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**French Railway Workers and the Question of Rescue During the
Holocaust
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In 1994, the French railway worker – or *cheminot* – Léon Bronchart was made a Righteous Amongst the Nations. The Righteous Amongst the Nations is an award granted by Yad Vashem since its creation in the 1950s, and it aims to commemorate those non-Jews who helped Jews during the Holocaust.¹ In this case, Bronchart was honoured for three reasons: he helped his neighbours, the Rosenberg family, during the German Occupation; he hid a Jew fleeing from the French Milice in a train; and he refused to drive a convoy of Jewish deportees in late 1942.² It is for this last reason that Bronchart is most celebrated. In fact, he is referred to by some as the only *cheminot* who refused to take part in the genocide: 'Léon Bronchart, the 'exemplary *cheminot*' (...) He is the only *cheminot* who is 'Righteous Amongst the Nations', the only mechanic who refused to drive a locomotive pulling a train of deportees.'³ But if it is often claimed that Léon Bronchart refused to drive a train of Jewish deportees, he in fact states in his memoirs that the train he refused to drive on 31 October 1942 in Montauban station contained political prisoners – not Jews.⁴ This completely changes the significance attributed to his gesture. Indeed, the requirement for becoming a Righteous is that one must have been aware that the people s/he were saving were Jewish.⁵ Bronchart was certainly aware that his neighbours, the Rosenbergs, were Jewish, and he might also have been aware that the man he hid in his locomotive was Jewish. The claim that he refused to drive a 'Jewish' convoy, however, is a misrepresentation of the actual events.

The example of Léon Bronchart paints a more complicated picture of the Righteous than is often presumed, and in doing so contributes to an emerging literature which re-examines the role of rescue in the Holocaust.⁶ As Sarah Gensburger explained in the opening of her book on the

¹ Sarah Gensburger, *Les Justes de France* (Paris: Sciences Po, 2010) 20-1. For more information on Mordechai Shenhavi and Yad Vashem, see Ran Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 61-3.

² Yad Vashem Archives, Paris: Dossier n°6354, Léon Bronchart. The story of Léon Bronchart is fully developed in the Epilogue of my upcoming book, *Ordinary Workers: French Railwaymen, Vichy and the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press), which will be translated and published in French with Tallandier.

³ Alain Lipietz, 'Léon Bronchart, juste, ouvrier et soldat' (22 September 2007), <http://lipietz.net/?breve259>.

⁴ Jewish convoys were being driven from Southern France to Drancy in the summer and autumn of 1942, and although some went via Montauban, known train schedules would suggest it is unlikely that that particular train carried Jews.

⁵ There are four basic conditions for receiving this award, one of which underlines that the 'initial motivation' must be 'the intention to help persecuted Jews'. Thus, if one does not realise that the victims being persecuted are *Jewish*, one cannot claim this award. See the Yad Vashem website for more information: <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/faq.asp#criteria>.

⁶ The historiography on rescue and the Righteous in the Holocaust has truly taken off since the 2000s: Yisrael Gutman, Efraim Zuroff, eds., *Rescue attempts during the Holocaust: proceedings of the Second Yad Vashem International Conference, Jerusalem April 8-11, 1974* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1977); Lucien Lazare, *Le livre des Justes: histoire du sauvetage des juifs par des non-juifs en France, 1940-1944* (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1993); Israel Gutman, et. al., *The encyclopedia of the righteous among the nations: rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2003); Hubert Hannoun, *L'épopée des Justes de France* (Paris: Connaissances et Savoirs, 2004); Pearl

Justes, or the Righteous, rescue is undoubtedly a key part of the story of the Holocaust, and gentile rescuers of Jews have always featured within it. Indeed, when Yad Vashem was created as The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in 1953, it was conceived around the ideas of Mordechai Shenhavi who sought to commemorate both the Jewish victims and the non-Jewish rescuers.⁷ The Righteous have since become much more widely known across the globe, especially since the 1990s Holocaust memory boom. *Schindler's List* (1993), the canonical Holocaust film directed by Steven Spielberg, was based precisely on the story of a Righteous, Oscar Schindler, whose actions led to the rescue of hundreds of Jews facing persecution.⁸ In 2007, a commemorative plaque for the French Righteous – or *Justes de France* – was placed in the Pantheon crypt, a site in central Paris where all the 'Great' French men (and a small handful of women) are buried, including the resistance hero Jean Moulin.⁹ In 2010, a bronze statue of Nicholas Winton, the 'British Schindler' who saved over 600 Jewish children during the war, was unveiled at Maidenhead railway station.¹⁰ Contemporary rituals to commemorate these Righteous men and women are thus part of daily life in Britain, France, America, and Europe more broadly.¹¹

However, there are some problems with the popular representations of rescue and the Righteous. First, the centrality the Righteous to Holocaust history and memory can be overplayed. Scholars in the past decade have sought to redress these interpretations of the Righteous, and to show that the survival of Jews during the Holocaust cannot be explained solely by the intervention of gentiles.¹² It was, first and foremost, an effort of survival from the victims themselves. It was also a network of assistance and support amongst the Jewish communities scattered across Europe. And one must not forget the geo-political factors which significantly shaped chances of survival

M. Oliner, *Saving the forsaken: religious culture and the rescue of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004); Yagil Limor, 'Rescue of Jews: Between History and Memory', *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, Vol. 28, n.2 (2004); Patrick Henry, *We only know men: the rescue of Jews in France during the Holocaust* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007); Jacques Sémelin, Claire Andrieu & Sarah Gensburger, *La résistance aux génocides: de la pluralité des actes de sauvetage* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation des sciences politiques, 2008); Levana Frenk, *Righteous among the nations in France and Belgium: a silent resistance* (Jérusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008); Suzanne Vormen, *Hidden children of the Holocaust: Belgian nuns and their daring rescue of young Jews from the Nazis* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Limor Yagil, *La France, terre de refuge et de désobéissance civile (1936-1944)* (Paris: Cerf, 2010); Jacques Sémelin, *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée: comment 75% des Juifs en France ont échappé à la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

⁷ Sarah Gensburger, *Les Justes de France* (Paris: Sciences Po 2010), 20-1.

⁸ Several books and articles raise the issues which traverse the film: Terrence Rafferty, 'A Man of Transactions' (review of Schindler's List), *New Yorker*, 20 Dec 1993; Y. Loshitzky, *Spielberg's Holocaust* (1997); Miriam Bratu Hansen, '“Schindler's List” is not “Shoah”': The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism and Public Memory', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 22, n°2, Winter 1996; Tim Cole, *Images of the Holocaust* (1999) 'Chapter 3: Oskar Schindler'; Karyn Ball, 'For and against the *Bilderverbot*: The Rhetoric of 'Unrepresentability' and Remediated 'Authenticity' in the German Reception of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*' in Bathrick, et.al., *Visualizing the Holocaust: documents, aesthetics, memory* (2008)

⁹ Mona Ozouf, 'Le Panthéon' in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de Mémoire*, Vol.1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); Béatrice Gurrey, 'Jacques Chirac fait entrer les Justes au Panthéon et invite la France à regarder son histoire "en face"', *Le Monde* (18 Janvier 2007), http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2007/01/18/jacques-chirac-fait-entrer-les-justes-au-pantheon_856858_3224.html.

¹⁰ 'Statue for 'British Schindler' Sir Nicholas Winton', *BBC News Berkshire* (18 September 2010), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-11356875>.

¹¹ Some events, however, are more problematic than others. Recent efforts to commemorate the Polish 'Righteous' have caused a lot of controversy: Donald Snyder, 'Poland's Dueling Holocaust Monuments to 'Righteous Gentiles' Spark Painful Debate', *The Jewish Daily Forward* (2 May 2014) <http://forward.com/articles/197120/polands-dueling-holocaust-monuments-to-righteous-g/?p=all>.

¹² Recent works have been particularly helpful in challenging certain assumptions and preconceptions of rescue: Sarah Gensburger, *Les Justes de France: politiques publiques de la mémoire* (Paris: Presses Sciences Po, 2010); Bob Moore, *Survivors: Jewish Self-Help and Rescue in Nazi-Occupied Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Patrick Cabanel, *L'Histoire des Justes de France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012); Susan Zuccotti, *Père Marie-Benoît and Jewish rescue: how a French priest together with Jewish friends saved thousands during the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

across Europe and North Africa.¹³ The Righteous do not necessarily fit within these stories. Second, there is a tendency to reduce those who lived in the Second World War into two categories: one was either a Righteous – those who ‘incarnated the honour of France, its valued for justice, tolerance and humanity’¹⁴ – or not. Should this imply that the non-Righteous did not incarnate French values? Had no sense of justice, tolerance or humanity? In many ways this categorisation of rescuers and non-rescuers mirrors the postwar resistance myth which saw society divided into resisters or non-resisters, and it reminds us of the ongoing assumption that moral lessons can – and must – be drawn from the Second World War, and particularly from the Holocaust. Not only that, but the commemoration of rescue is often inflated with political and/or national rhetoric, not least in the French case.¹⁵ As the quote above showed, the *Justes* symbolised French values. Recent studies of rescue go beyond these simplistic categorisations, and they engage with the historical complexities of rescue in the Holocaust, thereby showing a far more complex story of power, struggle, self-advancement, spontaneity, humanism, empathy, exploitation, political affiliation, social class.

