

SOCIAL WORKERS IN ISRAEL

the basic aims of the social worker—to help human beings to become integrated into the society in which they live. Israel is engaged in a thrilling process of human engineering. Everyone who participates in it is bound to have a very rich professional experience, with the rare gratification that comes from

helping to set a pattern for creative living in a pioneer land.

Qualified social workers may obtain application forms from Mrs. L. Benor, Executive Secretary, National Committee to Select Social Workers for Israel, 16 East 66th Street, New York 21, N. Y. Telephone: TRafalgar 9-1300.

AN AMERICAN SOCIAL WORKER IN ISRAEL*

By LOUIS H. SOBEL

*Jewish Child Care Assn.,
New York, N. Y.*

TWO years ago—and from this very platform—it was my privilege as the President of the Conference to extend our greetings to the then one-day old State of Israel—and more particularly to our colleagues there in the fields of social welfare. Few of us will forget the excitement of that moment—and the rich promise that it held forth.

Today it is my pleasure to bring to you—from Israel—the warmest greetings of social workers there—and to tell you something about the way in which that promise is being realized at least in the eyes of a visiting social worker from the United States and in the face of odds which to most of us here seem insuperable.

First a word or two as to the length and purpose of my trip to Israel. I was there from March 22nd to May 2nd. The visit was purely personal. We were on no official mission in behalf of any organization. It was intended as a long-delayed vacation. Nor did I in any sense attempt a systematic survey of social welfare as a whole—or any part of it. What I have to say represents at best general impressions—about those aspects of social welfare which I saw and *as of the time I saw it*. The situation there is so dynamic and changing that only today's visit can keep you really up-to-

date and determine the continuing validity of the comments or reactions of any visitor to or from Israel.

Though Israel is a small country, there was so much ground to cover, so much to see, to sense, even within the field of social welfare, that I decided very soon after arrival to concentrate on those aspects more directly related to my own experience and work—child welfare—though I did have contact with and an opportunity to see or react to other phases.

Tonight's report therefore will deal only with selected programs rather than the topic in the printed program—social welfare as a whole. That wording was a result of my search for the fewest words to go into the cable response requested by George Rabinoff; and to make certain that I could be free to roam the field in terms of what might have appealed to me during the course of my visits.

As everywhere—but even more so in Israel—we can understand social welfare only against the background of its more recent history generally; and more specifically the social and economic problems, needs and development of the country. One's first impression is a surprising sense of "normalcy," of calm—of quiet confidence; so much so in fact that it is necessary to focus most sharply even on the events of yesterday to recall what has transpired in the two short years since the birth of the State; or for

* Presented at the National Conference of Jewish Social Welfare, June, 1950.

that matter, that it is *only* two years. A full-scale hot war waged by the armed might of the combined Arab world; an uncertain truce in an atmosphere charged with hostility on every side and talk about, threats of, and preparation for a "second round"; the establishment of the complex machinery of state at federal and local levels; elections universally recognized as truly free and the effective organization of a high level parliament based on these elections; the transfer from voluntary auspices to government, or the development of such services as police, transportation, postal—in fact the whole gamut of civil services and facilities which we take for granted in all states which have had years, decades, even centuries to create, develop and recreate them. There are, of course, knowledgeable individuals who will point to the fact that the Jewish agency and the Vaad Leumi during the mandate were in effect "governments within governments"; and that a good many of the services indicated above were carried on for years through these agencies. Granted! But such "objective" observations must also allow for the unparalleled conditions and problems under which conversion to statehood and its responsibilities had to take place:

(a) The successful prosecution of a life or death war against odds which made every battle won, and the final victory a major miracle.

(b) Simultaneously, and within sound and even sight of screaming shells, the acceleration of the in-gathering of the exiles—from the DP camps, from other parts of Europe, from North Africa. From May 15, 1948, to this date some 360,000 Jews have come into Israel. A similar influx of such proportions into the U. S. A. would have meant the acceptance of some 70 million people.

The variety of background, cultures, languages, even civilizations from which they came, and which they brought, added to the enormity and complexity of the problem. All of us here tonight—the older ones from direct experience and the younger ones from the study of the professional literature—will recall the long and frequent discussions from the platform of this very Conference, in the first twenty-five years of its experience (and more latterly again in the last decade in relation to the new migration) around the serious social and individual problems created by the conflicts of the younger generation as it moved away from cultures of their immigrant parents. It should not be too difficult to visualize or project the problems arising (in fact, already well-developed) in Israel as a result of the large scale *migrations*, even *transplantations* of whole populations lock, stock and cultures; with deep differences in language, customs, dress, concepts of family life, education (often the lack of it), religious practices and even racial characteristics; to say nothing of the differences in religious philosophies and practices.

