

German Railroads and the Holocaust:  
Uncovering the Tracks



This paper is dedicated to my paternal grandmother (after whom I'm named), great uncle and great aunt (pictured above right to left), and to my great-grandparents. They rode the trains to death in Auschwitz-Birkenau or forced labor. Only two came back. I am a legacy of the Shoah. But aren't we all?

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*“And in that sense I look also at the bureaucratic destruction process – for this is what it was – as a series of minute steps taken in logical order and relying above all as much as possible on experience. And this goes not only, incidentally, for the administrative steps that were taken, but also the psychological arguments, even the propaganda...Then these bureaucrats became inventors. But like all inventors of institutions they did not copyright or patent their achievements, and they prefer obscurity.”*

~ Raul Hilberg

*“When we were put onto this train, which, of course, I don’t need to describe to you. It was a cattle car, as you know. No windows and no seats. No toilet. When we got onto the trains, none of us knew we were being taken to a concentration camp. None of us knew anything about Auschwitz. At least, I don’t think we knew. We honestly thought we were going to be relocated. Until the door closed, and we heard the lock go on from the outside. I believe that was the first we knew wherever we were going to be taken to, it was not going to be freedom, and it was not going to be a great relocation.”*

~ Fritzie Fritzshall

The contrast between German perpetrators and their Jewish victims is manifest in the role of railroads in the Holocaust. During deportation to extermination camps,<sup>1</sup> the entirety of a Jew's world existed within the confines of a cramped, foul, and enervating cattle car. Outside of this world, literally and figuratively, stood the Nazi regime's most valuable weapon: Germany's railroad industry. The meticulous and methodological operation of the railroads by German government agencies<sup>2</sup> during the Holocaust was not only instrumental, but also vital to the implementation of Hitler's Final Solution. In 1934, Julius Dorpmüller, general director of the *Deutsche Reichsbahn*,<sup>3</sup> Germany's railway network, "accepted enough of the Nazi's values and goals to subordinate the *Reichsbahn* to the Hitler regime's ambitious plans for military and racial domination" (Mierzejewski 1: 25). According to historian Alfred Mierzejewski, the *Reichsbahn* knowingly cooperated under Hitler's jurisdiction to facilitate the deportation of three million European Jews to their deaths (2: xiv). What is notable here is the perpetrators' awareness and acquiescence with Hitler's plan for the systematic murder of Europe's Jewish population, although many feigned ignorance. The significance of the railroads is two-fold. The innovation, organization, and deception that characterized the bureaucratic structure of the German railroad industry enabled the Final Solution and simultaneously inflicted horror on the Jews during their

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<sup>1</sup> "After the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the Nazis began the systematic deportation of Jews from all over Europe to six extermination camps established in former Polish territory - Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek. Extermination camps were killing centers designed to carry out genocide. About three million Jews were gassed in extermination camps" ("The 'Final Solution'").

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will focus on the *Deutsche Reichsbahn*. However, there are a range of railway agencies outside of Germany worth noting - some autonomous and others under *Reichsbahn* control.

Under *Reichsbahn* Control: Krakow, Warsaw, Paris, Brussels, Dutch railways, Danish railways

Autonomous Railroads: Protektorat (Prague), Slovakia (Bratislava), Axis Satellites: Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria

Supervised by Chief of Army Transport: Norwegian railways, Croatia, Serbia, Greece, Italy (Verona)

\*See *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Vol. 2 Table 8-1

<sup>3</sup> "The *Reichsbahn* had been created through the amalgamation of the railways owned by Germany's states on 1 April 1920. In the wake of military defeat and the collapse of the imperial regime, the old state railways were unable to meet the transportation demands of the German nation and accumulated massive deficits. To overcome these problems, and to help hold the country together in the face of separatist sentiment in the Rhineland and Bavaria, the fledgling republican government unified Germany's state railways under its newly created Reich Transportation Ministry" (Mierzejewski 2: xi).

deportation. It is critical to recognize that the Germans operating the railroads and facilitating death traffic “were not just random workers throwing a switch, but part of a murderous bureaucracy, an organized evil” (Levine qtd. in Linenthal 66).

