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Without A Trace: The Obligation of Memory

**TRANSPORTS TO EXTINCTION:
THE DEPORTATION OF THE JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST**

**Yad Vashem – the Central theme for Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day
2022**

Transports to Extinction

The Deportation of the Jews during the Holocaust

The Central Theme for Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day 2022

In keeping with the policy of the "Final Solution," during World War II the Germans and their collaborators uprooted millions of Jews from their homes and deported them to their deaths. This meticulously organized operation was an event of historic significance, obliterating Jewish communities throughout German-occupied territory that had existed for centuries. Vast numbers of Jews were sent straight to the extermination sites, while many others were first taken to ghettos and transit camps. Thus, the cattle – or railway – car, the principal mode of Nazi deportation, became one of the most iconic symbols of the Holocaust. Originally a symbol of progress, globalization and human technological prowess during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the railway car warped into the emblem of the backsliding of human values into the abyss of wholesale mass murder on an unprecedented scale.

Europe's modern transportation system was recruited into the service of Nazi Germany's genocidal plans. The Reichsbahn (German State Railway) transported the Jews with the assistance of government-run railways in occupied and German-allied countries. The deportation operation was cooperatively coordinated by bureaucrats in the Reichsbahn, the Reich security authorities, government ministries and municipal authorities. The main authority tasked with sourcing the trains and arranging the deportations was the Department for Jewish Affairs and Evacuation in the SS-run Reich Security Main Office.

More than half of those murdered in the Holocaust were brought to their deaths through the elaborate deportation system developed by these joint efforts and an immense bureaucratic infrastructure, which used mainly trains, but also enlisted trucks, ships and wagons, and sometimes forced the deportees to march on foot.

Despite the increasing complexity of the war, its distant fronts and the German Army's need for means of operational military transportation, the deportation of Jews by train to their deaths continued throughout, ceaselessly and relentlessly, as another task to be fulfilled. In an effort to reduce the number of journeys and to cut costs, the deportation authorities began to make use of antiquated railway cars, to increase the number of cars in each transport, and to cram as many Jews – men, women and children – as was physically possible inside each car.

Organization and Implementation of the Deportations

Although the deportations were carried out across occupied Europe, there were distinct differences between the deportations in Western and Southern Europe, and those further east. The lack of restraint that characterized German policy in Eastern Europe led to the confinement of most of the Jews into open or sealed ghettos, which were often established in the impoverished neighborhoods of the cities and towns, and inside which the Jews suffered from appalling crowding, debilitating hunger and rampant disease.

The deportations in Eastern Europe were typically savage, and habitually began with Jews being murdered in their homes, in the streets and in local cemeteries. Such was the fate that befell the Jews of Lublin – the victims of the first deportation carried out by Germans in the *Generalgouvernement* (central Poland under German administration).

In March-April 1941, some 40,000 Jews were confined in a ghetto established in Lublin's old city quarter. In early 1942, a few short weeks before the deportation, German brutality towards the 40,000 Jews in the city's ghetto escalated, with many being shot. But nothing prepared the Jews of Lublin for the events of 17 March 1942, the day the mass deportations began. At 5 am, the Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators woke the Jews, and ordered them to leave their homes within a matter of minutes. The deportees were led to the collection point, in this case the venerable "Maharshal" Synagogue, which had stood in Lublin for 375 years. Those who tarried in their departure, or tried to evade the deportation, were dragged forcibly, beaten or shot. A few craftsmen were returned to the ghetto, while the rest of the Jews were marched 3 km from the synagogue to the freight train station, from where they were deported to the Bełżec extermination camp.

The element of surprise, the shouting of the Germans and Ukrainians, the wailing of the deportees, and the beatings and shootings, combined to terrorize the Jews into submission. In addition to those shot leaving their homes, others were murdered on their way to the synagogue and during the march to the train station. By 14 April 1942, approximately 30,000 Lublin Jews had been deported to their deaths in Bełżec and thousands killed in their homes and in the streets; thousands more were executed soon after in the nearby woods.

The format for deporting the Jews of Central Europe was usually similar to that in the west and south, and was based upon deception; the transports were misleadingly referred to as "labor recruitment." While the Germans directed the deportations, in practice they entrusted significant elements of their implementation to local police forces and their auxiliaries. Unlike the Jews of Eastern Europe, the Jews of Central, Western and Southern Europe were concentrated prior to their deportation mainly in transit camps, from which the deportations left for the extermination camps.

Much documentary evidence remains of the bureaucratic management of the deportations from Western and Central Europe: lists of deportees' names, documentation of looted property and additional documents – the litany of extinction. Conversely, the Jews of Poland were deported without registration or detailed documentation, and each day, thousands were crammed into cattle cars that made their way to the death camps.

The policy of deception spanned geographical borders and was carried out systematically in all the occupied countries. For instance, the deportation of the Jews of Thessaloniki, the largest Jewish community in Greece, commenced in March 1943. In the weeks leading up to the deportation, the Jews were confined in three ghettos,

and then in a ghetto in the Baron Hirsch neighborhood. They were permitted to take a specific sum of Polish zlotys, which they bought with Greek drachmas, but forbidden to take any gold, other coins or precious stones. Their journey was financed by the liquidation of their assets, and employees at the Greek State Railway handed them their tickets. In their testimonies, survivors related that the Germans took all of their belongings, replacing them with a signed piece of paper specifying the value of their possessions in Reichsmarks. They were told that they would be able to receive the aforementioned sum on arrival in Poland.

