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The Deportation Journeys of the Holocaust

Connor Schonta

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Roughly three million Jews were transported to extermination centers by train during the Holocaust.¹ Nearly all who boarded deportation trains were unaware of the fate that awaited them; and for most, fate meant death in a gas chamber.² Some, however, did survive. One such survivor was Franca Charlupski, a Polish Jew, who was born in 1920 in the city of Lodz. In 1942, Franca and her family were deported to Auschwitz where only she and her sister would survive. In a 1985 interview, Charlupski contemplated her survival of the Holocaust and why she felt so compelled to share her story:

I feel so strongly about it, that I must talk about it because there must have been a reason that I was....Why was I better than the other six million? I mean, why me? Why, there was others that did survive but here, I was right there. And for some reason or another, I'm here and thank God I am capable of talking about it. I just wonder where...There are some people that do claim that this never happened.³

Charlupski's suffering did not end with the defeat of the Nazis in 1945. Like other Holocaust survivors, Charlupski had to carry the horrific memories with her each and every day. Though the physical experience had long passed, Charlupski was still wrestling with the burden of survival some forty years later. Sadly, her uncertainty of how to live in light of what she witnessed is not unique.

Profound questioning and enduring brokenness permeate the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. To interact with such testimonies is overwhelming. One may desire to empathize with Holocaust victims and to understand the pain that persists, but how does he or she actually empathize and actually understand? The events of the Holocaust are manifest evil. The scale to which they were taken is nothing short of absurd. Those who suffered through the Holocaust truly endured the incomprehensible.

Contributing to the Final Solution's incomprehensibility were the trains used for Jewish deportation. In post war interviews and testimonies, survivors consistently share memories from their

1. Alfred Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich: A History of the German National Railway, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 115.

2. Wolfgang Benz, *The Holocaust: A German Historian Examines the Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 136. Benz estimates that 90% of Jewish deportees brought to Auschwitz were gassed upon arrival. The percentage was even higher in the Operation Reinhard Camps, which were exclusively purposed in killing.

3. Franca Charlupski, "Franca Charlupski," interview by Sidney Bolkosky, June 18, 1985, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/charlupski>.

train journeys. Yet despite the frequency with which Holocaust victims discuss their train experiences, contemporary society maintains an insufficient awareness of their role in the Holocaust. It is common for those outside the realm of professional academia to—unintentionally—confine their understanding of Holocaust suffering to the terms and statistics they hear most often: Auschwitz, gas chambers, ghettos, and six-million-dead. These then become “symbols” that limit a fuller perspective of the Jewish-Holocaust experience.⁴ According to historians Wendy Lower and Ray Brandon, a sort of “Auschwitz syndrome” has “stopped us from seeing other aspects of the Holocaust.”⁵

Thus, without proper context and understanding, one may view the transit journey as the deplorable but inevitable avenue by which Jews were moved from “point-A” to “point-B.” In reality, though, the train journeys are of much greater significance. For many victims, the train journey served as the tragic breaking point through which they lost their sense of humanity. For others, the train journey constituted the final days and hours of life—the event that predicated an instant and pitiful death. And for tens of thousands, the train was itself a coffin.

Bessie K. was a victim of train deportation, and shortly before she entered the cattle car, Nazi soldiers took her baby. Regarding the ensuing train experience, Bessie writes, “I don’t know how long we were going in the train, but to me it was a lifetime. The way I felt is I was born on the train and I died on the train...I wasn’t even alive. I wasn’t even alive. I wasn’t there.”⁶ For Bessie, the train journey marked the period of utmost devastation and tragedy; it was the epitome of Holocaust suffering.

Simone Gigliotti, Holocaust historian and author of *The Train Journey*, goes as far as to refer to the deportations as a “hidden Holocaust inside trains.”⁷ Aboard the trains, victims were confronted with

4. Dan Stone, “Beyond the Auschwitz Syndrome,” *History Today* 60, no. 7 (July 2010): 27.

5. *Ibid.*, 28.

6. Joshua Greene & Shiva Kumar, *Witness: Voices from the Holocaust* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 111.

7. Simone Gigliotti, *The Train Journey: Transit, Captivity, and Witnessing in the Holocaust* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 2.

nauseating physical conditions and the torment of countless unknowns—most deportees were left to wonder where they were going, how long it would take, and what would happen upon arrival. Tragically, once the train reached its destination, victims experienced the brutality of arrival shock as they were rapidly selected for death amidst chaos and commotion.⁸

Major deportations of Jews to extermination camps did not occur on a large scale until 1942. At the start of the war, Nazi leadership did not have a comprehensive plan to deal with the “Jewish question.”⁹ Hitler and his officers knew that they wanted greater Germany riden of Jewry, but they had not yet committed themselves to systematized mass murder. During the first few years of war, the Nazis relied on the forced emigration of Jews, even considering an option to resettle all European Jews in Madagascar.¹⁰ However, the expanding war effort soon made emigration a logistical nightmare; thus, the Germans increasingly confined the Jews to miserable ghettos.¹¹ Though Jewish ghettos were established all over German-controlled Europe, the largest were in Poland (Warsaw, Lodz, and Lublin) where two million Jews lived.¹² The Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), an agency within the SS, led the efforts to concentrate Jews in ghettos. Under the leadership of Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler, the RSHA “became the central organization of the Nazi terror.”¹³

In June 1941, Hitler and the Wehrmacht opened a second front by attacking the Soviet Union. As the German army pushed towards Moscow, Himmler and Heydrich’s SS troops followed behind and initiated the mass murder of Jews. These exterminations occurred in the East—specifically Ukraine and conquered Soviet territory—and were carried out by mobile killing units, also called the

8. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 37.

9. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler. The Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 61.

10. Jeff Hill, *The Holocaust* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 2006), 160. Called the “Madagascar Plan,” German officials detailed a plan by which Germany would acquire Madagascar from France via mandate. Jews were then to be shipped to Madagascar where they would be largely self-provisioning, though still under the rule of Germany. It quickly proved unfeasible and was dropped from serious consideration once Operation Barbarossa failed to decisively win the war.

11. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), 106.

12. Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich*, 115.

13. Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler’s Hangman: The Life of Heydrich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 167.

