Alexandra Patrikiou

Escaping the Death Train

The Survival Strategies of Errikos Botton[1]

Abstract: This contribution deals with the escape of Errikos Botton from a death train on the way from Greece to Auschwitz. Errikos Botton was born in 1919 in Salonika, he started his studies in chemistry in Athens before the war and thus managed to avoid deportation in the first wave in 1943. However, in early June 1944 the German occupiers arrested him in Athens and sent him to Chaidari concentration camp. He was stacked in a train along with other Jews arrested from Dodecanese Islands of Rhodes and Kos. In the border region of Slovakia and German-occupied Poland he managed to escape along with three other young men, and to return safely to Salonika in July 1945.

Using Botton's typescript memoir and two Oral History interviews, this article narrates his story, which reveals a series of conscious choices and decisions, i.e., his wider survival strategies to confront racial persecutions during World War II. In addition, a closer look at his experience of the train journey in correlation to Errikos' sociocultural background leads to a better understanding of his conscious choice to escape from the death train. Finally, the aim of this article is to look at the deportations from the perspective of the victims; in other words, not as a horrible means of mass transport of anonymous and submissive individuals to almost certain death, but as one episode in the life of an individual as a historical subject.

Introduction

On February 12, 1946, Errikos Isaac Botton asked the Jewish Community of Athens (JCA) to verify his deportation by the German occupiers a year and a half earlier in order that his cancelled food stamps could be reissued:

> On August 2, 1944 after spending fifty days in Chaidari camp I was deported along with the Jews of Rhodes to Poland. During the journey near the Slovak-Polish borders, I escaped along with three other men, who have already returned to Athens. After a lot of suffering on the mountains of Slovakia, I managed to survive and return to Salonika on July 27,

1 An earlier version of this article was written in collaboration with Dr Maria Vassilikou, whom I would like to thank for her insightful comments in all versions of the text.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110746464-021

> 1945 (approximately). Ten days ago, I came back to Athens, where I live permanently [...]. Two witnesses that escaped with me confirm my testimony.[2]

Botton's request was quite common for all survivors who were trying to begin their lives from scratch.[3] To start anew and to get some kind of aid survivors had to briefly describe their experiences of the Shoah and, indeed, to have them verified. However, Botton's rather extraordinary case falls into the numerically small category of those Jews who were arrested and deported but successfully escaped from the trains heading to the extermination camps.

By presenting and analyzing Botton's story this contribution aims to look at the deportations from the perspective of the victims; in other words, not as a horrible means of mass transport of anonymous and submissive individuals to almost certain death, but as one episode in the life of an individual as a historical subject. A closer look at his experience of the train journey in correlation to his sociocultural background also leads to a better understanding of his conscious choice to escape from the death train. Furthermore, Botton's case will be put into broader context of flight and escape during the Shoah in Europe in order to see whether it confirms the typology proposed in other countries.[4] Finally, examining this one case will allow a thorough analysis of the factors, which might have increased or decreased the chances of escaping from the deportation transports.

The primary sources used for this article include a 62-page unpublished typescript in Greek, which Botton wrote in 1991 with the benefit of hindsight, as well as his two audiovisual interviews deposited at the Visual History Archive of the Shoah Foundation[5] and the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University.[6] A photocopy of the typescript was donated to the Jewish Museum of Greece (JMG) in

2 Non-catalogued Archive of the Jewish Community of Athens (JCA). I would like to thank Philip Carabott for providing me with a copy of this document and critically reading and discussing this article. Translation by the author.

3 Indicatively, see numerous such examples in Leon Nar: *Ξανά στη Σαλονίκη*, Athens: Polis, 2018, and Rika Benveniste: *Αυτοί που επέζησαν. Αντίσταση, Εκτόπιση, Επιστροφή. Θεσσαλονικείς Εβραίοι στη δεκαετία του 1940*, Athens: Polis, 2014.

