

CAMP ARRIVALS

The Failed Resettlement

The camps were not the destinations of promised resettlement. They were points of no return in a human-engineered system of death that polluted the landscape and survivors' memories, with flames, smoke, and smell. Would not arrival at the camps offer relief from suffocation and stench in the trains? Preparations for arrival at the camp, and the process of unloading, prompted some deportees to return to the hopes they had when the journey began. But how could the promise of safe arrivals, of deportation as a journey of life, be securely carried into the camp world, considering the torments experienced in trains? Released from their mobile chambers, deportees were unsettled by the incomprehensibility of their first visions of the camp. This unease was strikingly captured in Vera Laska's description of her Auschwitz arrival:

Dawn, the bleakest, most wretched, shocking, mortifying dawn of my life. The apocalypse of a doomsday where forlorn souls loom against the reddish glow. The long train comes to a screeching halt, the doors are being opened. Pandemonium. The living stepping on the dead to get out. Air, breathe deeply, air, as much as you want, air ... Flames from factory chimneys shooting upward and licking with blazing red and orange tongues of the awakening sky. How can red flames spit black smoke? But logic is excused here and now. Strange smells. Stranger people.¹

Deportees' confrontation with the camps generated new challenges for the senses, perception, and truth telling. The image of the Jew as foreign and unrecognizable was part of Kay Gundel's profile of Auschwitz's inmates: "I moved toward the door and saw baldheaded, emaciated human beings, men shuffling along in baggy striped shirts and obeying the guards like silent robots. Their faces were blank. Their bodies stooped and slack."² The Auschwitz climate immobilized her already frail body, for it was "cold. Icy. My body shook from the trials of the train ride, the lack of food and sleep, and the overwhelming, paralyzing fright."³ Ruth Klüger was relieved

Notes for this chapter begin on page 198.

to have the carriage doors opened before the excrement became “truly unbearable”: “We should have been relieved ... to be outside the sardine box where we had been suffocating and to be breathing fresh air at last. But the air wasn’t fresh. It smelled like nothing on earth, and I knew instinctively and immediately that this was no place for crying, that the last thing I needed was to attract attention.”⁴ Anna Heilman’s desperation continued after arriving at Majdanek:

Coming out of the car, there were 120 left from our original 170. Half of them were mad, half beaten up, half-dead from thirst. No food or drink ever tasted as good to me as the mud under our feet when we jumped out of the railway car. It must have rained hard to have left this much water, which we scooped with our bare hands and which tasted like heavenly nectar. Drinking, or rather eating, this mud, little did I suspect that this place would become my first contact with the bitter reality and constant menace of life in the concentration camp.⁵

The descriptions by Gundel, Heilman, Klüger, and other deportees of arrival traumas at various Holocaust camps are the subject of this chapter. I focus on deportees’ encounters with the camp world, and how the camp arrival has become, in representational terms, a scene of writing and embodied terror. Similar to my analysis of the earlier stages of deportation transit, I interpret several themes in the representation of arrival, which reflect transitions in mobile and fixed forms of captivity. The first stage included anticipation and preparations for arrival from within the train carriage, and described deportees’ impressions of the landscape and the noise of the camp. The release from the train onto the platform was the second, if not most terrifying stage, with violent and cruel separations and selections for death. Although deportees often represent these stages without interruption, my interpretation intends to make distinctions between visibility from inside the train, and impressions after deportees were unloaded at the camp. The train’s carriage door remains the marker of spatial separation between these two locations of captivity.

The emergence of the camp as a failed resettlement destination began with the train’s approach into its surrounds. Some deportees commented on the near collapse of others and saw glimpses of what appeared to be lights, fences, and barbed wire. Others were deceived by the appearance of ostensible normality in structures of the modern transit process, such as clocks, timetables, and station platforms. Deportees’ testimonies of arrival at the various camps were, however, not consistent or explicable. Whether in Belzec or Auschwitz, deportees describe the camp landscape in terms of foreignness, otherness, and exile. These descriptions were mediated by the camps’ geographies of scale and order. Deportees were delivered into the symbolic geography of the Holocaust, with certain camps occupying the

margins of that geography.⁶ What geographies of surveillance informed an Auschwitz arrival as opposed to a Treblinka arrival, for example? What was the reception procedure? How did impressions of the physical, natural environment, so geographically distant for many deportees, conflict with the intimidation of the unnatural surveillance detail? If deportees were navigating different perceptual threats at each stage of deportation transit, how did release from the train restore sight as a reliable witness truth to describe events, interactions, and other embodied experiences in these other-worldly locations?

An analysis of Holocaust arrivals in the Operation Reinhard camps, and in Majdanek and Auschwitz, gives a fascinating conclusion to deportation transit's tellability and the conditions that make and unmake the Holocaust witness. An analysis of how deportees interpreted arrival also provides a spatial and culturally significant entry into the camp system, and in particular, confirmation of Wyschogrod's death-world where life was the exception. Such analysis also permits a brief investigation of what happened to deportees who survived selections and were recruited, however briefly, into the camp regime of work commandos. These workers often felt compelled to bear witness not only for themselves but also as proxies for deportees who did not survive selections, and to camp processes of "gray zone" labor tasks, extermination, and plunder.

In his calculation of the number of special trains involved in the transport of Jews, Alfred Mierzejewski estimated that approximately 613 arrived at Auschwitz and 390 at Treblinka as part of the Final Solution.⁷ In terms of numbers killed, Auschwitz was the largest concentration and extermination facility in the Nazi camp regime, and also recorded the largest number of survivors. The testimonies used for the analysis of arrival reflect that outcome. In *Atlas of the Holocaust*, Martin Gilbert reinforced the geographical ruptures and repeated territorial crossings of deportation trains. He argued for the historical singularity of an Auschwitz arrival through visually plotting deportation railway routes across Europe and their convergence in the capital destination of murder.⁸ The meaning of an Auschwitz "arrival," of the finality of the destination as synonymous with the destruction of an ethnic, cultural, and racial minority, has for some scholars, displaced the juridical significance of the Operation Reinhard death camps—Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka.

Treblinka was the most important site for the destruction of Polish Jewry. The physical dismantling of the Operation Reinhard camps during the war has been interpreted as contributing to a discursive erasure of their singular extermination purpose from historical memory.⁹ These camps did not have mass-witnessed liberations from advancing Allied armies, as their dismantling was hastened by resistance movements, in addition to other

factors. The relatively few survivors of these camps in comparison to Auschwitz have also contributed to their marginalization in historical writing. The approximate number of Jewish victims in the camps confirms this: Auschwitz (up to 1,000,000), Treblinka (up to 800,000), Belzec (434,508), Sobibor (over 150,000), Kulmhof ([Chelmno] over 150,000), and Lublin (over 50,000).¹⁰

It is undeniable that testimonies of deportation have assisted in the representation of Auschwitz as a singular topography of the Holocaust's extremity. The writing of an Auschwitz arrival is lyrical, stark, brutal, and spare; the observations meander across witness positions of reportage, self-observation, intense metaphorical associations, and convey disappointment with the failed resettlement promise. Auschwitz is often appropriated as a filter or prism for other camp operations, or has operated as a portable memory substitute for the vanquished witnesses and correspondingly limited testimonial sources from the Operation Reinhard camps. Yet that portability can be qualified. The arrival and reception of deportees at Auschwitz was both continuous and discontinuous with the unloading and immobility that gripped deportees at Operation Reinhard station platforms.

Common themes in testimonies of arrival at different camps include the presence of a starved and weird-looking inmate population, an ostensibly compliant Jewish inmate workforce who participated in disrobing, sorting, and disposal in Sonderkommando units, and the presence of an orchestra to pacify deportees and muffle the death screams of those being marched to the gas chambers. The physical scale of the camps was not so much empirically quantified in testimonies, rather it was embodied as a feared and ever expanding scale of sounds, burning smells, and instructional terror. The impact of arrival varied according to an inmate's opportunities for visual witness, and the spatial proximity of incoming deportees to parts of a camp that were not immediately revealed or concealed, such as barracks, wash rooms, and disinfectant areas. Mobility and proximity affected a deportee's witnessing perspectives, as did sight, a relative construct that did not always permit a corroborative truth about the people, impressions, and landscapes encountered in the camps. The relativity of sight as an available witness truth recalls Ernst Van Alphen's comment about "visual imprints," that what is seen is not always comprehended. In many ways, evidence of the murderous nature of Auschwitz is carried by its witnesses, who in particular, are expected to provide "all-seeing" and "all-knowing" reports about life and death in the huge camp complex, imparting a privileged if not impossible mobility in parts of the camp where access was not permitted. The possibility of a visual truth is therefore not only perceptual but also spatial and authorized; witnessing depends on mobility and access to restricted camp areas.