Einsatzgruppen.¹⁴ Overall, during 1941 and 1942, the mobile killing units shot and killed over 1.5 million Jews.¹⁵ However, in the eyes of Nazi leadership, the methods of the *Einsatzgruppen* proved inefficient and detrimental to the soldiers tasked with carrying out such heinous acts.¹⁶ After visiting a mass shooting and burial site in Minsk, Himmler was troubled by the impact that such barbarous acts had on his men. A witness to Himmler's visit remembered him worrying about the shooters: "These men are finished for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages."¹⁷ As a result of his visit, Himmler began to more urgently seek other methods of killing.

When the Nazis failed to decisively defeat the Soviet Union through Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's desire to eradicate Jewry intensified.¹⁸ Himmler and Heydrich responded to the heightened urgency by conceiving a more systematic effort of extermination. By the summer of 1941, Himmler and Heydrich had moved from concepts of resettlement and mass shootings to large-scale deportations and mass exterminations.¹⁹ Hitler wanted all Jews from the greater German region removed and the most likely destination was the General Government (Poland). Interfering with this action was Hans Frank, the Nazi official in charge of the General Government. Frank refused to receive any more shipments of Jews because the Polish ghettos were already well beyond their max capacity and conditions were virtually unlivable.²⁰ Frank was adamant that Poland's ghettos, namely Warsaw, Lodz, and Lublin, needed to be liquidated immediately. In a speech recorded in his diary, Frank stated, "Gentleman, I must ask you to rid

14. Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 13.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 10. Browning's book examines the individual soldiers of a specific *Einsatzgruppen* unit. His thesis argues that the soldiers who committed mass murder were in fact ordinary men, not sadistic monsters. Thus, their orders to murder Jews took a brutal psychological toll.

17. Arad Yitzhak, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 8.

18. Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (New York: Random House, 1991), 204.

19. *Ibid.*, 199.

20. *Ibid.*, 235.

yourself of all feeling of pity. We must annihilate the Jews... We now have approximately 2,500,000 of them in the general government... the general government must become free of Jews”²¹ Frank’s fervent desire for the liquidation of Polish Jews fit nicely within Himmler and Heydrich’s developing plan of mass deportation and extermination. Thus, by the fall of 1941, Himmler and Heydrich initiated the systemized liquidation of all Polish Jews, deporting them to extermination centers.

In early 1942, top Nazi officials met at the Wannsee Conference, which Heydrich propagated as a means to affirm approval for his authority in carrying out the Final Solution.²² At Wannsee, Heydrich informed the attendants of the fact that, ultimately, roughly eleven million European Jews would need to be “resettled to the East.”²³ In actuality, Heydrich’s vague and understated language described the deportations and murders that were yet underway. Months prior to the Wannsee Conference, Adolf Eichmann—the RSHA’s administrative director of emigration and deportation—was already arranging for Jews to be deported to Chelmno where they were killed via mobile gas vans.²⁴ Meanwhile, new and larger annihilation camps were being constructed.²⁵ Heydrich and Himmler’s efforts culminated in the initiation of “Operation Reinhard,” which commenced widespread deportations of Polish Jews to the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka extermination camps.²⁶ Together, these three camps constituted “pure” death camps in that their sole purpose was to immediately murder deportees.²⁷ Operation Reinhard

21. Ibid., 184.

22. Gerwath, *Hitler’s Hangman*, 148.

23. Ibid., 149.

24. David Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a “Desk Murderer”* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2004), 101. Chelmno, the first of the Nazis’ six annihilation centers, began operations in December of 1941. By war’s end, 152,000 Jews would be killed at Chelmno, almost exclusively by mobile gas vans.

25. Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide*, 229.

26. Arad Yitzhak, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 15. The operation was named after Reinhard Heydrich (chief of the RSHA) who was assassinated in June 1942. In his place, Odilo Globocnik took control as the managing director of Operation Reinhard’s extermination processes.

27. Stone, “Beyond the Auschwitz Syndrome,” 29.

occurred almost completely in 1942 and 1943. The Nazis put over 1.5 million Jews on trains, which took them to Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka.²⁸ Almost none survived.²⁹

In conjunction with Operation Reinhard, the Nazis added the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek extermination camps. Thus, beginning in 1942, the Final Solution was centered on the deportation of Jews from ghettos and holding camps to the six main annihilation centers.³⁰ Himmler planned and strategically placed each of the major killing centers in locations that offered “access to main lines as well as seclusion.”³¹ Jews from Poland, and soon from all over Europe, were forced to make the train journey from communities and ghettos to extermination camps.

A joint effort between the Deutsche Reichsbahn and SS carried out large-scale deportations of Jews to extermination centers, beginning with the Operation Reinhard Camps and then primarily through Auschwitz. During the war, Germany’s national railway, the Deutsch Reichsbahn, continued to function as a private enterprise by providing transit service to paying customers.³² However, since coming to power in 1933, Nazi leadership worked to realign the Reichsbahn with government objectives, and this process was anything but smooth. Tension between the two powerful institutions proved persistent, exasperated by the habit of the Nazi government to “take money from the Reichsbahn’s operating account for its own purposes.”³³ Dissension aside, the Reichsbahn proved vital to the Nazi war effort as it transported the Wehrmacht’s supplies and personnel.³⁴

28. Benz, *The Holocaust*, 145-151. Benz estimates that 600,000, 250,000, and 900,000 Jews were murdered at Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka respectively. By the end of 1942, Himmler had already ordered for the destruction of Belzec and similar orders would later be given for Sobibor and Treblinka. Himmler wanted evidence of the wholesale murder that took place at each camp eliminated.

29. Sybille Steinbacher, *Auschwitz: A History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 38. Steinbacher’s research indicates that no more than 54 Jews survived Treblinka while just three escaped from Belzec. Chelmno, though not a part of Operation Reinhard, operated alongside the other camps and saw just two survivors.

30. Yaron Pasher, *Holocaust Versus Wehrmacht: How Hitler’s “Final Solution” Undermined the German War Effort* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 5.

31. Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich*, 117.

32. *Ibid.*, 162.

33. *Ibid.*, 65.