Bronchart’s story engages with these broad debates around the history and memory of rescue, but it also raises specific questions about rescue in railway deportations. Indeed, his story resonates within the recent polemic which has surrounded the SNCF since the 1990s regarding its role in the Jewish deportations. The French National Railway Company – the SNCF – has come under very harsh criticism for their role in deporting over 76,000 Jews from France.¹⁶ One of the side-effects of this polemic has been that cheminots working for the SNCF at the time have been judged for not refusing to take part in the deportations, or for not sabotaging the Jewish convoys. Why had French cheminots ‘managed widespread, organised resistance to all kinds of German demands – except deportations east’?¹⁷ Some contrast this absence of rescue with Bronchart’s refusal to drive a convoy, including the academic Michael Curtis who claimed that ‘*only one SNCF worker, Léon Bronchart, refused on October 31, 1942, to work on a convoy.*’¹⁸ Yet to what extent is Bronchart’s story representative of the historical realities of railway workers, rescue and the deportation trains? To what extent does this story reveal anything about the relationship(s) between railwaymen and Jews during the Holocaust?

This article considers that Bronchart’s legacy is not only a misrepresentation of the actual historical events, but it is also a rare occurrence in the railway milieu at the time. Indeed, the question of rescue in the Holocaust is far more complex, as is the relationship between French railwaymen, Jews and the deportations. This article thus looks beyond the Bronchart story and explores the different historical contexts which help to better understand these questions and

¹³ Mark Mazower emphasised the significance of geography when examining the massacres of Jews in the Soviet Union territories in 1941. Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2009) 178.

¹⁴ Speech by Jacques Chirac, 18 January 2007, Paris, <http://www.jacqueschirac-asso.fr/fr/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Comm%C3%A9moration-des-Justes-de-France-au-Panth%C3%A9on.pdf>

¹⁵ See Sarah Gensburger, *Les Justes de France* (Paris: Sciences Po 2010).

¹⁶ The author gave a paper on the ‘SNCF Affair’ at the *Lessons and Legacies* conference in 2012. The paper will be published in the conference series, volume XII, in November 2016. A more detailed discussion of the Affair also appears in the Epilogue of the author’s upcoming monograph, *Ordinary Workers*. Currently, the best academic sources on the topic include Annette Wieviorka, ‘La Shoah, la SNCF et le juge’, *L’Histoire* n°316 (January 2007); Georges Ribeill, ‘SNCF et Déportations’, *Historail* n°4 (January 2008); Michael Marrus, ‘The Case of the French Railways and the Deportation of Jews in 1944,’ eds., David Bankier and Dan Michman, *Holocaust and Justice: Representation and Historiography of the Holocaust in Post-War Trials* (Jerusalem, 2010), 245-64.

¹⁷ Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), 331-332. See also Annie Kriegel, *Réflexion sur les questions juives* (Paris: Hachette, 1984); Françoise Laborde, *Ca va mieux en le disant* (Paris: J’ai lu, 2009) 95-6.

¹⁸ Author’s emphasis. Michael Curtis, *Jews, Antisemitism and the Middle East* (New Brunswick (USA): Transaction Publishers (2013) 122. For similar comments, see also Benjamin Ivry, *The Jewish Daily Forward* (16 March 2012) <http://forward.com/articles/152642/time-to-come-clean-on-shoah-role/?p=all>; Antoine Rappoport, ‘Civilian vs French State and French Railroad Company : a justice awaited for 60 years’, The Romanian Jewish Community website (undated) http://www.romanianjewish.org/en/index_fcer2.html.

relationships. In doing so, it challenges traditional assumptions around cheminots' attitudes towards the deportations in general, and to the Jews in particular. It also reveals the general issues surrounding rescue and deportation during the Second World War.

In order to fully address this question, we must also take into consideration cheminots' reactions to the deportation of non-Jews, as well as the reactions of the general population to both Jewish and non-Jewish deportations. This is for several reasons. First, as it will be shown in this article, the population at the time did not necessarily distinguish between Jewish and non-Jewish persecution. In the early 1940s, most people in France did not understand the specificity of Jewish deportations or repression; rather, they assimilated it to other forms of repression throughout France, not least of communists, resisters and workers. The story of rescue in the deportations must, therefore, be seen with this in mind. Second, although the two biggest data works on the deportations from France during the Second World War make a clear distinction between group deportation transports of Jews and non-Jews, experiences of deportation were not so neatly divided.¹⁹ Whilst the division between racial and non-racial deportations is natural due to the unique circumstances of Jewish persecution and extermination, the experiences of physical deportation were not so clearly separable. The experience of a French resister deported from Compiègne to Buchenwald in a convoy of over 1000 people was much more similar to that of a Jew deported from Drancy to Auschwitz, than to that of another French resister deported from Gare de l'Est to a German prison in a traveller car guarded by two SS.²⁰ Indeed, approximately thirty convoys seem to have been organised in conditions similar to the Jewish convoys, convoys of between 900-2000 deportees packed into sealed carriages with no distributions of food or water.²¹ The experiences of these internees in the camps was, of course, very different, since survival rates for Jews were so much lower. This naturally affects the availability of testimonies and memoirs. In contrast, the availability of non-Jewish sources helps to supplement the little information we have about cheminots' roles in and reactions to the deportations. As this article will argue, what comes across in the archives is that cheminots reacted to Jewish and non-Jewish deportations in very similar ways: whilst most were horrified by the deportations, there are no records indicating any actual intervention or sabotage of these transports, no matter who they were carrying. The polemic around the indifference of French railway workers to *Jewish* convoys is thus a question of memory, not of history.

This article aims to step away from these assumptions about rescue in Jewish railway deportations – those which glorify the acts of the Righteous Léon Bronchart, and by implication judge the absence of sabotage and defiance of other railway workers. Instead, it reveals the many realities which the railway community faced during the war, and how this shaped, or limited, their reactions to the railway deportations. First, it explains the relationship between the French and the deportations, showing in particular the limitations of cheminots' knowledge and understanding of Jewish persecution specifically. Second, it outlines the reactions of railway workers to the deportations, Jewish but also non-Jewish. Indeed, although cheminots did not sabotage the trains or make grand rescue gestures during the deportations themselves, an enumeration of small gestures show a level of humanism, empathy and even at times rescue amongst the community. Finally, this article shifts its focus to actual rescue operations on deportation trains. How frequent were such operations? Who carried them out? Were railwaymen involved? The case under discussion will highlight the complicated logistical and diplomatic processes necessary behind such operations, processes which were beyond the control of railway workers.

¹⁹ One book examines the deportations for racial reasons, whilst the other examines the deportations for non-racial reasons : Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, *Mémorial de la déportation des Juifs de France* (Paris: Serge et Béate Klarsfeld, 1978); Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Déportation (FMD), *Livre-Mémorial des déportés de France arrêtés par mesure de répression et dans certains cas par mesure de persécution 1940-1945*, 4 vols. (Paris: Tirésias, 2004).

²⁰ Find an example for each.

²¹ Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Déportation (FMD), *Livre-Mémorial des déportés de France arrêtés par mesure de répression et dans certains cas par mesure de persécution 1940-1945*, 4 vols. (Paris: Tirésias, 2004).

CHEMINOTS, DEPORTATIONS AND THE JEWISH QUESTION

Cheminots were involved in the deportation of almost 160,000 men, women and children were deported from France between 1941 and 1944, 76,000 of whom were deported on racial grounds (antisemitic persecution) and 83,000 on non-racial grounds (political prisoners, resisters, hostages).²² In addition to this, one must consider the deportation of French workers to Germany, a process which began with the *Relève* in April 1942 and intensified with the implementation of the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO), the Forced Labour Service, in February 1943.²³ But to what extent did cheminots distinguish between Jewish and non-Jewish deportations? To what extent did they differentiate deportations linked to volunteer or forced labour, and deportations linked to Nazi policies of persecution, repression and genocide?