Preparing for Arrival

Memories of arriving at camps, like those of the journey, had little or no outlet for immediate written recording, a deprivation that is partially recovered in testimonies that attempt to recall the shock of entry. The shock has been represented in scenes and encounters that have become familiar over the years to readers of Holocaust testimonies and memoirs, and viewers of films. These shocks include the foreignness of the camp, its surveillance architecture, the sound of German as a camp language, and the devastating selections of arriving deportees. For those who survived the selection process, reselections, and camp work, and lived to tell it, the traumatic story of deportation transit does not end in the camps but begins there. Most of the testimonies I use are retrospective constructions, and it is clear that the assertion of the camp as a significant place in a deportee's wartime biography allows them to impose order and certainty on their transit experiences. But there are conflicts in experiential and narrative or testimonial time. It was the absence of knowing one's place in experiential time that is reclaimed in narrative or testimonial time.

In the first stage of representing arrival, deportees report being anxious about the location of arrival after arduous and agonizing journeys, sometimes attempting to conceal the effects of transit in minor attempts at reinvention. Some deportees reported changing their clothes, made efforts to clean themselves to appear productive and ready to work. Testimonies also revealed a particularly illuminating conversation about the future, a conversation that testified to the faith of deportees in the deceptive image of resettlement. But how was arrival anticipated from within the confines of the carriage? What factors influenced the representation of the camps of Operation Reinhard as opposed to Auschwitz as feared landscapes?

Belzec was the first of the Operation Reinhard camps to be constructed and its small scale was deceptively lethal. Reports from survivors of Belzec are rare in the historical archive, making Rudolf Reder's account of arrival there a singularly important testimony. He arrived on one of the first transports from Lemberg during the great Aktion, which lasted for two weeks in August 1942 and during which 50,000 Jews were deported. Reder was sixty-one when he arrived at Belzec, and upon arrival was fortunate to be selected to join the Jewish death brigade and to be the camp's odd man. He remained in Belzec for three months. Toward the end of November 1942 he was taken to Lemberg, where he survived, hidden by his former housekeeper.¹¹

In terms of layout, Belzec was divided into two camps: Camp I was the reception and administrative center, and promised deportees an image of future mobility; Camp II was an extermination sector. A long railroad ramp of approximately five hundred meters could accommodate twenty-eight freight

cars. There were two huts for arrivals: one for undressing and the other for storing clothes and luggage.¹² Reder's incarceration in Belzec afforded a unique insight into the transit ruse at the camp.¹³ His account of entry into the camp, and then witness of the arrival of other transports emphasized the physical landscape and its limited modernity. There was underdevelopment, and the sidings "led through empty fields; not one habitable building in sight."¹⁴ The limited development created a specifically fabricated purpose, to secure the deportees' belief in survival and compliance with instructions. Belzec housed a "small station" with a post office, suggesting an open circuit of communication with the outside world.

Descriptions of a Treblinka arrival confirmed its status as one of the most convincing transit images. In Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, survivors made reference to the "Road to Heaven" or "Road to Death," where the "relation between height and visibility of the objects in the death camp was important for the way the Nazis directed the final steps of the Jews."¹⁵ Sections of the road were arranged to prevent prisoners from seeing their internal destinations, a similar deception to that found in Sobibor.¹⁶ Unlike descriptions of the primitive landscapes of Belzec, Treblinka was inviting for deportees; its fields appeared lush, green, and welcoming. Abraham Kolski described Treblinka's station as "beautiful."¹⁷ Miriam and Saul Kuperhand's account of their arrival demonstrates retrospective witness intrusion, of having the death space interfere with the experiential, historical moment of recognition. Visions of the camp and impositions of fatal meaning are conflated in their account of captivity: "Daylight began to come through the tiny windows, and already we could see groups of laborers wearing the Star of David. We were near Treblinka's gas chambers, but at least the sight of the workers confirmed that we would work for the devil for some time before being cast into hell. The train slowed and then stood still for a couple of hours. Then we started to move again, passing through a thick pine forest. In another time we might have been tourists enjoying the lovely scenery."¹⁸

Arrival in the dark of night or early morning added to the sense of foreboding. Chiel Rajchman's account of arrival at Treblinka attempts to recreate the aura of arrival in using the present tense voice. Yet this aura is compromised by his insertion of the destination: "It is 4 AM. We stop, we are close to the station Treblinka ... the cars are locked and we don't know what will happen to us."¹⁹ In what appears to be indecisive urges of the driver, the train knows no destination, yet for Rajchman, death has long been at work:

Suddenly we see a sad and terrible display, a display of death I see looking through the small openings of the car large piles of clothes. I see that already we are doomed. After a short while the door of the car is being opened with devilish screams: "Raus, Raus." [Out!] It is too late. I have doubts about our misfortune.

I grab my sister and try to leave the car fast while leaving everything behind in the wagon.²⁰

Rajchman provides a corroborating visual witness truth about Treblinka's efficient operation and receiving capacity: "Treblinka had been built professionally. It looked like a regular railway station. The platforms are sufficiently long and wide to accommodate regular trains of up to 40 cars."²¹

Richard Glazar's *Trap with a Green Fence* is a critical testimony of camp labor and survival.²² In recalling his crossing into Poland, Glazar emphasized the visual landscape of Treblinka, a physicality that concealed the evidence of its interior operation:

The train often stops, now and then for longer periods of time, especially at night. After the second night, as daylight approaches, we can tell by the signs that we must be somewhere in Poland. Shortly after midday we stop again. There is a small station house identified as "Treblinka." A part of the train is uncoupled. At the curve we can see the front cars turning onto a one-track spur. Forest is on both sides. The train travels very slowly. I can make out individual pine, birch and fir trees.²³

He not only captured the psychological despair of deportees, but also underscored his own survival through selection for labor:

It is difficult to say how many they chose from among the thousands who arrived on our transport—more than twenty, or fewer. A few of the faces disappeared from sight as quickly as I had become aware of them. One was said to have swallowed an entire bottle of sleeping pills. Another put an end to it all the next day in order to follow his wife and child to death.²⁴

In his interview with David Boder, Jurek Kestenberg reported that the confusion of deportees began before the train's arrival. It was the utterance of the word "Majdanek" that caused sheer terror among passengers, for it signaled endings and beginnings:

"Majdanek. Everybody out." The train was immediately surrounded by ... by the gendarmery, and we were all chased out of the train. Into every train /car/ ran a few Ukrainians, and they took and chased everybody with rifles from the ... the train /cars/. They did not look who it was, whether a ... a woman or a man. They just struck, beat with rifles over the heads. They chased out in one line everybody on ... on ... on a ... on a ... such a platform. Chased out everybody and /ordered/ "Run, run fast."²⁵

Like other deportees, Kestenberg was exhausted from the journey, but there was no reprieve. They were all ordered to run to a "house," which Kestenberg

believed to be a gassing facility, but in fact was a bathing area. He recalls running the obstacle course of terror without hydration, with the Nazi guards cruelly imposing a rigorous athleticism on the already fatigued deportees:

How is it possible after riding such a long time where we didn't have a drop of water, were so weakened. Suddenly we were told to ... suddenly here we are told to run. And so we did run. Many people did fall to the sides while running. They ordered /us/ to run still faster, still faster. The bath was a long distance away. Coming to the bath, they said, "No, this is not good, You shall wait. You will be sent to another bath."²⁶

Anna Heilman's arrival scene at Majdanek mixes reportage and reflection. In her video testimony, she described an arrival scene that is more hectic than the same moment she depicted in her book, *Never Far Away*. The embodied performance of her video testimony arguably allows for a visually charged recall of traumatic moments including the violence of guards and disorientation of deportees who barely had time to recover from the journey. The platform becomes the place for regeneration and forced movement:

We arrived in Majdanek. It was raining when we arrived, so I bent down to scoop the mud, to quench my thirst, and I got a crop over my back, and the soldiers were lined up on the road, raus, raus, raus ... from our wagon, there were 170 of us, we left half of the people dead, and others were mad. There was a woman, whose child was killed, and she was running naked, and we had to run, I lost my sister, I lost my father, and we are running through an obstacle course.²⁷

The physical scale of Auschwitz locates it at the core of the camp system. It is also central because of the number of survivors from that location, and because of the retrospective weight that the word "Auschwitz" carries, namely, in popular cultural representations, memorialization, and commemorative practices. But this construction is also grounded in empirical truths: the long distance of Auschwitz from various locations across Europe, the multiple victim groups incarcerated in the principal and sub-camps, and the duration of the camps' operation. Zalmen Gradowski's journey to Auschwitz was prefaced by a long, agonizing report about crossing borders and boundaries, surveying rural development and dismissing the bleak Polish landscape: "We have been traveling such a long time that night has again set in. We stopped once more. From time to time the train starts, going several kilometers and stops again. The oppressive, nightmarish night has put the large, worried and woe-begone mass of Jews to sleep. They realize that they are very near to their goal. According to the timetable they have approached the final stage of their journey."²⁸ The station of Katowice signals that Auschwitz is near, and yet the passengers have "grown used to the monotonous traveling life,

they have become as one with it.”²⁹ That adaptation was soon terminated, as deportees moved toward the door, eager to get out: “The train slowed down and entered some branched out tracks. A prolonged whistle announced our arrival at the last stage. The train stopped. Everyone in the carriage was trembling. All are in a hurry and are pushing towards the exit. They want to breathe in, to suck into lungs some fresh air and also some freedom.”³⁰