(c) These are but the social and cultural aspects of the absorption problem. I have not touched on such basics as housing, feeding, clothing, medical care. We in the United States (together with the Israelis) are rightfully distressed at the conditions of the 90,000 or more Jews still in the reception camps. But in all fairness we must recognize the tremendous achievements in the "absorption" of some 270,000 in one way or another.

The dire economic conditions and pressures within, and *on*, the country as a whole is Israel's pressing problem, second only to military security. It is

not within my scope or competence to consider these fundamental economic aspects. At this point and for an audience so sensitive to such realities, it is only necessary to refer to them and to their obvious meaning in the daily lives of every man, woman and child—old, new, and to come.

It is because of all this that one is so favorably and pleasantly surprised to find such "normalcy" in so many aspects of life in Israel—so much optimism about the future, so much confidence.

But as "usual" or as regular as life may appear to the naked eye—the trained social worker looking in for the first time on social service facilities is struck immediately by the difference between the social welfare scene there and here. Even passing reference to the quantitative aspects of the public relief program will point up the problem. The total population in Israel is about 1,100,000. The number receiving relief or assistance from or through the public and private agencies is about 200,000. Such a high proportion of a total population receiving assistance poses differences (for an American social worker) not only in *numbers* but in the very *quality* of the problem. Questions of relief standards, administrative methods and structure, personnel, underlying philosophy and directions take on meanings quite different from, and *not* comparable to, our own relief problems and programs.

The American social worker will also note the prominent role in social welfare—as in all aspects of life in Israel—of the political and ideological differences and struggles. These are deep and intense. They are affected by, and reflect, the political divisions in the world generally. But as always with the Jews—only more so. Most Ameri-

can visitors are prepared for such conflicts in what *they* look upon as the *proper* arenas for *political* activity—the Knesset, the foreign office, elections. They are not prepared for the all-pervasive nature of the political and ideological struggle. It appears everywhere. In many of the more systematic surveys and studies (to which a good part of the country is now being subjected) there is a tendency to under-emphasize or over-play this reality, depending on the point of view. Social welfare in Israel is so *much* a part of the political scene there, that a special effort is necessary to understand this development which runs counter to our American effort to keep welfare *apart from* politics. In the first place we must recall that these political drives and influences are *not* political in the narrow sense of that term, as we use it here when we talk of "keeping politics out of social welfare." They are more likely to be expressions of fundamental and deeply rooted *ideological* differences on the role of religion and even the social and economic structure towards which the country and its basic institutions are moving.

It is my feeling that by and large these differences do not serve only the negative purposes to be expected if we apply only our own more limited criteria. Something constructive seems to flow from the social competition engendered by the differences. I do not want to minimize the problems or very real dangers in such division. But for the time being at least and in the area of social welfare, the various groups are learning to accept, live with and even in *some* cases be modified by the differences.

The Youth Aliyah (and some here will recall its early struggles on religious and political questions both in Europe and in Palestine) is a splendid example

of this kind of inter-group adjustment without serious loss to the fundamental objectives of Youth Aliyah. The system—or more properly, systems of education (since there are at least four) is rapidly becoming another such good example. Incidentally, compulsory education was introduced only on April 1st of this year. The recent compromise of Mapai, and the religious block on the question of education of children in the reception centers—still another.

It seems to me also that the generally recognized excellence of the kibbutzim and children's institutions of the Hashomer Hatzair at one end and the Hapoel Ha-Mizrachi (reading from left to right) is no accident. It appears to be related to the deep devotion to their respective causes which give to their activities that little extra measure of something—spirit, focus, motivation, orientation—call it what you will.

It is difficult for an American social worker in Israel to understand the tendencies and developments of social work there, unless one recalls that by and large whatever experienced or trained personnel there is, came from Europe, bringing with them the European emphasis on the mass, and administrative aspects of social welfare rather than on the individual. Though there is real striving for a knowledge of American approach and methods, especially in those areas in need of case work, there appears to be little understanding of such an approach (perhaps even less than our *own* understanding), as expressed in our highly individualized techniques.

There are some real beginnings in this direction, as represented by the Lasker Mental Hygiene Clinic (described more fully below); the development of a mental hygiene approach in the Pro-

bation Dept. (which incidentally is part of the Ministry of Welfare rather than Justice), the organization of Malben (hard-core) program, also described later. But with these exceptions the personnel in social welfare in Israel by and large has no orientation towards, and even less preparation for, individualized social case work.

Let us look a little more closely at a few of the specific programs. I was particularly impressed with the work of Youth Aliyah. As most of you know this program goes back some 17 years. It was conceived as a way of facilitating the migration of youth (15-17) from Europe to Palestine for training and life in agricultural settlements. Henrietta Szold, its first director, gave it the inspiration of her genius, wisdom, and great understanding. Over the course of the years it has prepared for and brought into Israel some 40,000 Jewish boys and girls. At the present time it has about 15,000 children and youth (ages 10-17) under care, distributed in about 200 agricultural settlements and institutions; and about evenly divided between the two types of placement; those above 14 largely in the agricultural settlements; and the younger children in children's institutions and villages conducted primarily by the large voluntary agencies.

Today, Youth Aliyah is a function of the Jewish Agency with a total budget of some 13 million dollars for the year. Hadassah provides about 3 million of this. It is one of the several great contributions of that organization to the upbuilding and development of the country. The children now arriving are received in a special reception center (Achuza) at Haifa. From there they go to one of several transit institutions—where they receive about 6-8 months of care, orientation, education, training in

Hebrew—preparatory to their longer term placement in a kibbutz or an institution. The kibbutz or institution assumes responsibility for their care. Youth Aliyah pays for each Y.A. child placed with them in very much the same manner that public agencies in this country "purchase" service from voluntary agencies in some communities. The per capita payment is \$14 per month for young people (15-17) placed in the kibbutzim; and \$50 per month in children's institutions and villages.

I cite these figures, especially the rate in the kibbutz (\$14 per month) because it goes to an important and basic consideration in the entire program. Since the per capita rate does not cover the actual cost of care—and since the kibbutzim and most of the institutions have no additional sources of income as here, the youth are expected to "pay a good part of their way" through active sharing in the work and production program—certainly in the kibbutz and even in the institution. In the voluntary, democratic and cooperative living arrangement of a kibbutz—in which every person plays his part as a member of the team—work by the young person (some 4-5 hours on top of 4-5 hours in formal schooling) takes on a meaning (both for child and the group) quite different from the very limited work—often on a made work basis—done by the children in our own institutions.

In drawing comparisons it is essential to note that "placement" in Israel has a content quite different from that in our country; so much so, in fact, that there can be little basis for comparison; except possibly in purely administrative terms. Let me try to explain. For one thing "placement" in the Youth Aliyah is a much more "normal" experience within the only true definition of normal—the

quantitative. A very substantial part of the total child and youth population has experienced placement (some 45-50,000)—or are in it now—about 15,000—in a general population of 1,000,000. New York City with 2,000,000 Jews has only about 2200 children in organized placement. Further and most important they are not placed as here because of *rejection* by parents—or for any reason which can give them that feeling. Their status is the consequence of a world situation of which they are keenly aware. More positively, the children feel—and are given every reason for doing so—that they are a vital and important part of a growing, pioneering, history making process. Indeed they are made to feel that they are the future of the country. All of this gives a unique richness and meaning to their lives. As the director of one children's home put it, "our job is more difficult than yours in terms of limited physical plants, time pressures, lack of funds, and the problems of resolving deeply-rooted ideological, ethnic, and language differences; but easier in that the individual child does not feel rejected, deprived, punished or guilty. Quite the contrary—he feels that he is an important part of society."

This is expressed in so many ways that even the younger children *sense* it. The older ones *know* it, not only from the words spoken and printed everywhere, but, more importantly, from the attitudes and feelings of the teachers, counselors (madrichim), the entire staff working with them. There is present everywhere a devotion to the children which approaches dedication and consecration; though with the light touch of love, rather than the heavy hand of duty. I am not saying that every staff member in every institution or "kibbutz" possesses or expresses these qualities.

Only the blindly romantic could make such a statement. But it is clearly the prevalent spirit; and I asked to be taken not only to different *types*, but to those functioning at mediocre as well as better levels. Nor do I mean to imply that there are no problems of, or with personnel as well as with children. But in that generally wholesome, positive, pioneering setting, such problems seem easier to bear—and indeed—resolve.