The historiography of Vichy France has repeatedly shown that the deportations of workers for forced labour in Germany triggered widespread turmoil across France – at the time, they were probably the deportations which had the most impact on French society. It is perhaps not so surprising, therefore, that it is these deportations which saw the most popular active resistance. On 6 January 1943, in Montluçon, 120 workers had been designated to go to work in Germany. Before the departure, local people had spread a number of tracts and fliers to protest against this deportation. They managed to rally several thousand people who arrived at the station before the train was set to depart at one o'clock in the afternoon. While the protestors were singing patriotic songs and shouting slogans, dozens of designated forced labourers managed to escape from the train. Wehrmacht officials eventually arrived at the station, and the crowd dispersed immediately, leaving a handful of deportees in the train which began its journey eastwards.²⁴ A similar incident took place in Mazamet in May 1943, when locals grouped around a train holding 2000 young men heading to Germany. But like in Montluçon, this only caused a minor delay to the transport.²⁵ No cheminots were identified specifically at these demonstrations.

These are the only active popular manifestations against the deportations which I have found reported in the archives; this does not, however, mean that the deportations of the 160,000 other people from France did not cause outrage. In fact, it is well known that the Jewish deportations of the summer of 1942 caused a wave of popular unrest in France. The prefect reports in particular show grass-roots disapproval over the deportation of children during that terrible summer.²⁶ But as the summer came to an end, the rate of deportation dropped drastically, and so did public furore over the Jewish convoys. Indeed, in that summer alone, 45 of the 79 Jewish convoys left France.²⁷ After October 1942, Jewish convoys were more evenly spread out, with only one or two leaving on a monthly basis towards the end of the occupation. In contrast, the forced labour transports and non-racial deportations significantly intensified after the summer of 1942. Numerically, the emphasis of the deportations had shifted, and it is undoubtedly these deportations – especially of the STO – which would grip popular attention from then on.

The shift in popular interest from Jewish to non-Jewish deportations can be partially explained by the changing pace of deportations after the Summer of 1942, but it must also be noted that

²² These numbers are rounded up from the statistics in the Klarsfeld and FMD publications.

²³ For more information see Patrice Arnaud, *Les STO: histoire des Français requis en Allemagne nazie, 1942-45* (Paris: CNRS editions, 2010).

²⁴ Charles Tillon, *Les FTP* (Paris: Julliard, 1962), pp. 212-213, cited in the Rapport Bachelier, 'V.4.1, Les transports du STO'.

²⁵ Archives Départementales Haute Garonne: 1831 W 98, 'Incident STO à Mazamet', May 1943.

²⁶ Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz: La 'solution finale' de la question juive en France* (Paris: Fayard, 2001, first ed. 1993); Michael R. and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995, first ed. 1981).

²⁷ There are 79 canonical convoys, although a handful of other convoys were organised, see Klarsfeld's *Mémorial* for more details.

the deportations of Jews and non-Jews were not necessarily distinguished from one another. Indeed, it is absolutely fundamental that one recognises the lack of a clear understanding of the Jewish specificity amongst the processes of persecution in Vichy France. Of course information, news, and most of all rumours penetrated France far and wide about antisemitic persecution.²⁸ The clandestine papers regularly passed through SNCF installations – thrown from trains, distributed in the workshops, hidden in stations – mentioned the Jewish deportations. On 9 July 1942, a French Communist Party (PCF) tract found in the Villeneuve-St-Georges workshops denounced the Jewish star: ‘Hitler’s brutes bring us back to the middle ages by showing their scandalous contempt for the human person’.²⁹ Another PCF tract was thrown from a train passing through Corbeil denouncing the ‘antisemitic campaigns of hitlerian cannibals’.³⁰ On October 1942, copies of *Combat* were found circulating in the railway buildings, not least the edition which included one article describing how Vichy was handing over the ‘Jews, our brothers’, ‘like cattle to the German authorities’.³¹

Even if tracts mentioned the Jewish deportations and persecution, they never underlined the specificity of their cause. The *Humanité* tract denounced the yellow star, but never understood its real origins: ‘The unanimity of the French people worries the invader, and that is why they are trying to divide (the French) by imposing a distinctive sign on the Jews. (...) the Hitlerians want to unleash hatred of the Jews in order to attenuate hatred of the *boches*’.³² Likewise, in *Combat* they assimilated the persecution of Jews to that of other groups: ‘All those who suffer from the Germans, whether Jewish or not, communist or not, are our brothers.’ This confirms what Renée Poznanski has said: that the remarks about Jewish persecution fell into a wider discourse against the occupier.³³ In fact, even if the clandestine press denounced racial laws and persecutions, some still believed in the existence of a ‘Jewish problem’. An author in *Combat* rejected the idea of a ‘racial’ Jewish problem: there was no ‘racial’ problem in France, he claimed, since ‘many Jewish families lose their distinctive traits over the generations, and they disappear into the mass of the nation...’.³⁴ These extracts are a strong reminder that for certain resisters, including Henry Frenay who ran *Combat*, there existed a ‘Jewish problem’, but one defined in purely French rather than Nazi terms.³⁵

The absence of Jewish specificity is also obvious in the clandestine cheminot press. The October 1942 edition of the *Tribune des Cheminots* wrote that ‘after the massive arrests of Jews, they’ve now arrested en masse the old trade union delegates and leaders who had remained the valiant defenders of their comrades [all this] in the hope of intimidating the mass of workers who they come to tear away from their homes’.³⁶ What is particularly important to underline here is how the case of the Jews is being discussed within the context of their workers’ condition. This is nothing exceptional: Renée Poznanski and Annette Wiewiorka have already underlined how communists discussed Jewish persecution in relation to their own political struggles.³⁷ This is not only because they lacked a specific understanding of the Jewish question, but also because their clandestine press was targeting specific readers. Indeed, the subjects raised in the tracts were

²⁸ This topic is briefly mentioned in another publication by the author, Ludivine Broch ‘Professionalism in the Final Solution: French Railway Workers and the Jewish Deportations 1942-1944,’ *Contemporary European History* 23.3 (2014) 359-81. However, it is here worth going into greater detail.

²⁹ SNCF/25/LM/258: (July 1942) ‘Les barbares hitlériens obligent les juifs à porter un signe distinctif’, undated and signed by the PCF.

³⁰ SNCF/25/LM/258: (August 1942) ‘A bas l’antisémitisme: Honneur aux camarades juifs morts pour la liberté et l’indépendance de la France’, written by the PCF.

³¹ SNCF/25/LM/258: (Nov. 1942) *Combat*, n°35, Octobre 1942.

³² SNCF : 25 LM 0258, ‘Les barbares Hitlériens ...’.

³³ Renée Poznanski, *Propagandes et Persécutions : la Résistance et le ‘problème juif’, 1940-1944* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), 253.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Poznanski, *Propagandes et Persécutions* (2008) 195-6.

³⁶ SNCF/25/LM/258: (Dec. 1942) ‘Cheminots, opposez-vous aux départs en Allemagne’, *La Tribune des cheminots*, by the Organe du Comité Populaire Central des Cheminots, dated Octobre 1942.

³⁷ See introduction in Renée Poznanski, *Propagandes et Persécutions : la Résistance et le ‘problème juif’, 1940-1944* (Paris: Fayard, 2008); Annette Wiewiorka, *Ils étaient juifs, résistants, communistes* (Paris: Denoël, 1986).

aimed to touch on the immediate and intimate issues of its audience, issues which were often linked to locality, class, or profession. Poznanski further underlines that the authors of these tracts and publications wanted to avoid sensitive subjects which might divide rather than unite opinion. In that case, why not link the deportation of Jews to the deportation of workers? It was, after all, a means to an end. All the same, one should not overestimate the links between these deportations; more often than not, the cheminot press was referring exclusively to the STO deportations.

It may come as a surprise to many that cheminots did not necessarily understand the specificity of the Jewish deportations – after all, they were working along the railways, and had a closer proximity to the deportees than the average Frenchman or even resister. But knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust in the early 1940s is a very tricky issue, and cheminots' knowledge of the Jewish deportations should not be overestimated. First, 'knowing' and 'understanding' were two entirely different things in the 1940s. People knew Jews were being deported; the large majority could not begin to imagine the nature of concentration and extermination camps. Denis Peschanski was already raising this issue in 1989: what did '*savoir*' even mean in those days?³⁸ Was it knowing that Jews were persecuted more than other groups? Was it to know that they left towards the East in atrocious conditions? Was it to know about the Nazis' plans for their total extermination? Did 'knowledge' need to be total, or could it only be partial? We must also place these questions back into the unique geographical context of Western Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, where the 'bloodlands' of the Holocaust were located, the situation was very different: antisemitic persecution was more visible than in Western Europe (at least for a time), and the local population was regularly drawn into this persecution. It was thereby much more common to have a basic understanding of the fate of the Jews depending on geography.³⁹ In contrast, the knowledge of the Holocaust in Western Europe, and particularly in France, was deeply fragmented and uncertain. As the journal of the young Jewish Parisian student, Hélène Berr, reveals, rumours were widespread but accurate knowledge was scarce.⁴⁰ Selecting and adding up some of this information in order to provide a coherent picture was very hard, especially for ordinary French people. Some might have been more acute to the dangers faced by Jews, if they lived in Paris, for instance, or witnessed roundups first hand. But still the risks faced by Jews were assimilated to those faced by other persecuted groups, and the specificity of the Nazi racial plan was largely unknown.