Deportees’ impressions of the desolate physical landscape began before release from the carriage, as unloading was often delayed. This waiting time allowed last-minute preparations. Nearing arrival at Auschwitz, Eva Gross and Anna Koppich recall hurriedly getting dressed, thinking that a refreshed appearance would be an advantage, as would layers of clothing. Gross wrote: “The door of the boxcar opened, but nobody moved. Mother opened her suitcase and took out two dresses and put them on. I was puzzled. It was hot enough wearing one dress, let alone three. She told me to do the same, that way the suitcases would be easier to carry. I didn’t argue. She also insisted that I remove my sandals and put on my sturdy walking shoes.”³¹ Koppich remembers that many deportees slept fully dressed in the train on the last night of the journey, as “we wanted to be ready when we arrived. At 3 AM we arrived. It was the Birkenau Station. We did not want to wake the children since we did not know if this was our final destination. When my father saw the barracks, he relaxed, and so did everybody else. Our car was the first one to be opened.”³²

These impressions merged with other signs of arrival, such as the slowing speed of the train, the sound of whistles, and barely visible glimpses of human life and development. Gisel Berman journeyed for three days and three nights before arriving in Auschwitz: “Peeking out the tiny window, I saw SS soldiers everywhere. Just beyond the platform was a charming white cottage with potted geraniums on the window sill.”³³ Berman thought that the train’s arrival meant a new beginning: “The train stopped and the big door opened. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. At last, we had arrived and could leave the suffocating stench of the miserable cattle car. We could eat, drink, work.”³⁴ Yet the deportees did not alight immediately at the platform. The only visible sign of development and residence disappeared from view, prompting an unanticipated image of a Holocaust destination: “A few hundred yards down the tracks, we made a new discovery. In front of us were high, barbed-wire fences, strung with high-voltage electrical wires. Strange shapes hung on the wires or huddled on the ground next to the fence. With revulsion, I realized that these were human bodies in various stages of decay. We soon learned that these were the people who hadn’t waited for Hitler’s final solution.”³⁵

The train’s creeping entry into the camp revealed a miserable modernity populated with inmates and little sign of cultivation and development.

Susan Beer recalled: "As the train began to slow down, I looked out its windows in the early dawn light and saw men in blue-and-white striped uniforms, working in fields under the eyes of SS guards. I thought we were approaching a labor camp. We disembarked at a nondescript little train station named Oswiecim."³⁶ After unloading she was marched several kilometers to Birkenau, where the desolation was clear: "The landscape was utterly barren; no grass, no flowers, no trees, no birds, no sign of life."³⁷ The difficulty in explaining the new landscape of resettlement was a common theme in testimonies. David Bergman was stunned by seeing violence and countless separations of families: "The train kept slowing down, and then we see barbed wire compound ... what is this, I had no idea, I was not in a camp before ... all of a sudden the train came to a stop ... they opened the doors, and that was when I saw hell ... all of a sudden, I saw Nazis beating people, and dragging children away from their parents."³⁸

The blistering light that most deportees saw when arriving in the evening provided no reassurance of the camp's location. If train journeys were destabilizing because of entrapment in fetid conditions, delivery to the camps introduced a larger scale of confinement, with the residue of sensory assaults of deportation trains relocated into the camp atmosphere. Benjamin Jacobs wrote:

It was light enough to see distant fences. We must be at a camp, and at least at the end of this misery. Perhaps the prophecy of our doom and death was wrong after all. The smoke, with the odor of burning flesh, that we suddenly smelled we passed off as the friction of the train's wheels on the rails. As the locomotive crept forward, we saw strangers on a ridge dressed in striped clothes with marching berets, walking like zombies and staring at our train as though they had been expecting us.³⁹

Light provided a stark illumination of the camp's arrival area. Olga Lengyel interpreted the camp's spectacular electrification as evidence of some form of civilization: "With difficulty, I ploughed through the compact mass of animal humanity to reach the little window. There I saw a weird spectacle. Outside was a veritable forest of barbed wire, which was illuminated at intervals by powerful search lights."⁴⁰ She then tries to describe what she later realizes is beyond imagination: "An immediate blanket of light covered everything within view. It was a chilling sight, yet reassuring, too. This lavish expenditure of electricity undoubtedly indicated that civilisation was nearby and an end to the condition we had endured. Still, I was far from comprehending the true meaning of the display. Where were we and what fate awaited us? I conjectured wisely, yet my imagination could not supply a reasonable explanation."⁴¹ Viktor Frankl describes the incarceration

appearance of the camp: “With the progressive dawn, the outlines of an immense camp became visible: long stretches of several rows of barbed wire fences” and “eventually we moved into the station.”⁴² The constant barrage of instruction was relentless for Frankl and his fellow deportees:

The initial silence was interrupted by shouted commands. We were to hear those rough, shrill tones from then on, over and over again in all the camps. Their sound was almost like the last cry of a victim, and yet there was a difference. It had a rasping hoarseness, as if it came from the throat of a man who had to keep shouting like that, a man who was being murdered again and again. The carriage doors were flung open and a small detachment of prisoners stormed inside. They wore striped uniforms, their heads were shaved, but they looked well fed.⁴³

Frankl believed that many deportees lived under the delusion of reprieve, the idea that a condemned man might get an exemption from death at the last minute, a faith that defied belief given the condition of many transports: “Nearly everyone in our transport lived under the illusion that he would be reprieved, that everything would yet be well. We did not realize the meaning behind the scene that was to follow presently. We were told to leave our luggage in the train and to fall into two lines—women on the one side, men on the other—in order to file past a senior SS officer.”⁴⁴

Off the Trains: A Failed Resettlement

The second stage of arrival involved the physical unloading of deportees and their belongings onto ramps. The alienation of the deportee from prior experiences of arrival at train stations occurred almost immediately on the unloading ramp, an ominous place of life and death. The platforms of train stations at all stages of deportation were represented as places of traumatic encounters—the expectations of deportation as a journey worth taking in the ghettos, and their conclusive destruction in the camps. How did scenes of selection—the separation and isolation that dominated actions on the platform, its energy, visibility, and its genocidal rupture—defy the deportee’s capacity for witnessing and representation?⁴⁵ The frenetic and often disordered pace of unloading contrasted with the slow crawl of freight cars and the resulting fatigue of deportees during the train journey.

The camp system was the political incarnation of state control of the body by ideology, architecture, and industry. But the system’s efficiency was also critically dependent on its human operators and enforcers. Irrespective of the camp’s location, testimonies recall the spectacle, violence, and intimidation by guards. Deportees also described the camps in terms

of foreignness, exotica, primitivism, and disassociation, a distancing reinforced in the look of people who populated it: the passivity, appearance, and adornment of the inmate workforce, and the reinforcement of terror in the presence of guards, dogs, whips, and guns to punish non-compliance. Although many deportees arrived at camps, the majority did not survive. The so-called selections of deportees for life or death were based on subjective criteria of appearance, presumed fitness for labor, gender, age, and usability. This menacing reception is recalled in testimonies in the vocabulary of its original decisive instruction that included “selection,” “left” and “right.” The death work of the camp was described in images of “fire,” which evoked the path to, or temporary avoidance of, a crematorium destination. These words divided populations and deportees, and were genocidal in implication and process.

Similar to other testimonies, Rudolf Reder identifies the platform at Belzec camp as a place of violent encounters and exploded illusions. On the platform, Belzec’s order and authority were administered by the SS men and their dogs. They were assisted by the so-called Zugführer, who were in camp contexts, a group of fifteen or so Jews selected from the death brigade with the task of being present at the ramp to meet each transport as it arrived. They were dressed in everyday clothing without any distinctive marking.⁴⁶ Reder conveys the assault to deportees in terms of a violent removal: “several dozen SS men yelling ‘Los’ opened the trucks, chasing people out with whips and rifle-butts. The doors were about a metre from the ground, and the people, young and old alike, had to jump down, often breaking arms and legs. Children were injured and all tumbled down exhausted, terrified and filthy.”⁴⁷ Reder’s testimony surveys the platform as an initiation into camp labor and the transformation of deportees into workers. The labor force comprised a number of camp occupations for which incoming victims were recruited. One task of workers at the ramps was to relocate those from arriving transports who were aged, ill, women, and small children. They “were thrown onto stretchers and taken to pits. There they were made to sit on the edge, while Irrmann—one of the Gestapo—shot them and pushed their bodies into the pit with a rifle-butt.”⁴⁸

Reder’s testimony about the reception of incoming transports at Belzec corroborates the historically documented process of the continuing deception of deportees, the expropriation of their luggage, and the welcome speech of future journeys, the last of which ended in death. His testimony underscores the importance of a visual truth to describe violent procedure of separations. He depicts the system of separations as both orderly and chaotic. His recollection of death’s motion as accompanied by orchestra music is disturbing, but the practice was not isolated to Belzec. It was a pacifying practice that attempted to drown out the sounds of dying victims:

