

## “The Long Way Home”



This is a documentary film made in 1977. Through interviews with holocaust survivors, newsreel footage, letters, journals and news reports, this Oscar-winning documentary chronicles the hardships faced by the European Jews freed from concentration camps in 1945. Many survivors discovered they no longer had homes to return to and found themselves in "displaced persons" camps. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 was seen as the solution to providing the refugees a homeland.

### Production details:

Written and directed by Mark Jonathan Harris; director of photography, Don Lenzer; edited by Kate Amend; music by Lee Holdridge; produced by Rabbi Marvin Hier and Richard Trank; released by Seventh Art Releasing. Running time: 119 minutes.

Narrated by: Morgan Freeman; With the voices of: Edward Asner, Ruth Gruber, Martin Landau and Miriam Margolyes.

### Critics

#### Emanuele Levy, *Variety*

Focusing on a critical, relatively unknown chapter in modern Jewish history, "The Long Way Home" is a landmark documentary about the torturous, humiliating plight of Jewish refugees who survived the Holocaust. Though grounded in the specific historical period of post-WWII, this momentous docu provides important insights and relevant lessons for contempo political refugees. Despite a somewhat conventional style, pic deserves to be seen on the bigscreen before it reaches its more natural habitats of PBS, cable and educational institutions.

For many Jews, the horrendous experience of the Holocaust did not end in 1945. Combining never-before-seen archival footage and stills and new interviews with survivors as well as important politicians, "The Long Way Home" sheds light on a shameful chapter in history --- namely, how the community of nations, including Britain and the United States, ignored the predicament of tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from 1945 to 1948, when the state of Israel was established and recognized by the U.N

In May 1945, Germany was defeated by the Allies and the war in Europe was officially terminated. American, British and Russian soldiers proudly liberated the Nazi concentration camps in Central and Eastern Europe. Thousands of starving, near-dead Jewish survivors were freed from Nazi persecution, but official liberation provided them with little solace. Many Jews were so physically and emotionally ill that they required months of convalescence; some died.

Those Jews who tried to return to their home countries were met with anti-Semitism and threats of physical violence. When five Jews were murdered in a Lithuanian village outside Vilna, Polish notes found in their pockets stated, "This will be the fate of all surviving Jews."

American and British authorities set up Displaced Persons Camps to house the refugees, often on the sites of former German death camps. Assigned to camps according to their country of origin, the Jews were mixed in with other displaced people, and found themselves sharing a roof with Nazi sympathizers, collaborators and murderers. At the same time, in what must be one of history's greatest ironies, German nationals were repatriated. No wonder a popular saying among the era's refugees was "Better to be a conquered German than a liberated Jew."

The first leaders to raise awareness of the survivors' needs were American Army chaplains, such as Rabbi Abraham Klausner, who in a new interview recalls how he helped organize the DPC and compile lists of survivors. Klausner and other witnesses disclose how they fought the policies of influential leaders, which

gave priority to a speedy economic recovery and reconstruction of postwar Germany and neglected the Jewish issue.

The other initiative to help European survivors came from various Jewish organizations in Palestine. Members of the Jewish Brigade, which had fought with the British, stayed in Europe to search out family members and fought British restrictions on Jewish emigration to Palestine. One of docu's most exciting segments is devoted to the bricha, (Hebrew word for "flight"), a concerted effort to help thousands of Jews reach Palestine illegally, in defiance of the Western world's prohibitions. The tragic fate of the Exodus gets fresh treatment through eyewitnesses who were aboard the ill-fated ship in 1947.

It's practically impossible to do justice to the rich historical tapestry that's at the center of "The Long Way Home," a meticulously researched and detailed film that chronicles tumultuous events almost month by month. Among the many highlights is a discussion of how British Prime Minister Clement Atlee was led to side with the Arab point of view. His nation's economy ravaged by war and a crumbling empire, he acted on the need to maintain a free flow of oil from the Middle East.

At the same time, docu doesn't overlook the courageous efforts of those who supported the survivors, such as American volunteers who risked their personal safety to aid in the illegal emigration to Palestine. One unsung hero is Clark Clifford, then adviser to President Truman, who eventually recommended the foundation of an independent state of Israel.

