Transports from France

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Approximately 76,000 Jews were deported from France between 1942 and 1944. Most went to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the vast majority were exterminated on arrival. However, in March 1943 four trains from France, each containing approximately 1,000 deportees, were directed to Sobibor. In fact not all the victims of those four transports ended their journey in Sobibor - but of those who did, only two young men were still alive in 1945.

Some 300,000 Jews were living in France when the Germans invaded the country in early summer 1940. Many were French citizens whose families had lived in France for centuries and who were fully assimilated. Others had come to France, often from Eastern Europe, to seek a better life and escape from antisemitism. In the 1930's, many German and Austrian Jews also sought refuge in France. After the German invasion, the northern part of France, including Paris, was governed by a German military administration. Most of the rest of the country (the "free zone") was ruled from Vichy by a government of collaborators led by WW1 hero Marshal Pétain and Pierre Laval. Alsace and Lorraine were incorporated in the Reich.

The Jews of France were required to register, and the usual restrictions on owning property and practising certain professions were introduced, as well as other signs of forthcoming persecution such as the marking of Jewish shops. The requirement to wear a yellow Star of David was imposed in June 1942. Jews who had been naturalised after certain dates were deprived of their citizenship, although many had children born in France who were therefore French citizens by birth. The Vichy government upheld far-right, authoritarian and chauvinist principles, and had strong antisemitic tendencies.

However, when deportations began in 1942, the Vichy authorities made determined efforts to protect French Jews from deportation, while leaving the Nazis free to do as they liked with nationals of other countries and stateless refugees. The Nazis in turn persuaded some of their allies, such as Romania, to agree to the deportation of their Jewish nationals living in France. (Italy and Franco's Spain, on the other hand, agreed to take back their Jewish nationals and would not allow them to be deported). Jews from occupied countries such as Poland or Russia were automatically "deportable". Ultimately, of course, the Nazis deported French citizens as well as other Jews.

The Jews of France were emancipated during the French Revolution, but France also had a long-standing political antisemitic tradition. The French Count Gobineau was one of the earliest antisemitic theorists, and the "Dreyfus affair" at the end of the nineteenth century was fuelled largely by antisemitism in the army and other leading circles of French society. In the 1930's one socialist French Prime Minister, Léon Blum, was Jewish. He was kept at Dachau as a privileged prisoner during the war, but his brother died at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

There was a flourishing antisemitic press, fed by distinguished authors such as Céline and Charles Maurras (head of "Action Catholique", which promoted fundamentalist Catholic and chauvinistic values). In France Jews were arrested, imprisoned and guarded by the French police, who also conducted round-ups such as the infamous "grand rafle du Vél d'Hiv" in July 1942. Deportees were escorted to the trains by police or militiamen, and the trains were manned by French railway workers until they
crossed the border. Even the lists of those who could be rounded up as "deportable" were compiled by French officials. Without this collaboration at all levels of the French administration, it would have been impossible for the Germans to deport so many Jews - they simply did not have the manpower to do so.

On the other hand, the French population in general disapproved of the persecution and humiliation of the Jews. Leading members of the Catholic hierarchy condemned the treatment of the Jews. Monsignor Saliége, Archbishop of Toulouse, wrote a pastoral letter in their defence which was read in all the churches of his diocese (ironically, the outspoken Archbishop was an invalid who had lost the use of his voice years previously). France’s Protestant community was particularly active in helping Jews. As in other countries, special efforts were made to protect children. This contrasting situation was reflected in France’s response to the Shoah after the war. Laval was hanged, but the apparently senile Pétain was simply kept in honourable detention until he died. After over 40 years of indifference, there has recently been a flurry of attempts to prosecute leading collaborators, such as French police chief René Bosquet (who was shot by a mentally disturbed person before he could be tried), or Maurice Papon who was responsible for deporting Jews from Bordeaux.

The trial of Lyon Gestapo chief Klaus Barbie for ordering the arrest and deportation of Jewish children in a home at Izieu made headlines worldwide - but Barbie was famous initially for the arrest of resistance leader Jean Moulin, who died in his custody.

None of the three Germans principally responsible for putting the "Final Solution" into effect in France ever came to trial. Theodor Dannecker, who was responsible for Jewish affairs in the Gestapo in France until 16 July 1942, committed suicide in the American POW camp in Bad Tölz in December 1945.