34. *Ibid.*

The Reichsbahn also provided the trains that the SS used to move Jewish deportees to ghettos and later to extermination camps. According to historian Yaron Pasher, the Reichsbahn provided over 40,000 train wagons and 2,500 locomotives for the deportation of Jews³⁵ and devoted “significant amounts of logistical attention to the deportation of Jews.” The Reichsbahn was so involved the systematized killings that Raul Hilberg dubbed it a “live organism.”³⁶ Alfred Mierzejewski, a prominent historian on Germany’s rail history, also makes strong assertions in regard to the Reichsbahn’s involvement in the Holocaust:

The Deutsch Reichsbahn was involved in the Nazi program of persecution of the Jews from beginning to end. Without the provision of transport by the Reichsbahn, the Holocaust would not have been possible. About half of the Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis were brought to their deaths by the DRB...it is impossible to estimate the overall effort made by the Reichsbahn to support the racist assault on Europe’s Jews. In absolute terms, there can be no doubt that it was substantial.³⁷

The logistics involved in deporting Jews to extermination camps were extremely complex. Throughout the war, the Reichsbahn worked closely with Himmler’s SS and Heydrich’s RSHA. More specifically, the Reichsbahn partnered with Adolf Eichmann—head of the RSHA’s department for deportations and transports—to coordinate the movement of Jews en masse.³⁸ Eichmann has been the subject of much controversy since the war ended, as historians have struggled to define his role within the implementation of the Holocaust. Eichmann’s job was strictly administrative—he oversaw the logistical processes that made way for the “resettlement” of Jews to the East. Eichmann was responsible for the paperwork that ensured that the correct trains were in the correct place to take the correct number of Jews to the correct destination.³⁹ In post-war trials, Eichmann adamantly defended his actions, claiming to be a

35. *Ibid.*, 5.

36. Raul Hilberg, “German Railroads/Jewish Souls,” *Society* 35, no. 2 (1998): 162.

37. Mierzejewski, *The Most Valuable Asset of the Reich*, 114; 128.

38. Gigliotti, *The Train Journey*, 40.

39. Cesarini, *Becoming Eichmann*, 117.

“paper-pusher” who followed orders. In reality, Eichmann, through his administrative duties, was the “managing director of the greatest single genocide in history.”⁴⁰

The complexity of coordinating Jewish deportation was present at both the macro and micro level. At the macro level, the Nazis struggled to merge their efforts with foreign offices across Europe. On a micro level, the Nazis utilized a mountain of memorandums and personnel to actually move individual Jews from hometowns and ghettos to extermination centers. The Nazis relied heavily on the cooperation of the Jewish Councils (*Judenrat*) to implement their decrees. Most often, it was the Jewish Council that chose and informed the individuals who were to be deported.⁴¹ A 1941 “Notice of Evacuation” released by the Stuttgart Jewish Council partly reads: “we are obliged to inform you that you and the children above have been assigned to an evacuation transport to the East...you have been officially banned from disposing of your property....You should pay the required sum of RM 57.65 per person immediately to the Jewish Council.”⁴² The hyperbolic language used by the Nazis and presented by Jewish Councils helped coerce Jews into following orders.

Even once Jews were rounded up for deportation, the complexities extended to issues of payment and train space. In simplified terms, the Reichsbahn treated Jewish deportees as third-class passengers, while the SS (specifically the RSHA) was considered the paying customer, as they were the entity requesting the trains.⁴³ For the most part, freight, or “cattle” cars, were provided for the deportation of Jews; Nazi records refer to them as “special” trains.⁴⁴ The predominant use of train cars that were purposed for animals and equipment confirms that those involved in coordinating Jewish deportations—namely the Reichsbahn and the SS—considered the Jews solely as cargo that needed to be moved and, ultimately, destroyed. As previously mentioned, the Reichsbahn charged payment to the SS for the

40. Ibid.

41. Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*, 318.

42. Hill, *The Holocaust*, 164.

43. Ibid., 40-41.

44. Ibid., 41.

deportations of Jews. However, the SS rarely paid for deportations out of its own pocket. Rather, it used money generated through the confiscation of Jewish possessions and currency to pay the fares for Jewish deportees.⁴⁵ Prior to deportation, the Germans forced Jews to sign over all their possessions to state control.⁴⁶ These “special taxes” were often collected from Jews in ghettos. Thus, Raul Hilberg offers a grim conclusion: “the Jews paid for their own transport to the killing centers.”⁴⁷

Survival accounts of the deportation experience provide an eye-opening perspective into the deplorable conditions of the train journeys. The journey from a ghetto to an extermination center was not simply uncomfortable—it was physically nauseating, humiliating, and traumatizing. Holocaust survivors’ horrific memories of how deportations assaulted their senses weigh heavily on them as they recount their experiences, though they are decades removed from the war. For instance, when asked about what she remembers from the train, Bella Camhi responds, “I, I, I can’t forget it.” The interviewer pressed Camhi, and she reiterates a loss for words: “I just can’t forget it.”⁴⁸ The miserable physical conditions were made worse by the fact that most train journeys lasted multiple days. Thus, Jews did not simply put up with the repulsive conditions for a short time; rather, they suffered through a hellish environment that worsened with each passing hour.

The most basic theme of deportation survival testimonies is that of dehumanization. Deportees were continually stripped of their personhood. This was mainly achieved by excessive over-crowding, thereby compounding the shame that Jews felt from being transported in “cattle cars.” Nearly every survivor mentions the assault of physical space that sprung from packed freight cars. When executing the deportation of the Jews, the Nazis looked to be as efficient as possible. With only a limited number of

45. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 298.

46. Cesarini, *Becoming Eichmann*, 121.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Bella Camhi, “Bella Camhi,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, November 18, 1999, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/camhi/>. The repetition of “I” in Camhi’s testimony speaks to the difficulty that survivors faced when recounting Holocaust testimony. Many survivors stutter and repeat themselves as they search for the right words, while also dealing with the pain that accompanies such memories. The words of each testimony have been presented in their original form.

trains, and with most being devoted to the Wehrmacht's war efforts, the Nazis packed freight cars beyond capacity. Toward the end of the war, when the German hopes of winning rung futile, the Nazis made habit of forcing over 150 Jewish deportees into a single freight car.⁴⁹ Alexander Schleifer, a Czech Jew sent to Auschwitz in 1944, remembers the train being so packed that the deportees were "on top of each other. Just like cattle."⁵⁰ Agi Rubin, a victim of Hungarian deportation, recalls that the victims on her train "were like sardines packed."⁵¹ Helene Shiver, when retelling her journey from Bulgaria to Dachau, also likened the cattle car to can of sardines, as everyone was standing and pressed up against one another.⁵² The comparison to sardines, like that of cattle, suggests that deportees felt as though their humanness were removed, and that they were something much less important, even undeserving of personal space.