## **Part 1: The Railroad Network**

### **Progression of the *Reichsbahn*: From Military Use to Deportation**

From pre-war rearmament to the outset of World War II and through the execution of the Final Solution, the *Reichsbahn* reformed its railroads and structural organization to satisfy the military, economic, and racial policy needs of the Third Reich.<sup>4</sup> Mobilization of the German railroad industry occurred in conjunction with mobilization for war. After the *Reichsbahn* aligned itself with the Nazi regime in the 1930s, it faced pressure to meet the growing demands of the government. As a result of Nazi rearmament and the job creation program during 1933-1939, the *Reichsbahn* became increasingly efficient, forced to reform its passenger service to keep up with an influx of traffic. As a result, The *Reichsbahn* tightened its schedules, developed a more rigid track design, and modified the construction of its trains to increase the speed of express trains and accommodate more passengers<sup>5</sup> (Mierzejewski 2: 26-27). In the years of conquest, 1939-1940, the *Reichsbahn* expanded its activities to deploy military units and bolster the war economy by managing increased passenger traffic (2: 77). The role of the *Reichsbahn* during the years of conquest proved critical for the next step in Hitler’s master plan that culminated in the Final Solution: relocation. “The deportations of the Jews were a component in the Nazi regime’s effort to remake the racial map of Europe” (2: 115). As evidenced in the

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<sup>4</sup> An alternative term for Nazi Germany.

<sup>5</sup> The term “passenger” is unsuitable because the Jews were not treated as passengers, only booked as such. See pages 4 and 12 for further discussion of this term.

following excerpt, the deportation of Jews required the dedication and collaboration of all facets of the railroad industry:

The organization and coordination of transports was a complicated matter, especially in a wartime setting. With the growing shortage of supplies and the priority given to military transports, the allocation of trains for the deportation of the Jews was not always easily accomplished. It took the close co-operation of all agencies- the SS, the civilian officials of the German Railway, the Ministry of Transportation and in some cases the Foreign Office - to overcome the difficulties and allow the transports to run so efficiently that millions of Jews could be deported to their death. (“The Transport”)

### **The Bureaucratic Structure of the *Reichsbahn***

Renowned Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg outlines the bureaucratic structure and industrial nature of the *Reichsbahn* and its implications for the realization of the Final Solution. The *Reichsbahn*, one of the largest organizations of the Third Reich, had approximately 1.4 million German personnel, including close to a half million civil servants and more than 900,000 employees (Hilberg 164). The essence of Hilberg’s argument is that all personnel were bureaucrats assigned to specific roles within different divisions of the *Reichsbahn*. And the coordination and unification of these divisions of the *Reichsbahn* facilitated the “destruction process”.<sup>6</sup> From start to finish, the *Reichsbahn* treated every transport as a business transaction, “prepared to transport Jews, or any group, for payment” (Hilberg 165).

The *Reichsbahn* reveals a differentiation in its administrative side and its operational side. The *Reichsbahn* personnel administered the trains like everything was a normal passenger business, on paper, but operated the transports as if the Jews were anything but human.

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<sup>6</sup> Hilberg’s term for the Final Solution.

With regard to personnel it was the distinction between the lawyers and accountants on the one hand and the engineers and mechanical specialists on the other. In functional terms it was a separation of financial and operation preoccupations. These two work areas became manifest also in the Jewish transports. If we had to state their combined effect in a single sentence, we would have to say that the Jews were booked as people and shipped as cattle. (Hilberg 165)

Following the conquest of Poland in 1939, the *Reichsbahn*'s main function was the deportation of Jews:

The requisitioning agency was the SS and Police, specifically the Reich Security Main Office (Security Police and Security Service). The section of the Main Office concerned with "resettlements" was headed by Adolf Eichmann. On February 20, 1941, Eichmann accepted responsibility for the transport costs in the incorporated Polish territories on behalf of the Main Office. (165)

Eichmann managed transports,<sup>7</sup> while Wilhelm Kleinmann's successor, engineer Albert Ganzenmüller directed three important railway divisions: The Traffic Division, Operations, and Group L.<sup>8</sup> The mechanistic operation of transports from Germany's conquest of Europe to the relocation of Jews during the Final Solution could not have been accomplished without the cooperation and knowledge of hundreds of *Reichsbahn* personnel.

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<sup>7</sup> The following quotation further illustrates the intricacies and interdependence of the various levels of the railway network: "SS Captain Franz Novak, Eichmann's transport expert, collected the details of the needs of the SS, and went with them to his counterpart in the Ministry of Transportation, Otto Stange. Novak often participated in 'Fahrplanonferenze' (travel plan conferences), meetings in the Ministry of Transport where trains and time on tracks were allocated. Once Novak had received general allocations, he and his assistant, Lieutenant Richard Hartmann, assigned specific trains and dates to the various Gestapo stations" (Lozowick 285).

<sup>8</sup> The Traffic Division provided guidelines for the allocation of passenger and freight cars to civilian users. Operations focused on timetables (formation and routing of trains). Group L (Landesverteidigung – Defense of the Land) regulated troop transports and munitions trains (Hilberg 164).