Each transport received the same treatment. People were ordered to undress and to leave their belongings in the courtyard. Each time there was the same deceptive speech. And each time people rejoiced. I saw the spark of hope in their eyes—hope that they may be going to work. But a minute later, with extreme brutality, babies were torn from their mothers, old and sick were thrown on stretchers, while men and little girls were driven with rifle-butts further on to a fenced path leading directly to the gas chambers. At the same time, and with the same brutality, the already naked women were ordered to the barracks, where they had their hair shaved ... Cries of fear and anguish, terrible moans, mingled with the music played by the orchestra. Hustled along and wounded by bayonets, first the men were made to run to the gas chambers. The askers counted 750 people to each chamber. Before all six chambers were filled to capacity, those in the first had already been suffering for nearly two hours. It was only when all six chambers were packed with people, when the doors were locked into position, that the engine was set in motion.⁴⁹

After Auschwitz, Treblinka was the largest camp for the murder of deportees. It was the primary destination for Jews from the *Generalgouvernement*, and also for many transports from Southern Europe. In wartime and immediate postwar accounts, its status as a graveyard was readily admitted and mourned. What distinguishes postwar interpretations of arrival is the backshadowing impulse that is invested less in the destination and more in charting the connecting links between locations. If arrival at camps gives deportees an opportunity to anchor their testimonies to the visual, a residual sense of the placelessness of these locations in a human geography persists. This conflict of the camps as an alien geography serviced by a modern and familiar transit infrastructure is a major theme in the tellability of arrival. This theme is not isolated to deportees' accounts, but is also evident in the re-witnessing reports of investigators who toured the camps after the end of World War II. The status of Treblinka as a preminent address of Jewish destruction preceded that of Auschwitz.

In November 1945, Rachel Auerbach, the Yiddish writer and chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto, was part of an official tour group of the ruins at the instruction of the Central State Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland. This tour resulted in her lamenting report, "In the Fields of Treblinka." Auerbach identified the railway tracks as the arteries to genocide: "The road to Treblinka. Here it is, the saddest of all roads ever to be trod by Jews, the journey made by so many hundreds of thousands of Jews in boxcars wired shut and packed beyond all limits, under conditions worse than any ever imposed upon calves shipped to the slaughterhouses."⁵⁰ If Auerbach mapped the end point, the historian Israel Gutman attempted to return to its origins. As origin and destination Warsaw and Treblinka were embedded in an intimate geography of suffering—the route of Holocaust

death traffic for Polish Jews: “Buried beneath its streets are the material remains of Jewish culture and civilisation. Some sixty miles away in the skies around Treblinka are the ashes of the Jews of Warsaw who were brought in the summer of 1942 by train to its gas chambers. Within hours of their arrival, their material possessions confiscated, their hair shaved, they were gassed and their bodies cremated, sent up in smoke.”⁵¹

The arrival moment at Treblinka was similar to other locations, yet Isadore Helfing’s shock in being so close to the mountain of corpses testified to the flow of transports into the camp and the workers’ carelessness in concealing the bodies from incoming deportees: “The minute they opened up the door I was facing right, there were about 2 storeys of dead people right in front laying there, this was the people that came before, dead in the train, they pushed them out, they didn’t have time to haul away, because another train came in,” and “I see boys dragging dead bodies to the grave, and I jumped right in and started dragging those bodies like I was one of them.”⁵²

Kalman Teigman was deported to Treblinka in September 1942 and remained there until the inmate revolt in August 1943. He remarked that the Nazis were intent on updating the station’s ruse and pacification of incoming deportees. Six months after he reached Treblinka, he testified that the camp’s commandants authorized alterations to the station platform and added flowers. There was also a hut, a large clock, music, a waiting room, railway timetables and large signs, which indicated that deportees had arrived in a trans-migrant community; arrows were visibly displayed, which directed the future journeys from the station: “Zu den Zuegen nach Bialystok und Wolkowysk” (To the trains to Bialystok and Wolkowysk).⁵³ The appearance of Treblinka as any other station is given visual credibility in the photo that depicts the platform and tiny station house (see Figure 6.1), which was discovered in an album that belonged to Kurt Franz, the camp’s deputy commandant. The knowledge of its possession and possible perspective of the photographer provokes thought about what is excised from the photo regarding the platform’s history of activity: of incoming and outgoing deportees, the surveillance, and the chaotic unloading at the ramp.

Similar practices of separation, selection, and relocation were applied in other camps. Platform scenes of isolation, concealment, limited modernity, and sensory assault appear in Moshe Bahir’s testimony about Sobibor, where he arrived in April 1942. Bahir recalled the release from the train and into the sound of order: “All the doors of the carriages were opened. German SS men, in green uniforms, were standing there, as well as Ukrainians in black uniforms. While I was still on the train, I heard the word ‘aufmachen’ (open up), and all the carriages were opened up simultaneously. There was terrible shouting. They began taking us to Camp I.”⁵⁴ Bahir



Figure 6.1 Train station, Treblinka, 1942–1943 (WS 35274). (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz), Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives.

went on to work in the *Bahnhofkommando* (Railway Station Unit), whose job involved removing the plundered belongings of deportees sent to their deaths, and clearing the platform of remaining rubbish and other items so that the “the transport waiting outside would be able to come in.”⁵⁵ Quite possibly, it was this roaming mobility that allowed Bahir to map the layout of the camp. For him, the physical landscape was the camp’s most effective method of concealment of plundering activities, and for hiding bodies and the evidence of death.

Bahir’s description of Sobibor as located in a primitive, uninhabited, forested area, with little sign of human habitation beyond the camp itself is further explored in his charting the sites of death and hiddenness: “Behind the hut extended barbed wire fences which were swallowed up in the tangle of trees. Behind the fence were huge piles of bundles and various personal belongings, flames of fire and pillars of smoke which arose from within the camp and, with their flickering light, tried to brighten the evening twilight, and above all, the smell of charred flesh which filled the air.”⁵⁶

Bahir’s work in the *Bahnhofkommando* allowed him to witness the arriving transports. The importance of being an eyewitness to the arrival procedure is highlighted in the following exchange between Bahir and the Attorney General at the Eichmann trial. He was questioned about the regularity with which the transports arrived at Sobibor:⁵⁷

Bahir: I remember certain periods. I remember a period when there were fewer trains; during the first period, when I was selected for work, fewer transports arrived—two transports came daily; perhaps there had been an instruction not to send many.

Attorney General: I am not asking you about instructions. My question is: What did you see? Who arrived?

Bahir: Later on, there was a time when many transports arrived—two each day, sometimes three. One at night, which had to wait until morning, and two more during the day. There were several such periods. The peak period I can remember was from May to July, August 1942. The second period was from October 1942 to the beginning of January 1943, when there were again many transports, two, and sometimes three, daily.

The marginalization of survivors of the Operation Reinhard camps as Holocaust eyewitnesses was not unusual given these camps were constructed for the purposes of extermination of deportees. Dov Freiberg, a fifteen-year-old boy when he arrived in Sobibor, also testified at the Eichmann trial. He spoke of the anticipation, unloading and separation characteristic of arrivals at other Operation Reinhard camps. These anticipations were misguided, for some deportees thought that direction to the East meant resettlement for agricultural work in Ukraine. Yet, how could these anticipations be convincing? Would they not be destroyed on arrival at the camp, if not beforehand by the fetid conditions in the trains? He recalled that

from the very moment we entered the camp, we were enveloped by a regime of fear. Everything happened at a rapid pace—indeed, there was not even time to think—there were shouts from SS men, from Ukrainian SS men, “Raus, raus” (out, out), and Schneller! Schneller! (faster, faster), and they forced us to run through the fences to a place where there was a small gate, “links, rechts” (left, right) ... In Sobibor, there were no selections for life and for death. Everyone who arrived—was exterminated. This was temporary—only for a few hours, or minutes. Links, rechts, meant men separately and women and children separately.⁵⁸

The promise of future mobility continued after unloading, as deception was employed until the very moment of extermination. Life was advertised in signage such as “SS Sonderkommando Umsiedlungslager” (Camp for Resettlement) and the instructions of hygiene (“to the showers”), and commerce (“to the cash desk”), which directed deportees from their arrival to the closed-in yard. Freiberg described his different witness opportunities in Sobibor as he graduated from deportee to worker. Striking in the following comment is the insistence on a visual truth, of what the deportees looked like, their origins, and the sense of a global war as explanation and internalization of the camp’s killing practices: “We saw what was going on,

but thought the whole world was being destroyed. We saw that transports were arriving in all kinds of ways, the people were well dressed, as if they had gone on a visit somewhere, people from France and Holland, from all sorts of countries, and all this went on, day after day, day after day.”⁵⁹ A particular transport that arrived from Bialystok is seared in Freiberg’s memory: “The freight cars were broken. Inside people were half dead, half alive. The people were naked. The dead, the living—all together, all injured ... it was something terrible.”⁶⁰ Freiberg’s comments support the contention that deception was maintained in the image of transit, particularly in the correspondence of “letter-actions”: “There were transports to whom they gave food and drink when they arrived, and they gave them writing paper and envelopes, in order to send letters home, and then they entered the yard, where they were undressed, and after Michel spoke (possibly a Commandant of sorts), there would be applause.”⁶¹