The manner by which deportation made Jews feel subhuman also confirmed such ideas in SS officials. The humiliating and dehumanizing deportation process twisted the moral capacity of Nazi perpetrators—they were unable to recognize Jewish deportees as individuals. In an interview with Franz Stangl—SS commandant of the Sobibor and Treblinka camps—Gitta Sterny asked Stangl how he viewed Jewish victims during the war, to which Stangl replied, "Cargo. They were cargo...I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass."⁵³ Stangl went on to explain that a turning point in the degradation of his moral judgment came when Christian Wirth—Stangl's superior and the SS commandant of Belzec—asked him, "What shall we do with this garbage?" when referring to murdered deportees.⁵⁴ The sheer scale of senseless horror was void of humanity. The result was that Jewish

49. Pasher, *Holocaust Versus Wehrmacht*, 5.

50. Alexander Schleifer, "Alexander Schleifer," interview by Sidney Bolkosky, August 1, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/schleifer/>.

51. Agi Rubin, "Agi Rubin," interview by Sidney Bolkosky, December 19, 1984, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/rubin/>.

52. Helene Shiver, "Shiver Presentation," DVD. April 17, 2000.

53. Michael Berenbaum, *Witness to the Holocaust: An Illustrated Documentary History of the Holocaust in the Words of its Victims, Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 192.

54. *Ibid.*, 193.

deportees were no longer individual people worthy of right treatment—neither in their own eyes or the Nazis’ eyes.

The spatial abuse caused by excessive crowding was made worse by other forms of sensory overload. For instance, countless survivors mention the horrible sounds that persisted throughout the journey. For Agi Rubin, the sounds were the most horrific aspect of the journey: “And the screams, the sounds, sounds still irritate me. Terrible, it's more fearful to me than being hit over the head. It was the sound.”⁵⁵ It is difficult for an individual today to imagine the devastation of hearing the helpless wails and cries on deportation trains, but for Rubin—as well as other survivors—the sounds of desperate friends, relatives, and strangers never cease to haunt her. David Kahan’s recollection of his train journey highlights the overwhelming commotion that battered the senses: “And, and again, the people screaming and crying and, and, and it was just, that was the first horrible, horrible situation that, that uh, I recall vividly, that we were packed in those cattle trains.”⁵⁶ Many survivors recount the prevalence of crying children and ailing elderly. Eva Ciglar remembers the constant “moaning and screaming” of “young one, babies, and old men.”⁵⁷ Paul Molnar recollects how many people “were screaming and some of them flipped out.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, no deportee had the option to separate him or herself from the fears, screams, and cries that enveloped the train journey

The freight cars that took Jews to extermination camps did not have bathroom facilities. This caused extreme humiliation and discomfort to the millions of Jews deported to extermination camps. Deportation survivors consistently explain that Nazi officials would place a single bucket or pail in each freight car to collect human waste. Survivors’ accounts of how they relieved themselves on the train are

55. Ibid.

56. David Kahan, “David Kahan,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, August 14, 1995, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/kahand/>.

57. Eva Ciglar, “Eva Ciglar,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, March 17, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/cigler/>.

58. Paul Molnar, “Paul Molnar,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, July 24, 2002, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/molnar/>.

both shocking and heart wrenching. Rose Green describes how there was “no privacy” as one would go to the bathroom in the bucket while “we were standing around ... it’s terrible.”⁵⁹ Regarding the waste bucket, Maurice Negre writes that “in a few hours it was full and overflowing and gave off a terrible odor. After that, people had no choice but to relieve themselves directly on the floor, and then meant we spent the trip enveloped in a poisonous stench.”⁶⁰ The shame and embarrassment was not just confined to relieving oneself in the bucket. Numerous accounts mentioned the shame involved in attempting to empty the bucket by dumping it out of the small windows of the freight car. Survivors went to great lengths to remove waste from the car, even when no bucket was given. David Lea remembers seeing others defecate on their hands before throwing it out the windows.⁶¹

Deportees were forced to act in ways that went against every inclination of self-worth and civility. Nathan Roth and Henry Krystal both recall memories of how the packed trains prevented many individuals from accessing the waste buckets. In regards to such situations, Krystal describes how those people “did what they needed to do and that was part of the, the, the, the, the confrontation with one’s excrements.”⁶² Similarly, Roth remembers that people would have to go to the bathroom “Right under them, under themselves.”⁶³ Felicia Shoss simply explains that many people “couldn’t control themselves” and relieved themselves in the midst of everyone.⁶⁴

Many survivors remember attempts made by collective groups in the cattle cars to avoid the dehumanizing process of defecating in the open. The idea of individuals working with one another to

59. Rose Green, “Rose Green,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, May 21, 2008, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/green/>.

60. Eugene Aroneanu, *Inside the Concentration Camps: Eyewitness Accounts of Life in Hitler’s Death Camps*, translated by Thomas Whissen (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 3.

61. David Lea, “Archive.” *Voices of the Holocaust*, 2015, accessed November 19, 2015, http://voices.iit.edu/search_results?filter_by=name.

62. Henry Krystal, “Henry Krystal,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, September 19, 1996, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/krystal/>.

63. Nathan Roth, “Nathan Roth,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, February 4, 1983, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/roth/>.

64. Felicia Shloss, “Felicia Shloss,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, February 19, 1983, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/schloss/>.

overcome such an embarrassing and miserable plight is difficult to comprehend. Jews had to exercise creativity and ingenuity in order to sustain a semblance of privacy. In a 2000 lecture, Helene Shiver described how many of the men shifted to the corner of the wagon and formed a makeshift wall. Those who had to go to the bathroom scooted behind the men and relieved themselves.⁶⁵ Over time the waste piled up, making the air disgusting and causing appalling levels of embarrassment. During train deportations, Jews had to rub shoulders with family members and strangers alike as they relieved themselves. Crammed face to face, they had to look other deportees in the eyes, yet somehow disassociate themselves from their humanness in order to go to the bathroom while those same eyes unavoidably looked on.

Wretched air was the miserable culmination of the train journey's physical vices. It should be noted that most cattle cars were sealed or closed wagons, which meant that the train doors were kept shut and the inside festered.⁶⁶ Most deportation trains did have a couple of small windows near the ceiling of the freight, but they were barred up by the Nazis to discourage escape attempts. Thus, the air inside the train quickly became humid, heavy, and foul. Body odor, human excrement, and oppressive heat combined to make the air unbearably heavy and nauseating. Countless survivors recall the vile air that permeated the train. Survivor Fred Ferber recalls the awful "stench" that came from the hot air and open excrement. Survivor Shari Weiss remembers that it felt like the air "was being taken away from you." Eventually, the air became too much to bear, and Shari's explanation of the deportees' response is tragic: "So we were scurrying like rats on a ship to find a place to get a little air. I mean I remember putting my face against a crack so that I should feel a little air coming through because otherwise you would suffocate."⁶⁷

65. Shiver, "Shiver Presentation," 2000.

66. "German Railways and the Holocaust," *USHMM*, 2015, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005445>.

