

EPILOGUE

Retelling Train Stories

On a trip to Europe in June and July 2007, the themes of transit and memory weighed heavily on me, as they had for many years. But the weight of that past was intellectual. I labored over it, daunted by the responsibility of the task, letting the experiences of the European victims defeat me and my limited abilities at telling their stories. I sorted through the testimony, the theory, what other people had said about deportation, and how people suffered because of it. Trains and trauma were known mainly through books and other people's words, and not from experiences of situating myself in the locations of witness, as if that intimacy would bring me closer to them. The pilgrimage from the Antipodes, the ostensible end of the world depending on how you look at it, to Europe, was long and punishing. History made me take this journey and forced me to think that I must visit the sites of genocide that began with the Holocaust, but did not end there. There were too many places to choose from, and, as if a child frustrated by impossible choices, I imposed an irrational selection process that did not reflect any coherent sequence. I embarked on my own return tourism. I took with me intrigue that was probably in excess of what might be considered normal for scholars of genocide. The names in my memory route have become my companions—Berlin, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Krakow, and Auschwitz.

In Berlin, I was overloaded with possibilities of perpetrators and victims, or at least traces of them. Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn: the memorial near the station's entry announces the origins and destinations of German Jews (see Figure E.1). I did not yet have my map of memory sites in Berlin, so it must have found me. In Charlottenburg, the stumbling stones in the footpath told me of the people who once called these streets their home before their deportation.¹

Outside of Berlin, the Wannsee Villa, an administrative meeting point of the Final Solution, beckoned. To get there, I took the Potsdam line on the S-Bahn, which passed through Grunewald. I could have missed it. With my camera, I imagined myself as a chronicler of sorts, documenting today's witnesses on a very pleasant June afternoon. There were not that many; I

Notes for this section are located on page 223.



Figure E.1 Memorial, Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn, Berlin. Photo by Simone Gigliotti.

might have noticed two people there at Platform 17. They were remote, carving out their place for memory work and reading dates on each side of the platform. These dates timetabled the destinations of the Berlin Jews, an inventory of deliveries. I went to leave, and the hollow people, in the concrete walls, seemed to disappear. I am sure they would have wanted to join me (see Figure E.2).

Memory also took me to Sarajevo, and then to Srebrenica, and perhaps it left me there. It was not a big leap from Berlin to Sarajevo in today's transit terms, but fifty years separate their traumas. The theme of transit was imposed upon us as we traveled from our conference location in Sarajevo to Srebrenica for a journey of around one hundred and thirty kilometers (about eighty miles). It took four hours to transport seven buses of genocide scholars under police escort to Srebrenica, to the Potočari memorial, and to Budak, the site of a mass grave that was unearthed in late June 2007. The mass grave was advertised as voluntary viewing in our conference program. It immediately became unmissable.

We were allowed the right of witness, or so it was told to us. When I looked at this grave, and when I think about it now, the scene is still blurred. An ambulance was parked next to the grave. Was it on standby for the



Figure E.2 Memorial to deported Jews, Grunewald train station, Berlin.
Photo by Simone Gigliotti.

genocide scholars? They could suffer. There were around two hundred of us, and we could not wait to see. To see the bones of skeletons that were under forensic examination and that rested in the pit on the mountain that was our first appointment with genocide memory on that day (see Figure E.3). I thought about the mass grave, and then the invasion of us as foreign genocide witnesses to local memory, to the name calling of the dead, to the burials. Transit and movement were important in Srebrenica and in Bosnia, and to the Serbs' forced relocations and ethnic cleansing. But transit on this day seemed threatened by local expectations of us to stay, witness, and tell the world with our cameras and words about the Bosnian national trauma. We had seen it, and now we were immobilized by the politics of memory.

Krakow and Auschwitz: The train journey between them was not so long. The name Krakow suggests a foreign past, not known to me except through testimonies and nostalgia. From the photos, I remember seeing horses and carriages, street sellers, and children in need of shoes. Perhaps they were from the ghetto. I was excited to be in Krakow, and closer still to Auschwitz, yet the logistics of getting there reminded me of the frustrating delays in waiting for trains that never arrived, delays that would not have been tolerated during deportations. I could wait another hour or two for my Auschwitz memory. The Galicia Jewish Museum sold maps of the Krakow Ghetto and Kazimierz. I would begin my own transit from the Podgórski square and the deportation memorial. I noticed some repairmen replacing



Figure E.3 Mass Grave, Srebrenica. Photo by Simone Gigliotti.

the lights that illuminated the chairs in the memorial square in the evening (see Figure E.4). From there, I went in search of physical traces of the ghetto: the post office, the orphanage, the resistance headquarters, and the hospital, among other locations of former Jewish life. When I remember Krakow, I think of the emptiness of the word “former” to describe absence. It prefaces countless descriptions of Jewish history. When I think about Krakow, as origin, I think of “former” and then of “future,” to Auschwitz, a particularly Jewish destination. When I don’t see “former” to describe the Jews, I seek evidence to the contrary.

Auschwitz was familiar in virtual and visual productions, and testimonies helped me imagine it, but I could not know it. En route from Krakow on the retro-looking train I thought about interiors and exteriors, grass and graffiti, industry and villages. I thought about the deportees, too. Arriving at Auschwitz I with my travel partners, we enact our own selections. I want to separate, and not be part of a group witness experience. But how could I not? I was competing with other foot traffic in the thousands of the white shoe and t-shirt brigade for viewing space. Competition for the best viewing



Figure E.4 Podgorze ghetto memorial, Krakow. Photo by Simone Gigliotti.

position of the chimney, the hanging area, and the experimentation rooms. I went around the grounds of Auschwitz I and into the memorial rooms with stories of individuals and communities destroyed. I am delayed, for I see Charlotte Delbo. She is a shadow on the wall. I am thinking of her poem “Arrivals, Departures.”²

But there is a station where those who arrive are those who are
leaving

A station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those
who have left never came back.

