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Mapping Jewish Slave Laborers' Trajectories Through Concentration Camps

Abstract: After victims had been deported from their home countries to concentration and death camps, the Germans transported prisoners selected for forced and slave labor to places where the war industry needed them. The movement of Jewish slave laborers from camp to camp was a central feature of the Holocaust. This paper scrutinizes this phenomenon through the experiences of a group of Dutch Jewish women selected in Sobibor. For most of their time in the Nazi concentration camps, they managed to stay together. Drawing upon wartime and postwar documents in the Arolsen Archives and survivor testimonies, this paper reconstructs and visualizes their pathways through geographic information system (GIS) and cartographic tools. The maps are not mere illustrations; they help us grasp and understand the protagonists' trajectories and experiences. The microhistory case presented in this paper is part of a larger doctoral study which follows over two hundred Dutch Jewish slave laborers through the concentration camp system.

Introduction

A train of 1,105 Dutch Jews in regular passenger coaches left *'Judendurchgangslager'* Westerbork in the Netherlands on March 10, 1943. Travelling for three days via Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin, Breslau, Łódź, and Lublin, it reached its final destination, Sobibor, on Saturday March 13 (see fig. 1).¹ The Germans selected some thirty women and forty men and relocated them to the Lublin camp system for slave labor. All the other deportees were murdered in the gas chambers of that Operation Reinhardt death camp. Most of the approximately seventy slave laborers who had escaped immediate annihilation that day would perish before war's end; only thirteen of them – all women – survived the Holocaust. Arriving in Sobibor marked the end of both the journey and the lives of those killed there; for the selected slave laborers it meant the beginning of continuous suffering, struggle for survival and, for most of them, deferred death.

¹ For the train route and details, see Yad Vashem: "Transports to Extinction: Holocaust (Shoah) Deportation Database". Available at: <https://deportation.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&itemId=6517696&ind=1>. Last accessed: 15.03.2021.

The March 10 transport was the second to leave the Netherlands for Sobibor. Deportations to the East had started on July 15, 1942, and continued until September 13, 1944, during which 112 trains with some 107,000 Jews left the country.² From July 1942 until March 1943, 51 trains with 46,454 people went to Auschwitz-Birkenau.³ The Germans sent nineteen transports with 34,313 persons to Sobibor between March and July 1943. Only 18 of those deportees survived, including 13 from the March 10 group. Most Jews were killed upon arrival in Auschwitz and Sobibor; some were selected for slave labor. The exact number remains unknown, but the figures suggest that 20,000 to 30,000 of the 107,000 deported Dutch Jews served as slave laborers.⁴ Many of them were transferred frequently to various camps. The majority died from the harsh work conditions and unhygienic circumstances in the camps, or were murdered by the guards. Only 5,200 Dutch Jewish deportees survived the war.

The Germans relocated those deportees selected for slave labor from site to site depending on where their labor was needed. Inmates worked as slave laborers for the SS, the Wehrmacht, other Nazi authorities, and private companies. Labor shortages prompted almost every sector of the German war economy to make use of detainees ‘supplied’ by the SS. Hundreds of sub-camps were erected at extant or newly established production facilities in the final war years. The main camps became hubs of a network of forced and slave labor sites. For the prisoners this meant that they were transferred again and again to places of incarceration where they had to fight anew for a position within the inmate hierarchy.

The movement of Jews from camp to camp was a central feature of the Holocaust. Yet, few studies of Jewish slave labor address this aspect. What happened

² Loe de Jong: *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog: Deel 8, Gevangenen en gedeporteerden*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978, 708; David Barnouw, Dirk Mulder, and Guus Veenendaal: *De Nederlandse Spoorwegen in oorlogstijd 1939–1945: Rijden voor Vaderland en Vijand*, Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2019, 116–122.

³ German Federal Archives: “Chronology of Deportations from the Netherlands”. Available at: <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/gedenkbuch/chronology/viewNetherlands.xhtml?lang=en>. Last accessed: 15.03.2021. Around 3,400 men aged 15–55 years were taken off the train in Cosel (Koźle), 80 kilometers before Auschwitz-Birkenau, to work for the Schmelt Organization. See Herman van Rens and Annelies Wilms: *Tussenstation Cosel. Joodse mannen uit West-Europa naar dwangarbeiderskampen in Silezië, 1942–1945*, Hilversum: Verloren, 2020.

⁴ This estimate is based on De Jong, *Het Koninkrijk*, 708, 888; Jens-Christian Wagner: “Work and Extermination in the Concentration Camps”, in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.): *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, London: Routledge, 2010, 127–148, esp. 154; Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt: *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008 (revised edition), 347–348.

to inmates after they left a specific site is beyond the scope of most concentration camp studies.⁵ The authors cast camps as static sites of labor, which in essence they were. But that is not how the victims experienced their imprisonment. This article will scrutinize the phenomenon of prisoner transferal. It will drill down on the fate of the approximately 30 women of the March 10 transport selected in Sobibor by applying a microhistory lens and following the thirteen survivors' trajectories through the camp system.⁶ Survivors' postwar witness statements elucidate the group's experiences. I have been able to identify twenty-eight of the thirty women. To understand these slave laborers' experiences, I will explore who initiated the relocations and what these shifts meant to the deportees. In general, did the Germans select Jews and send them off to another camp, or did Jews exert some form of agency over their site of incarceration? And, very specifically, how did the March 10 group stay together for such a long time?

Documents from the Arolsen Archives, in combination with survivor testimonies, have been crucial to reconstruct the victims' pathways. The convergence of these sources allowed me to trace their movements between camps. In some cases, the exact date of transfer could not be determined but only guesstimated after careful scrutiny of the available records and literature. I collected the spatial data obtained from the archival documents in a database, which I used to create maps with a geographic information system (GIS) and cartographic tools. A similar approach can be found in historian Henning Borggräfe's re-

5 See, for example, Felicja Karay: *Death Comes in Yellow: Skarżysko-Kamienna Slave Labor Camp*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996; Wolf Gruner: *Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Aims 1938–1944*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Bella Gutterman: *A Narrow Bridge to Life: Jewish Forced Labor and Survival in the Gross-Rosen Camp System, 1940–1945*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2008; Christopher Browning: *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010; Marc Buggeln: *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