As a case in point, Walter Stier explains his role as a bureaucrat during the resettlement of Jews. Stier served as the head of Reich Railways Department 33, which was responsible for “special trains.” He clarifies that the special trains during the war were resettlement trains:

*Right, but why were there more special trains during the war than before or after?*<sup>9</sup>

I see what you’re getting at. You’re referring to the so-called resettlement trains.<sup>10</sup>

*Resettlement. That’s it.*

That’s what they were called. Those trains were ordered by the Ministry of Transport of the Reich. You needed an order from the Ministry. (Lanzmann 134)

After fifteen or more years, Stier remained reluctant to admit to his involvement with the death trains. He held fast to his claim that he was strictly a bureaucrat glued to his desk, and that he had no knowledge of the resettlement trains being destined for extermination. However, he asserts, “I was the last district; without me these trains couldn’t reach their destination” (qtd. in Lanzmann 135).

Raul Hilberg’s analysis of the *Fahrplananordnung 587*,<sup>11</sup> as seen in Illustration 1, verifies that Stier’s claims of ignorance are false and proves that he, as well as all perpetrators were complicitous workers.<sup>12</sup> The *Fahrplananordnung* documents, which dealt with the ‘special trains,’ were schedules used to regulate death traffic.<sup>13</sup> Eight bureaucrats received this particular schedule (Lanzmann 140). Hilberg reasons, “for this relatively short distance through Radom to the Warsaw district – eight, because the train passes through these stations. Therefore, each one has to know” (qtd. in Lanzmann 140).

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<sup>9</sup> If italicized, the speaker is Lanzmann.

<sup>10</sup> If normal print, the speaker is Stier.

<sup>11</sup> The term *Fahrplananordnung* refers to a document used to schedule special trains. The *Fahrplananordnung 587* details the schedule of a deportation to Treblinka (Cole 1).

<sup>12</sup> Lanzmann interviews Hilberg about the train schedules, and in this exchange, they challenge and refute Stier’s claims of ignorance.

<sup>13</sup> Lanzmann and Hilberg use this term to describe the transports to the camps.

The *Fahrplananordnung* does more than confirm the bureaucrats' knowledge of the Jews' destination, it reveals the "destructive potential of paperwork within state bureaucracies" (Cole 1). The *Fahrplananordnung* chronicled the times and dates of the transports. Hilberg discerns that one train would transport a load of passengers to one site, then would return emptied for another load, and go to the next site. Holocaust studies professor Tim Cole notes "there is something terrifyingly banal about a single sheet of paper being part of the process of transporting people to their deaths. *Fahrplananordnung* 587 does not simply record that 10,000 'Jews' were taken to Treblinka in September 1942, but initiated this action" (1). What Hilberg and Cole conclude about this document is horrifying. The allocation of trains and methodical scheduling not only enabled, but ensured the Jews' fate.

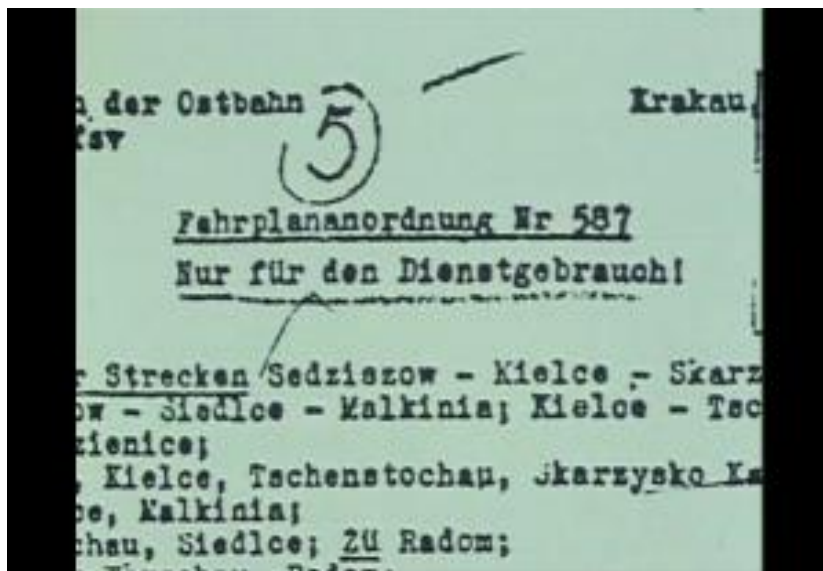


Illustration 1. (Credit: Fragment of a scene from *Shoah*)

Furthermore, Hilberg explains how the terminology of these documents used by *Reichsbahn* personnel was also deceptive, and what the use of this terminology implies about the entire Nazi operation.