Deportations to death began as early as 1941. That autumn, Romania, an ally of Germany, initiated the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Jews to Transnistria from Bukovina, Bessarabia and adjacent Ukrainian areas. The deportations were carried out with barbaric cruelty. Many were murdered en route, while others met their deaths in the ghettos and camps established in Transnistria.

In Western Poland, deportations to the Chelmno extermination camp began in December 1941.

The Deportees' Experience

*"Life in the cattle cars was the death of my adolescence. How quickly I aged,"*¹ wrote the late Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel of his deportation in May 1944 to Auschwitz-Birkenau from his home in Sighet, then under Hungarian rule. Simon Grinbaud, who was deported from the Drancy transit camp in France to Auschwitz-Birkenau in September 1942, describes boarding the train in his memoir:

*"In such a car, which was designed to transport 'eighteen horses' according to the sign on the door, we were a hundred of us – adults, children, sick, elderly, in indescribably crowded conditions... In every car there was a bucket with water for everyone and another bucket for toilets; so much of the water reserve was soiled as we boarded the train."*²

The overcrowding in the cars was unbearable, the feeling of suffocation overwhelming, and a desperate struggle ensued for proximity to the narrow window. Growing hunger and thirst magnified the anguish. The necessity to relieve themselves inside the railcar was a nadir for the humiliated deportees. The journey in the freight cars was sometimes a matter of hours (within Poland); often three to four days (from France, Hungary and the Netherlands); occasionally seven to eight days (from Thessaloniki); while some deportees were shuttled around for more than two weeks on boats and trains (the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia on their journey to Treblinka). Others were marched on foot, and were forced to cross a wide river on dilapidated rafts (the Jews of Bessarabia, Bukovina and Dorohoi, who were deported to Transnistria). None of the deportees had the slightest idea regarding the location or nature of their final destination.

¹ Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs*, Volume One (UK: HarperCollins, 1997) pp. 75-76.

² <https://deportation.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&itemId=5092605&ind=-1>

The deportations tore entire families apart. Oftentimes parents, siblings, children and friends were left behind. Inside the cattle cars, Jews tried in different ways to convey their situation and feelings to loved ones left behind, and wrote them letters on scraps of paper they found, in great haste and in many cases, in code. The writers threw their letters out of the train, in the hope that someone would pick them up and send them on to their destination. One of those writers was Aron Liwerant, who wrote the following message in the railway car that left the Drancy transit camp in France headed for the Majdanek camp, where he was murdered. He tossed the note out of the deportation train. Aron did not know where he was bound, but he wanted to leave a message of hope for his children:

Dear Berthe. It is already the fourth day. I am now in the railroad car. We are surely traveling to Germany. I am also certain that we are going to work. We are about 700 people. 23 railroad cars... I hope, my child, that you will know how to behave as a free person, even though you are meanwhile without your parents. Don't forget... to be a Jew and also a human being... Tell Simon everything that I write you. Tell him to study and be a good student, because he is gifted... I am going with confidence that you will grow up and be a good, healthy and smart girl.

Your Father,

Hoping to see you soon³

Many of the deportees perished in the railroad cars, succumbing to suffocation, ferocious thirst or utter exhaustion. In light of the appalling conditions in the cars, leaping from the moving train was one way to attempt to stay alive. There were those who survived the jump, but many others died in the process, or were denounced to the Germans by locals.

In July 1944, the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania was liquidated, and the remaining Jews, including the Perk family, were crammed into a cattle car that had one small opening covered with barbed wire. One of the Jews in the car managed to tear the barbed wire. Kalman Perk jumped from the train, and later wrote about this experience:

Just 14 years old, in short trousers and a shirt, I jumped from the train into a hostile world. With great anguish, I left my loved ones to their fate... We didn't cry or kiss each other before I jumped from the car. Father just looked at me and said: "Kalman, be a 'mensch' (human being)." These last words were my father's will and testament.⁴

The shock that accompanied the stages of deportation – the roundup and the time inside the cars – lingered after the deportees' arrival at the extermination camps. Jaco Poliker talks about this in his testimony. Born in Thessaloniki, Poliker was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau with his pregnant wife Celia and their young son

³ Walter Zwi Bacharach (ed.), *Last Letters from the Shoah*, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2013) pp. 265-266.

⁴ Translated from the Hebrew: <https://www.yadvashem.org/he/remembrance/survivors/perk.html>

Mordechai. After many long days in the overcrowded cattle cars without food or water, the train pulled into the station.

When we finally arrived at "our destination" and the train stopped... the doors suddenly opened. Outside it was still dark, and the Germans started beating us indiscriminately, shouting: "Out! Quickly! Everybody out! Quickly, quickly!" Stunned to the point of insanity, people were thrown out [of the car]. I held my child in my arms the entire time. The boy was faint, half dead. At some point, when the beaten masses had been pushed out with tremendous force by rampaging Germans, I don't know how it happened, the child slipped out of my arms and disappeared. A mighty wave of people propelled me, trampling everything underfoot. The wave washed over me, too. I didn't see my child or my family again. In one instant, everything was swallowed up; my whole world vanished as if it had never existed...⁵

The deportations ripped the deportees from the human world as they knew it, and separated them from it irrevocably. The world they recognized was stolen from them forever.

⁵ Halina Birnbaum, "Hurban Yahadut Yavan Besipuro Shel Nitzol Misaloniki (The Destruction of Greek Jewry through the Story of a Survivor from Thessaloniki)," in *Zachor: Kovetz Tiud Lemesirut Nefesh Begi Hahariga Betkufat Hashoah* (Hebrew), volume 11 (Bnei Brak: Agudat Zachor Beyisrael, 1986), p. 88