6 Survivors' experiences have been discussed briefly in Jules Schelvis: *Sobibor: A History of a Nazi Death Camp*, London: Bloomsbury, 2007, 128–130. Schelvis erred on some points: "Sophie van Praag" should have been Debora van Praag; Jetje Verman did not end up in Theresienstadt but stayed behind in Bergen-Belsen and was liberated there; Bertha and Debora van Praag were part of the group sent to Trawniki as well; Trawniki was evacuated by mid-May 1944 and not in early June 1944; the evacuees of Lublin-Majdanek were put on trains in Ćmielów instead of Chmielów (the latter being another Polish village on the other side of the Vistula river); one and not all four Dutch women died in Bliżyn due to tuberculosis; Bertha and Celine Ensel and Sientje Verman did not travel via Buchenwald to Lippstadt but were brought there directly from Auschwitz-Birkenau.

search.⁷ Borggräfe followed a group of 297 inmates on a macro level using GIS. I use similar techniques here, yet I have included survivor testimonies to scrutinize prisoner relocation on a micro level. These witness statements are key to understanding why deportees were transferred and how they experienced these shifts. The maps in this article serve a more robust function than mere illustration. Following historian Richard White's argument, they are part of the research process itself as they allow both the author and the audience to comprehend the spatial extent of this history.⁸ The geovisualizations show the relocations of the group of women from site to site and as dispersed over time. Thus, the interplay between the maps, survivor testimonies, and archival material offers a new and more nuanced lens on the experiences of these Jewish slave laborers.

Deportation from the Netherlands to German-Occupied Poland

The Germans assembled the majority of Dutch Jews in Westerbork transit camp before deporting them to concentration and annihilation camps in the Reich and in occupied Poland. They concealed their true intentions and made the Jews believe they were to be sent to labor camps in the East. Camp commandant SS-Obersturmführer Albert Gemmeker ordered the Jewish Council in Westerbork to assist with the preparations for each deportation. Among other obligations, Jewish Council members had to compile the transport list and announce names the evening prior to departure. On the day itself, it fell to the Jewish Council to help with the logistics of getting the targeted people aboard the train and provide food parcels to the deportees.⁹ Most people on the 10 March transport

7 Henning Borggräfe: "Die Rekonstruktion von Verfolgungswegen im NS-Terrorssystem. Eine Fallstudie zu Opfern der Aktion 'Arbeitsscheu Reich'", in Henning Borggräfe (ed.): *Freilegungen: Wege, Orte, und Räume der NS-Verfolgung*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016, 56–82.

8 Richard White: "What is Spatial History?", in *Stanford University Spatial History Project, Spatial History Lab*, Working Paper, 2010, 1–6. Available at: <https://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/media/images/publication/what%20is%20spatial%20history%20pub%20020110.pdf>. Last accessed: 26.07.2021.

9 Cato Polak, 250d Kampen en Gevangenissen buiten Nederland, inventory 759, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam; Mirjam Blits: *Auschwitz 13917: Hoe ik de Duitse concentratiekampen overleefde*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1961, 13. Blits's book is an adaption of her testimony written shortly after she returned to the Netherlands. The events described in both sources are the same, yet in the book, all persons have been assigned pseudonyms and the text has been edited for publication. For the original testimony manuscript, see Mirjam Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750.

had been in Westerbork for only a few days or weeks. As they boarded the train, the sisters Debora (born March 6, 1926) and Bertha (born May 9, 1928) van Praag were warned by Jewish aides not to volunteer for anything when incarcerated in the camps. They were told to do only what the Germans told them to do as they would not know what they were actually volunteering for.¹⁰ It is unclear whether the helpers gave this advice to the sisters alone or whether it was a general instruction communicated to all deportees. Other testimonies do not provide any indication of such warning. After the transport left Westerbork, Gemmeker sent a telex message to various German authorities, including the Reichssicherheitshauptamt Department IV B 4 in Berlin and SS- und Polizeiführer in Lublin, Odilo Globocnik, notifying them about the departure and estimated time of arrival. Globocnik passed on this information to the commandant of Sobibor.¹¹

The train wagons deployed on 10 March were in bad shape, yet the windows allowed the deportees to look outside which made the journey somewhat bearable. Still, people feared what awaited them.¹² Mirjam Blits (born June 5, 1916) was deported together with her husband Elias Penha (born January 24, 1912). They met the couple Menno (born April 13, 1909) and Annie (born September 29, 1917) Troostwijk in their coach. Menno found Blits a brave woman and asked her to look after Annie; Blits agreed and asked him to look after her husband in return. The train halted in Breslau and the deportees saw Jewish slave laborers for the first time, as the latter were working on the railway tracks. Blits looked out the window hoping to see her father who had been deported in November 1942, and she shouted his name. She grew upset when she did not see him, and Penha calmed her down by saying that her father, an upholsterer, was surely working in an airplane factory. As they moved on, Blits and others in the wagon threw food to the Jews laboring outside. The SS guards responded by firing at the laborers and the train.¹³ This was the first time the Dutch Jews experienced the deadly violence that awaited them.

Arriving in Sobibor, the deportees were beaten out of the train. They had no idea where they were. The Germans needed 25 to 30 women as slave laborers. The SS asked nurses, seamstresses, washers, and household maids to identify themselves. Only six stood forward, and an SS man randomly chose another

10 Debora Sessler-van Praag, interview 25384, segment 27, Visual History Archive (VHA), USC Shoah Foundation, 1995. Last accessed: 15.01.2020.

11 Schelvis, Sobibor, 50–51.

12 Blits, Auschwitz, 11–12; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Debora Sessler-van Praag, interview 52693, segments 101–102, VHA, 1995. Last accessed: 16.01.2020.

13 Blits, Auschwitz, 11–13.



Fig. 1: This map shows the route of the March 10, 1943, deportation train travelling from Westerbork via Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin, Breslau, Łódź, and Lublin to Sobibór. Borders as of February 28, 1943. Basemap: Michael De Groot: *Building the New Order: 1938–1945*, Stanford University: Spatial History Lab, 2010. Copyright Daan de Leeuw.

20 or so, almost all young women aged 15 to 40.¹⁴ When Blits was selected but Troostwijk was not, Blits boldly approached the SS man and asked if Troostwijk could join the group as well. He allowed her to do so. Blits thus intervened directly in the drafting process, managed to keep her new friend close and, even though unaware of it at the time, saved Troostwijk from imminent death. The

14 A few women in their forties were selected as well, including Henderiene den Arend-van der Reis (b. 19.06.1896), Auguste Berliner (b. 28.09.1901), and Hilde Beate Blumendal (b. 22.09.1902). See Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 3; Blits, Auschwitz, 17; Surry Polak and Suze Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Transport List 10 March 1943, 804 Onderzoek–Vernietigingskamp Sobibor, inventory 55, NIOD, Amsterdam; List Camp Majdanek-Lublin by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC), Paris, 1.1.23.1/1205094–1205097/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; List 138 Lublin Włodowa by the AJDC, Paris, 1.1.23.1/1205106–1205109/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives. See further individuals' entries at Joods Monument website. Available at: <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/>. Last accessed: 01.12.2021. The AJDC lists are early postwar documents and cannot be verified as completely accurate. Some ITS index cards refer to them as "Doc[uments] of doubtful value" (e.g., 0.1/48464342 and 97962884/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives). Still, these documents are among the few sources that include names of Dutch Jews selected in Sobibor for slave labor. Names that appear on the lists and referred to in this article have been cross-checked with survivor testimonies, the 10 March 1943 transport list, the Amsterdam Jewish Council index cards, and individuals' entries at the Joods Monument.