Arrival at Auschwitz was depicted in testimonies as a fraught discovery, expressed in descriptions of the camp population—the commandants, guards, subordinates and inmates, and particularly the Jewish labor force. But it was also delayed. Sophie Machtinger recalled the interior of the motionless carriage: “The train stood, and we could see in the distance an enormous yard surrounded by concrete pillars and barbed wire. It was getting brighter, and we could make out people dressed in what we perceived as pajamas with blue and white stripes.”⁶² After being instructed to abandon any possessions, she is emotionally paralyzed: “We were engulfed by indifference, and things suddenly lost their meaning, things which we had prepared so many years before.”⁶³

Louis de Wijze, deported from Westerbork transit camp on 23 March 1944, describes his abrupt arrival: “We hear the opening of the sliding doors of the first cars. All tense, we look at one another as the noises come our way. Then our door flies open. ‘Everybody out. All your luggage on the platform. Quick. Quick.’”⁶⁴ The frenzy of arrival threw deportees into even more terror: “we grab our stuff, jump outside, and immediately find ourselves in a raging storm. Men in striped clothes hastily drive everybody off the train. The SS, their Alsatians on the leash, club any prisoners still holding onto their possessions.”⁶⁵ Benjamin Jacobs describes the terror of his unloading from the carriage: “The doors rolled open, and startled us with loud bangs ... ‘Raus ...’ the cement platform was crowded with SS men, yelling and waving us impatiently, out of the wagon. We thought we knew all about Auschwitz’s horror, but we were soon to discover how little we actually did know. Each of us had been quietly evaluating his chance of survival.”⁶⁶ Helen Lewis was also extremely nervous at arrival: “At dawn the train stopped again. The doors were ripped open, and amid obscene yelling and cursing, some wild-looking creatures in striped prison clothes

boarded the wagons and flung us and our bundles out onto the platform, where seemingly amused SS men with fierce dogs received us.”⁶⁷ Moshe Garbarz, deported from the Pithiviers camp in France to Auschwitz, recalls the shouting: “Our train finally came to a standstill. There! We had arrived. Suddenly came shouts: ‘Aussteigen! Los! Los! Leave all your belongings, your own people will come and get them.’ After two sleepless nights, our legs were shaking, our heads were buzzing, our eyes were blinded by the light. The blows they struck woke us right up.”⁶⁸

The extreme shock for deportees of the abrupt unloading was immediately redirected to the camp’s surreal activities. Upon entering the fields of Auschwitz, Lily Malnik reportedly “saw fire from far away,” and was instructed to leave her luggage and stand in line.⁶⁹ Pearl Spiegel arrived at Auschwitz in May 1944 after two days: “We were told to leave all of our belongings in the railroad car. Then we were told to line up—men and boys to the left and women and children on the right.”⁷⁰ For Miso Vogel, his arrival at Auschwitz was accompanied by order, terror, and forward mobility: “The doors of the car were opened and it was the first time they had seen SS guards, each officer had a dog, and saw prisoners in striped uniforms. The separation process: told to line up in rows of 5. We were marched from the station about 1.5 miles to the entrance of Auschwitz with the sign, ‘Arbeit macht frei.’”⁷¹

Descriptions of the procedural similarities at camps were secondary to the traumas of their imposition. The process of order is reinforced in Lotte Weiss’s account: “We continued our sad and fateful journey for many hours and when we stopped again the bolted doors were unlocked. We were driven out by SS men with submachine guns and Alsatian dogs.”⁷² Separation lingers in Sam Profetas’s platform scene: “We reached Auschwitz-Birkenau, where we were ordered to come out, leaving all of our stuff in the railway cars. Then they separated the old people, the little children, and the women holding babies.”⁷³ Deported from Rhodes, Rosa Ferera could not predict her family’s fate on arrival: “Up to this time we had no idea what our ultimate fate would be. However, on arrival at Auschwitz, a selection was made and our parents and all young infants were separated from us and taken to the crematoriums.”⁷⁴

Descriptions of the exotica of the landscape extended to descriptions of the inmate population, and the decay of the train’s corpses suggest a metaphor for the camp ethos. Olga Lengyel recalls:

While we were assembled on the station platform, our luggage was taken down by the creatures in convict stripes. Then the bodies of those who had died on the journey were removed. The corpses that had been with us for days were bloated hideously and in various stages of decomposition. The odors were so nauseating

that thousands of flies had been attracted. They fed on the dead and attacked the living, tormenting us incessantly.⁷⁵

Lengyel's sentiment is repeated in Primo Levi's account. He recalls that "the climax came suddenly. The door opened with a crash, and the dark echoed the outlandish orders in that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to a millennial anger. A vast platform appeared before us, lit up by reflectors. A little beyond it, a row of lorries."⁷⁶ Levi then describes what he saw on the platform: "two groups of strange individuals emerged into the light of the lamps. They walked in squads, in rows of three, with an old, embarrassed step, head dangling in front, arms rigid."⁷⁷ Levi anticipates his future in the form of "strange individuals" of the system, an indelible imprint of the death-world: "We looked at each other without a word. It was all incomprehensible and mad, but one thing we had understood. This was the metamorphosis that awaited us. Tomorrow we would be like them."⁷⁸

If deportees struggled to describe the inmates who walked around as if characters in a bizarre script, they were less ambiguous in their condemnation of the Nazis as sadistic, pathological, and cunning. The Nazis and the supporting staff on the ramps contrasted visually and behaviorally with the inmates in their appearance, power, and potential for brutality: "Every two yards along the platform stood a soldier with a dog and a machine gun aimed at us, while other SS men were driving us from the train with strange whips equipped with iron balls at the end."⁷⁹ Eva Quittner recalled the presence of a women's orchestra who had standing orders to "play at the arrival of every transport ... The Germans, with their flair for organisation and some ingenuity, had worked out that music would help to reassure the newcomers and avoid a general panic."⁸⁰

Ernst Michel remembers the sound of vicious and barking dogs: "after a while—I had no idea how long—I sensed that something was wrong. I heard voices yelling and the train came to a halt. I heard dogs barking. Angry dogs. Dogs that meant trouble."⁸¹ He also describes the violent assaults against deportees, and tried to protect himself: "the beatings began as we jumped from the train. Keeping a small bag under my arm, I jumped down, grabbed a fistful of snow, and shoved it into my mouth."⁸² The mayhem continued in the desperate rush to find and protect family members, which was often futile. Michel recalled that "as far as I could see, there were endless rows of cattle cars being emptied. The old, the infirm, men, women, children, babies, created a seething mass of inhumanity. It was mayhem."⁸³ Michel tries to explain the scene through a fictional allusion, revealing a failure of the witness to describe what he sees as an authentic truth: "it was a scene from Dante's *Inferno*. More and more people joined the procession

that slowly moved forward. I could not see where it was going. Men and women were searching for each other, crying and yelling.”⁸⁴ Ruth Elias continues Michel’s theme of shock and terror at arrival: “At some point in the late afternoon the train stopped. The doors were ripped open and we faced a terrifying pandemonium: shouting, yelling, barking dogs ... Get out, out! Leave everything behind! Get out! Faster, you swine! Line up in rows of five! Faster! Faster!”⁸⁵

Does not the order “Leave everything behind” capture what deportees struggled to do? The SS instruction does not just refer to material possessions, but also refers to how we can interpret deportees’ entry into the camp world. A despairing, melancholy tone saturates many accounts of arrival, and some testifiers cannot divorce the destination of the journey from the interpretation of the arrival location. Although repeated references are made to the often chaotic reception by SS officers, their dogs, and other prisoners, survivors identify the beginnings of deportation and their passage to the camp as a route of mourning. This retroactive witness laments the lost world of before with a mythical, nostalgic aura, even if that world was the incarcerational ghetto and its restricted mobility. Helen Lewis reflects on life in the ghetto through the lens of Auschwitz: “Amid the soul-destroying restrictions and deprivations of daily life in Terezin, I had thought of home in Prague, even under the German occupation, as a lost paradise. Now I found myself remembering the ghetto’s ugliness with something like the same nostalgia ... In Terezin, on the ramparts and in the hospital, there had been grass and even a few flowers ... Here nature had died, alongside people.”⁸⁶

The otherness of an Auschwitz arrival was also recalled in the deliberate plundering of material possessions, hope, and orientation. Elie Wiesel mourned “the cherished objects we had brought with us this far were left behind in the train, and with them, at last, our illusions.”⁸⁷ Arrival was a displacement from the past and future, captivity in an endless present. The inexplicability of the encounter with the camp world, of language’s failure to represent the physical landscapes and sensory assault, evokes Ernst Van Alphen’s “visual imprints” to describe the effect of unassimilated witness truths, particularly in references to the Jewish “other” in the camp. The Jewish “other” was represented as decivilized in varying states of alterity, misery, and immobility, for example, as laborers, beleaguered camp inmates, *Muselmänner*, and corpses. In the following excerpts, language struggles to meet the demands of vision. Henja Frydman recalled the visual distinctiveness and foreignness of the Jews:

