to call on Jews to leave their homes; on the contrary, it often could not cope with the flow of people who wanted to escape. Thus, it was truly a service organization.