Underneath *Nur für den Dienstgebrauch* – “Only for internal use.” But this turns out to be a very low classification for secrecy. And the fact that in this entire document, which after all deals with death trains, one cannot see – not only on this one, one cannot see it on others – the word *geheim*, “secret,” is astonishing to me. That they would not have done that is very astonishing. On second thought, I believe that had they labeled it secret, they would have invited a great many inquiring from people who got hold of it. They would then perhaps have raised more questions; they would have focused attention on the thing. And the key to the entire operation from the psychological standpoint was never to utter the words that would be appropriate to the action being taken. Say nothing; do these things; do not describe them. (qtd. in Lanzmann 139)

The clever coordination of the railroads – from the structure of the *Reichsbahn* to the very words on the documents – served multiple functions. It permitted the Nazis to conceal the malicious motivation behind the operation of the railroads and to avoid speculation. And this obscurity afforded them the freedom to inflict torture on the Jews during deportation.

## **Part 2: An Excremental Assault on European Jews**

As revealed by Stier’s case, there is an obligation “to understand that the murderers themselves were human beings and that it was human choice and man-made circumstances that led to the murder of six million Jews and millions of others” (“Teaching about the Perpetrators”). This prompts further questions about how human beings could be driven to this degree of evil. Individuals and families had been uprooted from their homes, schools, and businesses, and had already relinquished most of their possessions. No one could have predicted the human-made

evil that awaited them at the cattle cars and beyond. Uncertainty and disorientation and perhaps a sense of hope governed their lives when the Jews arrived at railway stations for transport.



Illustration 2. “Deportation of Jews from Kormend, Hungary in 1944.” (Credit: Yad Vashem, courtesy of the Hungarian National Museum, Photo #35577).



Illustration 3. “During a deportation action in the Brzeziny ghetto, Jews are marched through town to the railroad station in Galkowek: (Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, Photo #91561).

As seen in Illustrations 2 and 3, the deportation actions were visible to the public. To promote the assumption that these deportations were routine in the context of war, the Nazis did not try to hide the Jews from sight. As illustrated by German scholar Peter Witte, they did, however, intentionally use vague terminology to conceal the true meaning of deportation.

The deportations were expressly described as a “first stage.” The Jews are to be taken out of the Lodz ghetto, where they are to spend the winter, and then to be “deported even further eastwards” the following spring. This terminology already virtually represents the death sentence for those Jews due for deportation, irrespective of the fact that at this point there were no extermination camps ready. (331)

Many Jews believed that they were being relocated when they were rounded up for resettlement in the ghettos, and then for deportation to the camps.<sup>14</sup> The overt deportation action did not signal to the public or the Jews themselves that deportation signified a death sentence. As survivor Fritzie Fritzshall recalls, “We honestly thought we were going to be relocated” (5). In addition to the lack of information, “there was really no energy to think, “What next Where next?” (Eichengreen 113). The voices of survivors Fritzshall and Eichengreen exemplify the confusion and uncertainty that the Jews experienced at the onset of their journey. The true horror began when the doors of the railcars were shut. Once the Jews were out of the public’s sight, the Nazis did not have to maintain an illusion of formality or normativity. Survivor John Mandel recounts, “as soon as we got on that train they, they sealed that car and we got out of that particular brick yard so the other people couldn't see what was happening, the treatment immediately became different. I mean, they, they no longer cared uh, uh, how they treated us.” In order to prevent global skepticism and uproar, the Nazis had to keep up appearances as they eased Europe into the Final Solution.

With the rise of Nazi anti-Semitism in the 1930s, the Jews were gradually stripped of their identities. And then suddenly, when they entered these “mobile chambers of death,” they lost their humanity (Gigliotti 122). Their world was now defined by the confines of the cattle car. Survivor Elie Wiesel describes the moment when the cattle car became his entire world. “They disappeared. The doors were closed. We were caught in a trap, right up to our necks. The doors were nailed up; the way back was finally cut off. The world was a cattle wagon hermetically sealed” (22). There was a lost sense of space and time. For Wiesel, the journey was “an endless night” (24). Another survivor echoes Wiesel’s sentiment:

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<sup>14</sup> In Illustration 3, the Jews can be seen carrying luggage and wearing respectable attire, giving off the impression of relocation.

Actually, I don't recall how long I was in the train because it was a terrible thing to me, because it seemed to me that [I was] losing everything that belongs to me and it was a hard fight for us. I was alone, within myself. And since that time, I think all my life I've been alone. To me, I was dead. I died and I didn't want to talk about it. And I didn't want to admit to myself that this had happened to me. 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 a train and I died on the train. (Bessie K qtd. in Gigliotti 115)

Many felt as if they had been held captive on that train their entire lives. Locked doors and claustrophobia now exacerbated their uncertainty and disorientation.