SS also selected some 40 men: doctors and nurses. The entire selection process took a few hours and then the group of men and women was sent to camp Lublin-Majdanek on the same train with which they had come. Anxious about what lay ahead, the deportees hardly spoke with one another.¹⁵

In Lublin, the women were quartered in a barrack, and these strangers had a moment together for the first time. Blits recalled that she spoke to the group:

The SS disappeared and finally we were alone. I felt called to address the girls and I asked for a moment of silence. I remember having said something along these lines: Girls, I am almost one of the oldest, 26 years old and married, and actually I am just a greenhorn like you all are, but perhaps, as I come from a working-class family and having been raised as a socialist, I know something about comradeship. I do not know you, I do not know anything about you or your social relationships, but let us learn to tolerate each other here, not to be angry or fight over nothing. Girls, we need each other badly, be strong and steadfast in your feelings towards each other. Help each other to endure this life, that is being made unbearable, bearable. Girls, give each other a hand, let good intentions inspire you, because where there is a will, there is a way.¹⁶

Blits reported that she received much support immediately. The other survivors did not mention this speech in their postwar witness statements. Perhaps Blits remembered her plea so vividly as she was the one who had spoken. Still, the group managed to stay together for a long time, and Blits's extensive testimony records countless examples of group solidarity such as food sharing and mutual protection in fights with other inmates.¹⁷

Jewish Slave Labor in the Midst of Genocide

The following day, March 14, 1943, the group of 30 women was brought by foot from Lublin-Majdanek to Lublin Alter Flughafen (Old Airfield), a sub-camp where goods from murdered Jews were collected, sorted, and shipped to Germa-

15 Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Sophia Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Judith Eliazar and Bertha Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Jetje Verman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segment 15; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 52693, segments 113–114; Blits, Auschwitz, 15–16.

16 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 3–4. Cf. Blits, Auschwitz, 20. Translation by the author.

17 For example Blits, Auschwitz, 25–27, 49, 66; Mirjam Mullaart-Blits, interview 21341, segments 27–28, VHA, 1996. Last accessed: 04.01.2021.

ny.¹⁸ Here the Dutch women learned about the mass killing of Jews in gas chambers. Until then they had been unaware of what was about to happen to the people who had remained in Sobibor. They also met female Polish Jewish prisoners for the first time. Cultural, religious, and linguistic barriers led to animosity between them. The Dutch Jews felt that the Polish Jews held them in contempt because they were not Orthodox and did not speak Yiddish. This spurred the March 10 group to bond with and support each other. Throughout their time in the camps, they fought physically with Polish Jewish women frequently.¹⁹ This was not their only problem. Much worse: The conditions in Lublin Alter Flughafen were harsh and at least four Dutch women died of disease, violence from the guards, or were sent to the gas chambers. Henderiene den Arend-van der Reis, Hilde Beate Blumendal, and Marga Cohen (born September 2, 1909) were selected by the SS and murdered in the gas chambers of Lublin-Majdanek. Sophia Cohen (born March 10, 1915) was raped by an SS man and subsequently gassed as well.²⁰

The group split up half a year later, when the Germans selected six seamstresses in Lublin Alter Flughafen, including survivors Celine Ensel (born April 9, 1926) and Sophie Verduin (born April 30, 1926), and forcibly transported them (in late September 1943) to the Lublin-Majdanek sub-camp of Bliżyn, with its armaments factory and stone quarry (see fig. 2). The victims were powerless with regard to the transfer; the SS forcibly relocated them to another site where their labor was needed. The Dutch women were assigned to a textile workshop. The camp population comprised 5,000 to 6,000 Polish Jews; the six women were the only Dutch people there. Grim conditions, poor hygiene, and SS terror led to hundreds of dead prisoners. Hester Fresco (born June 19, 1926) and Lotje Stad (born May 30, 1914) died from exhaustion, Lena Verduin (born Oc-

18 Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segments 16–18.

19 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 4–5; Blits, Auschwitz, 22–26; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segments 16–20.

20 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 6–7; Blits, Auschwitz, 30–31, 40–42; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Sophia Engelsman-Huisman, interview 11233, segments 32–34, VHA, 1996. Last accessed: 25.06.2021. Suze and Sury Polak also referred to Juurtje van Praag and “Miss Wurms” who had died in Lublin Alter Flughafen. I have been unable to identify them in the other testimonies, nor on the transport list or AJDC lists. Miss Wurms could have been Clara Wurms-Hamburg (b. 21.06.1880) or Hendrika Canes-Wurms (b. 08.04.1882), mentioned on the transport list, however, the Joods Monument website states that both women were murdered in Sobibor on 13 March 1943.

tober 6, 1927) of typhus, and Charlotte Zeehandelaar-Andriesse (born September 23, 1917) perished from tuberculosis.²¹

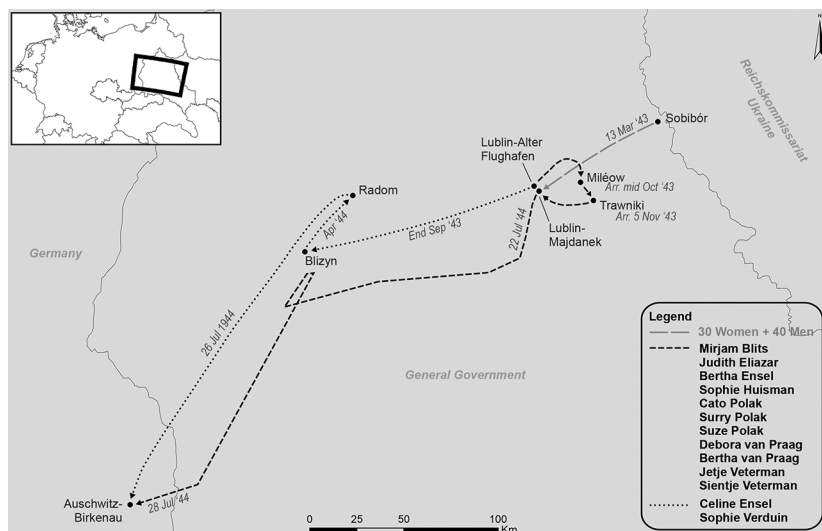


Fig. 2: This map illustrates how the group of Dutch women was transferred through the concentration camp system between March 1943 and July 1944. Note how a large section of the group stayed together until the summer of 1944. The indicated transfer from Lublin-Majdanek to Auschwitz-Birkenau follows the exact route of the death march (see also fig. 3 in this article). Borders as of December 31, 1943. Basemap: Michael De Groot: *Building the New Order: 1938–1945*, Stanford University: Spatial History Lab, 2010. Copyright Daan de Leeuw.