67. Shari Weiss, "Shari Weiss," interview by Sidney Bolkosky, April 17, 1985, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/weiss/>.

For most deportees, the suffocating air exasperated their pervasive thirst; the lack of water was the cause of insurmountable anguish. A great number of Holocaust testimonies speak of a “crippling,”⁶⁸ “overwhelming,” and “constant thirst”⁶⁹ that plagued deportees. Larry Brenner, a Hungarian Jew who was deported to Auschwitz, describes the lack of water as a “murderous thing.”⁷⁰ Martin Shlanger, when on transit from Budapest to Poland, recalls how the “agonizing thirst of children” made them scream and yell endlessly.⁷¹ Paul Molnar, after discussing the numerous miseries of deportation, concludes that “What we really missed was water.”⁷² Fred Ferber describes how obtaining a minutia of water from leaking pipes was his only relief and a “tremendous benefit.”⁷³

For most, however, no relief came. Dehydration was commonplace on Holocaust trains. Once dehydration set in, passengers were truly desperate to curb their thirst in any manner possible. On this issue, Dr. Leloir recalls, “All of us were racked with thirst. I saw some of my comrades pushed to the point of drinking their own urine, others to licking the sweat off the backs of fellow prisoners.”⁷⁴

Ultimately, matters such as the lack of water were made worse by the unpredictably long durations of the train journeys. In “Cattle Car Complexes,” Simone Gigliotti notes that deportation trains often traveled slow and were delayed frequently due to heavy traffic, often from trains supporting Wehrmacht operations.⁷⁵ Many survivors recall the miserable frustration of the trains constantly starting and stopping. Mira Kimmelman recalls how the “journey seemed endless with so many stops along the

68. Ibid.

69. Greene and Kuman, *Witness*, 108.

70. Brenner, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/brenner/>.

71. Martin Shlanger, “Martin Shlanger,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, March 4, 1983, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/shlanger/>.

72. Molnar, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/molnar/>.

73. Aroneanu, *Inside the Concentration Camps*, 117

74. Simone Gigliotti, “‘Cattle Car Complexes’: A Correspondence with Historical Captivity and Post-Holocaust Witness,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 25.

way to allow military trains to pass.”⁷⁶ Journeys from Greece, specifically the island of Corfu, were known to last more than two weeks.⁷⁷ Upon arrival, deportees were terribly weakened from the deplorable conditions and only a few were in any condition to be selected for work; 95% of the Jews from Corfu were immediately gassed.⁷⁸

Beyond the physical conditions of the train, one of the most prevalent themes that pervade survivor accounts of the deportation trains is the unknown. Confusion, ignorance, and deception riddled the transit journeys of Jewish victims. For starters, Jews were never given specifics about their destination. Nazi officials were pressed to keep Jews compliant during deportation so that delays would be limited and the deportation schedules would be kept. Nazi officials deliberately deceived Jews with vague promises about their eventual destinations. Survivors repeatedly describe how they were often promised that the trains would take them to places of work, that they would be useful, and that they would be reunited with their families. Szymon Binke, a Holocaust survivor who was taken from Lodz to Auschwitz, recounts the deceiving promises of the Nazi official in charge of deportation, as well as the response of the Jews: “He [German official] says, “They [Russians] are coming and they'll kill you because you are uh, uh, working for the German uh, uh, war machine. We'll give you jobs in the uh, in, in Germany. You'll be taken care of,’ blah-blah-blah and all this and you know we believed him. So a lot of people even volunteered to, to, to uh, to go there.”⁷⁹

The promise of work and an improved situation, even if difficult to believe, was effective in securing Jewish compliance. Life in the ghettos was brutal, and any opportunity to escape must have been powerfully appealing. Bella Camhi, a Jewish deportee from Salonika Greece, discussed the allure of

75. Mira Kimmelman, *Echoes from the Holocaust: A Memoir* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 56.

76. “Transports to Extinction,” *Yad Vashem: The International Institute for Holocaust Research*, 2015, accessed November 9, 2015, <http://db.yadvashem.org/deportation/search.html?language=en>.

77. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 120.

78. Szymon Binke, “Szymon Binke,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, June 16, 1997, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/binke/>.

work, saying, “they’re giving you work, what else you want? It’s something that you don’t have here.”⁸⁰

To some Jews, the promise of work seemed sensible. Throughout the war, Jews in the ghetto received word about the status of the war. As the war prolonged and Germany suffered defeats more frequently, the need for Jewish workers in the Eastern front seemed logical. In her memoir, Mira Kimmelman remembers having such thoughts: “They needed us, their slaves, to work for Germany’s war machine. As long as we had strength, we were to repair roads and bridges, dig ditches... This was the reason the order was given to evacuate us to Auschwitz.”⁸¹

Survivor accounts suggest that there was no standard method of deception used by the Nazis. Some Nazi officials promised food or safety,⁸² while others promised deportees that compliance would allow for reunification with family.⁸³ For instance, Salvatore and Lili Katan, siblings and natives of Greece, were told that participating in the deportation would keep their entire family together. Thus, they willingly boarded the train that eventually deposited them at Auschwitz; most of their family was murdered there.⁸⁴ Others were given no specific promise, but were simply ordered by the Nazis to meet at a certain location, usually a school, church, or civic building, and await their deportation to the East. Abraham P. remembers waiting at the school for departure: “They kept us there all day long, not knowing what is going to happen, what they are going to do. And everybody was just sitting there, with their own thoughts.”⁸⁵ For the most part, Jews adhered to even vague instructions such as this. When compared to the detestable ghettos, a new destination seemed to be the only good option. Ultimately, because of the

79. Bella Camhi, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/camhi/>.

80. Kimmelman, *Echoes from the Holocaust*, 55.

81. Ruth Kent, “Ruth Kent,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, May 4, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/kentru/>.

82. Bella Camhi, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/camhi/>.

83. Salvatore and Lili Katan, “Salvatore and Lili Katan,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, August 18, 1981, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/katan/>.