Although there is no direct evidence, it is possible to get some understanding of how little ordinary cheminots knew about the Jewish convoys through a simple process of elimination and deduction. Indeed, the large majority of railway workers would never see a deportation train within their lifetime. This is for several reasons. First, the percentage of deportation convoys was very low in comparison to the total traffic flow of the railways. According to Serge Klarsfeld and Gérard Gobitz, 79 Jewish convoys left France between March 1942 and August 1944, and 17 convoys transferred Jews from the Free to the Occupied Zone between June and October 1942.⁴¹ In contrast, the monthly railway traffic consisted of tens of thousands of trains in a single month. Amidst this body of transport, the Jewish convoys were a drop in the ocean. Secondly, the convoys tended to take almost the same trajectory each time. As such, the same cheminots, in the same stations, would be the only ones to truly see what was happening. This considerably limits the number of cheminots who came into contact with the Jews in cattle cars.

³⁸ Denis Peschanski, 'Vichy France and the Final Solution', paper presented at the European Research Centre, Department of European Studies, Loughborough University (1989); Denis Peschanski, 'Qui savait quoi dans la population ?' in Stéphane Courtois and Adam Rayski, *Qui savait quoi? L'extermination des juifs 1941-45* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1987).

³⁹ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2009); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Bodley Head, 2010).

⁴⁰ Hélène Berr, *Journal: 1942-1944* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008).

⁴¹ Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz, La 'solution finale' de la question juive en France* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 170-1, 370. Voir aussi Gérard Gobitz, *Les déportations de réfugiés de Zone Libre en 1942* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).

Even in those cases where cheminots saw the cattle cars, their ability to get in contact with the deportees themselves was seriously limited. One rare testimony highlights the difficulties cheminots had in approaching the deportation convoys and the deportees.⁴² Raoul Merlin, the assistant chief of Compiègne station, witnessed a number of deportation convoys between 1942 and 1944, and his account gives the clearest insight into cheminots' roles in and perceptions of the event.⁴³ By announcing the departure only a few days before the transport, the Germans avoided the spread of rumours which risked agitating the population. Empty freight cars were ordered from other depots, and cheminots had to sort through the new arrivals and choose the sturdiest cars to use for the convoy.⁴⁴ They would assemble one locomotive, approximately twenty freight cars for Jews and luggage, and a few passenger cars for the security guards. They placed barbed wire over the windows, on order of the Germans. 'From that point on German military authorities took control of the convoy, examining it closely, sometimes requesting an inadequate rail car to be replaced by another.'⁴⁵

On the day of departure itself, the convoy was brought to the ramps of the station and all of the doors were opened – no cheminots were allowed within close proximity of the train, only German or French guards. In the town a slow procession of a thousand Jews, including women and children, would appear walking through the silent streets, encircled by Vichy or German police. Once on the platform they were ordered to climb into the freight cars with their luggage and food parcels. With everyone compressed in the cattle cars, the doors were slammed shut and sealed. At this point, under SS supervision, two French cheminots, the driver and the mechanic, boarded the locomotive – indeed, it was illegal for non-French (Germans, Americans, etc.) to drive trains in French territory. The cheminots would thus start up the engine and drive the train until they reached the German border. At the border town of Novéant, they got off of their locomotive, and the convoy was handed over to Deutsche Reichsbahn railway workers who then drove the trains to the death camps. The Frenchmen headed back towards Paris.

As the war went on, so did German presence around deportation trains, adding another layer of danger to any resistance activity. When preparing the convoys, cheminots were under constant German supervision. The two unarmed cheminots who drove the deportation convoys were escorted by a minimum of 16 heavily armed Germans. By 1944 a wall of sentinels would form around the train to make sure people did not approach it within 100 metres.⁴⁶ Since there were so many guards involved in the deportation trains, if one of them got injured or killed in the sabotage – a situation which was highly likely considering the effects of railway sabotage on traveller trains – there was no question that brutal repression would automatically ensue.

Even this small percentage of cheminots who organised, prepared and drove the convoys east most probably had a limited understanding of the Final Solution. The destination 'Auschwitz' meant nothing to them. The very idea of the *univers concentrationnaire* was unheard of. Catherine de Bechillon, the daughter of Henri Lang (a highly ranked SNCF engineer deported in the first convoy to Auschwitz), declared that even if cheminots had a clearer idea than most about what was happening, their knowledge remained very vague. They heard rumours of camps, saw people

⁴² AN: 72 AJ 311, Raoul Merlin testimony, *chef de gare principal honoraire*, Compiègne, 28 March 1966.

⁴³ AN: 72AJ 311, Raoul Merlin testimony. It is testimony is reproduced in Rapport Bachelier, 'IV.3.8, La formation des convois de déportation, matériel et embarquement'. Extracts were also published in Guckes, 'Le rôle des chemins de fer dans la déportation' in *Le Monde Juif* (1999) 29-110.

⁴⁴ A brief comment on the state of the cattle cars. In Heiner Lichtenstein 'Punctually on the Ramp' in Wollenberg, *The German Public and the Persecution of Jews* (1996), the Lichtenstein points out that the cars were in despicable state, 'on purpose'. The author disagrees with this statement. First, the sturdiness of cars varied from convoy to convoy, and the state of the cars depended on the railway equipment available. As such, there can be no uniform declaration as such. Second, it was easier to escape if cars were in bad condition. As such, Germans were precisely looking for 'sturdy' cars.

⁴⁵ AN: 72AJ 311, Raoul Merlin testimony.

⁴⁶ Association pour l'Histoire des Chemins de fer Français (AHICF): Interview transcript with Bernard Le Chatelier (19 November 1999).

being put into cattle cars, as well as armed German guards, and that was it. 'Could we really stand up against something so mysterious?' she asked.⁴⁷

Ultimately, like the French people, most cheminots were not interested in finding out more about the specifics of the Jewish question. According to Bernard Le Chatelier, who worked at Compiègne station: 'Spring 42, yes, I'm sure I [heard about the deportation transports of Jews]... Even at Compiègne we had heard some talk of this, [but] we did not know their fate, we only knew they were being treated in a specific way (...) Obviously, we asked ourselves [some questions] but life was tough enough as it was and our mind was concentrated on how we were going to live.'⁴⁸ This reaction was not unique to the cheminots. At all levels of society, the French were too preoccupied by their immediate circumstances to get overly involved in the potential massacre happening on the other side of Europe.⁴⁹ Paulette Brüssière, who was a secretary in Paris at the time, was also reluctant to enquire about the fate of her two Jewish colleagues who suddenly stopped coming to work. As she explained in her interview, her daily concerns and struggles took up most of her time and energy, and there was little sense in asking too many questions in this period of occupation and supervision.⁵⁰ Robert Gildea's term 'shrinking horizons' is particularly fitting here, as it describes how French people detached themselves from their surroundings to focus on their personal concerns, and this could also be said about the cheminots.⁵¹

ASSISTANCE, SUPPORT AND THE ABSENCE OF SABOTAGE

Cheminots' horizons may have been shrinking, but they were certainly not immune to the deportations from France. Indeed, the cheminot press regularly called upon the cheminots to prevent or intervene in the deportation trains, not least those carrying forced labour workers, political prisoners or resisters: 'Refuse to drive the trains of the odious *relève*⁵²; 'We will not drive the deportation trains!'⁵³ Violence was even encouraged in some cases: 'Oppose the deportations, refuse to drive the trains, sabotage the material'.⁵⁴ And yet, no visible, uniform or organised manifestations of this kind have shown up in the numerous archives explored – not even in the case of the deportation of forced labour workers.

What does emerge, however, from the archives, are innumerable acts of individual spontaneity, support and assistance in cases of both Jewish and non-Jewish deportations. The most commonly cited gesture was picking up the scraps of paper which internees slid through the cracks of the cattle cars as they passed through rail stations. Indeed, once the train was out of sight, cheminots would approach the tracks and pick up these scraps of paper on which were scribbled messages of hope and love.⁵⁵ They would then forward them to the addresses and names they managed to decipher, giving people the immeasurable gift of a last word from a loved

⁴⁷ AHICF: Interview transcript Catherine de Béchillon, (2 July 1997). See also Catherine De Bechillon, interviewed for *Les Lois raciales*, documentary directed by Claude Binsse, produced by SNCF (June 2000).