The first thing we saw were very emaciated men, in bathing suits. And we were thinking, “What could these be? Maybe we are out of our minds?” We could not imagine that these were our own Jews. We didn’t recognize them. They were

marching five abreast, and looked at us with horror in their eyes, and we also could not understand why their faces were so full of terror when they saw us.⁸⁸

Frydman continues her testimony with words that frustrate the attempt at interpretation, again evoking Auschwitz as the center of the symbolic geography: "To tell! That is the hardest things for us. Why? Because there are no words. No way of expressing it, that can describe what happened from the day when we disembarked from the train in the lager Auschwitz until the day of our liberation."⁸⁹ Frydman maps the division of the population, the inducement to volunteer for foot and truck transit to the main camp, and most fearfully, not knowing the fate of that internal journey. At the arrival platform she was

lined up five abreast, men on the one side, women on the other side. German officers, with a stick in hand, with savage outcries which were for us still new, started dividing us up, one to the right, one to the left, whichever way it would occur to them and were instructed to "leave your bundles here; you will return presently. We will just count you up" ... we left our packages, women were separated from men, sisters from brothers, women to one side, and the men away to the other side. They then started what was called a selection. They asked us who were tired, and they told these to step into the trucks which were waiting. They also told us that the old people shouldn't exert themselves by walking on foot, and that they should mount the trucks and they would be driven to the lager, and the young ones should walk.⁹⁰

Helene Tichauer conveys the disorientation of arrival. In her interview with David Boder she recalls what happened after her selection at Auschwitz and ensuing march to a gate:

On the way we saw something that I hardly could describe any more today. It was a most peculiar sight. Half-finished stone blocks /buildings/ surrounded with barbed wire. On the roofs, at the windows, stood striped, living corpses. I can't express myself differently. People without faces, /without/ facial expressions, like...like made of stone. Next to them stood ... today we know they were sentries, sentries so to speak, who guarded these prisoners, and /word not clear/ who ... these were men. When they say us, they were ... when they in some way directed their attention at us, they were yelled at, so that they would not dare any more to turn their head/s/, and continued with their work. At that time, as I understand it now, the lager Auschwitz was being constructed for us, for the women ... to complete it, so to speak, because most of them were up on the roofs.⁹¹

The perceptual assaults of arrival are also recalled in the testimony of Leon Cohen, with the admission of inexplicability becoming his only possible representation. He is able to report basic observations about the

weather on the morning his train arrived, but his camp experience, during which he was a member of a Sonderkommando unit, remains mystifying: “It was spring and the sun was shining, but most of the prisoners only briefly enjoyed the glorious weather before being dispatched to the ovens and reduced to ashes ... For eleven months I experienced Hell on Earth. No words will ever convey the true meaning of my story and I find it impossible to adequately describe the horrors that I witnessed.”⁹²

For the majority of deportees transported, arrival at the camps signaled an end to transit. In his assessment of why deportees boarded deportation trains, historian Israel Gutman asserted that deportees battled two complementary yet fatal visions: a belief in the transit image that was maintained not just in the rhetoric of resettlement and safe journeys, but also in the deliberate representation of mistruths, designed to induce, ultimately, compliance with Nazi intentions:

The truth of the death camp was not conveyed in a vacuum. There were also rumors of greetings, letters, and people who allegedly returned from the deportations. The Germans and their agents deliberately spread these false stories in order to create confusion and disinformation. Poles in the underworld promised that in exchange for large sums of money they would look for and find loved ones who had been deported. Every sign of hope was welcomed. People repressed knowledge of their doom. They desperately, even self-destructively, clung to illusions.⁹³

In this economy of illusions, deportees were victims in the regime of self-expropriation. They packed belongings, goods, mementos, clothes, and food, either hurriedly or expectantly, depending on the abruptness of the deportation action, for what was portrayed as their resettlement journey from the ghetto to point of departure.

The inventory of illusions persisted in the reception of deportees. In Treblinka, for example, the alienness of the camp was not only physical and infrastructural. It was also interpreted in the assembly of Jews from different regions of Europe who did not share languages or customs. For the deportees recruited into work commandos, “arrival” meant being witness-participants in the system of expropriation and plunder, and observers to the bewilderment of arriving deportees. They provided critical commentary about the attitudes and appearance of incoming deportees, who were often cast in ethnically distinct terms. New transports, especially those from Southern Europe, were received with both apprehension and much anticipation. The first group of Greek Jews arrived in Treblinka from Salonica on 26 March 1943. The transport consisted of 2,800 Jews in forty-eight train wagons, which passed through Czechoslovakia and Poland. Among them were academics and intellectuals. Samuel Willenberg witnessed their

arrival and noted the racial exotica of Greek Jews in terms of their skin tone, appearance, and language:

In the beginning of Spring, 1943, the whistle of the train informed us of the arrival of a new transport. From the wagons a slightly weird crowd exited. The people that arrived had dark faces, curly hair and [were as] black as a crow as they spoke a foreign language ... Amongst the arrivals was an especially large number of wealthy people of the intelligentsia, professors and lecturers. Though they made their way to the camp in wagons, they weren't crowded in as usual, and what appeared to us as being the strangest, was that the wagons were not closed and locked, and not labeled ... They all went down from the train cars relaxfully and completely calm. Women dressed finely, nice children, and men straightening and fixing the wrinkles of their elegant clothes, passed calmly from the ramp to the transport amassment area.⁹⁴

The deportees' belief in resettlement appears reinforced through Willenberg's shock that the wagons were "not closed and locked, and not labeled."⁹⁵

Work in an arrival commando, as described by Richard Glazar in Treblinka, also permitted a close analysis of racialism and recycling that dominated the camp's logic. Glazar noted a distinct difference between the allocation of care and community for a transport from the West and those from the East. For example, the maintenance of a transit ruse was perceived as necessary for those deportees from the West, who were sometimes transported in passenger cars, and were generally perceived as more socially assimilated and educated. This perception contrasted with views of deportees from Poland, who were seen as racially and socially inferior. The solicitation of compliance of deportees from the West was arguably more necessary because their distances and transport routes were much more noticeable to local populations who might have objected to the disappearance of Jews from their communities. Glazar commented that transports from Darmstadt, Theresienstadt, or anywhere in the West, were handled with "relative care. These passengers don't seem to sense anything amiss. All apprehension is immediately banished. No one can imagine his own end—such a very naked end."⁹⁶ But deportees in transports from the East, were already "half dead from the effect of being herded into the cattle cars, or from the journey itself. Most of these people are pushed into the middle hallway with the 'shower rooms' on either side."⁹⁷

The camp sorting commandos' anticipation of an arriving transport, especially those from the Western and Southern Europe, was reflected in the value attached to various items in deportees' suitcases. These items, most of which were personal for the deportee, were removed at arrival and sent for sorting in barracks, and this process required specialist knowledge. For example, transports with doctors on board delivered pharmaceutical items into Treblinka,

and these were sorted by medical students who were also camp inmates.⁹⁸ Luggage items provided a constant source of anticipation, delight, and wonder for sorting commandos, who often took these items to trade with camp guards. Glazar noted: "It is all but impossible to imagine what can be found among the last things packed by thousands and thousands: a case outfitted like a small laboratory, a collapsible leather bag full of tools, and other items."⁹⁹ He also helped himself to food: "Never in these past two years of war has my mouth been so full of butter, chocolate, sugar. From another pile I take a shirt, every day a clean one, every day a shirt from another dead man."¹⁰⁰ The plundered goods that were stored in the sorting commando barracks in the Operation Reinhard camps represented a final expropriation of the deportee, a system of plunder and profit that was repeated in other camps.

Apart from working in arrival and sorting commandos, some incoming deportees, usually men, were selected for work in the Sonderkommando.¹⁰¹ At Auschwitz, there were five groups of Sonderkommando labor that carried out tasks specific to the extermination process: receiving newcomers in the undressing room, removing the victims' clothing after they left the hall, carrying the bodies after gassing to the place of cremation, collecting valuables, shaving hair and extracting gold teeth, operating the furnaces for the cremation of the bodies of those murdered, crushing the remnants of bones and body parts that had not been consumed in the flames, and disposing of the ashes.¹⁰² This clinical description of a profoundly gruesome process belies a rather problematic moral complex in relation to disclosure and survival. Members in Sonderkommando units did not reveal to victims the fate that awaited them, believing it was preferable not to arouse the victims' terror, and in doing so, secure their own survival for a few weeks longer. In his interviews with former Sonderkommando workers, Gideon Greif interprets their dilemma as "apart from having to participate in the industrial-scale murder, the Sonderkommando men were thrust into a tragic paradox. It was in their unconscious interest that as many Jewish transports as possible arrive, since any slowdown in the pace of arrivals, let alone termination of labor at the 'death factory,' posed an existential threat to them. Their right to live hinged on the continued inflow of transports."¹⁰³

If language struggled to meet the demands of deportees' visions and experiences of the camps, what role does photography of the camps' functions and effects play in providing visual corroboration to testimonies about the separations and plunder of arrival? Photography operates as an alternative visual imprint; its reading depends on knowing the identity of the photographer and the purpose of the image. These conditions are not always available when interpreting images in the photographic archive of the Holocaust. What assumptions can be made about perpetrators' intentions to document, for example, arrival from an administrative perspective, particularly the

acquisition of deportees' suitcases and the items carried with them? The stolen belongings of deportees depicted in photography can be seen as less ambiguous in their memorial and symbolic value. Their discovery during the liberation of Majdanek in July 1944 and Auschwitz in January 1945 by Red Army soldiers represented another form of delivery or arrival; of personal belongings without ownership, and also in the evidentiary utility of photography in capturing the enormous scale of plundering and recycling that thrived in the camps.