In mid-October, the women of the original group remaining in Lublin Alter Flughafen were given a chance to escape the horrible conditions of that site when the SS sought 40 to 50 volunteers to work in a jam factory at another camp.²² The women weighed their options. The sisters van Praag remembered the aides' counsel in Westerbork not to volunteer for jobs. Debora van Praag re-

²¹ Sophie Verduin, NIOD 250d, inventory 904; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510, 4; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Martin Dean: "Bliżyn", in Geoffrey P. Megargee (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, volume I, part B, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009, 880–882.

²² Correspondence file Judith Eliazar, 6.3.3.2/101230678–101230683/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592. Correspondence file Judith Eliazar states "mid-Oct" as arrival date in Milejów and 5 November as departure date. Huisman said the group was in Milejów for 18 days. Hence the date should have been on or around 18 October 1943.

called: “My sister said, ‘We are not going to volunteer, are we?’ And I said, ‘Well Bep [Bertha], we are dying here, we might as well volunteer. I am dying here, we are going to be dead in no time, I am going to volunteer.’ So, we volunteered”.²³ Thirteen Dutch women decided to sign up for the transfer. A few March 10 transport deportees preferred to stay in Lublin Alter Flughafen because they had access to food by working in the camp kitchen or through connections with Polish prisoners. None of them would survive.²⁴ This example demonstrates an instance of victims’ limited agency, framed by the options presented by the Germans, over their site of incarceration. And even though the thirteen detainees had volunteered, uncertainty about the new location still prompted fear as they were taken by truck to the jam factory in Milejów. Indeed, the Ukrainian guards who accompanied the transport made a throat-slitting gesture, implying that the women would be killed.²⁵

Perhaps contrary to the Dutch Jews’ expectations, the Wehrmacht officials who ran the jam factory welcomed the prisoners and treated them well. The hygienic conditions were terrible but violence was rare and the daily food rations generous. The camp’s male and female detainees had to clean fruits and vegetables for jam production, which gave them the opportunity to eat the peels secretly. Blits felt she had made the right decision. The Dutch group stayed for almost three weeks in Milejów. It was just during this time that Heinrich Himmler, spooked by the Jewish uprisings in Warsaw, Białystok, Vilna, Treblinka, and Sobibor, decided upon the so-called Operation Harvest Festival in the Lublin district. Some 42,000 Jews remaining in the region, most of them camp slave laborers, were murdered on November 3 and 4, 1943. The prisoners in Milejów were spared. The Germans kept these inmates alive as their labor was considered

23 Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segment 27. Sophia Huisman said in her postwar testimony that her friend Cato Polak was also reluctant to volunteer as Polak was afraid what awaited her in the new camp. In the end, both women decided to volunteer too. See Engelsman-Huisman, VHA 11233, segments 40–41.

24 Flora Blok (b. 07.08.1913) and Fanny Landsman (b. 01.11.1924) decided to remain in Lublin Alter Flughafen. See Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 9–10; Blits, Auschwitz, 46. Auguste Berliner, Naatje Roodveldt-Moffie (b. 07.01.1916), and Judith Swaab (b. 28.12.1924) must have stayed there too. They most likely died in Lublin Alter Flughafen before or during Operation Harvest Festival (3–4 November 1943). See AJDC, Paris, List Camp Majdanek-Lublin, Arolsen Archives; AJDC, Paris List 138 Lublin Włodowa, Arolsen Archives; Transport List 10 March 1943, NIOD 804, 55; Individuals’ Entries on Joods Monument.

25 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 9–10; Blits, Auschwitz, 46; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segments 27–30; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 52693, segments 140–146.

indispensable to finish the gruesome action, and they were sent to Trawniki to do so the day after the massacre.²⁶

Thousands of Jews had been killed in Trawniki during Operation Harvest Festival. Jewish men brought in from Milejów were forced to burn bodies for two weeks after which they themselves were executed. The Jewish women had to extract gold teeth and sort the plundered goods and possessions, and sometimes assist with burning bodies. After the men were murdered, around 40 women prisoners remained in the camp for six months to sort the looted goods of the Jews killed in Trawniki and the Lublin district. Despite their predecessors' gruesome fate, incarceration in the camp allowed the Dutch women to recuperate, as they could acquire better clothes and food and the guards were relatively nonviolent. Still, Troostwijk contracted tuberculosis and died during this time. By mid-May 1944, with the advance of the Red Army, the Germans forcibly relocated the prisoners to Lublin-Majdanek. The Dutch Jews were afraid they would be killed there.²⁷

The women were not gassed. They were put to work in the camp laundry, sewing shop, and farmland. As the Red Army was advancing toward Lublin, the SS evacuated the site on July 22, 1944, and the victims were involuntarily uprooted once more. Before the 1,000 to 1,200 inmates marched westward in the direction of Auschwitz (see fig. 3), escorted by SS men and Wehrmacht soldiers, they saw the gas chambers and crematoria blown up. Soviet airplanes flew over the marching column and fired at it. The Germans fell on the ground and the prisoners had to protect their guards with their own bodies by laying over them. According to Blits, the Red Army pilots flew off when they were close enough to identify the striped prisoner uniforms. In the confusion of the attack, many lost their blankets, shoes, and food. The prisoners had to walk for days with hardly any rest. Klaartje Gompertz (born April 14, 1905) was shot by the guards because she was no longer able to move. Debora van Praag was exhausted too but her sister Bertha pushed her to continue. One day in the town Kraśnik,

26 Correspondence file Judith Eliazar, Arolsen Archives; Blits, Auschwitz, 46–47; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761.