⁴⁸ AHICF: Interview transcript Bernard Le Chatelier (19 November 1999).

⁴⁹ Pierre Laborie, 'La Résistance et le sort des juifs' in Guillon and Laborie, *Mémoire et Histoire* (1995). Article also published in Pierre Laborie, *Les Français des années troubles: de la guerre d'Espagne à la Libération* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003).

⁵⁰ Author's Interview Paulette Brüssière, Viry Chatillon (26 February 2008).

⁵¹ Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation of France 1940-45* (London: Pan Books Macmillan, 2003, c2002).

⁵² SNCF Archives: 25 LM 0258, 'Refusons de conduire les trains de l'odieuse relève. Sabotons (...) service de ravitaillement des boches', (picked up September 1943); 'Cheminots', Le Comité Populaire des Cheminots (picked up December 1942).

⁵³ SNCF: 25 LM 0258, 'Cheminots- Alerte!' (picked up December 1942).

⁵⁴ SNCF: 25 LM 0258, 'Opposez vous aux déportations, refusez de conduire les trains, sabotez le matériel', Fédération des Cheminots (picked up September 43).

⁵⁵ AN: 72 AJ 496, Aimé Krafft responds to Paul Durand, January 1959; 72 AJ 311, Raoul Merlin testimony.

one : ‘a wonderful being whom I thank with all my heart put this piece of paper in an envelope and sent it to Sarah’, wrote Raymonde Mann about her departure from Pithiviers to Drancy in the summer of 1942.⁵⁶ One cheminot hurried alongside a deportation train in August 1944 to personally take the letter from Annie Guéhenno, a gesture which meant so much to her at the time, and which she was careful to remember when writing her memoirs.⁵⁷ Denise Dufournier

Other gestures helped alleviate the anxieties of internees. One cheminot manage to smuggle water to Dr Francis Rohmer, a non-Jew, who was deported from Compiègne to Dachau in July 1944 in one of the most deadly convoys.⁵⁸ The majority of these gestures were never recorded, and we will never be able to have a complete picture of this phenomenon. However, memoirs of both Jewish and non-Jewish survivors are extremely useful when trying to get a clearer picture of what was happening in those first moments of deportation. Whilst some of the memoirs which have been examined were published, most were unpublished memoirs collected at the *Foundation pour la Mémoire de la Déportation* (FMD). The memoirs conserved there were written by both Jewish and non-Jewish survivors were, and almost two dozen of them mentioned the infamous railway journeys from France to the concentration camps.⁵⁹ In fact, when examining these memoirs held at the FMD, one is struck by the absence of any resentment towards the cheminots. Indeed, survivors remembered with horror the indifference and sometimes even cruelty of passers-by, *Gendarmes*, or the Germans. As the Paris-born Jew Sam Braun walked from Drancy to the rail station, he looked at the French gendarmes escorting them to the freight cars: ‘a word, an explanation for their passivity would have allowed us to understand, and probably to accept, our fate with more resignation’.⁶⁰ In contrast, they only mentioned the cheminot in neutral or positive contexts. In fact, in all the survivor memoirs I have come across, there is a visible absence of criticism when it comes to the cheminots’ roles in deportations.

Gestures of support from the cheminots are further confirmed in Jewish convoys. In 1943, there were fifteen escape attempts on the Jewish convoys from 9, 11 and 13 February, nine of which were successful.⁶¹ Escape attempts infuriated the Germans. First, they caused delays to the train schedule. Second, they undermined the effectiveness of German authority and security. After three consecutive reports gave details of the escapes in February, they began to elaborate new plans for the organisation and preparation of the trains. Overall, the intensification of security measures considerably worsened the conditions of deportation. Passengers were separated from their luggage so they could not retrieve tools to help them escape. Because men showed more audacity, they decided to mix the men with women and children rather than divide them in the

⁵⁶ Foundation pour la Mémoire de la Déportation (FMD): Raymonde Mann born Knych, ‘Physionomie d’une famille Juive en France dans la rafle du 16 juillet 1942 récits en plus’ (undated) 13.

⁵⁷ Annie Guéhenno, *L’épreuve* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1968).

⁵⁸ See Dr Francis Rohmer in *Tragédie de la Déportation* (1954). Of the 2521 deportees who left Compiègne, 984 of them died en route to Dachau from suffocation, thirst and hunger. Only 121 returned in 1945.

⁵⁹ FMD: Jacques Adam, ‘Impressions et souvenirs de 23 mois de déportation chez les Nazis’ ; Gérard Avéran, ‘Rescapé de l’Holocaust’ ; Alphonse Basquin, ‘Vers le sud aussi ‘route de la mort’ !’ ; Serge-Noël Belliard, ‘Matricule 69627: un témoignage sur la vie au camp de concentration de Sachsenhausen’ ; Pierre Boulay, ‘Un épisode de réseau parmi tant d’autres’ ; Sam Marcel Braun, ‘Les larmes d’Auschwitz’ ; Paul Butet, ‘cinquante ans après... ! Souvenirs du ‘Häftling’ 38007’ ; Robert Cahen, ‘Souvenirs de ma déportation en Allemagne’ ; Edith Davidovici (née Stern), ‘La Shoah’ ; Georges Gabriel Decarli, ‘Récit d’une vie à jamais marquée par la déportation’ ; Paul Denis, ‘Devant le nazisme le mode a tremblé, l’impossible oubli: la déportation’ ; Guy Domalan, ‘Buchenwald – Dora – Kommandos’ cinquantenaire de la libération’ ; Pierre-Henri Drelon, ‘Du drame de Tulle le 9 juin 1944 au camp de la mort de Dachau (une tragédie)’ ; Raymod Durand, ‘Quand la mort rodait: une année de déportation: mai 1944-mai 1945’ ; Louis Eudier, ‘Notre combat’ ; Jules Fainzang, ‘Mémoire de déportation’ ; Moshe Garbarz ‘Varsovie, Auschwitz, Buchenwald – l’Odyssée d’un juif Polonais’ ; Henri Garrigoux, ‘Prisons et transports Neuengamme’ ; Robert Gayard, ‘Histoire du camp de Blankenbourg et de son évacuation’ ; Roland Haas, (sans titre) ; Nadine Heflter, ‘1944-45’ ; Pierre Hemard ‘Buchenwald – matricule 2688 – 10 mai 1943 au 10 mai 1945’ ; Raymonde Mann, ‘Physionomie d’une famille Juive en France dans la rafle du 16 juillet 1942 récits en plus’.

⁶⁰ FMD: Sam Marcel Braun, ‘Les larmes d’Auschwitz’.

⁶¹ Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine (CDJC): XXVc-208, a series of documents dated 10-18 February 1943. They all discuss the convoys of 9, 11, 13 February 1943.

transports. Moreover, all deportees were searched before boarding the cars. German guards were supplied with more weapons, which they were given the freedom to use when they deemed it necessary. They were also expected to seal the cars from the outside, and to only open them upon arrival.⁶²

But within the German reports, French railway workers were also directly accused of assisting Jews in their escape attempts.⁶³ By slowing down the trains at crucial points – at night time, near a forest – or by loosening floorboards in the convoys, cheminots were criticised for giving internees opportunities to jump from the moving convoy.⁶⁴ The Germans threatened the cheminots with severe reprisals, and also implemented new measures to prevent any kind of indirect assistance to the deportees. Those who prepared the convoys had to make sure that the freight cars were sturdy, and that no floorboards could be loosened. As for the cheminots who drove the trains to the German border, they were forbidden to slow the train at nightfall. These very accusations are confirmed in testimonies. Bernard Le Chatelier recounted that ‘the *mécanicien* and the *chauffeur* tried to organise a break down; and in particular, in my train they organised a *rupture d’attelage* which brought the train to a full stop, and allowed five or six guys who had dug at the floorboards to escape.’⁶⁵ The deportee Guy Domalan further commented that ‘the cheminots loosened floorboards that prisoners could then break themselves’.⁶⁶

Of course, not all of the escape attempts can be explained through cheminot intervention; once again, one is reminded of the importance of Jewish self-reliance for survival. Abram Frydland, who successfully escaped from convoy n°46 on 9 February 1943, had smuggled a small saw onto the train. Once the train had set off, he and some friends furiously sawed at the floorboards until they managed to make a hole big enough to slip through. They then waited until nightfall before taking the big leap off the train. Abram was the only one who made it to freedom; the others were caught, and either shot or put back on the train.⁶⁷