84. Greene and Kumar, *Witness*, 105.

deception and vague orders employed by Nazis, most Jews voluntarily and hopefully entered the train cars, unsure of their destination, but under the false impression that it would take them somewhere better.

Many survivor accounts do not mention the deception of Nazi officials, but simply stress their absolute uncertainty about the destination of deportation. The fear of an unknown fate was especially difficult for families. Most deportees lived with their families in community camps and ghettos prior to deportation. Thus, families were often deported together, enduring the journey among those they held most dear. Helen Lang remembers witnessing a mother of nine children, seemingly unconcerned with anything but the needs of her children, all of who were overcome with severe dehydration.⁸⁶ For that mother, personal suffering and fear were put on the wayside, and her thoughts were undoubtedly centered on the coming fate of her precious children. The sheer brutality of the train journey meant that some individuals had to helplessly watch their family members die en route. Helen K., recounting her deportation to Madjanek, writes, “My brother died in my arms...There was not enough oxygen for all those people.”⁸⁷ Helen, in the midst of the utter confusion and nauseating conditions, had to simultaneously experience and process the death of her brother, something of which she could do nothing about.

Survivor Freda Magnus shares the heartbreaking story of her family’s lot. During much of the war, Magnus and her family were in hiding near the Lodz ghetto in Poland. One day, Magnus witnessed her brother’s capture and subsequent deportation. She quickly went to her family’s hiding place and convinced them to go with her brother so that they could all remain together. During the deportation journey, Magnus contemplated the fear of the unknown fortune that she had brought upon her family. Tragically, Magnus and her family were deported to Auschwitz, whereupon Freda was selected to work

85. Helen Lang, “Helen Lang,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, February 23, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/lang/>.

86. Greene and Kumar, *Witness*, 108.

while her family was murdered. Magnus states that she is “sorry to this day,” feeling responsible for her family’s deaths.⁸⁸

While the concept of an unknown fate dominated the thoughts of deportees, it also brought faith and religion to the forefront of the transit experience. The circumstances of the train journey epitomized desperation and helplessness, thereby causing many victims to search for answers in God. In his article on post-Holocaust interpretation, Dan Mathewson explores the wide-ranging views of God held by Holocaust survivors, historians, and authors. Mathewson’s article presents a clear picture of the struggle to reconcile the Judeo-Christian God to the reality of the Holocaust, and how to relate such understanding to the biblical story of Job. When paralleling Job to the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel sees Job as a model for the Holocaust survivor’s protest against an “unjust deity.”⁸⁹ On the other hand, Marissa Raphael, a Jewish professor of theology, believes that Job and the Holocaust illustrate God’s relational goodness. And according to the Jewish writer Richard Rubenstein, the Holocaust demands “God to be dead.”⁹⁰ The differences of opinion among prominent Jewish thinkers suggest that the religious questions put forth as a consequence of the Holocaust are awfully difficult ones. They weigh heavily on individuals today, and they most certainly weighed heavily on those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand. Questions about God and religion were repeatedly considered as Jews endured the cattle car journey.

In her memoir on the Holocaust, Erna Rubinstein, a Polish Jew, writes about a certain rainy day at the very onset of the war when she lived in Przesmyśl, Poland. After being informed that the Germans were quickly approaching, Rubinstein remembers praying to God with “fervent devotion,” so much so that—to Rubinstein—“The prayer so filled my entire being that nothing but God existed. Imbued, thus, with His omnipotence and His tremendous capacity to direct things, I walked out of the church,

87. Freda Magnus, “Freda Magnus,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, July 22, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/magnus/>.

88. Dan Mathewson, “Between Testimony and Interpretation: The Book of Job in Post-Holocaust, Jewish Theological Reflection,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 18.

89. *Ibid.*, 19.

completely at peace with myself.”⁹¹ Once the Germans arrived, they moved Rubinstein and the Przesmysl Jews to the Plaszow ghetto. A few years later, having spent that time enduring detestable ghetto conditions, Rubinstein was deported to Auschwitz. On the train, she recalls how, once the initial shock had worn off and the foul air became unbearable, the cattle car filled with the prayers of the deportees: “we all repeated: ‘Adon Olam, Lord of the Universe....’ Our prayers enveloped us sounding loud and clear.”⁹² Once the train reached Auschwitz, Rubinstein and some others were selected for work, but the vast majority was gassed upon arrival. Rubinstein’s circumstances demanded that pious faith be juxtaposed with inexplicable suffering. In the cattle cars, Jews desperately called out to God, imploring him to be their rescuer and pleading for a semblance of hope amidst rampant death. The startling reality of extreme human cruelty made the cattle cars prisons of spiritual confusion, and it forced the prisoners to confront their God in light of such absurd tragedy.

Religious questioning penetrated familial constructs as well. Edith P., a Czechoslovak Jew who was deported to Auschwitz, remembers her sister asking their father about God: “I remember my sister told him, ‘Father! We have always been a very God-loving people. How come that God has forsaken us?’”⁹³ Edith shares that her father was a “devout religious man,” but how can a father answer such a profound question amidst the senseless horrors taking place? How does a father provide a suitable defense of God when being questioned by his fearful and anguished daughter on board a train to an unknown fate? The train cars were not simply locations of spiritual suffering on an individual level, but saw the weight of religious questioning penetrate familial bonds. Parents who had for so long taught their children about a loving and sovereign God were suddenly rendered answerable to such claims, yet having to do so as their children sat among human waste, battled dehydration, breathed insufferable air, and awaited an unknown destination.

90. Erna Rubinstein, *The Survivor in Us All: A Memoir of the Holocaust* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983), 34.

91. *Ibid.*, 113.

92. Greene and Kumar, *Witness*, 112.

David Kahan recalls his father “praying all the time” during the deportation journey. Similarly, Ilya Kessler, who was a young girl when deported, remembers all the “old people” davening and praying. For Kessler, the atrocities she witnessed were too much to bear, and she now believes that “[there is] no God.”⁹⁴ Kessler was not the only survivor to attribute a loss of faith to the experience of the deportation experience. Bella Camhi describes her own spiritual dissonance: “Sitting in there and I says to myself, this is not justice. This is—if God is there, I start taking it with Him, from so religion, I started not believing anymore. How can a human flesh go through?”⁹⁵

When studying the train journey from a modern perspective, it is easy to act as though Jewish victims simply went through the motions of suffering set before them, as if they were somehow unaware of the unprecedented injustices being acted upon them. However, Camhi’s testimony suggests that the some deportees were conscious of the unexplainable atrocity that was taking place. As a result, they were forced to wrestle with unfathomably difficult, transcendent questions while simultaneously bearing the weight of Nazi cruelty. For Camhi, such questions proved to be unanswerable, beyond the reach of a higher power. The ramifications of the unknown during the train journey were truly of spiritual proportions.

