

Transports from France

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Map

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

Some 300,000 Jews were living in France when the Germans invaded the country in **early summer 1940**. Many were French citizens whose families had lived in France for centuries and who were fully assimilated. Others had come to France, often from Eastern Europe, to seek a better life and escape from antisemitism. In the **1930's**, many German and Austrian Jews also sought refuge in France. After the German invasion, the northern part of France, including

Paris, was governed by a German military administration. Most of the rest of the country (the "free zone") was ruled from **Vichy** by a government of collaborators led by WW1 hero **Marshal Pétain** and **Pierre Laval**. Alsace and Lorraine were incorporated in the *Reich*.

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

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

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

There was a flourishing antisemitic press, fed by distinguished authors such as **Céline** and **Charles Maurras** (head of "Action Catholique", which promoted fundamentalist Catholic and chauvinistic values). In France Jews were arrested, imprisoned and guarded by the French police, who also conducted round-ups such as the infamous "grand rafle du Vél d'Hiv" in **July 1942**. Deportees were escorted to the trains by police or militiamen, and the trains were manned by French railway workers until they



Deportation Camp Drancy

crossed the border. Even the lists of those who could be rounded up as "deportable" were compiled by French officials. Without this collaboration at all levels of the French administration, it would have been impossible for the Germans to deport so many Jews - they simply did not have the manpower to do so.

On the other hand, the French population in general disapproved of the persecution and humiliation of the Jews. Leading members of the Catholic hierarchy condemned the treatment of the Jews. Monsignor **Saliège**, Archbishop of **Toulouse**, wrote a pastoral letter in their defence which was read in all the churches of his diocese (ironically, the outspoken Archbishop was an invalid who had lost the use of his voice years previously). France's Protestant community was particularly active in helping Jews. As in other countries, special efforts were made to protect children. This contrasting situation was reflected in France's response to the Shoah after the war.

Laval was hanged, but the apparently senile **Pétain** was simply kept in honourable detention until he died. After over 40 years of indifference, there has recently been a flurry of attempts to prosecute leading collaborators, such as French police chief **René Bosquet** (who was shot by a mentally disturbed person before he could be tried), or **Maurice Papon** who was responsible for deporting Jews from **Bordeaux**.



Brunner

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

None of the three Germans principally responsible for putting the "Final Solution" into effect in France ever



Barbed Wire & Guard's Bunker

came to trial. **Theodor Dannecker**, who was responsible for Jewish affairs in the **Gestapo** in France until **16 July 1942**, committed suicide in the American POW camp in **Bad Tölz** in **December 1945**.

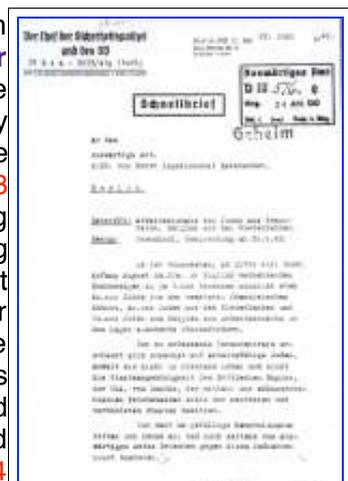
Most deportations from France, including the four trains to **Sobibor**, took place under **Heinz Rothke**, born in **1913**, who had previously been a military administrator in **Brest**. He had abandoned theology studies to become a lawyer and was a civil servant before the war. **Rothke** was apparently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

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



Letter from March 1942

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



reached **Auschwitz**. **March 1943** Convoy 49 from **Drancy**



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

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

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



Letter from August 1942

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

All the victims were taken to the camp at **Gurs**.