Moreover, not all deportees were necessarily looking to escape the convoys, and tensions could even arise when people in the same car would debate whether or not to try and escape. Whilst some saw an escape attempt as the obvious choice, others were very concerned with the harsh reprisals that may affect the other deportees. Indeed, German guards were allowed to engage in violent repressions when escapes were attempted along the journey. Escapees were often shot immediately, whilst those in the cattle cars suffered intense humiliations. After Dr Lohéac’s car was damaged by deportees attempting to undo the floorboards, the train was stopped and the deportees inside the car were made to descend from the train. They were ordered to take off all of their clothes, to take their food and descend from the train with their hands in the air: ‘On the platform were fifty-five prisoners in Indian file, completely naked, both arms up in the air, with one hand gripping the bread and the other the *sauccisson*: shivering from cold and emotion, we would have looked ridiculous, had the reality not been so tragic.’⁶⁸ They were then pushed into other already-crammed freight cars. This was not an exceptional occurrence and other deportees

⁶² This was not always the case, and some convoys were stopped along the journey, the doors would be opened and food and water would be distributed by guards or the Red Cross. In some cases a few cars would be opened for a small distribution of food, while the others would stay locked. This was the case for the ‘train de la mort’ which left Compiègne on 2 July 1944. See Christian Bernadac, *Le Train de la Mort* (France Empire, 1970).

⁶³ CDJC: XXVc-208, Series of documents dated 10-18 February 1943.

⁶⁴ CDJC:XXVc-208, Report (12 February 1943).

⁶⁵ AHICF: Interview transcript, Le Chatelier (1999).

⁶⁶ FMD: Guy Domalan, ‘Buchenwald – Dora – kommandos’ cinquantenaire de la libération’.

⁶⁷ The information provided in Klarsfeld’s *Mémorial* (1978) confirms that the convoys that left Drancy on the 11th and the 13th February 1943 had respectively 3 and 8 escape attempts. However, the exact number of escape attempts on Abram’s convoy is unknown.

⁶⁸ Dr. Paul Lohéac, ‘Evasions et représailles : Convoi du 28 juillet 1944’ in *Tragédie de la Déportation* (Hachette, 1954) 25.

would be faced to suffer similar humiliation and trauma.⁶⁹ It is perhaps not so surprising, therefore, that escape attempts were heavily debated by deportees themselves. Annie Guéhenno was one of those fervent believers that escaping from the convoy was necessary in order to avoid an intolerable fate. However the other women ganged up on her to prevent her from escaping.⁷⁰ Similarly, Alfred Blum and Joseph Silber recounted how when they deported in April 1943, they had to knock out the elected 'leader' of their cattle car in order to go through with their escape plan.⁷¹

Chances for assistance at the moment of deportation were thus slim, and those for actual rescue even smaller; aid and support were more effectively given before arrests, and cheminots were part of these networks. Historians frequently stumble across such incidents in their own research, and when added together, these 'anecdotes' make quite a sizeable list of individual acts. Deville hid Jews who were looking to cross the demarcation line; Nouvion helped Jews cross the line, find refuge, jobs and false papers; Léon Bronchart also hid Jews on his locomotive and helped them obtain false papers. César Chamy sang the praises of the cheminots in general for having helped smuggle Jews on trains.⁷² Thus cheminots, who were so often *passseurs*, had many opportunities to meet and help Jews on the run.⁷³

The gestures of support and assistance provided by cheminots were not, however, necessarily disinterested. When Weill accepted the invitation of one cheminot who offered to take him in for the night, he woke up to find the cheminot in question crawling into his bed.⁷⁴ Likewise, not all cheminots participated in efforts to help the deportees – even when it just meant picking up scraps of paper fallen from the convoys. Dureux, the *chef de gare principal adjoint*, picked up the tiny notes destined to loved ones only to hand them over to the authorities, 'this of his own initiative, without any pressure from the *boches*,' explained one of his colleagues.⁷⁵ Such incidents are a strong reminder that it is impossible to generalise cheminot behaviours. There were far too many workers, far too many personalities, characters and inclinations to create a homogenous picture.

If small gestures of support and assistance to persecuted Jews are scattered throughout memoirs, testimonies and archives, the sabotage of Jewish convoys is noticeably absent. As Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton noted in 1981, and as Annie Kriegel reiterated in 1984, why did railway workers sabotage so many German military transports, but never the Jewish convoys?⁷⁶ This question is fully explored in other publications, yet some main points merit mention at this stage.⁷⁷ First, it was a matter of cheminot professionalism. Indeed, far from being natural-born saboteurs, cheminots were historically reluctant to engage in railway sabotage. Whereas workers in the late-nineteenth century were encouraged to engage in industrial sabotage, cheminots considered that railway sabotage was far too serious and dangerous. Cheminots did not want to see the destruction of their material, their trains, their locomotives. They were also only too

⁶⁹ FMD: Jacques Adam, 'Impressions et souvenirs de 23 mois de déportation chez les Nazis'. See Dr François Wetterwald and Louis Maury in *Tragédie de la Déportation* (1954).

⁷⁰ Annie Guéhenno, *L'épreuve* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1968).

⁷¹ CDJC: CDLXI-20, Letters from Alfred Blum and Joseph Silber (1964) detailing their escape from convoy XX in Belgium.

⁷² AN: 72 AJ 495, R. Deville, 'Réponse à une enquête lancée par Paul Durand'; 72 AJ 497: F. Nouvion, 'Réponse à une enquête lancée par Paul Durand'; YVA/Dossier n°6354: Léon Bronchart; CDJC: DLXI-1, César Chamay, testimony.

⁷³ See Julie Philippe, 'Aide et sauvetage de la population Juive dans les départements de la Nièvre et de la Côte d'Or', Masters thesis in contemporary history at the University of Dijon (2006/7), available at http://www.yadvashem-france.org/medias/documents/Memoire_Julie_Philippe.pdf; Gilles Hennequin, *Résistance en Côte d'Or, vol. 7, La répression* (Brétigny: G. Hennequin, 2010).

⁷⁴ Jean Weill, *Mémoires d'un enfant de l'Armistice* (Strasbourg: La maison Myrtil Weill) 39.

⁷⁵ AN: 72/AJ/498, Bulletin des Chemins de fer, edited by *France d'Abord*, n°2 (November 1943), cited in Bachelier Report, 4.3.18. 'Réactions des cheminots contre les persécutions et les déportations.'

⁷⁶ See footnote 16.

⁷⁷ See Ludivine Broch *Ordinary Workers*, to be released with Cambridge University Press and Tallandier; 'Professionalism in the Final Solution: French Railway Workers and the Jewish Deportations 1942-1944,' *Contemporary European History* 23.3 (2014) 359-81.

aware that when dealing with railway materials and machines so large and imposing, sabotage seriously endangered the lives of both colleagues and travellers. Sabotaging German materials was thus a very different matter, since the convoys did not carry travellers within them. Also, there is no evidence that cheminots were necessarily the authors of railway sabotage: many of them could be – and were – triggered by people outside the railways.

The second main reason not to sabotage deportation trains was that the atmosphere of this period was extremely tense, and the fear of repression widespread. Not only were deportation trains intensely supervised, but a wave of repression hit the cheminot milieu particularly hard from 1943 onwards, as more and more cheminots were shot, taken hostage and/or deported to the camps.⁷⁸ This atmosphere of fear and repression made large rescue operations or active forms of resistance less likely in highly-supervised spaces. Not only that, but the somewhat mysterious fate of the deportees should not be disregarded: there was no firm knowledge that Jewish men, women and children were being gassed upon arrival to Auschwitz.

Finally, one must consider the overall usefulness of sabotaging deportation trains. Indeed, the link between railway sabotage and Jewish rescue is even more tenuous when you consider a broad historical perspective. Sabotaging or bombing the instruments of the Final Solution (camps, ghettos, convoys, railway tracks) was not as useful as one might initially think. By sabotaging railway tracks heading east, the Allies were not rescuing anyone; rather, they were delaying the transport by several hours or even days, thereby prolonging the agony inside the convoys. One non-Jewish deportation train which left France for Auschwitz in July 1944 was delayed by these bombings, and over 500 people died in those rail cars.⁷⁹ In her memoirs, Simone Veil described how the bombing of Mathausen frightened those internees which it did not kill.⁸⁰ When Jan Karski related his conversation with the Jewish Polish resistance in 1942 in his memoirs, he declared that, according to these resisters, it was too late to bomb the camps, and too late to bomb the railway lines. If anything was to be done, it was to completely wipe out Germany.⁸¹ This does not mean that bombing or sabotage were not powerful symbols, but if the explosion of the crematorium in Auschwitz and the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto were acts of courage and resistance, they were not acts of rescue as such.