The physical and psychological effects of the deportation journey encompassed the essence of Nazi evil, but the proceedings of camp arrival gave such evil a tragic finality. By the time the deportation trains reached the extermination camps, the deportees had been deceived, dehumanized, humiliated, weakened, and disoriented. Tragically, the arrival at extermination camps brought more suffering. Deportees were immediately met with a “tumult” of commotion.⁹⁶ Battered and confused, Jews were swiftly navigated through the horrid selection process where, unbeknownst to them, their fate was to be helplessly sealed.

93. Ilya Kessler, “Ilya Kessler,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, November 1, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/Kessler/>.

94. Camhi, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/camhi/>.

95. *Ibid.*

Arrival proceedings were relatively consistent between the Operation Reinhard death camps. Auschwitz, being much larger in scale and more meticulously planned, operated deportee arrivals differently. The Operation Reinhard Camps—Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka—were constructed hastily and were limited in capacity, thereby preventing them from holding an entire train within its campgrounds.⁹⁷ As a result, deportation trains always stopped just outside the camp. Then, usually twenty at a time, engines pushed cattle cars into the camp where the Jews were forced out, and then the empty wagons moved back outside the camp. This process was repeated until completion and it caused great suffering among the trapped deportees.

For one, the process of moving individual cattle cars in and out of the camp was extremely time consuming. This meant that victims were trapped inside wagons for many hours, sometimes for over a day, awaiting entrance into the camp. Proximity to the camp meant that victims could smell the odor of the crematoriums and burial grounds. After a long journey, the toxic physical conditions of the train wagons festered inside the static cattle cars. Many Jews died of starvation, dehydration, and disease within a stationary wagon, just a few meters from the death camp that was purposed to do the killing. This was especially prevalent at Belzec, where gassing installations consistently broke down, thus causing “unimaginable suffering to the deportees who...were crammed into railway cars...and left to suffocate on sidings only a few hundred meters from the camp.”⁹⁸

Abraham Bomba, a survivor of Treblinka, remembers arriving without any knowledge of what occurred at the camp.⁹⁹ Though his train reached Treblinka by 6:00 a.m., his cattle car did not enter the grounds of the camp until noon. For six hours, Abraham witnessed train after train—each full of Jews—

96. Michael Allen, “Not Just a ‘Dating Game’: Origins of the Holocaust at Auschwitz in the Light of Witness Testimony,” *German History* 25, no. 2 (April 2007): 165. Unlike Auschwitz, Chelmo and the Operation Reinhard camps were built ad hoc, often time through the use of existing structures and scavenged materials.

97. Berenbaum, *Witness to the Holocaust*, 188. Belzec, the first camp of Operation Reinhard, was constructed in early 1942. Its commandant, Christian Wirth, was notorious for experimenting with different methods of killing. Unlike Auschwitz where the gas Zyklon B was used, Belzec (as well as Sobibor and Treblinka) used much less dependable forms of gassing, such as engine exhaust.

98. Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 44.

move into the camp and then return an hour or so later, but empty. For those six hours, Abraham endured the miserable odors, agonizing thirst, and persistent cries of other deportees, all covered by the lingering question of what was happening to those who were being brought into the camp.

In their interviews, survivors consistently recall the initial chaos and mayhem when the train doors were opened. Deportees were struck with a frenzy of activity. The sudden hyperactivity was especially overwhelming because it came on the heels of prolonged inactivity within the cattle cars. The sharp contrast between the static, nauseating train ride and the rushed tumult of arrival was extreme beyond measure and haunts those who survived. Abraham Bomba, one of the few survivors of Treblinka, remembers the frantic response of the Jews upon entering Treblinka: “The crying and the hollering and the shouting that was going on over there! It was impossible. The hollering and the crying was in your ears and your mind for days and days, and at night the same thing. From the howling you couldn’t even sleep a couple of nights.”¹⁰⁰

Survivor testimony presents numerous commonalities to the arrival experience. First, deportees were immediately commanded to leave their belongings on the train or discard them into a nearby ditch.¹⁰¹ This was the cause of much confusion among deportees. Many deportees yet hoped that genuine resettlement laid beyond the deportation journey. For instance, the Nazis gathered thousands of prized family photos and heirlooms from Jewish prisoners entering the Madjanek camp. The Jews believed that a new home—in some form—awaited them; thus, they brought their most beloved possessions, not knowing that, upon arrival, their possessions would be taken as a precursor to their death.¹⁰²

Being forced to abandon the last of their possessions dashed such hopes. As luggage was piled near the railcars, so too were the bodies of those who died during the train ride: “We had to unload the boxcars not just of the suitcases but also of the dead and dying. The dead—and that included anybody

99. *Ibid.*, 37.

100. Eva Ackermann, “Eva Ackermann,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, December 6, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/Ackermann/>.

118. *A Painful Reminder: Evidence for All Mankind*, DVD, directed by Brian Blake (London: Grandpa Television, 1985).

who could not stand up—were tossed onto a pile. The suitcases and packages were gathered and the boxcars were scrubbed down so that no trace remained of their hideous contents.”¹⁰³

Many survivors recall their interaction with the *sonderkommando* and *kapos*—Jewish prisoners who assisted the SS with train arrivals—and how they looked like “non-humans.”¹⁰⁴ Other survivors recall the prevalence of German Shepherds, and how their loud barks added to the intimidating and hectic scene. And yet the most traumatizing part of stepping off the trains was the odor of death: “the smells were terrible, especially the chimneys.”¹⁰⁵ In a post-war interview, Franz Stangl—the Nazi commandant of Sobibor and Treblinka—recalled his first visit to Belzec in early 1942: “As one arrived, one first reached Belzec railway station, on the left side of the road... The smell. Oh God, the smell. It was everywhere.”¹⁰⁶

It is difficult to imagine the polarizing shock the deportees experienced after being immobilized in the freight cars for multiple days, and then to so quickly be released into a frenzy of energy and action. George Vine, who was just a child when he was transported to Auschwitz, remembers what it felt like when the train door opened:

And all of a sudden these doors open up and all of a sudden you face, you know, your blinded. You couldn't see nothing. All you heard is, is, is, is uh, shootings and hittings and uh, they were running around with these sticks and hitting you over the head. And of course, the situation was much more organized then it looked to us. Because they knew exactly what they were doing but to us it looked like it was chaos, it was just, everybody's shooting and killing and, you know. But I only recall one thing--running. I recall that I was hit over the head and somebody pushed me off, and I was running. And the next thing I know is that I'm lined up....¹⁰⁷

101. Eugene Aroneanu, *Inside the Concentration Camps: Eyewitness Accounts of Life in Hitler's Death Camps*. Translated by Thomas Whissen. Westport (CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 5.