27 Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segments 28–32; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 10–34; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Vetterman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906; Blits, Auschwitz, 50–152; Peter Black: “Trawniki”, in Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, volume I, part B, 893–897. The transfer date is based on Blits and Black. The other sources referenced – as well as the correspondence file on Judith Eliazar in the Arolsen Archives – claim dates in June and July 1944, but this is impossible as Trawniki was closed in May 1944.

the Germans chose the attic of a brick factory as a shelter for the night, right above the ovens below, so the prisoners could dry up after marching in the rain. The space became unbearably hot and those without shoes burned their feet. The Germans allowed the German inmates, Christian Poles, and Soviet POWs to leave the attic. The SS men wanted to set the building afire with the Jewish prisoners inside, but (allegedly) the Wehrmacht soldiers and privileged evacuees managed to change their minds. For some reason, the temperature in the attic dropped again, and the following day the death march continued. On the morning of the fifth day, the prisoners crossed the Vistula and shortly thereafter were loaded onto open train wagons in Ćmielów. The transport reached Auschwitz-Birkenau the following day, July 28. Only 452 men and 156 women had survived the march, including 11 Dutch women of the March 10 transport.²⁸

It remains unclear whether the Germans intended to kill the Majdanek prisoners in Auschwitz. Three survivors asserted that an Oberfeldwebel had given the order not to murder them, apparently because they had protected the German soldiers and SS men when the Soviet fighter jets had attacked. In the event, the entire Majdanek group was detailed to slave labor in Birkenau.²⁹ The newly arrived prisoners were quarantined for three weeks, and then the 11 Dutch women were assigned to the ‘*Scheissekommando*’. They and 20 female Polish Jews had to pull a horse cart with an excrements tank on top to a site beyond the camp enclosure and emptied the container there.³⁰

28 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 35–46; Blits, Auschwitz, 153–201; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Veterman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segments 36–38; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 52693, segments 193–205; “Map Death March Lublin”, in *Death Marches: Routes and Distances*, volume II, UNRRA Central Tracing Bureau, 28.05.1946, 5.3.3/84619474/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Schelvis, Sobibor, 130; Daniel Blatman: *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, 58; Elissa Mailänder: *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015, 35. According to Blits, Eliazar and Ensel, Huisman, and Cato Polak, and correspondence file Judith Eliazar (Arolsen Archives), the death march took place in August, but this is impossible because Lublin-Majdanek was evacuated on 22 July 1944.

29 Blits, Auschwitz, 205–206; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761. See also Sessler-van Praag, VHA 52693, segments 230–231. According to Cato Polak (NIOD 250d, inventory 759) and the sisters Surry and Suze Polak, camp commandant SS-Hauptsturmführer Josef Kramer was present at the evacuees’ acceptance into the camp. This implies that he must have approved the decision not to murder the Lublin-Majdanek evacuees.

30 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 49–52; Blits, Auschwitz, 214, 220–227; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761. Cato Polak and the sisters Surry and Suze

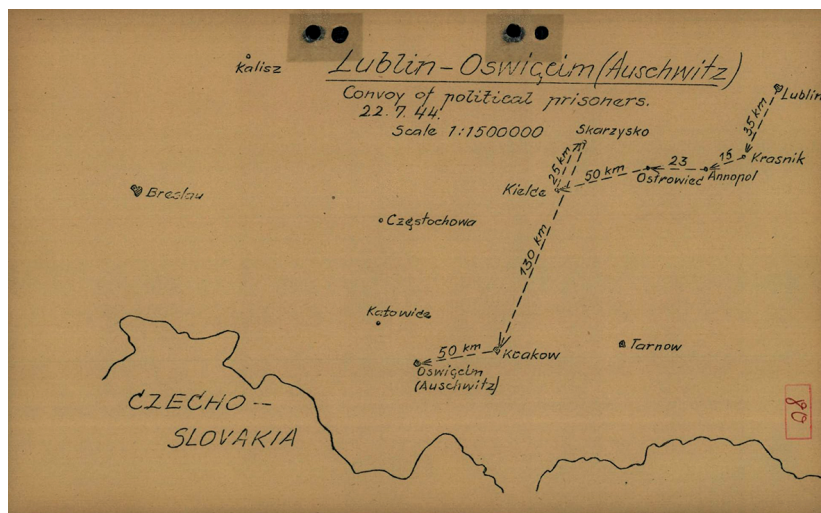


Fig. 3: UNRRA map of the death march from Lublin to Auschwitz July 22, 1944. This early postwar map held by the Arolsen Archives has been made by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration's (UNRRA) Central Tracing Bureau (CTB) and was published in *Death Marches: Routes and Distances* in May 1946. In addition to providing relief and support to World War Two refugees and Displaced Persons, UNRRA also investigated the fate of the deceased victims and the location of mass graves. Establishing the exact routes of death marches supported this action. UNRRA map, 5.3.3/84619474/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

The group met other Dutch prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau, including Celine Ensel and Sophie Verduin, whom they had last seen in Lublin Alter Flughafen a year earlier.³¹ From the six Dutch women sent to Bliżyn only Ensel and Verduin had survived. The Germans had brought them by lorry to Radom in April 1944, where they worked in agriculture until that incarceration site was evacuated on July 26. The prisoners were relocated to Auschwitz-Birkenau by trucks and train (see fig. 2). Verduin's postwar testimony does not indicate who decided on these transfers, but it is almost certain the Germans initiated them in re-

Polak mentioned that they worked in the grass sods commando before being assigned to the 'shit commando'. The other testimonies do not mention this.

31 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 49–56; Blits, Auschwitz, 204–224; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Vetterman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906.

sponse to the Soviet military advances.³² One day Verduin and Ensel saw the other women in another section of Auschwitz-Birkenau. They were not allowed to meet each other, but sisters Bertha (born May 23, 1924) and Celine Ensel managed to speak to each other from afar. They would be reunited later.³³

The Final Months: Dispersal, Ongoing Suffering, and Survival

Continuous selections and relocation transports fractured the group in Auschwitz-Birkenau into smaller segments. And as the German military situation worsened in fall 1944, the SS began to evacuate Auschwitz. The gassings in Birkenau stopped, the gas chambers were dismantled, and tens of thousands of prisoners were transported to concentration camps in central Germany to work in the armaments industry.³⁴ During a selection in early November, SS doctor Josef Mengele found most March 10 deportees sufficiently fit to be relocated to the West. Some were ordered to stay in Auschwitz: Sientje Verman (born April 17, 1922) and Debora van Praag had scabies, and Bertha van Praag pleurisy and typhus. Bertha and Celine Ensel remained there too. The forced separation caused much despair. The women bound for Germany thought their friends would be gassed.³⁵ However, they were not: the Ensel sisters and Verman were transported to Lippstadt later that month,³⁶ Bertha van Praag was brought to the *Revier* (the camp hospital), and her sister Debora continued working as a slave laborer, no longer in the ‘*Scheissekommando*’ but in a textile workshop. Four months later she fell ill and was taken to the *Revier*, too. Debora happened to be placed

³² Verduin, NIOD 250d, inventory 904; Evelyn Zegenhagen: “Radom [aka Radom (Szkolna Street)]”, in Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, volume I, part B, 892–893. Verduin stated in her testimony that she stayed “until the spring” in Bliżyn and remained in Radom for three months. Radom was evacuated on 26 July 1944, so Verduin and Ensel must have been transferred to Radom in April 1944.