4 Tanja von Fransecky: *Escapees: The History of Jews Who Fled Nazi Deportation Trains in France*, trnsl. Benjamin Liebelt, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019.

5 Anry Mpotton, Interview 42858 in Greek by Pauline Matathias, Visual History Archive (VHA), USC Shoah Foundation, 01.04.1998.

6 Henry B., Interview 3017 in French by Jaša Almuli, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (Fortunoff Archive), 12.12.1999.

1991.[7] The typescript constitutes a type of memoir, a 'life narrative' as he calls it, even though he focuses mostly on the period 1940 to 1945 and offers little information on his prewar or postwar life. His aim is to describe the extent of the brutality during the Shoah; an impossible and frightful task.[8] It should not go amiss that these are narratives, both the typescript and the interviews, shaped by the cultural, social and political framework of Shoah commemoration, and thus limit our perspective on Botton's contemporaneous views. The story is contextualized by an interview of his brother Markos to the Visual History Archive,[9] as well as Sam David Nehama's interviews in the Oral History Archive of the JMG[10] and the Visual History Archive.[11] Sam, a 13-year-old boy at the time, was deported along with members of his family (originally from Bitola) in the same cattle wagon, as Botton was. Therefore, we have the unimaginable fortune of being able to better contextualize Botton's story as well as to hear of what happened after the escape.

A Jew from Salonika in German-Occupied Athens

Botton's decision to escape the death train to Auschwitz was not out of the blue. It was one decision in a series of decisions during the Shoah. This one decision was part of a wider survival strategy to confront the racial persecution. What was his life up to his arrest and deportation like? How does this particular decision fit in with the rest of his Shoah experiences? These questions help us frame and comprehend his story. Errikos Bottton was born on August 10, 1919, in Salonika.[12] Salonika had rather recently been incorporated into the Greek state in 1912 after the successful outcome of the First Balkan War. The multicultural city was home to the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the Balkans. Its incorporation into the Greek state signified the increase of the country's Jewish population from

7 Errikos Botton's Typescript, JMG Archival Collection (from now on Typescript). The typescript was donated to the Museum by Errikos Sasson in the memory of his parents Laura Nachmia and Solomon Sasson. JMG 2015.039, JMG Archival Collection, Jewish Museum of Greece, Athens.
8 Typescript, 1.
9 Markos Mpotton, Interview 43906 in Greek by Pauline Matathias, VHA, 05.05.1998.
10 Oral History Archive of the Jewish Museum of Greece (JMG/OHA/070). Special thanks to the JMG for letting me use its archival collection and its Oral History Archive.
11 Samuel Nehama, Interview 687 in English by Bonnie Gurewitsch, VHA, 25.01.1995.
12 Details on his family were found in both his interviews, while the typescript mentions only a few things.

less than 10,000 to circa 90,000 after 1912.[13] Salonikan Jewry, while diminishing in numbers during the interwar period due to immigration mostly to France and Palestine and rising antisemitism, constituted a vibrant, flourishing, and multifaceted community before World War Two. Nevertheless, due to a number of factors, such as the Great Fire of 1917 and the influx of refugees from Asia Minor after 1922, the city's Jewish character was progressively fading.

Errikos was born in a "petit-bourgeois"[14] family with four children – Marios, Sarah, himself and Markos. His father Isaac was a peddler, who went out of business during the financial crisis of 1929 to 1932 that led the family to extreme poverty. They lost their house and merchandise to debt. Isaac never managed to recover his business and the two older siblings, Marios and Sarah, supported the family financially. Marios was working at a bike store, while Sarah was tutoring young children in French. Before the financial destruction of the family, all the children were attending or had finished foreign language schools (the French Jean Baptist de la Salle and the Italian Uberto Primo). Learning foreign languages was a vital and inherent characteristic of the complex framework of Jewish education in Thessaloniki.[15] The Botton family was no exception.