102. Marton Adler, “Marton Adler,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, July 13, 1989, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/adler/>.

103. Krystal, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/krystal/>.

104. Berenbaum, *Witness to the Holocaust*, 188.

105. George Vine, “George Vine,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, July 5, 1983, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/vineg/>.

Agi Rubin, much like George Vine, emphasizes how quickly her arrival at camp evoked shock and horror. There was no time to think or comprehend—the deportees simply reacted to the insane environment. Also, like Vine’s account, Rubin notes the brutal physicality of the camp arrival—the Nazis pushed, shoved, and beat the disoriented Jews into the line that would determine their fate:

And, uh, just no impression, just that chaotic, you are being shoved and you are trying to hold onto your family to stay together because that was a very important factor. You don't have any impression, you, you that was my impression, the crazy people... what's next? You don't have time to think. We were just shoved up very quickly, schnell, schnell, everything was always schnell.¹⁰⁸

Rubin’s account brings up one of the most heartbreaking aspects of the camp arrivals: separation from family. For many families, the only solace of the train journey was being with loved ones. Upon arriving at the extermination camps, the Nazis dismantled and separated families before they could understand the gravity of the situation. There were few goodbyes, little closure, and hardly the time to comprehend that loved ones were being lost forever.

Annie Eisenberg’s tragic arrival experience highlights the swiftness and horridness of family separation at extermination camps.¹⁰⁹ Eisenberg recalls how she initially got off the train with her entire family. Soon after being forced into the selection line, Eisenberg’s sister frantically ran back to the train to grab diapers for her baby. While hurrying back off the train, her foot got caught in the freight car. Eisenberg turned her attention from the selection line to her sister and helplessly watched. Eventually, Eisenberg’s sister was able to free her foot and she miraculously joined Eisenberg back in line. But when they turned their focus back to the selection, their whole family was gone. In that short time, Eisenberg’s family was selected and sent to the gas chambers. Eisenberg and her sister never saw them again.¹¹⁰

106. Rubin, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/rubin/>.

107. Anne Eisenberg, “Annie Eisenberg,” interview by Sidney Bolkosky, May 11, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/eisenberg/>.

108. *Ibid.*

Edith Roth remembers how her father ran from the selection line, desperate to retrieve food from the train for Edith and her siblings.¹¹¹ The SS demanded that he return to the selection line, to which Edith's father replied: "oh, what are my children going to eat?" The SS then beat Edith's father while Edith helplessly watched. She says in her interview: "I never, never forget my father's face." Soon after, Edith and her sister were separated from the rest of their family, never to see them again.¹¹² Amidst the chaos of arrival, Edith Roth witnessed her father being beaten simply because he acted according to the instinct of his heart—to provide and take care of his children at all costs. Before Edith could recognize the vain sacrifice of her father, and before her father could realize the consequence of his protective will, they were separated from one another forever. The chaos and commotion truly tore the bonds of family in the most heart-wrenching of ways.

Countless other survivors describe the devastating and confusing moments in which they were separated from their families. Yet even at the moment of separation, most Jews were not aware of what the different selection lines meant. For those who were selected to work, it was not until later that they learned about the fate of their friends and family. Most survivors tell of how they had little to no knowledge of a place like Auschwitz, the gas chambers, or the crematoriums before arriving. Even those that may have heard rumors usually refused to believe them—they seemed too horrible to be true.¹¹³

Ultimately, the tragedy of the deportation journey can never be fully understood by those who did not experience it. But through studying the accounts of those who survived, individuals today can develop a greater perspective of the holistic suffering that Jews endured during the Holocaust, and thus better remember and honor the memories and legacies of Holocaust victims, a concept that George Vine's father understood very well:

But he [my father] just said that you are young and you are strong and you will live, and you must live because one day the world may not believe what happened to us and you must live to be a witness and how important that statement was to me in so many different ways during my

109. Edith Roth, "Edith Roth," interview by Sidney Bolkosky, March 28, 1982, *Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/rothe/>.

110. Ibid.

111. Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 45.

lifetime from then 'til today. How these--a single statement has made such a big change in my life.¹¹⁴

Efforts to keep the truth of the Holocaust in the public's collective memory have been important since the war ended. Soon after the Allies liberated countless concentration and death camps, Allied filmmakers worked to gather footage and compile a film to forever testify to the reality of the Holocaust. Though *A Painful Reminder* was not released until many decades later, its purpose and intent remains undeniably relevant.¹¹⁵ With each passing year, the Holocaust becomes more of a distant memory, and so few of those who experienced it are alive today. Thus, the need to read the stories of those who endured the unthinkable is pressing. This paper sought to do just that, and specifically in regard to the tragic journeys of deportation.

The transit journey was holistically devastating. Jewish deportees faced an onslaught of physical and psychological traumas. The unknown permeated the train rides, forcing deportees to suffer the weight of pondering their fate. Spiritual crises, physical humiliation, and family tragedy were common to Jews on trains. Upon arrival, a frenzy of activity tore families apart and the overwhelming majority was sent to its death. Helene Shiver, after sharing her experience on her deportation to Dachau, informed her listeners: "It's a nightmare. It never goes away."¹¹⁶ Soon after, she passionately declared: "It happened!" before imploring, "Don't let anyone tell you it didn't!"¹¹⁷ It is a significant endeavor to study the accounts of Holocaust survivors, for through it, one is reminded of how much the victims endured, and that it truly happened—it happened to real individuals at a real time in history. And as they are remembered, may they be rightfully honored.

112. Vine, *Voice/Vision*, <http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/vineg/>.

112. *A Painful Reminder*, Brian Blake, 1985.

114. Shiver, "Shiver Presentation," 2000.

115. *Ibid.*