It is the largest station in the world.

And I am almost there. A witness to traces. But this is Auschwitz I and now I am waiting for a shuttle bus to transport me and my travel partners to Auschwitz II-Birkenau, once resident to the largest station in the world. I wanted to walk the route of the deportees, but they objected. “It is too hot, no?” “It is too far, no?” It was not more than three kilometers. We are transported in compressed conditions in the name of memory. I cannot wait to get out. We arrive and we separate. I am not unhappy with that outcome. The trip has been creating stress. Perhaps Birkenau would give me some relief. When I was back in Berlin I wrote to my friend, Roger, a scholar of German film in Australia, about Auschwitz. His reply was to e-mail Peter Weiss’s *Meine Ortschaft* (My Place), written in 1964.³ Weiss

wrote: “But after a while silence and numbness set in here, too. A living person came, and what happened is closed off from this living person. The living person who comes here, from another world, possesses nothing but his knowledge of figures, of reports written down, of testimonies, they are a part of his life, he grapples with them, but can only comprehend what happens to him himself.”

I write this in Wellington, New Zealand, and I am thinking about what I was doing on that day in Auschwitz. I was closed off from history. I thought I could rise above it and think about Auschwitz through memory. Auschwitz is outside of history, and only for memory. History is fixed and memory is disordered. On the platform, I remembered what deportees told me and others in their testimonies of arrival. Was this where they stood? Was that the barrack they saw and to which they were taken? The platform was long, endless, an almost spectacular and important welcome for the deportees in the largest station of the world. Film crews, backpackers, and families on day trips: Auschwitz has broad appeal (see Figure E.5). At the end of the day, I reconnected with my travel partners. I was exhausted. Exhausted from thinking what happened to the deportees after they arrived in this place and went to *that* place, and from carrying their memories inside of me. It was a long-delayed arrival.

I think about my European journey to genocide and its sites of commission as one small gesture of recovery. But what does rewitnessing actually achieve? I was a statistic in the economy of pilgrimages that includes Zionist group witness such as the March of the Living where youth and adults



Figure E.5 Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Photo by Simone Gigliotti.

from around the world make their own Holocaust journeys to Auschwitz, and then to Israel, and scholarly excursions, including that undertaken by the historian Martin Gilbert. Chronicled in *Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past*, the diary is an account of Gilbert's two-week trip to sites of Holocaust deportations in Europe, including Berlin, Prague, Krakow, Zamosc, Lublin, Treblinka, and Chelmno. The book's explicit witness tourism was dramatized as an "unforgettable voyage of discovery,"⁴ a voyage that promises discovery as a disturbing passage that reroutes the historical displacement of Holocaust arrivals.

Discovery, displacement, and exile shape transit stories and travelogues. These stories include others both near and distant to my location of writing. They are stories that evoke deportation as a departure that originated in Europe but has now moved far beyond it. They include the stories of Ruth Wajnryb, an Australian-born daughter of Holocaust survivors, who spoke of imagined pasts while standing in the freight car that rests in the permanent exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: "How can I not think of my father in such a place? Like other fragments of stories that we heard, it elicits memories of events never personally experienced but many times imagined."⁵

Claire Kahane's memoir of her trip to Poland, "Geographies of Loss," advertised itself as a "document of my effort to mourn."⁶ A first-generation American, she negotiates a disturbing inheritance, as her parents had "come from this part of Europe and had been part of its history and culture; each of us had lost some part of our own history with the disappearance of European Jewry in the Holocaust."⁷ The theme of disappearance is evoked in her entry of "May 9, 1994: The Train." In it, she recalls her journey from Warsaw to Krakow. She is not in the train, but it is with her, a companion in the fusion, and confusion, of scenes of witness:

The sound of the train from Warsaw to Krakow, the sound of the train moving through Poland, is a sound familiar to me from old nightmares. I look out the graying window at a dreary, wet landscape, and I'm in a story I know, have heard, have grown up with in films and fantasy, a story in which I assume the role as victim. I am being transported.⁸

Unlike Ruth Wajnryb and Claire Kahane, my own transit stories are not freighted with memories of generational or family connection. I write in their absence, from the words and voices of people I do not know, people who are known to me in misery, pain, and recovery, in ways they never should have been. I see them in photographs, gathering belongings, and saying farewell as they are about to leave. Occasionally, they stare back. What happened inside the trains? To this they are the only witnesses.

Notes

1. The “stumbling stones” are a reference to the *Stolpersteine Project* by German artist Gunter Demnig. Tiles are placed in the footpaths of streets across Germany. See <http://www.stolpersteine.com>.
2. I have tried to preserve the format of the extract as it appears in “None of Us Will Return” from Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 3–10.
3. Peter Weiss (1916–1982) was a German dramatist and novelist. The son of a Jewish father, his family left Germany in 1934 to escape Nazi persecution and eventually settled in Sweden. Auschwitz and the Nazi era preoccupied Weiss’s writings and plays, and *Meine Ortschaft* reflects on a destination he did not know. I thank Roger Hillman for his translation of it. Among many writings on Weiss, see Jürgen E. Schlunk, “Auschwitz and Its Function in Peter Weiss’ Search for Identity,” *German Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (1987): 11n30.
4. Martin Gilbert, *Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997).
5. Ruth Wajnryb, *The Silence: How Tragedy Shapes Talk* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 2–3.
6. Claire Kahane, “Geographies of Loss,” in *Shaping Losses*, 30.
7. *Ibid.*, 31.
8. *Ibid.*, 36.