

Foreword by Floriane Azoulay

This publication stems from the international conference of the same name held by the Arolsen Archives from November 2 to 4, 2020. The event was sponsored by Deutsche Bahn AG, and the original plan was to hold the conference at the former Kaiserbahnhof railway station in Potsdam to provide a direct historical link to the former Reichsbahn, the German national railway system, which played a central role in the deportations. However, the pandemic forced us to change our plans, and this conference became the first large event we held online. The advantage of this approach was that it enabled many people to attend who would not have been able to travel to the venue.

One thing that emerged very clearly from the presentations and discussions held by the experts who took part was the very high level of scholarly interest shown in the topic of indexing and cataloging source materials. The Arolsen Archives are the world's most comprehensive archive on the victims of National Socialism, and we hold valuable collections and documents on deportations, which our specialist staff index and make available to the public online. The conference focused on the deportations of Jews and Sinti and Roma, and it brought together various topics that had previously received attention at events in Vienna, Hamburg, and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. As reflected in the articles in this volume, the event served to gather knowledge about source materials, but it also showed how many questions remain unanswered despite extensive research.

This is particularly noticeable when it comes to visual sources. For the territory of the German Reich, those photographs of German deportations whose existence we were aware of up until now, come from only a small number of localities. The idea for the #LastSeen initiative arose during the conference, born from a desire to bring these pictures together and make everything accessible online. At the request of those involved, the Arolsen Archives undertook to implement the idea quickly, a task that is well suited to us because of our digital expertise. When seen in isolation, the pictures only show the perspective of the perpetrators, so it is important to contextualize the images and put them into relief by providing as much information as possible about the lives of the persecutees in order to give these people's names, their history, and their dignity back to them. Taken between 1938 and 1945, the photos also show very vividly how National Socialist injustice and the exclusion of the victims of persecution took place right before the public's eyes. The pictures throw light on the last moment when the deportees were excluded from German society and show how many people knew about these crimes and even participated. This inevitably leads us to direct our attention to contemporary questions about the various options we have today when we witness injustice. Thus, the

goals of the #LastSeen initiative include using a traveling exhibition to bring the pictures to remote rural areas and using the materials to create an interactive low-threshold educational offering that is especially suitable for young people.

As the Nazi period recedes into the ever-more distant past, subsequent generations are less and less able to imagine the atrocities that were committed, and this increases the danger of losing sight of the historical facts. As a recent study commissioned by the Arolsen Archives on ‘Generation Z and Nazi History’ showed, there is a high level of interest in this period of history and a clear sense of the injustice of everyday racism. At the same time, however, it should be noted that there is little knowledge about the Holocaust, and that antisemitism is mostly neither recognized as a central ideology of National Socialism nor as a separate phenomenon in its own right. But the continuity of antisemitism as a worldview within society remains unbroken, and it persists today without attracting much social protest as a rule. Structural antiziganism and the discrimination associated with it also demonstrate how centuries-old stereotypes still continue to exist today, even in democracies. Many Sinti and Roma and Jews hide their identity because they are afraid of being disadvantaged or resented. The fact that the reasons for the persecution of two of the largest victim groups targeted by the National Socialists are still not a thing of the past although nearly 80 years have passed should give us a pause for thought. By implementing the #LastSeen initiative and projects like the conference on Nazi deportations that draw attention to numerous questions and unearth relevant academic findings, the Arolsen Archives are responding to changes in the culture of remembrance and to the associated political challenges of our time.

Floriane Azoulay

Director, Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution