

*Case Closed*



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## HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN POSTWAR AMERICA



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*To Steve*



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## ABBREVIATIONS

DP(s)	Displaced Person(s)
DPA	Displaced Persons Act
DPC	Displaced Persons Commission
EJCA	European-Jewish Children's Aid
FSD	Family Service Department
GJCA	German-Jewish Children's Aid
HIAS	Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society
JDC	American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee
JFCS	Jewish Family and Children's Services
NCJW	National Council of Jewish Women
NRS	National Refugee Service
NYANA	New York Association for New Americans
RFD	Religious Functionaries Department
UJA	United Jewish Appeal
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
USNA	United Service for New Americans
VSD	Vocational Service Department



*Case Closed*



# Introduction



The May 1950 issue of *New Neighbors*, a newsletter about Jewish refugees in the United States, contains a cheerful photograph of a young girl peering into the camera. The caption beneath it reads:

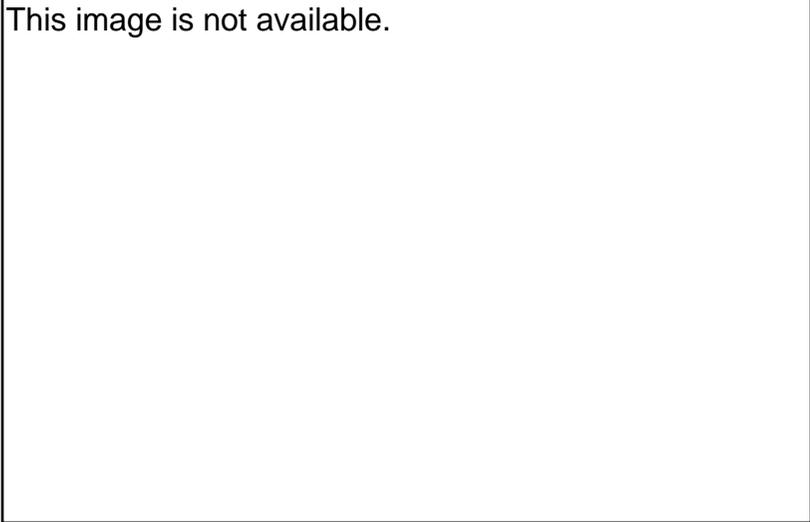
Propitious Arrival: Happily displaying her pigtailed is bright-eyed Bracha Rabinowicz, 13, who arrived in the United States from a DP camp in Germany on the day the Senate approved legislation liberalizing the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. The youngster, a native of Poland who survived the war by hiding in caves with her mother until liberation, symbolizes the new hope of the homeless men, women and children still in the DP camps abroad.<sup>1</sup>

Bracha Rabinowicz was one of 140,000 Jewish displaced persons (DPs) who emigrated to the United States from Europe in the years 1946–1954.<sup>2</sup> The pages of *New Neighbors* are filled with their snapshots. The pictures are poignant and the accompanying accounts overwhelmingly happy: refugees succeed in new professions, play on soccer teams, celebrate holidays in freedom, and are gathered in by Jewish communities around the nation. But what do these images hide? About what are they silent? What lies in the gap between these public relations portraits and the way in which Bracha, a child survivor of genocide, became part of the fabric of American life? The history belied by the celluloid is the subject of *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America*.

*Case Closed* returns to the time before the “Holocaust” occupied a central place in American consciousness and those who had endured this event had not yet secured a place of honor and reverence as “survivors.” This work gives voice to these individuals as they were then: “refugees,” “DPs,” “New Americans,” “greeners,” “units,” “immigrants.” And their first

years here were harsh—not, as the PR images projected, unfailingly upbeat. The postwar narrative of triumph is a construct that the media promoted then and that has persisted to this day. And while it may be comforting, it effaces Holocaust survivors' struggles and impedes our understanding of the impact of genocide on the individual and on society, as a whole.

In *Case Closed* I challenge this accepted narrative by scrutinizing survivors' first years in America through the eyes of those who lived it. To do so, I synthesize a wide array of archival material, including case files of refugees recorded by agency social workers, letters and minutes from agency meetings, contemporary journal articles written by social workers and physicians, and oral testimonies. These tools add texture and depth to our understanding of the experience and throw a bright light on the survivors' perspective. The hundreds of case files I analyze give an unvarnished account of the newcomers' experiences and contrast sharply with the glowing media accounts of the day. What becomes immediately and devastatingly apparent is that these newcomers were refugees from genocide. The reason they found themselves in America made them immigrants like no other. Unlike those who flocked to the United States fifty years earlier, they did not leave the old country out of a desire to better themselves economically, nor did they save to send earnings home or to bring their families to the new country.



This image is not available.

DP Booter: New American soccer team in Denver, Colorado. *New Neighbors* 3, no. 4 (May 1950). Collection of author.