

# Fascinating Facts

By 1914, approximately 59,000 Jews were living in Palestine under Ottoman rule. The settlement—the *Yishuv*—was largely made up of Jews that had emigrated from Europe and were largely dependent on sources outside of Palestine for their income. The outbreak of World War I destroyed those channels, leaving the community isolated and destitute. Palestine was a part of the Ottoman Empire until 1918.

With disaster looming, the *Yishuv*'s leaders appealed to Henry Morgenthau, Sr., then the U.S. ambassador to Turkey. Morgenthau was appalled by the misery he witnessed. On August 31, 1914, Morgenthau sent an urgent cable to New York-based Jewish philanthropist Jacob Schiff, requesting \$50,000 of aid to keep the Jews of Palestine from starvation and death. In a month, \$50,000 (the equivalent of \$1 million in the year 2000) was raised through the efforts of what was intended to be an ad hoc and temporary collective of three existing religious and secular Jewish organizations: the American Jewish Relief Committee, the Central Committee for the Relief of Jews Suffering Through the War, and People's Relief Committee. As world war consumed Europe and devastated Eastern European Jewish communities, American relief organizations were overwhelmed with the scope of the need. On the 9th day of Kislev 5675 /1914 the Joint Distribution Committee was formed. Henceforth all major organizations wanting to provide aid to their Jewish brothers overseas funneled their funds through the Joint.

During WWI the Joint distributed \$15,000,000 in food, clothing and medical supplies to Eastern European Jews uprooted by the war. The Joint didn't send money to Europe. They established and staffed clinics, warehouses and distribution centers which needy Jews could turn to. The Joint established soup kitchens and purchased housing. The Joint established the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) to retrain Jews who had lost their livelihood. Between 1945 and 1954 the Joint distributed \$350,000,000 to help refugees rebuild their lives. In 1939, the United Palestine Appeal merged with the Joint to form the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). The UJA raised and distributed 1 billion dollars in the decade following the Second World War. As time went on and the crises of the World Wars receded, the Joint broadened its focus to other groups of needy people around the world.

For the Joint to be formed Jewish groups had to subordinate their ideological differences. Although many groups continued to channel relief efforts to causes reflecting their values, the large-scale impact of pooled resources was the necessary response in times of mass upheaval. The founding of the Joint Distribution Committee was a shining light in the annals of American Jewry.