Most deportations from France, including the four trains to Sobibor, took place under Heinz Rothke, born in 1913, who had previously been a military administrator in Brest. He had abandoned theology studies to become a lawyer and was a civil servant before the war. Rothke was apparently a workaholic and a ferocious antisemite who disliked personal contact with Jews. He had overall responsibility for the main French transit camp at Drancy outside Paris, but he seldom went there. After 2 July 1943 he was assisted by Alois Brunner, who in particular became effective commandant of Drancy. Brunner was also involved in the deportation of Jews from Wien to Sobibor (via Trawniki in the early summer of 1942). He took refuge in Syria after the war, and is probably dead now - all attempts to extradite him for trial have failed.

Both Dannecker and Brunner belonged to Adolf Eichmann’s inner circle of "deportation experts" assigned to several countries; Rothke did not, but he was just as enthusiastic about deporting Jews. After the war he became a lawyer in Wolfsberg, Bavaria. He died in 1966. France never requested his extradition and, indeed, seems to have made little attempt to find him.

It is not entirely clear why for one month the French transports went to Sobibor rather than Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Auschwitz Chronicle, compiled by Danuta Czech, shows that in late February and early March 1943 transports of Jews from Berlin (including some Norwegian Jews) were reaching the camp. It had been expected that most of these Jews would be fit for work, but in fact most of them were selected for gassing. Other transports during this time came from Poland and the Netherlands (which also supplied 19,000 victims to Sobibor); and on 4
March 1943 Convoy 49 from Drancy

Letter from June 1942

Letter from August 1942

Jews in Drancy Courtyard #1

Jews in Sobibor

Letter from March 1943 Convoy 49 from Drancy

However, during the first months of 1943 the SS and their civilian contractors were attempting to make the new Crematorium II operational, and this was taking longer than expected. Moreover, there was a resurgence of typhus in the camp at this time. On the other hand, transports to Sobibor and Treblinka seem to have slackened during this period.

Richard Glazar reports that very few trains came to Treblinka in early 1943. Most of Poland’s Jews had either been killed or were being exploited for labour, and transports formerly expected from Romania and Romanian-occupied territory had not materialised.

Belzec ceased to function as a gassing centre at the end of 1942. Thus Auschwitz may have seemed overloaded, while Sobibor had spare "capacity". No doubt railway schedules throughout Europe and military railway and rolling-stock requirements also played a part in the decision.

The Jews on the first two trains from France to Sobibor were victims of a reprisal action for the killing of two Luftwaffe officers in Paris on 13 February 1943. The Germans had previously responded to attacks of this kind by executing hostages or political prisoners sentenced to death, but the military authorities had come to believe that this type of response was counter-productive. The SS and the German Embassy therefore decided instead to deport 2,000 Jews, all men fit for work aged from 16 to 65, foreigners or stateless and of a "deportable" nationality. The commandant of Paris, Kurt Lischka, transmitted this order to the head of the French Police, who was apparently not confident that he would be able to fill the quota easily in Paris. He therefore passed on the order to the police prefects in the former free zone, who carried out a man-hunt in the camps and reception centres in their territory and among the "Groups of Foreign Workers" (Groupes de travailleurs étrangers or "GTE"), and arrested Jews in their homes.

All the victims were taken to the camp at Gurs.

Little or no attempt was made to separate French citizens from "deportables". Victims taken to Gurs from the camp at Nexon included Polish and Czech Jews who had fought for France in 1940 or were members of the Foreign Legion. One was a 65-year old rabbi. They were given five minutes to pack their bags. From Gurs two transports to Drancy were organised: one of 975 Jews on 26 February; the other, of 770 Jews, on 2 March.

Convoy No 50: The first contingent, reduced to 888 men aged from 16 to 65, made up almost all Convoy No 50, which left Drancy for Sobibor on 4 March 1943. 136 deportees from Drancy, including 66 women, were added to them. The 1,024 deportees included 377 Poles, 268 Germans, 99 Austrians, 91 Russians and 30 Dutch prisoners, a total of 865. The remaining 159 victims were presumably French citizens. They included Elie, Marie and Suzanne Levi, born in Paris in 1929, 1934 and 1937 respectively. The official destination of Convoy 50 was Chelm near Lublin, where some of the deportees were selected for work at Majdanek before being transferred to Auschwitz in July 1943. Four of them were still alive in 1945. The rest of the convoy was gassed at Sobibor.