The heat, the crowding, the thirst, and the stench caused incredible confusion, chaos, and even savage competitiveness. In his testimony, survivor Simon Cymerath depicts the jungle-like atmosphere:

It was a little window and who was stronger tried, you know. It was like sardines. It was in July. The heat was unbelievable. We were just burned up, you know, for thirst. And, and who didn't have any uh, strength fell down. This is like a jungle, a jungle. And the other stepped on it that he could reach because the window was high. It was just a little window in that, in that cattle car. And who was short couldn't reach it. But half of the people, some whole tra...whole uh, a whole wagon, cattle were, were, came and they only opened the doors and unloaded dead people. I've never seen in my whole life something like it, you know, how in a day and a half what could happen to people in that heat and no air and no water and no facilities. Like flies. One stepped on each other. Just a miracle. I

don't know how I survived. I wasn't that, you know, big of a man. Just pure luck, I don't know.<sup>15</sup> (Cymerath)

The inside of a cattle car was a jungle, but the Jews were not animals. Hilberg remarks that “Jews were booked as people and shipped as cattle” (165). “Shipped as cattle” implies inhumane treatment. The reality was that Jews were treated worse than cattle. They were certainly not passengers. Survivor accounts of the barbarity and suffering that occurred in the trains reveals that even the term ‘cattle’ is unsuitable. As Cymerath remarks, they were sardines and flies. They were refuse.

Holocaust scholar Terrence Des Pres uses the term “excremental assault” to illustrate how the “prisoners were systematically subjected to filth” (57). The following passage paints a picture of this concept.

The temperature started to rise, as the freight car was enclosed and body heat had no outlet...The only place to urinate was through a slot in the skylight, though whoever tried, usually missed, spilling urine on the floor...When dawn finally rose...we were all quite ill and shattered, crushed not only by the weight of fatigue but by the stifling, moist atmosphere and the foul odor of excrement....There was no latrine, no provision....On top of everything else, a lot of people had vomited on the floor. We were to live for days on end breathing those foul smells, and soon we lived in the foulness itself. (Kessel qtd. in Des Pres 53)

The “bucket” is the epitome of excremental assault. Descriptions of the bucket are especially prevalent in survivor testimonies. By analyzing the dehumanizing nature of the buckets, we are made aware that the conditions inside the trains were deliberate. Approximately eighty passengers were forced into a single cattle car, with barely enough oxygen to breathe. They were

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<sup>15</sup> Important to note that survival does not mean heroism or success. Survival was a matter of chance.

given buckets to use as toilets, which frequently overflowed. The smell consumed the cars. In her testimony, Fritzshall describes how the buckets and the smell they produced robbed the passengers of any remaining dignity: “How do I tell you about a train ride like that? About the dignity that is taken away from you when you need to use a bucket as a toilet in the middle of a compartment on a train, in front of everyone? ...It’s strange, fear gives out a certain smell and that mixed with open bucket – it’s a smell I don’t believe one can ever forget. It’s not to be described” (6). The buckets exemplify how Nazis used the transports as mechanisms for humiliation and injustice. The Nazis intentionally combined horrible physical conditions with random violence to produce overwhelming terror. The railroads were not just a step in the destruction process. They were not a means to an end. They were the end. The Jews had ‘died’ on the trains before they even reached their destination.

The rail transport was a major part of the calculated transition of the Jews from “booked people” to “shipped cattle.” The theory, concept, and treatment of Jews as vermin and swine was already entrenched in anti-Semitic Germany and neighboring countries, so actually treating the Jews as cattle was consistent with that world view. It also gave a rationale, if not an excuse, to the perpetrators and bystanders for their actions and inaction. But the testimonial evidence shows that there was more to being a bureaucrat in the German railway system than being able to rationalize one’s contribution to the destruction of so many. These workers chose to be silent, to conform, to remain in relatively safe surroundings far from the war fronts. But they also chose to be diligent, efficient, and often creative in resolving conflicts and developing workarounds. They produced paper trails to support the illusion of deportations as routine activities unworthy of scrutiny. These attributes suggest “Hitler’s willing executioners” much more than they do reluctant workers, who were fearful to speak up, resist, or even surreptitiously slow the death



traffic. As for the Jews, they were victims in ways unimaginable to anyone but the perpetrators. They were victims of dehydration, suffocation, psychological abuse and “excremental assault.” They were deprived of their sense of space and time, and their humanity. To find that humanity, we work hard to uncover the tracks of the German railroad apparatus.