Errikos attended the French primary school, graduated from a Greek public high school and went on to study chemistry at the University of Athens, as this was "the science of the future".[16] He arrived in Athens in 1938 during the Metaxas Dictatorship (1936 to 1941), which provided impoverished students with coupons for lunch and dinner. In order to pay his rent, he was tutoring young Jewish students in mathematics and sharing a room with two other Jewish friends: Marios Avraam Benaroyias (born Athens 1920) and David Avraam Allalouf (born Salonika 1922).

The Jewish presence in Athens was fairly new, especially compared with Salonika, with the first Ashkenazi Jews arriving with the Bavarian King Otto in the 1830s. Only in 1890 did the Jews of Athens formulate the first non-Christian brotherhood recognized by the Greek State.[17] By the 1930s, the Jewish Communi-

13 Devin E. Naar: *Jewish Salonica. Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016, 25.

14 VHA interview, 42858. Translation by the author.

15 For the importance of schools during and after the transition of the city to Modern Greece, cf. Naar, 166 – 167.

16 VHA interview, 42858. Translation by the author.

17 Philip Carabott: "Μικρές ιστορίες με άρωμα νεωτερικότητας (1890 – 93): Η Ισραηλιτική Αδελφότης Αθηνών και 'Η ανθρωποθυσία παρά τοις Ιουδαίοις'", in Kaiti Aroni-Tsichli, Stephanos Papageorgiou and Alexandra Patrikiou (eds.): *Η Ελλάδα της Νεωτερικότητας. Κοινωνικές κρίσεις και ιδεολογικά διλήμματα (19ος – 20ός αιώνας)*, Athens: Papazisis, 2014, 113 – 142.

ty of Athens was a flourishing community of approximately 3,000 people, the second largest in the country. During World War Two, approximately another 3,000 from the German and the Bulgarian zones of Occupation found temporary refuge in practically Italian-occupied Athens, as the Italians were unwilling to comply with the German intentions of persecuting the Jewish population.

In 1943, Botton had joined the youth organization United Panhellenic Organization of Youth (EPON) of the communist-led resistance organization (National Liberation Front, EAM) but did not manage to join its military wing, the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS), although he tried.[18] It is estimated that at least 650 Jewish men and women, from almost all the Jewish communities in the country, joined EAM, ELAS and/or EPON. When he attempted to find the necessary liaison to flee to the mountains and join ELAS, he was told that everyone was in danger, and he was no exception to that.[19] Not being able to join ELAS made him feel that he had not done enough: "This was my weakness. We weren't doing any high-quality resistance, i.e., armed".[20] In addition, he believed that the fact that he was not armed was partly to blame on his arrest in 1944. Despite that feeling of worthlessness regarding his participation in the youth resistance organization, that same participation is evidence of a broader active stance towards the German occupation and racial persecution. Joining EPON as a university student was not an isolated or exceptional event. During the Occupation, a massive youth movement was created with numerous organizations, the largest of which was EPON, which is said to have more than 500,000 members.[21] Jewish experiences in EPON were no different from everyone else's.[22] Botton says: "We were going out at night and we were writing [slogans] on the walls. [...] The entire university was in EPON".[23] Their participation constituted a moment of overcoming oneself, a turning point in their lifetime and a passport to adulthood.[24] Despite Botton's questioning the efficacy of his participation in EPON, it is certain that this experience further intensified his stance of taking matters into his own hands; i.e., not leaving everything to chance.

18 On Jewish participation in the communist-led resistance, see Iassonas Chandrinos, *Συναγωνιστές. Το ΕΑΜ και οι Εβραίοι της Ελλάδας*, Athens: Psifides, 2020. See also JMG digital exhibition in English "Synagonistis: Greek Jews in the National Resistance" https://www.jewishmuseum.gr/en/synagonistis-greek-jews-in-the-national-resistance-8/. Last accessed: 04.03.2022.