³³ Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592.

³⁴ Nikolaus Wachsmann: *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, 553.

³⁵ Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 55–56; Blits, *Auschwitz*, 236–240; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Verman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906. Verman referred to Josef Mengele as the one who conducted the selection. Mengele is often adduced by survivors, as he became such an infamous figure in later postwar decades. Still, Verman’s reference can be regarded as trustworthy because at the time of her witness statement in August 1947 Mengele was still an (almost) unknown figure in the public discourse about Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Holocaust.

³⁶ See footnote 47.

in the bed right next to Bertha. The van Praag sisters were thus reunited and liberated in the hospital shortly thereafter, on January 27, 1945.³⁷

The prisoners deemed fit in the early November selection were loaded onto a train. The guards gave them an exceptionally large food ration consisting of a loaf of bread, a big chunk of butter, and a thick slice of sausage. This prompted the Jewish slave laborers to believe they would not be killed because they were needed for the war effort: a correct assessment. The train left Auschwitz-Birkenau in the evening and took three nights and three days to reach North Germany (see fig. 4).³⁸

Arriving in Celle, the prisoners were forced to walk for a few hours through the forest and moorland to Bergen-Belsen. The women were disillusioned when they saw the dreadful conditions of the camp. Bergen-Belsen had been set up as a detention site to hold privileged Jews to exchange with the Allies for German captives or to initiate peace negotiations. Its function changed in spring 1944 when the SS began to dump inmates from other camps no longer able to work into Bergen-Belsen, officially to recuperate. Without medical care, the debilitated laborers died soon after arrival. In addition, a tent camp was built to function as a transit camp for evacuated female Jews from Auschwitz-Birkenau in fall 1944. These prisoners were assigned to work in the German armaments industry. Overpopulated and in a deplorable state, Bergen-Belsen became a “de facto death camp”.³⁹

The Dutch women were assigned to a tent, which was destroyed by a storm on the third day. The detainees slept in the open air for two cold November nights until they were quartered in a barrack. The survivors recalled the lack

37 Sessler-van Praag, VHA 25384, segments 39–40; Sessler-van Praag, VHA 52693, segment 217; List of Dutch Liberated at Auschwitz, 3.1.1.3/78786333–78786334/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

38 Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 55–56; Blits, Auschwitz, 241–243; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; correspondence file Mirjam Blits, 6.3.3.2/104382807–104382818/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; correspondence file Judith Eliazar, Arolsen Archives. The transfer most likely took place on 4–7 November 1944. Correspondence file Mirjam Blits states that she was brought to Bergen-Belsen “Anfang November 1944” (at the beginning of November). Blits’s and Eliazar’s correspondence files note that they were relocated to Fallersleben on 17 November 1944. In her testimony, Eliazar recalled she was in Bergen-Belsen for ten days. As the transport lasted three days and nights, it is most likely that they arrived in Bergen-Belsen on 7 November, and departed from Auschwitz-Birkenau on 4 November.

39 Thomas Rahe: “Bergen-Belsen Main Camp”, in Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, volume I, part A, 278–281.

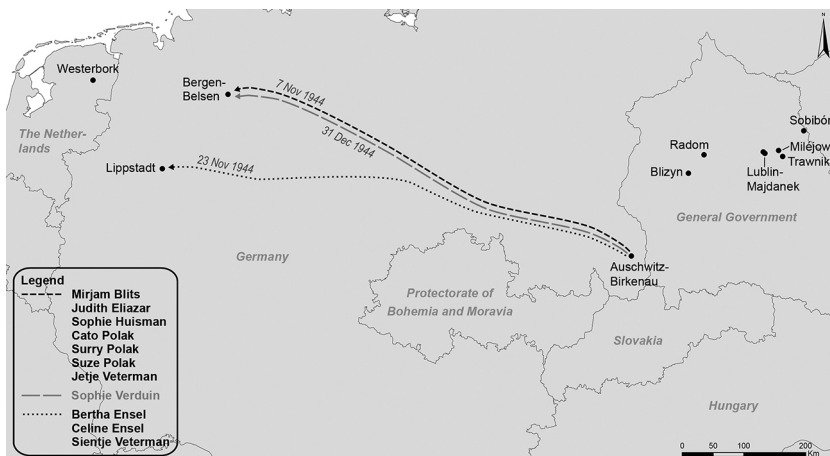


Fig. 4: In the fall of 1944, the March 10 group dispersed due to selections and relocation transports. This map tracks the deportees' movements from August 1944 until the end of that year. Borders as of October 31, 1944. Basemap: Michael De Groot: *Building the New Order: 1938–1945*, Stanford University: Spatial History Lab, 2010. Copyright Daan de Leeuw.

of food, abominable hygienic conditions, and insufficient medical care in the camp which resulted in rampant disease and a staggering number of deaths.⁴⁰

The women met other Dutch Jewish slave laborers in Bergen-Belsen, including one referred to as Julia Wijnrothe.⁴¹ The guards sent her to another incarceration site as a punishment for talking across the barbed fence to her boyfriend who was held in another section of the camp. Although they disciplined her, the guards allowed Wijnrothe to bring three women with her; she asked Blits whom she deemed very brave. Blits agreed and voluntarily chose to join her, as did Judith Eliazar (born December 3, 1914). Blits recalled that she had already decided to get out of Bergen-Belsen when the opportunity would present itself. She felt that the harsh conditions of the camp drained her of all her strength and her wish to survive. Her desperation stripped her of her solidarity with the other

⁴⁰ Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 56–60; Blits, Auschwitz, 244–252; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761.