### **Part 3: Memorializing the Holocaust**

Uncovering covered tracks is a painstaking and painful process. It exposes perpetrators to evidence of their horrific crimes. It exposes bystanders to the enormity of their acquiescence in, or apathy to, those crimes. It exposes the raw nerve endings of surviving victims, and survivors of victims. It exposes those removed in geography, time, and experience to feelings of shock, disbelief, and anguish. Memorialization is an outgrowth of this process, and vice versa. It is a way to record, remember, and reflect on the experience in a way that indicts the perpetrators, questions the bystanders, honors the memories of the victims, and may offer solace to the survivors. Just possibly it can teach valuable lessons regarding human interaction.

A memorial is not only a reminder. It is a conversation. From its inception to its erection, and to its interaction with its visitors and landscape, a memorial poses questions that it seeks to answer, that it wishes or forces us to ask or leaves unanswered. The following quotation illustrates how a memorial engages with its visitors, and often its location:

First, most are meant to be lasting. They last because they are supposed to become part of our landscape. They are meant to engage us in contemplation either when we are alone with our individual thoughts and feelings or when we are gathered with others in a more collective spirit at the memorial site. Secondly, usually they contribute to the physical

landscape as a site where a nation talks to itself about itself. As a result, such monuments and memorials become sites of national memory and national identity. (Gamber)

A memorialist is faced with the task of sparking this conversation, be it an internal reflection or a deeper engagement with a community. While most memorials strive to capture an event in a tasteful, imaginative, and poignant way, each individual memorial serves a distinct function and evokes different responses.

There are over two-hundred fifty Holocaust memorials around the world, of wide-ranging designs and intentions (Weber). Why did survivors and their descendants, and even many far removed in nexus, distance and time, feel a duty to preserve and protect not only the voices of the lost generations, but their own? And why did the bystanders and perpetrators and their descendants support these efforts, however reluctantly? They needed to perpetuate a memory and convey a message. A Holocaust memorialist confronts elapsed time, distant events, and the evolving interests, concerns, and cultural sensitivities of the audience when conceptualizing a memorial or monument. The memorialist must make careful choices, in order to create something that is honest and timeless. The “why here?” and “why now?” questions allow the memorialist discretion in deciding who specifically this memorial is for and what significance the memorial intends to communicate.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC, grappled mightily with these questions. “It’s a museum about the moral obscenity of certain forms of human behavior, and we’re thoroughly uncompromising about presenting that,” USHMM Project Director Michael Berenbaum remarks. At the same time, “we had to avoid the pornography of the human fascination with evil and violence, which sometimes ends up being a celebration. We believe we have done justice to that balance” (qtd. in “Depicting Holocaust...”).

USHMM contains a railcar exhibit that is the result of incredible creativity, thoughtfulness, and planning. Every component of the display from its arrangement to its details to the way in which it interacts with the public is a deliberate product of a lengthy and contentious thought process. The creators of this memorial also had to consider how the railcar fit, physically and thematically, into the museum as a whole. Each memorial tells a story. A memorial within a museum tells its own story in the context of a broader story. As scholar Raul Hilberg asserts, railroads were vital to the Final Solution and thus, railcars are symbols of the suffering and dehumanization that characterized the Holocaust. Therefore, USHMM made the railcar a significant part of the museum's experience. As Oren Baruch Stier states, "they were literal vehicles of suffering, appropriately transformed into vehicles of memory" (83). The railcar, donated by the Polish government is central to USHMM's deportation exhibit. USHMM sought to convey authenticity, although this railcar was not proved conclusively to have been used for deportations:

...The Polish government spruced up the railcar with a fresh coat of red paint before shipping it off to the United States, clearly having missed the point that the USHMM wanted the railcar precisely because it looked authentic when spotted in a Warsaw depot...The new layer of paint, along with eight other layers, were subsequently removed, and the car was restored to its original appearance. The railcar now appears convincingly discolored and appropriately worn for a World War II artifact, with its reddish-brown façade revealing patches of unevenly faded wood. (Hansen-Glucklich)



Illustration 4. "Front view of the railcar with the "Selection of Hungarian Jews" murals in the background on display on the third floor of the Permanent Exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

This was one of many decisions USHMM made regarding the railcar exhibit. Stier suggests that the Poles' desire to make the railcar more presentable was an attempt to cover up the past (88).