Convoy No 51: The 770 Jews transferred from Gurs on 2 March were joined by over 150 Jews assembled at the camp of Nexon. On arrival at Drancy they numbered 926 men, aged from 16 to 65, the majority aged from 37 to 45. Once again, many of these victims had fought for France; some of them had been decorated. 73 Drancy internees, including 39 women, were added to this contingent to make up the required number. The youngest member of the convoy, Victor Fiszban, was born in Piotrkow in 1928. Convoy 51 was also sent to Chelm, and then on to Sobibor. There were 6 survivors in 1945: Two of them, Mendel Fuks and Maurice Jablonsky, said that on arrival at Sobibor they were selected with a group of young people to go and work "very hard", and they at once set off again for Majdanek without entering Sobibor. Those selected were subsequently transferred to Auschwitz or Budzyn labour camp.
Convoy No 52: Convoy 52 comprised 640 men and 360 women. Over half the deportees, around 700, had French nationality, classed in various categories: French, French subjects, French by choice, by naturalisation and French by origin. Many of the victims of this transport had been arrested during a "clean-up" of the Old Port of Marseille which was carried out on Heinrich Himmler’s orders from 22 to 24 January 1943 to arrest "undesirables" such as petty criminals, prostitutes and, of course, Jews. The 800 Jewish "undesirables", many of whom came from French North Africa, were taken to the camp at Compiègne. At the beginning of March it was decided to deport them, and on 10 March, 786 were transported to Drancy. 570 of them were French nationals. The Germans were particularly contemptuous of the Marseille Jews, whom they called "criminal scum", and the Jewish leader at Drancy also complained that they arrived virtually without luggage and stole from other prisoners. In fact these poor people had been arrested at night and given no opportunity to pack any belongings. Also included in Convoy 52 were foreign furriers and their families arrested on 18 March, following a request by Röthke to the Paris police. There were 12 children under 12 and 140 young people aged from 12 to 21. Warned in advance by Röthke that the convoy would be made up in majority of French Jews, the heads of the French police objected to taking part in organising the departure of the convoy. In the end the French police gave in and cooperated, except that at the last minute the Gendarmerie did not provide the usual escort, which was replaced by 30 men from the German Order Police. The convoy left Drancy on 23 March, officially for Chelm but then went on to Sobibor. There were no survivors in 1945.

Convoy No 53: Again, a majority of the 1,000 Jews in this convoy (580) were French. There were also 114 Poles, 56 Hungarians, 49 Russians and 29 Germans. 119 were children aged less than 17. The convoy was made up of Jews arrested in the January Round-up at Marseille and some Jews arrested during a round-up in Paris on 11 February 1943, plus a few dozen Lyon Jews arrested on 9 February and sent on 9 March to the camp of Beaune-la-Rolande as provisionally "non-deportable". The convoy left Drancy on 25 March. 13 victims escaped in Germany. They were recaptured and transferred from Frankfurt and Darmstadt to Auschwitz. 3 of the escapees were still alive in 1945. When the train arrived at Sobibor, 15 deportees responded to a call for men who were prepared to work hard. Two of them were still alive in 1945.

One of the two survivors of Convoy 53 was Lucien Dunietz or Dunicz. He was born in Kiev but came to France to study chemistry at the University of Caen. He married a French woman, who was expecting their second child when he was arrested in the street in Paris in February 1943. He escaped from Sobibor during the revolt in October 1943. After the war he rejoined his family and they emigrated to Israel. He refused to speak about his experiences in Sobibor. In 1965 he agreed to give evidence at the trial of former Sobibor staff in Hagen, but he died of a heart attack before he could do so. He was 53. The other survivor of Convoy 53, Antonius Bardach, came from Lviv (Lwow). He was first held in the camp of Méringac near Bordeaux, before being transferred to Drancy, and then to Sobibor. He said the journey took about six days, with no food or water, in a sealed cattle truck which stank of excrement because he and his fellow prisoners were obliged to use it as a toilet. A young prisoner died during the journey. During Bardach’s imprisonment at Sobibor he did a variety of jobs, including collecting the victims’ personal belongings and clothes and cleaning freight cars. He was beaten on many occasions, and suffered from hunger and diarrhea. After the revolt he hid in the woods near Lublin until the liberation.

See the List of deported Jews from the French Department Bas-Rhin!
In: René Gutman, Le Memorbuch, Mémorial de la Déportation et de la Résistance des Juifs dus Bas-Rhin (Editions La Nuée Bleue/DNA, Strasbourg, 2005).

The Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names (Yad Vashem)

Photos: GFH

Sources:
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Miriam Novitch: *Sobibor, Martyre et Révolte* (Centre de publication Asie orientale, Université Paris 7, 1978 - testimony by the widow of Lucien Dunietz)
*Marseille, Vichy et les Juifs* (Amicale des Déportés d’Auschwitz et des Camps de Haute-Silésie)
Personal communication from Serge Klarsfeld

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