

## **PROGRAMME TRAINS AND THE HOLOCAUST**

**9:00** Registration

**9:30** Welcome and introduction by moderator Annelies Beck

### **Session 1: Departure – Intro by moderator**

The first panel focuses on the point of departure for the victims from Belgium and northern France. Deportations took place from the Dossin barracks, but also from Drancy. What happened exactly and what about the attitude of the Belgian officials?

#### **9:50 – 10:10: *Deportation from the Dossin barracks 1942-1944* - Laurence Schram**

On 27 July 1942, the Nazis opened the assembly camp for Jews, located in the Dossin barracks in Mechelen. From August 4, 1942, to July 31, 1944, about 25 000 Jews and 350 Roma were deported from the Dossin barracks (Mechelen) to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Five special transports brought 218 Jews with enemy or neutral nationalities to other camps. The sole function of this camp consists of gathering racial deportees for genocidal deportation. In 1945 only 5% of these victims have survived.

This lecture focusses on the planning, the organization and the preparation of the racial deportation from the Dossin barracks. Based on archives and testimonies, the different periods of the camp are analysed. The Nazis first tried to summon the Jews before organizing large-scale round-ups. The last period is characterized by denunciations and manhunts. The rhythm of transport departures is strongly influenced by these periods. At the time of the summons and the round-ups, some 1,000 deportees embarked in third class passenger coaches, which followed each other from week to week. Afterwards, the Nazis had difficulty to gather the deportees. The transports were less numerous and less crowded. From Transport 20 onwards, the Nazis used freight wagons. Some deportees threw messages out of the wagons, leaving so their last sign of life.

#### **10:10 – 10:30: *A lesser - or a greater evil? The National Railway Company of Belgium and the deportations during WWII* - Nico Wouters**

In June 1940, the framework of cooperation between the German Wehrmacht Verkehrs Direktion and the National Railway Company of Belgium (NMBS/SNCB) seemed clear and aligned with the general Belgian administrative and economic 'policy of the lesser evil'. When the failure of this policy became apparent in 1941, this was particularly problematic for the NMBS/SNCB whose execution of German orders quickly escalated. The deportations of victims of Nazi persecution, most notably the Jewish victims on their route to extermination, became one of the darkest - largely unwritten - pages of this policy. The historic evaluation of the role and responsibility of the NMBS/SNCB is complex: it is an evaluation of both collaboration as well as resistance within the NMBS/SNCB, of judicial clarity of international law, but most importantly of the democratic resilience of a Belgian political system under dictatorship. This intervention aims to present the main factors of evaluation and suggest conclusions and further research.

**10:30 – 10:50: Q&A**

**10:50 – 11:10: coffee break**

**11:10 – 11:40: 3 moments in the deportation history of Belgium and Northern France. Four key aspects, characteristics and events of the deportation of Jews and Roma from Belgium and northern France:**

- ***Left Behind: the deportation rate of obligatory slave labourers and their families* - Dorien Styven**

The deportation for obligatory slave labour of 2.252 Jewish men from Belgium to northern France in June-September 1942 had an immediate effect on the survival chances of their families who were left behind. This contribution illustrates their trajectories in time and space, describes the consequences of the obligatory labour by Organisation Todt and the train as a symbol for the moment when the communication stopped.

- ***Save the children (September 11, 1942)* - Grégory Célerse**

On September 11, 1942 the German authorities supported by elements of the French security forces arrested across northern France hundreds of foreign Jews and their children, many of whom were born on French soil. This operation was planned on the eve of Roch Hachana, the Jewish New year. The Jews arrested were gathered in a local triage train station in Lille's popular neighborhood called Fives.

Elements of the SNCF (French National Railroad Company) working on the spot that day, spontaneously decided to act. Some were elements of the French Resistance. But they were a minority. Most of them did not belong to any underground organization. The most relevant element documenting the events is a recently found four-page report from Jean Mabilie the stationmaster. Twenty-five identified members of the SNCF did participate in what is today considered by Serge Klarsfeld as the largest rescue of Jews from a deportation train to Auschwitz. The USHMM in Washington DC considers this unplanned operation as one of the most important in occupied Europe from 1942-1944. 39 people have been identified as having been rescued that day. Some testimonies mention up to 60 people saved that day.

- ***The attack on the XXth convoy* - Koen Aerts**

**11:40 – 12:00: Q&A**

**12:00 – 13:00: Lunch break**

## **Session 2: Changing images on trains**

Not all associations with trains and deportation are the correct ones or rather give us the full picture. Most people associate deportation trains with wagons, normally used to transport animals or freight. And when one thinks of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the arrival of the trains as well as the selection on the platform, people think of the gate with the words "Arbeit macht Frei" and the towers and barracks. This panel will bring change in these views, and lead us to a historically more accurate, but therefore not one single bit less tragic view.

- ***13:00 – 13:20: From "passenger car" to "wagon": the misleading deception of deportation* - Johan Puttemans**

From the third-class railway carriages to the beast carriages, people from all over Europe were taken to the Nazi concentration camps and killing centres. Johan Puttemans also goes

into detail about the ruses that the Nazis set up to bring people to these places, always trying to avoid revolt and panic. In the Treblinka II killing centre, the SS built a fake train station to make the death trap look as innocent as possible.

**13:20 – 13:30: Q&A**

**13:30 – 13:45: moving to Zachor-room**

**13:45 – 14:10: Alicja Gescinska Zachor-Room**

**14:10 – 14:25: moving back to Museum**

**14:25 – 14:50: Q&A**

**14:50 – 15:10: Coffee break**

### **15:10 - 16:00 Session 3: Roundtable on the representation of trains and stations in Holocaust memory**

Train tracks can have very powerful symbolic values. This panel will explore how tracks and traces can convey very different memories, including within Jewish memory. What is the impact of the tracks themselves and how can we address such Holocaust memories when the tracks are no longer there? What types of traces remain and how can they play a role in the memorialization of the deportation? How do different initiatives and organizations work with the traces of so many lost lives? What are we transmitting from this history to future generations and in which way do we do so?

#### ***From a symbol of progress to a genocidal tool - Frédéric Crahay***

From the train as a possibility for a better life, a new start for migrant (Jewish) people from the East to a tool for deportation to forced work, concentration camps and killing centres.

Modern historians suggest that, without the mass transportation enabled by the railways, the scale of the 'Final Solution' would not have been as huge. Statistics estimating the total number of victims are still based in part on the shipping records of the German railways. How did the train evolve from a modern means of transport to an efficient means of deportation and what impact did it have on the image of the train after 1945?

#### ***Tracks and Traces of Deportation***

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### ***The train of 1000 - Hannes Vanwymelbeke***

The 1000 Train is a joint initiative of the War Heritage Institute and the Auschwitz Foundation to commemorate the victory of democracy over Nazi Germany. The idea was born in 2008 on the occasion of the international commemoration of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp. The aim is to invite 1,000 young people from all over Europe to visit the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps in Poland, with the aim of raising their awareness of the atrocities committed during the Second World War and to talk to them, of course, about the Holocaust. Next issue of the Train of 1000 is planned for 2023.

**16:00 – 17:00: *The importance of witnesses and the screening of the documentary of the Auschwitz Foundation “Déportés de Malines à Auschwitz – Gedeporteerd van Mechelen naar Auschwitz” – Frédéric Crahay***

**17:00 – 17:15: Closing remarks by Annelies Beck**