The luggage items that were discovered during the liberation of these camps support previous testimonies of arrival: the expropriation of deportees' belongings at the ramp, their sorting by inmate commandos for reuse and redistribution in the Reich and surrounding areas, and in their status as abandoned and unclaimed. Indeed, the biography of the Holocaust deportee was revealed in the artifacts that symbolize indeterminate migrations and promised futures: shoes, suitcases, and personal photos.

As noted in the introduction to this book, photography was crucial in the depiction of crowd and boarding scenes from ghettos and transit camps to the death camps, yet its role in depicting arrival scenes is far more sanitized. As the primary evidence of deportation, the deportees themselves are mainly seen on the ramps—for example, in *The Auschwitz Album*—prior to selections. They disappear from the photographs as though they had never arrived, their imprints barely visible. Though complicated and ideologically freighted, photographs and film of the liberation of the camps continued to represent expropriation, revealing, however, a shifting ethical status in documenting the enormity of mass murder—the incomprehension of what was found in huge camp warehouses of expropriated goods. The image of shoes at Majdanek is similar to others, which depict the unknown biographies of genocide as shoes without owners or claimants, and a symbol of deportees' terminated foot journeys (see Figure 6.2). The photo's arc-like composition suggests a deliberate intervention to illustrate the scale of genocide with the personalization of shoes placed in the foreground, the snow acting as a cushion. The effect is immediate. Shoes are separated from the mound and placed at the forefront of the image, an invitation to the viewer to contemplate the fate of the shoes' owners.

The grainy photo taken by Soviet liberators at Majdanek recovers the portraits deportees from Western Europe took with them on their journeys (see Figure 6.3). The photo is a multilayered reference to death in the camps and the liberators' rescue of the victims' photos through reframing and witnessing. The photographer's framing of the portraits is a symbol of temporal fusion: prewar life and personal memories of women, particularly in the unknown and unconfirmed fate of those depicted. This collage works as a memorial witness to destroyed lives, faces without names that are reinforced with the missing owners of shoes in the previous image.



Figure 6.2 Victims' shoes, Majdanek, 1944 (WS 77716). (University of Minnesota Libraries), Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives, United Press International.



Figure 6.3 Photographs belonging to deported Jews, Majdanek, 1944 (WS 79199). (Sovfoto/Eastfoto), Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives, SovFoto.

As these photos suggest, the status of the deportee as a now-unavailable witness is highlighted in the use of the camera as a clinical documenter of an inventory of unclaimed personal belongings. Once part of a person's life story, these items are depersonalized and made anonymous through their accumulation. In complying with luggage requirements at departure from ghettos, deportees implemented a self-selection process, a process of divestment that continued in the camp regime at arrival and in warehouses for sorting expropriated goods. Goods that arrived in Auschwitz are depicted as overflowing next to the rail lines and the trains (see Figure 6.4).

This image from *The Auschwitz Album* depicts three kinds of traffic: the entry of the train into the camp and its emptying of passengers and their luggage, the use of the prisoners in the Aufräumungskommando (order commandos) to sort through the personal belongings confiscated from the transport of Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia, and in the foreground, the railway lines, which imply the vast rail network that enabled trains to arrive with deportees and depart with their expropriated freight. One of the outcomes of this freight was depicted in the photo of women sorting shoes at the "Canada" warehouse (see Figure 6.5). These shoes, like those at Majdanek, signify life, loss, and traces, but also possible reuse by the women who rummage through them.



Figure 6.4 Confiscated luggage from the arriving transport of Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia to Auschwitz, 1944 (WS 77381). Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives.



Figure 6.5 Auschwitz women inmates sort through shoes from the transport of Hungarian Jews, 1944 (WS 77394). Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives.

If an itinerant life characterized transit for deportees, their biographies were encased in both material and symbolic terms in the form of suitcases. As outlined in deportees' accounts, items in suitcases had to comply with specific items of "voyage luggage," although deportees often brought other items reflecting a combination of memorialization and anticipated uses: photos, brushes, clothes, blankets, medical supplies and pills, prosthetic limbs, glasses, pillows, shoes, tools for construction, and materials for writing. These items were also testaments to hope; a material biography of mobility that reflected the occupation, age, gender, and expectations of the deportee.

The post-liberation photo in Auschwitz of the mountain of suitcases (see Figure 6.6) does not only testify to plunder, accumulation, and recycling, but also to an absence of their owners—the deportees as the ultimate missing freight of the Holocaust's deportation trains. Indeed, this absence is evoked in the image of the valises or small cases, which are placed at the door of the freight car in the permanent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM; see Figure 6.7). In their status as artifacts of Holocaust transit, with the personal inscriptions of deportees written on the outside of them, the valises recall what deportees were forced to carry with them on to the trains and abandoned as they got off. The transport of valises



Figure 6.6 Suitcases of inmates found after liberation, Auschwitz, 1945 (WS 12022). (Panstwowe Muzeum w Oswiecim-Brzezinka), Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives.



Figure 6.7 Valises near the freight car, Permanent Exhibition, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (WS N02436). Courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives.

from museums in Poland to the USHMM exhibit symbolizes what I referred to earlier as the mobility of the symbolic geography of the Holocaust from site of historical origin to postwar refuge. Removed from their camp locations and transformed into artifacts by the memorial context of exhibition, the valises that remain are traces of their former owners.¹⁰⁴ The fusion of past and present is complete when the museum visitor carries with them the revealed freight of deportation as the knowledge of its outcomes that were mostly unknown to deportees—arrival at the camps was a failed resettlement.

The revelation of resettlement as death and the erasure of the victims' biography was the final scene of arrival for deportees who were transported to concentration camps. The perceptual destabilizations that occurred during the train journey, particularly the minimized opportunities for reliable visual truths, were partially restored on arrival. But arrival did not necessarily mean that what was visually seen could be comprehended or made tellable. The sensory assaults of deportation train journeys were not reversed upon release from the trains at the camps. Rather they were relocated and reconstituted according to specific locations and places of chaos, separation, and death: the platform, the sorting area, and the gas chamber.

Notes

1. Laska, "Auschwitz: A Factual Deposition," 175.
2. USHMM RG-02.004*01; Acc. 1986.019, Gundel, "Reborn," p. 94.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
4. Klüger, *Still Alive*, 94.
5. Heilman, *Never Far Away*, 65.
6. Recent critical overviews of Auschwitz and the Operation Reinhard camps include Peter Hayes, "Auschwitz, Capital of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 2 (2003): 330–50.
7. Mierzejewski, *Most Valuable Asset of the Reich*, 127.
8. See map 3 in Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Holocaust*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).
9. Donald Bloxham, "The Missing Camps of Aktion Reinhard: The Judicial Displacement of a Mass Murder," in *The Memory of Catastrophe*, ed. Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 118–31.
10. The figures are quoted from Raul Hilberg, whose statistics are conservative in relation to the widely accepted figure of six million Jews. He notes 1942 as the most destructive year when 2.6 million Jews were killed. See *The Destruction of the European Jews*, table B-3 in appendix B, 1320–21. Other statistics include the destruction of Jews as national groups in Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis & the "Final Solution"* (London: BBC Books, 2005), 374. Rees writes that 1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz, of whom one million who died there were Jews. See also Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt,