Writer-director Mark Jonathan Harris deserves praise for this epic documentary, though his treatment of exciting and revelatory footage is often too conventional, including old-fashioned use of narration (by Morgan Freeman), impersonated voices of celebrities and rather sentimental music, composed and conducted by Lee Holdridge. The filmmakers should prepare themselves for criticism from pro-Palestinian factions for undermining the Arabs' standpoint, though in their defense, docu's goal is to reconstruct the Jewish experience.

### **Peter Stack, *San Francisco Chronicles***

For survivors of the Holocaust, the end of the war did not completely end their suffering. But how they fought their way back is the lesser-told story of that era.

It's no wonder "The Long Way Home," opening today at the Roxie Cinema, won the Oscar in March for best documentary feature. It's an extraordinarily powerful study of three years following World War II, when the Jews of Europe somehow summoned the courage to rise up from near total destruction.

"The Long Way Home," written and directed by Mark Jonathan Harris, includes horrendous scenes from the concentration camps as prisoners were being liberated by the Allies in the spring of 1945. Harris has assembled a film of exceptional immediacy, using news and archival footage, stills, on-camera interviews and often eloquent readings of letters and diaries.

But like the tide of hurt humanity it records, the documentary moves forward -- and ultimately becomes an inspiring look at the Jewish determination to return to a historical homeland and establish the state of Israel. The undertaking was dangerous, sometimes even illegal.

Morgan Freeman narrates. Other actors -- Edward Asner, Miriam Margolyes, Martin Landau, David Paymer and Helen Slater -- read from diaries and letters.

The film documents how survivors were liberated from one form of hell only to be shunted into another in a devastated and still anti-Semitic Europe. "We were hated because we returned from the dead," wrote one survivor.

Many of the survivors were herded into overcrowded displaced persons camps. Suicide, hunger, disease, madness, a desperate need to bear children as a hope for the future -- all characterized life framed by barbed wire and overseen in rigid military style.

"The Long Way Home" makes a compelling argument that the Zionist vision that helped create Israel in 1948 was the key to Jewish survival in a hell on earth.

**Janet Maslin, *The New York Times***

Enormously powerful archival scenes punctuate the Holocaust documentary "The Long Way Home," giving an intimate dimension to the film's historical drama. Frankly Zionist in its sympathies, Mark Jonathan Harris's stirring and accomplished film spans the period from the liberation of Nazi concentration camp survivors in 1945 to the founding of Israel as a Jewish homeland three years later, emphasizing the profound connection between these events. Along the way, Harris creates an intense empathy for the refugees' experience and for aspects of their ordeal that are often ignored.

Early in the film, shocking scenes of survivors at the camps are accompanied by a description of the liberating soldiers' reaction to what they saw. "Few are prepared for the hell they encounter," says Morgan Freeman, the film's narrator, with dignity and compassion. (Other actors, among them Edward Asner, Miriam Margolyes and Martin Landau, are heard reading from diaries and letters.) Survivors talk of how the soldiers' horror triggered their own shame, and of how much unexpected anger surrounded their liberation. The film scenes accompanying this description are raw and startling, like one that shows the starved ex-prisoners rioting over a truckload of potatoes.

Some ate so ravenously that their stomachs ruptured. Others succumbed to disease and exhaustion. And a different kind of suffering awaited those who recovered their physical stamina. Survivors speak of being shunned by outsiders who did not want to contemplate what they had been through. "We were hated," one says, "because we returned from the dead."

But returned to what? "The Long Way Home" traces the sad progress of people realizing that their houses and families were gone and that their European homelands no longer wanted them. Many remained in displaced persons camps, and the film's arduous research offers glimpses of conditions there. "We are living like a litter of puppies crowded under the body of their mother," one woman wrote of that ordeal.

There are also remarkable scenes of refugee groups trekking over the Alps, carrying babies, in hopes of reaching safety in Palestine. The film strongly maintains that only the goal of a Zionist state could have given such demoralized people the strength they found. Meanwhile, "The Long Way Home" retraces British political opposition to the founding of a Jewish state and Jewish terrorism against British colonial rule.

Among scenes depicted here are the aftermath of the bombing of the King David Hotel and the British rerouting of the refugee ship Exodus in 1947. "To this day I can still smell Cyprus," says Ruth Gruber, an American reporter who covered the camp where refugees were detained.

Yet "The Long Way Home," a film made under the auspices of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, manages to find images of hope, resilience and gentle humanity amid the misery. Its final words: "We're going on."