⁴¹ Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 60; Blits, Auschwitz, 256–263; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510. The name Julia Wijnrothe does not appear on the Westerbork transport lists, the Jewish Council index card system, and the Vught prisoner registration forms. I have been unable to determine her identity. See 1.1.46.1 List Material Westerbork, 1.2.4.2 Index Cards from the 'Judenrat' ('Jewish Council') File in Amsterdam, 1.1.12.1 List Material Herzogenbusch/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

Dutch Sobibor women; they were no longer on her mind when she chose to accompany Wijnrothe, Blits admitted. The others wanted to come too but they were not allowed to do so. As this instance demonstrates, prisoner agency and powerlessness could sometimes exist in the same moment.⁴²

After ten days in Bergen-Belsen, the remainder of the March 10 transport group was thus fragmented once more (see fig. 5). Blits and Eliazar were taken by cattle car to Fallersleben (*Volkswagenwerke*) on November 17, 1944, together with Wijnrothe, another Dutch woman, Jeanette de Vries-Blitz (born March 20, 1910), whom Blits had met in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and 46 Hungarian Jewish women. In this Neuengamme sub-camp, the inmates worked in an armaments factory.⁴³ The conditions were relatively good, although the food portions grew smaller as the Allies approached. The camp was evacuated on April 8, 1945, and 1,600 women were shipped by train to Salzwedel. Even though the two camps were rather close to each other, the journey in cattle cars took over a day. The locked wagons without windows blocked all light and air; conditions inside Blits's and Eliazar's car were so horrible that five women were asphyxiated from the heat and lack of oxygen. In Salzwedel, another Neuengamme sub-camp, the prisoners were not forced to work. The Americans liberated Blits and Eliazar there on April 14, 1945.⁴⁴

Sophia Huisman (born January 22, 1926), Cato Polak (born December 4, 1920), Surry Polak (born September 18, 1912), and Suze Polak (born February 7, 1926) were relocated from Bergen-Belsen to Raguhn on February 7, 1945. Their testimonies do not provide any information as to whether choice was involved. Together with another 496 female Bergen-Belsen inmates they were

⁴² Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 60; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759.

⁴³ Penha-Blits, NIOD 250d, inventory 750, 60; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; correspondence file Judith Eliazar, Arolsen Archives; correspondence file Mirjam Blits, Arolsen Archives; Therkel Straede: "Fallersleben (Volkswagenwerke)", in Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, volume I, part B, 2009, 1107–1108. Blits's and Eliazar's correspondence files state that they were transferred to Fallersleben on 17 November 1944; Straede's encyclopedia entry mentions 18 November 1944. The difference can be explained by the possibility that the women were perhaps registered as inmates the day after their arrival.

⁴⁴ Blits, *Auschwitz*, 264–300; Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; correspondence file Mirjam Blits, Arolsen Archives; correspondence file Judith Eliazar, Arolsen Archives; Straede, *Fallersleben*; Dietrich Banse: "Salzwedel", in Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, volume I, part B, 1170–1172; Marc Buggeln: *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 292, 297. According to Blits's and Eliazar's correspondence files and Buggeln, the evacuation of Fallersleben to Salzwedel took place on 8 April 1945. Straede mentioned 7 April.

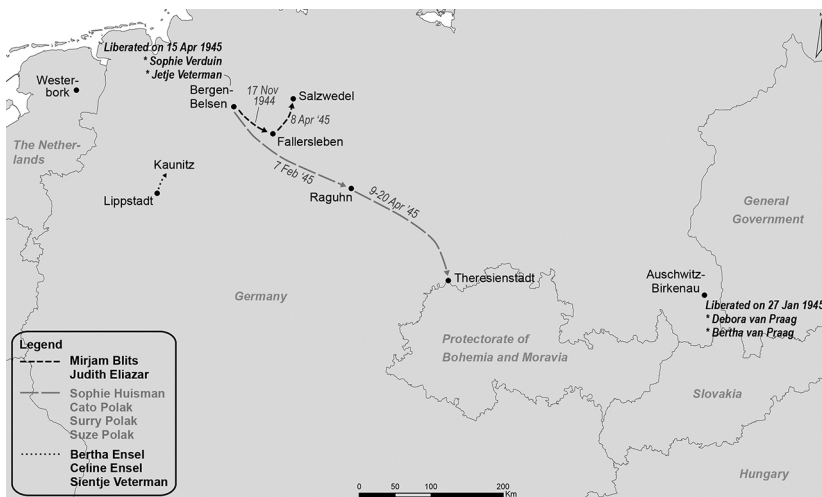


Fig. 5: Prisoner transfers continued during the final months of World War Two. The group of Dutch Jewish slave laborers fell into smaller segments. The women mentioned in the legend were liberated in the final site of their trajectory. Borders as of January 31, 1945. Basemap: Michael De Groot: *Building the New Order: 1938–1945*, Stanford University: Spatial History Lab, 2010. Copyright Daan de Leeuw.

the camp's first prisoners; all Jews except for two. Raguhrn, one of the last Buchenwald sub-camps for women to be established, was located close to a factory where the slave laborers produced Junker airplane parts. The plant made use of forced civilian laborers as well, including some Dutch men with whom the four women connected secretly. The conditions in the camp and on the worksite were abhorrent: tiny food rations and hygienic circumstances so bad that many inmates contracted typhus. Civilian laborers fled the site, something the Dutch women considered too, yet before they could prepare sufficiently the SS evacuated the camp. The approximately 500 prisoners were pushed onto a train on April 9. The journey through Germany lasted 12 days and at least 60 women died from typhus, hunger, and cold. The survivors shared the wagon with the dead until the transport reached Theresienstadt on April 20. Perhaps the transfer took so long because the destination had not been determined upon departure or the train had difficulty crossing the country in the midst of chaos and breakdown. The four Dutch Jewish slave laborers were liberated in Theresienstadt on May 8, 1945.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Huisman, NIOD 250d, inventory 592; Engelsman-Huisman, VHA 11233, segments 79–85;

Jetje Veterman (born June 3, 1923) and Sophie Verduin ended up in Bergen-Belsen. Veterman had been transferred there with the other women in early November 1944, and while the rest of the group was relocated to various camps, she remained in Bergen-Belsen. Veterman contracted typhus for a second time while incarcerated in the camp system. Perhaps her illness was the reason she stayed behind; her postwar testimony is silent on this question. Yet the witness statement does report a remarkable turn of events: she received a note from her sister Sientje Veterman (born April 17, 1922) through a woman prisoner who had been brought to Bergen-Belsen. Sientje wrote that she was in Lippstadt and that she had to work very hard. This short letter was the only news Jetje received from her sister.⁴⁶ Verduin stayed in Auschwitz-Birkenau until New Year's Eve 1944/1945 when she was transported to Bergen-Belsen. The archival documents do not provide any insight as to whether she volunteered. It seems Verduin and Veterman did not see each other in that camp, at least their testimonies do not indicate that they did. The British army liberated both women in Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945.⁴⁷

The sisters Bertha and Celine Ensel and Sientje Veterman had remained in Auschwitz-Birkenau until the Germans brought them with 300 other female prisoners to the Buchenwald sub-camp Lippstadt on November 23, 1944. The survivors' testimonies do not say whether these Dutch Jewish slave laborers had any agency over their relocation. The SS had established the site as a women's camp for the Lippstadt Eisen- und Metallwerke (LEM) in summer 1944. The barracks stood on the factory premises, guarded by a small contingent of SS men and women overseers. LEM produced armaments such as ammunition and airplane parts. The inmates worked long hours, received little food, and were subjected to beatings and humiliations by the guards. The living and medical conditions in the camp were grim. The SS evacuated the camp at the end of March and

Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 759; Polak and Polak, NIOD 250d, inventory 761; Transport list Bergen-Belsen–Raguhn, 07.02.1945, 1.1.3.1/3393363–3393409 and 1.1.5.1/5289324–5289346/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Evelyn Zegenhagen: “Raguhn”, in Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, volume I, part A, 409–410. The NIOD testimonies state that the women were liberated on May 9. The correct date is May 8. See Vojtěch Blodig and Joseph Robert White: “Terezín”, in Martin Dean and Mel Hecker (eds.): *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, volume II, part A, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012, 180–184.