The absence of sabotage in both Jewish and non-Jewish deportation trains should not overshadow the existence of numerous gestures of humanism, assistance and rescue, and cheminots' gestures towards deportees raise important points. First, that those cheminots who assisted, helped and supported men, women and children on the run or facing deportation, did so regardless if they were Jewish or not. Even if they knew about cases of Jewish persecution, they mostly understood this within a broader phenomenon of the persecution of French people or workers. Second, these gestures were made possible because of the proximity of the cheminot to the deportation process. As previously mentioned, the cheminots were not as closely tied to the deportation process as is often imagined; but their physical circumstances meant that some actions, whether through a resistance network or through individual action, were possible. This confirms the comments of Christian Chevandier, who stated that the support cheminots gave Jews was often linked to circumstance and opportunity: 'as workers on the railway, they had a different (but not unlimited) access to deportees, goods and materials.'⁸² Finally, cheminot gestures show the limits of rescue. Indeed, behind a rescuer sat a network of individuals, a mountain of logistical concerns, a set of complex moral questions, and an extremely sensitive geo-political situation, all of which played a key role in the successful (or not) rescue operations. As the next section will show, non-cheminots were the ones who led those rare rescue operations on deportation trains, individuals who had far better access to these networks, resources and connections than ordinary railwaymen.

⁷⁸ SNCF: 25 LM 1940, Nominative list of agents.

⁷⁹ Christian Bernadac, *Le Train de la Mort* (France Empire, 1970).

⁸⁰ Simone Veil, *Une Vie* (Paris: Stock, 2007) 94.

⁸¹ Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State, My Report to the World* (Penguin Classics, 2011) 351.

⁸² Christian Chevandier, 'La Résistance des cheminots: le primat de la fonctionnalité plus qu'une réelle spécificité', dans Antoine Prost, ed., *La Résistance, une histoire sociale* (Paris: Editions de l'atelier, 1997) 158.

RESCUE OPERATIONS AND THE DEPORTATION CONVOYS

Cheminots' reluctance to actively rescue Jewish (and non-Jewish) deportees at the time of deportation is a reflection of broader societal issues, not least an apprehension to approach and intervene in the highly-supervised deportation convoys. Indeed, cases of rescue or resistance on moving trains transporting hundreds of people are incredibly rare in the archives, and not just in France. One reason, as mentioned earlier, was because of the lack of a specific understanding of the deportees' fate. Another reason was the limited opportunities to approach and effectively intervene in the deportation convoys. Linked to this second reason, stopping/intervening with a moving train was a massive logistical operation which cheminots alone could not so easily undertake. As this final section will show, the two known rescue operations to save deportees were undertaken by people with far greater connections and resources than an ordinary train driver – it was not enough to know the railway milieu.

Two incidents in France and Belgium reveal the full complexities of rescue during deportation. This first is the case of the XXth Jewish convoy in Belgium, when in April 1943 three Jewish resisters decided to stop the deportation train en route to Auschwitz. When they initially suggested this idea to their resistance network, it was dismissed: not only was it far too dangerous considering the risk of repression, but furthermore the rescue of Jews was not a priority within the Belgian resistance. These three men thus had to act alone, and on 19 April 1943 they managed to bring the convoy to a halt by flashing a red light and open some of the carriage doors. Their intervention allowed 231 of the 1631 Jews inside the train to escape from the convoy, although many were eventually caught and only 100 of them actually escaped death.⁸³ The operation was never repeated, and deportations to Auschwitz continued until July 1944.

The second case, which took place in France, is an entirely different operation altogether, and although it was aimed at both Jewish and non-Jewish deportees, only a selection of non-Jewish deportees managed to be saved. This story is set in the summer of 1944, and involved the last deportations from Paris. The main character of this story is Raoul Nordling, the Swedish consul in Paris. According to the historian Fabrice Virgili, it was Nordling's furious energy and dedication which saved dozens of people from deportation.⁸⁴ This story is told mostly from Nordling's perspective, which naturally taints the objectivity of these exact events. Still, the emphasis on bureaucracy and logistics, as well as the geo-political factors at play, are very revealing.

By the summer of 1944, rumours were spreading that Allied troops would liberate Paris at any moment. Although similar rumours had previously proven unreliable, this time, things were different: Parisians in the streets were whistling more gaily than usual, and Germans were beginning to fear the worst. Nordling was not oblivious to these changes. But one incident in particular moved him to act. On 6 August 1944, one of the more lenient German judges with whom Nordling was acquainted warned him about the tragic events which were soon to take

⁸³ Marion Schreiber, *Silent Rebels: the true story of the raid on the twentieth train to Auschwitz* (London: Atlantic, 2003). See also <http://www.crif.org/fr/actualites/belgiqueshoah-le-19-avril-1943-attaque-du-xx%C3%A8-convoi-malinesauschwitz/36475> ; <http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/this-day-in-jewish-history/this-day-in-jewish-history-daring-escape-from-an-auschwitz-bound-train.premium-1.516423>.

⁸⁴ Fabrice Virgili wrote an introduction to Nordling's memoirs. Raoul Nordling, *Sauver Paris: mémoires du consul de Suède (1905-1944)* (Bruxelles: Complex, 2002) 15. Most of the following information has been extracted from his memoirs.

place: all French prisoners would either be killed by the Gestapo, or killed... Nordling was deeply shaken by this, since a close family relative had been in Fresnes prison for over a year.⁸⁵

The Swedish consul began his ambitious mission by using a diplomatic route, and he contacted Otto Abetz, the German ambassador in Paris. The latter listened attentively to Nordling's argument: 'Given the current state of affairs (...), any abuse of power from the Germans would only worsen their situation, whereas any humane gesture on their part could be brought in their favour.'⁸⁶ Abetz advised the Swede to address his subordinate, Hofman, who had a reputation for being quite amiable. However, Hofman proved useless. He told Nordling that the embassy was not allowed to make such decisions, and that Himmler was the only one with any real power. As such, Nordling should consult Oberg.⁸⁷

Nordling was suddenly going down a bureaucratic and administrative maze which risked taking weeks before anything could be sorted out. By that point, it would probably be too late. The clock was ticking: the Americans were approaching Paris, and the Germans were fleeing with prisoners. On 11 August, Nordling decided to move things along by adding new pressures. The director of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* had just been imprisoned for refusing to reveal which students were affiliated to resistance groups. Seizing this opportunity, Nordling went straight to Laval's collaborators, hoping to pull some strings. He quickly obtained the support of Cardinal Suhard, a very influential figure at the time, and then met with Laval himself on 14 August 1944 to tell him about the horror of the deportations:⁸⁸

About 120 men, women and children were packed into a freight car. They had to remain standing up with nothing to eat or drink; women gave birth en route, and the journey could last up to 6 days. Nobody was allowed off so they relieved themselves in the freight cars. [Moreover] the evacuation of the camps was going so slowly that we had every reason to fear that the Allies would arrive before their departure, so the Germans would simply shoot all the remaining prisoners.⁸⁹

Laval agreed that these were unacceptable conditions. He approached Abetz and Oberg himself, and both assured him that measures were already being carried out to rectify this problem: there were less people packed into individual freight cars, the Red Cross was allowed to approach the convoy to distribute goods amongst the prisoners, and the ill were placed in a more spacious car attached to each train.⁹⁰

Nordling's aim was not to improve conditions of deportation, but to place the camps and prisons under the authority of the Red Cross. Nordling therefore approached Abetz and Oberg again, and put a special emphasis on the prison of Fresnes which was being evacuated. He drove madly around Paris, between prisons, camps and government buildings in order to avoid the deportation or death of French civilian prisoners. A main obstacle was Dietrich Von Choltitz, the

⁸⁵Speech by Raoul Nordling at the Swedish Consulate in Paris, 15 June 1945. André Desfeuilles, *Le Consul Général de Suède, Raoul Nordling et la Libération de Paris (Août 1944)*, Bulletin Historique du Royal-Suédois (Paris : Tassin, 1945) 5-6.

⁸⁶ Nordling, *Sauver Paris* (2002) 85.

⁸⁷ Karl Oberg, stationed in Paris, was in charge of the SS throughout France between 1942 and 1944. He played an important role in implementing the Final Solution in France.

⁸⁸ Nordling was referring to both racial and non-racial deportations. For example, when Nordling evokes *children* in the freight cars, this was only the case in racial deportations. Indeed in his memoirs it is clear that Nordling tried to prevent the deportation of *French civilians*, rather than a particular group of deportees.