Though, their gesture may have been well-intentioned. Whatever the intention, USHMM removed layers of the new paint to provide a more accurate and truthful representation of the railcar, consistent with the museum's mission. The railcar is situated on actual tracks from Treblinka, not just for authentic context, but also for the definitive role the railroads played in the deportation to the death camps. Railroads represent the unstoppable bureaucratic and mechanistic instruments of a powerful nation exerting its will on the powerless. Viewing the exterior of the railcar, the murals of deportees seen in Illustration 4, and the tracks from Treblinka, we feel a sense of public loss. The scale of the exhibit captures the magnitude of the German crimes.

The exhibit's inclusion of the luggage seen in Illustration 5 represents a more personal loss. This component of the exhibit has multiple effects:

The luggage is scattered about as if discarded in a hurry, suggesting a reconstructed environment. Visitors may even read a few of the names on the suitcases, for example,

Ilse Knapp and Frieda Fischl. These names, marked clearly in large letters, reveal the calculating deceit of the perpetrators and the piteous hope of the deportees, who were misled into believing that they would be permitted to reclaim their belongings later. (Hansen-Glucklich)



Illustration 5. “A collection of valises belonging to Jews who were deported to death camps. These valises are displayed at the base of the railcar on the third floor of the Permanent Exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

This tribute is honest, informative, and evokes a powerful response. The luggage demonstrates Germany’s effort to deceive the Jews. The arrangement of the suitcases also contributes to the authenticity. Instead of engraving names on the railcar itself, the luggage makes the experience and the sense of loss all the more real and personal. This specific reference to the passengers is heart-rending for the visitor as it prompts a personal connection to the victims and represents a lost “hope for the future” (Hansen-Glucklich). By maintaining the external and internal appearance and reconstructing the environment of a railcar with the train tracks and the luggage, USHMM endeavors to make the exhibit come alive for the museum-goer.

You, the visitor, see the railway car, the tracks, and the luggage and begin a conversation in your head. Who was in this car and where were they going? What did they pack? What did

they feel, know, and fear? Perhaps you recall train rides you've taken before – a business trip, a visit to see family or friends, a family vacation. It was likely a pleasant experience in a comfortable passenger train, with a sense of anticipation about the warm welcome you'd receive at your planned destination.

The experience continues. You choose to walk into this car. It has no seats, no bathroom, and no observation windows. It is bare and barren and you feel confined and uncomfortable and look for the exit. But for the Jews there was no exit, no chance to reconsider this trip. You begin to draw pictures in your head. At first they are of faceless and nameless people, then perhaps members of your own circle of family and friends. Do you wonder about yourself, as a deportee, or perhaps as a railway worker, a stationmaster, a towns person on the railway platform, or a guard?

In developing this exhibit, USHMM decided to make passing through the railcar a choice for the visitor:

It is possible to avoid passing through the car, but here there is no secret door, rather an alternate path just before the railcar display (this path leads directly to the replica of the Auschwitz camp gate, "Arbeit Macht Frei," and avoids most of the section on deportations). This makes entering the car more of a choice, which is presumably why museum planners designed it this way. (Stier 89)

In the car, you are left alone with your thoughts, the minimal lighting, and the "musty smell of wood," forced to contend with the discomfort and questions that the exhibit provokes (89). The choice to walk through the car gives the exhibit an experimental, as well as historical quality.

As director of the exhibition, Martin Smith rejected absurd suggestions for the railcar display, such as "rocking the car and playing screams to accentuate its effect" (Stier 90). The

exhibition planners wanted to maintain historical accuracy and ensure that the artifact integrated into the context of the exhibit and the museum. Stier draws a parallel between the railcar's contextualization within the museum and the museum's interaction with the memorial landscape of the nation's capital:

...in its inception, engaged in a constant struggle to define its position vis-à-vis the central American institutions it would call its neighbors. The careful strategy of integration, represented by the presentation and placement of the railway car, echoes the museum's quest to define its relationship to American memory and the Holocaust's status on U.S. soil. (Stier 92)

In summary, there are many layers to this exhibit. The visitors to the museum are immersed in an internal conversation, the railcar is in a conversation with the museum, and the museum reverberates with the memorials, as well as the monuments, of the capital's landscape.

In describing memorials to Verdun (WWI) and Dresden (WWII), Dr. Dacia Viejo-Rose comments,

Memorials are far more complicated than any granite monument might suggest. They are processes involving a constellation of meanings, symbols, emotions, memories and narratives. Memorials are not inherently about reconciliation but they can come to be used to communicate reconciliatory messages. Yes, memorials matter, but it is our use of them that make them matter, for better or worse. ("Do Memorials Matter?")

