

How ORT Began

BY ADAM PENN

The road that starts at Jaffa Gate in the walls of Old Jerusalem, and serves as the mainline that carries trucks, buses and cheruts across the waist of Israel to the Mediterranean, stretches like a direction sign to the point of ORT's origin in Israel 25 years ago.

For it was in a building located in the alleyways of Jaffa that the first ORT school was founded, and where the first classes were held on December 14, 1948.

As in the birth of many endeavors, the origins of ORT Israel are numerous, depending on the vantage point from which one looks. But there is only one genesis. ORT Israel was an outgrowth and extension to Israel of ORT as an international Jewish service agency.

When Jaffa school was opened in 1948, ORT had a history of 68 years, during which it had given aid to over 500,000 Jews in every part of Europe, had set up programs in all the havens of the world where Jews had escaped from the holocaust, and was at that moment still deeply involved in the salvage operations in the DP camps of Germany, Austria and Italy.

ORT brought this history and experience, and many of the people who had participated in it, to the task of creating ORT Israel.

When the guns stopped firing and the War of Independence was over, among the manifold difficulties facing the new Israel was what to do with its demobilized soldiers and war wounded. The Ministry of Defense asked ORT to begin a program of vocational rehabilitation for them, and for this purpose made available a structure in the heart of old Jaffa.

It was not a particularly generous gift. Jaffa's Arab population having fled, the city was to all intents a ghost town. The Salti House, located at 8 Apak Street, had been a crumbling three-story Arab factory. It was in the line of fire during the battles for Jaffa, and when ORT took over it was, according to an eye witness report by its first Director, Zvi Rivlin, "half demolished by shelling."

It was as if the Ministry had challenged ORT to rehabilitate the building and its soldiers

simultaneously.

"In those days," recalls Rivlin, "we were always tearing something down and putting something up. . . Often enough pupils had to watch out for falling debris. Nor was the study material situation particularly satisfactory. Instructors and students would go off to scrounge in the ruins of Jaffa for old iron, strings of wire or wood boards, and adapt them to study usages. Yet we never heard any complaints about lack of material or technical deficiencies."

The students were assigned to the school, which carried the legend Merkaz ORT (ORT Center) under which was the inscription "The ORT Training Center for ex-Servicemen."

These were graduates of the hard school of war, and they proved an exceptional group. Most were young men with one or another sort of war wound. The course of study included radio communications and repair, typewriter maintenance, electrical installation and toolmaking. They took to it all with a will. Many of them volunteering for construction work on the school building.

In early Spring, 1949, 46 students arrived with their instructors from the ORT school in Sofia, Bulgaria. ORT pledged to parents that their youth would be able to continue their schooling in Israel. These first were followed by later waves of youth and adults from all over Europe, east and west. They will always have a very special place in the story of ORT, like the prodigal son who has returned.

"They were an absolutely model group," recalls Zvi Rivlin. "They served as a kind of experimental human laboratory. Neither we nor they had previous experience to go by. Which is why they helped us fix the initial shape of educational methods and vocational guidance in this school of ours."

Jaffa was the first ORT school in Israel. It was quickly joined by others. By the close of its first full year of operation, ORT had an enrollment of 1,534 scattered in seventeen institutions. This became the core for the development of ORT Israel.

In an atmosphere where party and ideological labels were dominant, ORT alone served no idea but vocational and technical education.

One other element had to be added to these earliest steps -- official status and support

--- without which ORT could not have become, as it has, Israel's basic resource for skilled manpower to man its economic development.

In the Spring of 1950, an ORT delegation met with the recently appointed Minister of Education, Zalman Shazar, now Israel's President. Their discussions resulted in a declaration of policy that had far-reaching implications for the future:

"I am glad to inform you that on my own initiative (italics in the original) we now propose to incorporate the ORT schools in the network of officially recognized institutions, and as a sign of our recognition, to grant them Government subsidies, although these have a more symbolic value than a monetary one. This straightens out the Medinah's (Government's) line with regard to ORT."

ORT in Israel today has a student body of about 50,000. The ORT educational system comprises 84 schools of every kind and size, plus service programs that function outside of schools. Its programs are located in 45 cities, towns, hamlets, farm settlements, a map of which would cover the entire face of Israel. This network graduates 12,000 technically equipped people into Israel's society and economy annually, and that number will grow.

ORT is today the nation's crucible for the creation of a large segment of those who will insure its living standards and its capacity to progress and defend itself.

This is the long road that began 25 years ago with the first school in Jaffa in December, 1948.



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