- Holocaust: A History* (London: John Murray, 2003), 291. They include statistics for Treblinka (750,000) and Belzec (550,000).
11. Reder, "Belzec," 268–69.
 12. Details about the camp's appearance are from Yitzhak Arad, "Operation Reinhard: Extermination Camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka," in *The Nazi Holocaust: Historical Articles on the Destruction of the European Jews*, ed. Michael Marrus (Westport: Meckler, 1989), vol. 3, no. 2, 1021–56.
 13. Reder's testimony from Belzec is further validated as exceptional through the inclusion of camp deaths: "Between 20 July 1942, the date when the camp was reopened after modernisation, and 11 December 1942, no fewer than 520,000 Jews were murdered in Belzec, of which ca. 38,000 died between 20 and 31 July, ca. 172,000 in August, ca. 132,000 in September, ca. 110,000 in October, ca. 61,000 in November and ca. 10,000 in December." See Reder, "Belzec," fn. 12, 276.
 14. Reder, "Belzec," 272.
 15. Lenartowicz, "Architecture of Terror," 65–66.
 16. *Ibid.*, 66.
 17. USHMM, RG 50.030*0113, Kolski, tape 1 of 2.
 18. Kuperhand and Kuperhand, *Shadows of Treblinka*, 108.
 19. USHMM, RG-02.137; Acc. 1994.A.138, Rajchman, "Testimony," p. 3.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Richard Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence: Survival in Treblinka*, trans. Roslyn Theobald (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995). Glazar, who participated in the uprising of August 1943, wrote his account in Czech immediately after 1945, yet could not find a publisher until 1990, when it was translated into German.
 23. *Ibid.*, 5.
 24. *Ibid.*, 11.
 25. Boder interview with Kestenberga, available at "Voices of the Holocaust," http://voices.iit.edu/frames.asp?path=Interviews/&page=keste&ext=_t.html.
 26. Boder interview with Kestenberga, available at "Voices of the Holocaust," http://voices.iit.edu/frames.asp?path=Interviews/&page=keste&ext=_t.html.
 27. USHMM, RG-50.030*258, Heilman.
 28. Gradowski, "Letter to a Friend," 92.
 29. *Ibid.*
 30. *Ibid.*, 93.
 31. USHMM, RG-02.111; Acc. 1994.A.202, Gross, "Prisoner 409," p. 194.
 32. USHMM, RG-04.048, "Concentration and Other Camps," Koppich, p. 58.
 33. USHMM, RG-02.157; Acc. 1994.A.0235, Berman, "Three Lives," p. 118.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
 36. USHMM, RG-02*144. Beer, "To Auschwitz and Back," p. 20.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 38. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Record Group 50, Oral History, Interview with David Bergman, RG-50.030*0020.
 39. Benjamin Jacobs, *The Dentist of Auschwitz: A Memoir* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 118.
 40. Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 12.
 41. *Ibid.*
 42. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 7.
 43. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

44. *Ibid.*, 9.
45. Gideon Greif's explanation of "selection" was that it was first used by Nazi doctors during the "Euthanasia" program. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, "selection" was associated with separation and isolation, and altogether it had seven goals themed around utility: selection of newcomers from the transports on the platform; selection in the camp; selection in hospitals of those who had not recovered quickly enough from their condition; selection for labor details; selection in the proximity of murder facilities where the Germans tried to remove deportees from transports who appeared disruptive and agitated and who posed a threat to the efficiency of the killing process; selection as a precaution; and selection in family camps. Greif contends that there were no fixed criteria for selections that were conducted arbitrarily and superficially by SS doctors, SS supervisors, and SS men from the Political Department. See Greif, *We Wept without Tears* (chap. 2, "Josef Sackar," fn. 9, 347–48). Anna Pawełczyńska supports the contention of randomness in the selection of incoming deportees from diverse backgrounds and beliefs, suggesting that "a general levelling occurred," although survival of inmates who entered the camp was also determined by a prisoner's previous life experiences and social position in the camp. See her *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 51–67.
46. Reder, "Belzec," 273. In normal circumstances, *Zugführer* referred to train master, but in the camp's usage the term referred to a group of Jews, led by an Oberzugführer, to greet each transport as it arrived (Reder, "Belzec," fn. 6).
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.* Esther Raab's impressions of Sobibor support Reder's testimony about the indiscriminate treatment of sick prisoners in the Operation Reinhard camps. Raab reported that at unloading sick travelers from smaller convoys were more noticeable and were shot on the spot, as the gassing was not worthy to be undertaken. This randomness appeared unusual for Auschwitz deportees. For them, the standard method of entry into the camp was unloading and selection on the train platform. See Esther Raab, quoted in Miriam Novitch, ed., *Sobibor: Martyrdom and Revolt: Documents and Testimonies* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1980), 137.
49. Reder, "Belzec," 276. The "askers" ("Askares" or "Askaris") identified former Soviet POWs who joined SS-Wachmannschaften and were trained in SS-Ausbildungslager Trawniki. They were also called "Trawnikimen" or "Blacks" because of their uniforms. They were the guards in the death camps during the liquidation of the ghettos and during deportations. Most of them were Ukrainians or Russian Volksdeutsche but among them were also Lithuanians, Latvians, and ethnic Russians. I thank Robert Kuwalek of the Belzec Memorial Museum in Poland for this information.
50. Rachel Auerbach, "In the Fields of Treblinka," in *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*, ed. Alexander Donat (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 24.
51. Gutman, *Resistance: Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, xii.
52. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Record Group 50, Oral History, Interview with Isadore Helfing, RG-50.042*0014; Acc. 1994.A.447.
53. Testimony of Kalman Teigman, *Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, vol. III, 1209.
54. Testimony of Moshe Bahir, *Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, vol. III, 1179.
55. *Ibid.*, 1180.
56. Moshe Bahir, in *Sobibor: Martyrdom and Revolt*, ed. Novitch, 143.
57. Testimony of Moshe Bahir, *Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, vol. III, 1181.
58. Testimony of Dov Freiberg, *Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, vol. III, 1167.
59. *Ibid.*, 1171.
60. *Ibid.*, 1173.

61. Ibid., 1176.
62. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Record Group 02, "Survivor Testimonies," Sophie Machtinger, "Recollections from My Life's Experiences," trans. Douglas Kouril, RG-02.012*01, p. 46.
63. USHMM, RG-02.012*01, Machtinger, "Recollections," p. 46.
64. Louis de Wijze, *Only My Life: A Survivor's Story* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 10.
65. Ibid.
66. Jacobs, *Dentist of Auschwitz*, 119.
67. Helen Lewis, *A Time to Speak* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), 62.
68. Garbarz and Garbarz, *Survivor*, 53.
69. USHMM, RG-50.030*146, Malnik.
70. USHMM, RG-02.002*04; Acc. 1991.A.0089, Spiegel, p. 2.
71. USHMM, RG-50.030* 0240, Vogel.
72. Weiss, *My Two Lives*, 26.
73. Profetas, "Y Afrieronos: Greek Jews and the Holocaust," 56.
74. USHMM, RG-02.002*11, Ferera, p. 2.
75. Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 23.
76. Levi, *If This Is a Man/The Truce*, 25.
77. Ibid., 26.
78. Ibid., 26–27.
79. Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 23.
80. Quittner, *Pebbles of Remembrance*, 233.
81. Michel, *Promises to Keep*, 37.
82. Ibid., 38.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 39.
85. Elias, *Triumph of Hope*, 107.
86. Lewis, *Time to Speak*, 64.
87. Wiesel, *Night*, 40.
88. Boder interview with Henja Frydman, 7 August 1946, available at "Voices of the Holocaust," http://voices.iit.edu/frames.asp?path=Interviews/&page=frydm&text=_t.html. Frydman reports that when her train left Drancy, its occupants were singing "The French Marseillaise, a [French] revolutionary song. We were screaming, we were yelling that they shouldn't let them deport us. And the police threw themselves on us and even wanted to fight with us." She tries to remember the words to sing it for Boder during the interview. The attempt is mainly unsuccessful.
89. Boder interview with Frydman, available at "Voices of the Holocaust," http://voices.iit.edu/frames.asp?path=Interviews/&page=frydm&text=_t.html.
90. Boder interview with Frydman, available at "Voices of the Holocaust," http://voices.iit.edu/frames.asp?path=Interviews/&page=frydm&text=_t.html.
91. Boder interview with Tichauer, available at "Voices of the Holocaust," http://voices.iit.edu/frames.asp?path=Interviews/&page=tisch&text=_t.html.
92. Cohen, *From Greece to Birkenau*, 17.
93. Gutman, *Resistance: Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, 142.
94. Samuel Willenberg, quoted in Yitzchak Kerem, "New Finds on Greek Jews in the Sobibor and Treblinka Death Camps in the Holocaust," in *The Jewish Communities of Southeastern Europe: From the Fifteenth Century to the End of World War II*, ed. I.K. Hassiotis (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1997), 250. See also Yitzchak Kerem, "Sephardic and Oriental Oral Testimonies: Their Importance for Holocaust Commemoration and Memory," in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*,

- ed. John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, vol. 3 (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 142–49; and Gail Holst-Warhaft, “The Tragedy of the Greek Jews: Three Survivors’ Accounts,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13, no. 1 (2000): 99–108.
95. Willenberg, “New Finds on Greek Jews,” 249.
96. Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 12.
97. *Ibid.*
98. *Ibid.*, 24.
99. *Ibid.*, 16.
100. *Ibid.*
101. In Auschwitz, the term “Sonderkommando” referred to inmates only and was officially introduced in September 1942, when the cremation operations began. In addition to Greif’s *We Wept without Tears*, see his “Between Sanity and Insanity: Spheres of Everyday Life in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando,” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 37–60. Also see the personal accounts of Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, trans. S. Flatauer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999) and Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account*, trans. Tibere Kremer and Richard Seaver (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1960).
102. Greif, *We Wept without Tears*, 10–11.
103. *Ibid.*, 86.
104. Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkowitz, “Introduction,” in *Shaping Losses*, 3.