⁴⁶ Veterman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906.

⁴⁷ Verduin, NIOD 250d, inventory 904; Veterman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906; correspondence file Jetje Veterman, 6.3.3.2/100387401–100387407/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; List of Dutch Jews Released from Various Camps, 1.1.47.1/5157920–5157922/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Dutch Released from Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald now in Eindhoven, 1.1.47.1/5157923–5157927/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

marched the prisoners by foot in the direction of Bergen-Belsen. When the evacuees reached the village of Kaunitz on Sunday April 1, 30 kilometers northeast of Lippstadt, the guards fled. American soldiers liberated the women a few hours later.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The 13 surviving Dutch women endured over two years in the Nazi concentration camp system. They lost family and friends and, as we have seen, were relocated continuously. With each transfer, the deportees faced entry in a new camp with its own unique geography, terror regime, slave labor circumstances, hygienic conditions, and prisoner hierarchy. At least 15 deportees of the March 10 transport selected in Sobibor did not survive the camps to which they were sent. Nine died in the Lublin-Majdanek camp system: the Germans sent four women to the gas chambers, as witnessed by the survivors; the others must have died before or in Operation Harvest Festival. The women who had been transferred to Bliżyn and Milejów were not killed in this murderous action. Bliżyn was not affected by Operation Harvest Festival as it was located in Radom district and not in Lublin district, where Himmler had ordered all Jews to be murdered. Prisoners in Milejów were spared to burn the dead Jews' bodies in Trawniki; after their task had been completed the Germans murdered the male prisoners but let the female prisoners live to work in the camp. Still, one of the March 10 women in Trawniki fell ill and died there. Four Dutch inmates in Bliżyn perished

48 Eliazar and Ensel, NIOD 250d, inventory 510; Veterman, NIOD 250d, inventory 906; Transport List Auschwitz-Birkenau to Lippstadt, 23.11.1944, 1.1.2.1/129637261–129637266 and 1.1.5.1/5289152–5289158/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Individual Documents Bertha Ensel, Buchenwald, 1.1.5.4/7553458–7553462/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Individual Documents Sertina (Celine) Ensel, Buchenwald, 1.1.5.4/7553466–7553472/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Individual Documents Sientje Veterman, Buchenwald, 1.1.5.4/7748244–7748251/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives; Evelyn Zegenhagen: “Lippstadt (Lippstädter Eisen- und Metalwerke) [aka LEM, SS-Kommando Lippstadt I]”, in Megargee, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, volume I, part A, 384–386. In her NIOD testimony, Bertha Ensel recalled that she was transported via Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald to Lippstadt. Extensive research in the Arolsen Archives, the Dutch Red Cross Archive, and Memorial Center Camp Westerbork has proven that this was not the case, and that she was transferred directly from Auschwitz-Birkenau to Lippstadt on 23 November 1944, together with her sister Celine Ensel and Sientje Veterman. See Email to author, Arolsen Archives, date 22.03.2021; Email to author, Memorial Center Camp Westerbork, date 30.03.2021.

from exhaustion and sickness. The last to die of the group of 30 deportees succumbed during the death march from Lublin-Majdanek to Auschwitz.

For the survivors, liberation put an end to their incarceration and the constant relocations. Blits expressed how she felt when the US Army liberated Salzwedel:

Everybody went crazy, completely wild. When we calmed down for a brief moment I suggested we leave the camp, to get out of that mess and lice plague and [return] to Holland. It sounded like music, Holland. I could return to my fatherland, there, where I belong. I was allowed to walk down the street freely once again, to board streetcars, and go to bars and cinemas. I was free again, free, free!⁴⁹

Transfer through the concentration camp system was common for most prisoners. Many deportees, who were not murdered on site, did not stay in the camp where they first arrived; sooner or later they found themselves on yet another transport to yet another unknown site. The longer the war lasted the more urgent the labor shortage became. Heinrich Himmler and Albert Speer tried to fill this void through the allocation of concentration camp inmates. Forced and slave laborers had to work for the German war effort in the armaments industry and in infrastructural projects. The main camps became the central points whence prisoners were shipped to sub-camps close to factories and work sites. The Germans sent the detainees where the war industry needed them.

Most of the time, the Nazis determined who was sent where. Very often the selections and transports were met with fear by the inmates as they did not know what awaited them. The possibility of being selected for the gas chambers was omnipresent for every Jewish slave laborer. Most of them were indeed murdered by the SS when their labor was no longer needed or when the terrible work and camp conditions had deprived them of all strength and energy. Each relocation could thus mean life or death.

The survivors' testimonies show that in some cases the inmates could exert some form of control over their site of incarceration. Sometimes the SS asked prisoners to volunteer for another camp; they left the decision to stay in or leave a certain site with the detainees. And on rare occasions, Jews affected the selection process by direct interaction with German guards, and thus managed to keep their relatives and friends close and to remain together. In these instances, the victims exerted some agency in a system of oppression and terror. The space that was occasionally given to prisoners problematizes the typical perspective of the SS concentration camps as a system in which the inmates were

⁴⁹ Blits, Auschwitz, 301. Translation by the author.

helpless and without any agency. By scrutinizing the Jewish slave laborers' trajectories on a microlevel, my study has unearthed instances of both power and powerlessness that shaped their experiences in the concentration camps.

The maps help us understand those experiences. On a macro level, GIS can be used as an analytical tool to plot the trajectories of hundreds of deportees, as Borggräfe's article has shown.⁵⁰ Visualizing prisoner transfers with GIS can reveal unknown patterns in their pathways through the camp system. Yet GIS alone cannot explain why inmates followed certain routes; we turn to survivor testimonies and German bureaucratic documents to fully understand this history. Combining both approaches and considering geovisualizations as part of the research process allow for a more fine-grained analysis of Jewish slave labor during the Holocaust, as my contribution has sought to do.

50 Borggräfe, *Rekonstruktion von Verfolgungswegen*.