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

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



Jews in Drancy Courtyard #1

Convoy No 51: The 770 Jews transferred from **Gurs** on **2 March** were joined by over 150 Jews assembled at the camp of **Nexon**. On arrival at **Drancy** they numbered 926 men, aged from 16 to 65, the majority aged from 37 to 45. Once again, many of these victims had fought for France; some of them had been decorated. 73 Drancy internees, including 39 women, were added to this contingent to make up the required number. The youngest member of the convoy, **Victor Fiszban**, was born in **Piotrkow** in **1928**. Convoy 51 was also sent to **Chelm**, and then on to **Sobibor**. There were 6 survivors in **1945**: Two of them, **Mendel Fuks** and **Maurice Jablonsky**, said that on arrival at **Sobibor** they were selected with a group of young people to go and work "very hard", and they at once set off again for **Majdanek** without entering **Sobibor**. Those selected were subsequently transferred to **Auschwitz** or **Budzyn** labour camp.

Convoy No 52: Convoy 52 comprised 640 men and 360 women. Over half the deportees, around 700, had French nationality, classed in various categories: French, French subjects, French by choice, by naturalisation and French by origin. Many of the victims of this transport had been arrested during a "clean-up" of the Old Port of **Marseille** which was carried out on **Heinrich Himmler's** orders from **22 to 24 January 1943** to arrest "undesirables" such as petty criminals, prostitutes and, of course, Jews.

The 800 Jewish "undesirables", many of whom came from French North Africa, were taken to the camp at **Compiègne**. At the **beginning of March** it was decided to deport them, and on **10 March**, 786 were transported to **Drancy**. 570 of them were French nationals. The Germans were particularly contemptuous of the **Marseille** Jews, whom they called "criminal scum", and the Jewish leader at **Drancy** also complained that they arrived virtually without luggage and stole from other prisoners. In fact these poor people had been arrested at night and given no opportunity to pack any belongings. Also included in Convoy 52 were foreign furriers and their families arrested on **18 March**, following a request by **Röthke** to the **Paris** police. There were 12 children under 12 and 140 young people aged from 12 to 21. Warned in advance by **Röthke** that the convoy would be made up in majority of French Jews, the heads of the French police objected to taking part in organising the departure of the convoy.

In the end the French police gave in and cooperated, except that at the last minute the Gendarmerie did not provide the usual escort, which was replaced by 30 men from the German Order Police. The convoy left **Drancy** on 23 March, officially for **Chelm** but then went on to **Sobibor**. There were no survivors in **1945**.

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



Jews in Drancy Courtyard #2

3 of the escapees were still alive in **1945**. When the train arrived at **Sobibor**, 15 deportees responded to a call for men who were prepared to work hard. Two of them were still alive in **1945**.

One of the two survivors of Convoy 53 was **Lucien Dunietz or Dunicz**. He was born in **Kiev** but came to France to study chemistry at the University of **Caen**. He married a French woman, who was expecting their second child when he was arrested in the street in **Paris** in **February 1943**. He escaped from **Sobibor** during the revolt in **October 1943**. After the war he rejoined his family and they emigrated to Israel. He refused to speak about his experiences in **Sobibor**. In **1965** he agreed to give evidence at the trial of former **Sobibor** staff in **Hagen**, but he died of a heart attack before he could do so. He was 53.

The other survivor of Convoy 53, **Antonius Bardach**, came from **Lviv (Lwow)**. He was first held in the camp of **Mérignac** near **Bordeaux**, before being transferred to **Drancy**, and then to **Sobibor**. He said the journey took about six days, with no food or water, in a sealed cattle truck which stank of excrement because he and his fellow prisoners were obliged to use it as a toilet. A young prisoner died during the journey. During **Bardach's** imprisonment at **Sobibor** he did a variety of jobs, including collecting the victims' personal belongings and clothes and cleaning freight cars. He was beaten on many occasions, and suffered from hunger and diarrhea. After the revolt he hid in the woods near **Lublin** until the liberation.

See the [List of deported Jews from the French Department Bas-Rhin!](#)

In: René Gutman, **Le Memorbuch**, Mémorial de la Déportation et de la Résistance des Juifs dus Bas-Rhin (Editions La Nuée Bleue/DNA, Strasbourg, 2005).

[The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names \(Yad Vashem\)](#)

Photos: GFH

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