⁸⁹ Nordling, *Sauver Paris* (2002) 92.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

German military governor.⁹¹ The latter disregarded most of Nordling's arguments by claiming that these were not *civilian* prisoners, but in fact *prisoners of war*. They thus belonged to the German army. He told Nordling that whatever had been discussed with Oberg and the SS was useless. The only institution with any real power was the German Army, which he represented himself. In his memoirs, the Swedish consul underlines that, despite difficult encounters between the two men, the Nazi was not oblivious to Nordling's requests. A mutual respect had established itself between the two men. Therefore, in the end they both agreed to a general truce which would last over 24 hours, starting 19 August 1944: the Nordling-Von Choltitz Accord. However, this 'accord' was never fully respected, and fighting between resistors and Germans started up again on 22 August 1944. On that day, Nordling suffered a heart attack.

Nordling's efforts had mixed results. On 17 August, women and sick prisoners were liberated from Fresnes prison. At another prison, the *caserne de Tourelles*, where there were French guards on duty, all prisoners were released. At Romainville, Nordling was unable to liberate the 60 female prisoners, but did manage to station two Red Cross nurses there. Unfortunately, the operations to save the Jews in Drancy failed completely. Nordling was unable to prevent the departure of Jewish deportees on 17 August 1944, and the convoy left Drancy with Aloïs Brunner at its head. The only minor redeeming feature was the fact that the remaining prisoners in Drancy did receive extra food rations afterwards. Other failures concerned non-Jewish deportations: Nordling made no progress at Compiègne, where 2400 people were still imprisoned and on 18 August when more than 1200 prisoners were deported to Buchenwald.

Nordling did, however, manage to stop the last convoy to leave Compiègne on 26 August before it reached the German border. The details of this rescue mission, also known as '*l'arrêt des cheminots*' to some, were revealed in Jean Habert's testimony. Habert was an SNCF employee at the time, working at the Rosières station. On the morning of 26 August, he had received a phone call: 'Due to the accord between the high German authorities and the consulate of Sweden, it is necessary to delay the transport n°....'⁹² The message stated that the train could not cross the Somme river, at which point the Nordling-Von Choltitz accord became invalid. When Habert realised that this train was carrying about 300 prisoners, he understood the urgency of the matter. He alerted the German station master who worked alongside him, only to discover that the train had just been redirected towards Péronne-Chapelette. Habert called the station and informed them that they had to stop the train because a diplomatic accord had been signed. As the clock ticked, French and German *cheminots* worked side by side to ensure that the orders were carried out. Eventually, Habert found out that the train had successfully been stopped at Péronne-Chapelette.

There are several things to point out about this incident. First, Nordling's order alone did not stop the train. Indeed, Habert's testimony indicates that the train may have been stopped for other reasons: '[one *cheminot*] supposes that the bridge over the Somme had been destroyed, and that the presence of German authorities was pure luck.'⁹³ Numerous testimonies from the villagers of Péronne also support this argument. Guy Savary stated that massive bombardments had hit Péronne-Chapelette in August so that the train station and civilian homes around it were completely destroyed, and the bridge was in an irreparable state.⁹⁴ Second, when the train stopped, the prisoners were not put into the care of the Red Cross, let alone liberated: they were walked into an ex-prisoner of war camp where the SS and the Wehrmacht continued to guard them in uncomfortable conditions for several days.⁹⁵ Testimonies from the townspeople, such as

⁹¹ Despite being an obstacle to Nordling, Von Choltitz, whose full title was Lieutenant General Dietrich Von Choltitz, has been recognized for 'saving' Paris as he did not implement the physical destruction of the city which Hitler had assigned him to carry out.

⁹² Jean Habert, 'Péronne, 26 Août 1944' in Marie-Noëlle Polino, ed., *Les cheminots dans la guerre et l'Occupation* (2007) 273.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁹⁴ Guy Savary, *Péronne, L'avis municipale entre les deux guerres mondiales et sous l'occupation* (La Vague verte, 2001).

⁹⁵ Archives Péronne: Anonymous, testimony of deportee from Péronne, held in the Town Hall in Péronne.

Mme Loones, Pierre Malthieu, Jacques Martel and Raymonde Mousso, indicate that many prisoners remained in Péronne, even after the Americans had liberated the town. They were accommodated by hospitable villagers for several days, until it was possible to find a way to return home.⁹⁶

But the most important conclusion to draw from the story of the last deportation train is just how complicated it was to successfully prevent a deportation train from travelling to Germany. Indeed, if anything Jean Habert's title *l'arrêt des cheminots* is highly misleading – in no way was this the single-handed act of the cheminots. The circumstances for this incident were here unique: it was the end of the Occupation; the Germans were under serious pressure; Nordling had a huge energy but also excellent contacts; the railway workers were able to act fast and participate in this final operation. It is undoubtedly the most successful operation of deportees being saved from the convoys – even the operation in Belgium had limited success due to the fact that so many escapees were subsequently caught and deported. And overall, it reminds us that intervening in deportation convoys themselves to rescue Jews (and non-Jews) required more than just technical knowledge of railway schedules and sabotage techniques.

CONCLUSION

Bronchart's refusal to drive a Jewish convoy is not only a misrepresentation of the historical reality, – it contained political prisoners rather than Jews – but it is also an overly simplistic example of actions which cheminots could have, and did, undertake to help Jews and other deportees. In fact, Bronchart's stand was, if anything, merely symbolic and inconclusive, since he was swiftly replaced by another driver. Not only that, but Bronchart's 'refusal' was completely uncommon amongst the cheminot community.⁹⁷ In contrast, his assistance to the Rosenbergs, and to the man he hid in his locomotive, is evocative of the gestures of assistance, support and rescue which cheminots carried out at various levels.

As such, Bronchart's story is not really one of rescue during the deportations, but one of contemporary expectations of rescue, and of the desire to draw moral lessons from history. Behind it lies an assumption that the Jewish convoys could have been stopped, something which is not completely new. Since the postwar period, there have been many questions about why the Allies did not bomb the tracks to Auschwitz, so much so that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum now explains the reasons on its website.⁹⁸ Most historians would agree that such comments are short-sighted, as they overlook the intensity of the historical realities at the time. Not only that, but they reduce Holocaust crimes to railway deportation; in reality, the Holocaust was committed in many spaces beyond the railways and the camps themselves.⁹⁹

This article has aimed to step away from the monopoly of the Bronchart story and explore the historical reality of railwaymen, rescue and the deportation trains. It explored the wider historical context(s) which framed the history of rescue in Vichy France, not least that of the cheminot

⁹⁶ Archives Péronne: Testimonies of M. Malthieu, M. Martel, M. Sacary, Mme Leroux, Mme Loones and Mme Mousso are all held in the archives of the Town Hall in Péronne.

⁹⁷ It is hard to know with real exactness who was being deported. Some Jewish deportation trains did, after all, pass through Montauban. However, a close analysis of Gerard Gobitz's book which highlighted railway trajectories suggests that there was no such passage on 31 October 1942.

⁹⁸ 'The United States and the Holocaust: Why Auschwitz was not bombed', <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008041>.

⁹⁹ This is emphasised in recent publications notably Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: the destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2009); Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Bodley Head, 2010).

community. The extent of their knowledge and understanding of Jewish specificity was questioned, and placed within a larger context of French awareness of the Holocaust. Moreover, their professional and traditional values were mentioned to highlight their reluctance to sabotage transports carrying any travellers altogether, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, deportees or non-deportees. Still, this does not mean that cheminots were indifferent to the fate of deportees, nor that they did not participate in individual acts of assistance or even in networks of rescue. Indeed, railway workers could help Jews on the run or give them some support through humane gestures – but interfering with the trains themselves was not as easy as is traditionally assumed, and the dangers associated with it were deemed too serious to be ignored. This was true of the Jewish deportation convoys, but also of non-Jewish deportations. By shifting our gaze to examine the actual rescue operations which *did* take place during the deportations, we are reminded that technical knowledge was not enough to prevent deportation trains from running, and that effective rescue operations required far more elaborate preparations and interventions than ones which cheminots could offer.

Cheminots are not central to the history of rescue in the Holocaust – and yet, their involvement with the deportations, their interactions with Jews and their reluctance to sabotage the convoys do give us greater insight into the complexities of Jewish rescue in the Second World War. Indeed, the decision to help Jews was not always obvious, and many circumstantial and societal factors came into play. Even when non-Jews rescued Jews, these plans were often part of broader patterns of humanitarian action or organised resistance. The case of the cheminots thus highlights the extent to which ordinary people in Western Europe were entangled with the Final Solution, but reminds us that there is no clear moral lesson behind this.