Foster home placement is used very little in the country as a whole—and within Youth Aliyah only as a measure of last resort. There are several reasons for this. First, and as indicated above, most of the leaders of social work in Israel come from Europe. They brought with them the European understanding, experience and programs in foster care. These did not include foster home placement for children to any appreciable extent. Second, the emphasis in all of Israel and particularly in child welfare is on the group, rather than the individual. This is pointed up in the statement made by Youth Aliyah itself in a pamphlet describing the program . . . "Children are only removed from their *groups* for *individual* care after all possible means have been used to restore them to normality in their *regular* surroundings. There are a number of foster homes in different parts of the country for children *requiring* an *intimate* family life and *close supervision*." Since foster home placement is essentially an individualized experience in a family setting, it runs counter the group emphasis. Third, even where foster home placement is sought for some special reason (there are some 200 children in such placement, many with relatives), the housing shortage makes home-finding an almost impossible task. In most of the institutions and kibbutzim there

are 4-6 children in a normal-size room. It requires no profound analysis to understand the drive towards this type of placement—for the compelling reasons of physical space—if for no other reason. Finally, even if there were more children than now have it, who needed foster home placement, and the evidence suggests that this is so, and assuming further that foster homes could be found—responsible administrators recognize that they are missing the one other vitally important component in foster home placement—a properly-trained, well-supervised, and professionally equipped staff.

On this subject of individualized care and service, however, there is a growing awareness all along the line—and more especially within Youth Aliyah—of the need for adequate facilities, program and personnel to take care of the increasing number of children who find it difficult to adjust to the new setting and life. Until recently there appeared to be very little in the way of unadjusted or difficult children within Youth Aliyah. The reasons were simple. They were, in the main, older children who had been carefully selected (in fact, *self-selected* to a large extent) as a result of their active participation in the Zionist youth groups in Europe from which they were drawn. They were specially prepared for life in Israel via the Hechalutz program. In the past two years the situation has changed considerably, through the large-scale emigration of Jewish children from North Africa and Middle East countries. These children are, in the main, younger. While they did not suffer the horrors of concentration camp and war experience, as did the youth of Europe, they have lived under the most miserable and primitive conditions in the ghettos of North Africa.

Many of them are the "dead-end kids" of the Mellas. They have not had the benefit of intensive Zionist education and orientation. The great majority have parents and strong traditional family ties. Separation must have had for them something of the shock and pain experienced by our own children in foster care in the United States. Their levels of education are low, with a high incidence of illiteracy. In many instances they have never learned the most elementary practices of personal hygiene and cleanliness.

Out of such material must inevitably come a higher proportion of maladjustment, problem behavior, disturbed and even sick children and youth. The wonder of it all is the large incidence of adjustment.

All of the above is within the Youth Aliyah program. In addition there is the inevitable proportion of children in trouble at home, in school and in the community generally.

There are some special homes and institutions designed to meet these problems. The most significant development in this direction is the Lasker Mental Hygiene and Child Guidance Centre of Hadassah opened in the fall of 1949. The primary purpose of the Center is "to organize mental hygiene work along the lines of training and education of key people responsible for the upbringing or handling of children so that they will be able to provide an emotional atmosphere for the children under their care, which will promote healthy personality development. In addition to this positive prophylactic approach, the Center intends to utilize the less positive approach of early diagnosis and efficient treatment in individual cases of children with disturbances. The work of the Centre in Jerusalem is at

present confined to children below school age. There are therapeutic activities with prospective mothers in the pre-natal clinics of Hadassah, and with problem children referred from the kindergarten network of Jerusalem."

I have quoted their own statement at some length in order to give you directly the feel of the problem as they face and understand it there. To the Lasker Clinic has also been assigned the handling of the increasing number of problem cases arising in the Youth Aliyah reception centers, in the institutions and the kibbutzim—on an extension basis; that is, the personnel of the Lasker Clinic will be available on a district basis for consultation on and direct work with problem or difficult children.

A program so wide and intensive obviously raises the all-important question of personnel; not so much for the Lasker Center itself which has several well-trained and qualified people—with openings for several more—but for the total welfare program in Israel and more particularly the child care and guidance aspects. In connection with personnel, I would like to touch upon the School of Social Work in Israel, founded some 15 years ago. It is located in an apartment in Jerusalem with some provision for extension work in Tel-Aviv. It is a tax supported school in that it is part of the Ministry of Welfare and receives its budget (\$14,000 per year) from the Ministry.

It is an *undergraduate* school with a two year program, increased only recently from one year. However, the completion of the course does not lead to a degree even on the baccalaureate level. There are no set academic requirements for admission; and only last year the minimum age for admission was increased

to 20, plus insistence upon full time matriculation for the duration of the course.