The same is most assuredly true of railway cars.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Railcars have been used in various ways to memorialize the deportees to the death camps and concentration camps. Each memorial offers a different perspective and a distinct experience. The children at Whitwell Middle School studied the Holocaust to learn about intolerance. They were struck by the enormity of six million Jews and began a collecting project. They chose to collect paper clips, worn by Norwegians as a subtle form of protest during World War II. They filled a boxcar with 11 million paperclips in honor of all the victims of Nazi genocide (Magilow 24). One criticism of this project and other collecting projects is that associating people with objects dishonors their memory (Magilow 28). It is also problematic that the paper clips are imprisoned within the boxcar. However, "the idea to store the paper clips in a boxcar was not originally a part of the project. It came about almost as an

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afterthought when the students and their teachers realized they needed to store their paper clips somewhere" (Magilow 32-33). These schoolchildren, inspired by their educators, created a project that was meaningful to them. But what was meaningful to them resonated far and wide, through media coverage and a movie about their project. An altogether different memorial was launched in 2007. "Train of Commemoration" is a real train – a rolling exhibition – both commemorating the deportations and their young victims, and calling on the current leadership of the Reichsbahn's successor, Deutsche Bahn, to acknowledge its role in the deportations and pay back the monies received ("Traveling Holocaust Exhibition: Memory Train to Auschwitz").



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## Research Reflection

During the first weeks of my course, *Legacies of the Holocaust*, I explored multiple topics prior to selecting the topic I would tackle for the rest of the semester: railroads. I enrolled in this course due to a personal connection and thus interest in the Holocaust. My paternal grandmother, great aunt and uncle, and great-grandparents were deported to Auschwitz, where they were made prisoners. My grandmother was the only survivor of my relatives. Throughout the research process, I began to grasp the magnitude of my topic and my approach to the project became less personal. My desire to honor my family turned into a greater responsibility to communicate the importance of my topic and its legacy to the general public. While I began this writing process realizing the importance of this topic to myself, my family, and the Jewish population, when writing my final paper, I came to realize the scope of my audience. The Holocaust is not only relevant to the Jewish population; the reality and consequences of the Holocaust are something that everyone should grapple with.

The freedom granted by the assignment did, however, allow me to include a personal dimension. This was the first research project I have conducted without a guiding prompt. While my professor outlined various themes and sources to consider, we were free to proceed with our papers however we wanted. With a broad topic and range of resources at my disposal, I did not know the direction I would take; I did not have a thesis going into the research process. Therefore, I used the research process to inform my argument. My argument developed as I interacted with multiple types of sources and perspectives. At the beginning of my research I focused on gathering a breadth of information about the topic. While initially overwhelmed by

the many sources I accumulated, this wealth of information ultimately proved beneficial, eventually leading to a comprehensive and unique thesis.

Previously, my Holocaust knowledge was limited to museum visits and books and films I was introduced to in Hebrew School. I knew nothing about the German railroad network. I used the library catalog to find books with substantive information that would allow me to frame the structure of my paper. I assessed the validity of these sources by the dates they were written and the credibility of their authors. Once I had an understanding of my topic, I needed an argument. The scholarly essays from the library's collection of articles were primary assets in the writing of my paper. I identified the main claims from these essays, which I then incorporated into a preliminary thesis. My initial aim was to focus on the perspective of the victim, and to tell a story of dehumanization by highlighting survivor testimony. Yet my thesis and paper evolved throughout the semester. My professor assured us that revision and rewriting were not only acceptable, but crucial elements of the writing process. I ultimately scrapped my first draft as I felt that I did not effectively use the information I had gathered when writing this version. I had to reconsider my sources to determine which to disregard and which would be most useful. After revisiting the essay sources, I gained a better sense of the argument I would develop. Several of the essays I analyzed emphasized the perpetrator's perspective. I grew increasingly interested in this dimension of my topic, so I altered my thesis to address the bureaucratic nature of the railroad network.

Having a working thesis certainly eased the research process. I knew what key terms to search for when using the library catalog and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum collections. Throughout the research and writing processes, students were encouraged to engage in conversation with both scholars and eyewitnesses in order to convey genuine voice in our

papers. An in-depth understanding of the authors of the sources as well as the content allowed me to fully integrate these sources within my paper. It was also helpful for me to assess my sources in relation to each other. I wanted to engage in conversation with the reader as well. In the final version of my paper, I targeted perpetrators, recognized victims, and challenged the audience to consider their role in remembering the Holocaust.

My final paper was the product of a lengthy and repetitive process of researching, writing, revising, and rewriting. The library resources helped guide the majority of my research and shaped my argument. Although researching and writing my paper was emotionally challenging, I am proud of what I have learned and am now more confident in my ability to effectively use resources to conduct a research project in the future.