Though the school has serious limitations, of which its director is thoroughly aware, in curriculum, field work opportunities, faculty, physical space, etc., it is helping to meet a very real need in the country. They are now giving consideration to the possibility of establishing—in addition to the present program—a graduate curriculum in conjunction with the Hebrew University. Even a limited graduate professional program will be helpful in raising the whole level of social work performance and standards. I might point out parenthetically that the more lasting and meaningful contribution of voluntary American organizations, other than the UJA itself, would seem to be in just this direction of raising standards through carefully selected projects—rather than in the effort to meet a total need for a larger number of people in a given area or function.

In relation to the personnel problem in social work, the National Council of Jewish Women is helping to meet a very real need through its program of scholarships to outstanding students for study in America in fields of social welfare. In creating a corps of highly trained, top level professional people, Council is making it possible for American methods to gain the acceptance and understanding necessary if the areas of social work requiring highly individualized attention are to be developed constructively.

I would like to touch on one more program in Israel which had a special fascination for me, even though it is only in its early formative and very difficult stages. Some four or five months ago the newspapers carried the story of the

agreement reached among the JDC, the Jewish Agency and the Government of Israel for the creation of a special organization to care for the so-called "hard-core" cases who had arrived, or would be arriving in Israel from May 15, 1948. During my stay in Israel the first batch of cases actually selected under and for this new program arrived in Haifa.

What is this "hard-core" group? It is made up of the tubercular, the blind, the aged, the chronically ill, physically handicapped, mentally ill, and mentally defective children. I wonder what there was in the hearts, and in the minds, and on the lips of the blind, the sick, the aged, and even the defective children, as they walked off the gang-plank and touched the soil of a land or saw the faces of a people, which had not only admitted them but *sought* them out, and bade them come. For that is what this hard-core program really does.

As projected, the program will have available for the first fifteen months some seventeen and one-half million dollars contributed about as follows: JDC—seven and one-half million; the Jewish Agency and the Government—seven and one-half million between them; and the IRO—two and one-half million.

In this audience there are people who have devoted and are devoting their lives and professional careers to the care of such groups here. They can tell you far better than I of the cost in energy, facilities, personnel, and that grubby thing called money, required for reasonably decent care of those who can respond to rehabilitation; and of the heartache and hopelessness—at whatever cost—for those of the "hard-core" categories for whom "program" can only mean, at best, decent custodial care for the "duration." This, in our great country with its great social work resources and skills, untold

wealth, and highly trained personnel. Even without first-hand knowledge, they can tell you what a program of this kind must mean in, and to Israel, at this fateful point in its history—facing the most pressing problems at the level of food, clothing, shelter, health, and the terrifying possibility of another life or death struggle. But there it is; a program which at this early stage has some 1500 in care. It is projected on the probability of an eventual total of 15,000—divided roughly about as follows; 3000 tubercular; 3000 mentally ill; 1000 chronically ill; 6500 aged; the balance—the blind, defective children, etc. To carry all this out, it will be necessary to extend existing facilities, train staff, and build new institutions. Unfortunately this is a long time process at best. There is a lack of skilled labor, a lack of building material, of transportation and of the most precious assets—time and skilled personnel.

I know of no parallel in modern history. If Israel had said "We will do all we can for such unfortunates as *are here*"—we would all have said "Dayenu." If they had said "this will have to wait until the healthy are on their feet, we can *then* take care of you"—no one could have objected. The decision and determination to do it *now*, represent to me, at least, humanitarianism and courage sorely needed in this fear-ridden world in which the pattern is exclusion, and the building of barriers which keep out not only the intended humans but humanity itself.

It is against and out of this complex background that one reacts to the social welfare scene in Israel. Along every road and hill in Israel one sees developing—literally overnight—new villages or settlements, not too attractive physically, but the product of a dynamic, pioneering effort—fighting against time and harsh, compelling realities—physical, economic, social, political. Along these same roads and on the stony mountainsides there are ancient towns and villages, charged with the history of civilization generally and Jewish history in particular. Today many of these teem with new life and vigor—and a hope for the future, rising phoenix-like from the rubble and ashes.

It is this indescribable combination of an historic past, pressing present and fateful future which characterizes all life in Israel, including social welfare.

If all this sounds romantic and impressionistic coming from a hard-boiled social worker—it is only because that is the net impression Israel left upon me. And I warned you at the outset that this paper would be more a series of impressions than the formal report which the printed program promised. More importantly—it is clear that Israel as it stands today—in all its aspects—is in good part a product of romance and miracles, kept alive in the soil of 2000 years of inspiration; fertilized and fructified by the last 50 years of perspiration. Whoever first said "to be a realist in Israel—you have to believe in miracles" was so right.