19 VHA interview, 42858.

20 Ibid. Translation by the author.

21 Odette Varon-Vassard: *Η ενηλικίωση μιας γενιάς. Νέοι και νέες στην Κατοχή και στην Αντίσταση*, Athens: Estia, 2009, 269 – 314.

22 Chandrinos, Συναγωνιστές, 57.

23 VHA interview, 42858. Translation by the author.

24 Varon-Vassard, Η ενηλικίωση μιας γενιάς, 520 – 521.

The deportations of the Jews from Greece essentially took place in two phases, one in 1943 and the second in 1944. This was largely due to the partition of the country into three different zones of occupation, German, Italian and Bulgarian, which demonstrated the secondary importance of Greece for the Third Reich and practically hindered the implementation of the Nuremberg laws, as the Germans had to convince their Italian partners.[25]

In early February 1943, Adolf Eichmann's agents, Alois Brunner and Dieter Wisliceny, arrived in Salonika in order to implement the 'Final Solution' on the 50,000 Jews who constituted 25 percent of the prewar city's population.[26] Preparations for the deportations began immediately.[27] From February 6, all Jews had to wear a yellow star and had to gather in the newly formed ghetto quarters. Within the next few days, Jews were forbidden to use the telephone, the tram or to own any professional or corporate organization. On March 1, they were ordered to register all of their belongings, and on March 15, 1943, the first cattle train with approximately 2,400 people from the Baron Hirsch ghetto-district began its gruesome journey to Auschwitz. Another eighteen transports would follow until August 1943, almost completely destroying the centuries-long Jewish presence of the city.[28]

Until the storm of anti-Jewish legislation in early 1943, Jews and Christians of Salonika largely shared the 'abnormal normality' of everyday life under German occupation: terror, fear, hunger, yearning for freedom.[29] Among the Salonikan deportees were Errikos' parents, his sister Sarah and his brother Marios. They were all murdered in Birkenau. Only his brother Markos managed to avoid deportation and joined EAM. Markos, who was a student of the Faculty of Agronomy, decided to disobey the first anti-Jewish mass action that took place in Salonika on Saturday, July 11, 1942, and did not present himself for registration. Instead, he was watching from afar the humiliation and violence his coreligionists were suffering.[30] Thanks to his contacts through the university, he succeeded in finding the necessary liaison to flee to the mountains along with few other young

25 Iason Chandrinos and Anna Maria Droumpouki: "The German Occupation and the Holocaust in Greece: A Survey", in Giorgos Antoniou and Dirk Moses (eds.): *The Holocaust in Greece*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 15 – 35, here 17.

26 Steven Bowman: *The Agony of Greek Jews 1940 – 1945*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 82.

27 Chandrinos-Droumpouki, German Occupation, 21.

28 For a chronicle of all the deportations from Greece, cf. Bowman, Agony, 80 – 93.

29 Benveniste, Αυτοί που επέζησαν, 61.

30 Ibid., 68; VHA interview, 43906.

male Jews from Salonika.[31] Since he was in Athens, Errikos managed to avoid the first wave of deportations in 1943.

In autumn 1943, the Italian capitulation meant the extension of the German authority on the rest of the country, including the Dodecanese Islands, which at the time were not part of the Greek state, and subsequently the beginning of the end for the Jews residing and/or hiding in these areas. Jürgen Stroop, an SS commander who had crushed the Warsaw ghetto uprising in spring 1943, was appointed Higher SS and Police Chief (*Höherer SS und Polizeiführer*) in Athens. Dieter Wisliceny, SS officer and deputy to Adolf Eichmann in the Jewish affairs department of the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), arrived in Athens after having completed his mission in Salonika and demanded from Rabbi Elias Barzilai lists of all Jews in Athens. Barzilai claimed that the lists were destroyed by the collaborationist pro-Nazi ESPO (Greek Socialist Patriotic Organization) and actually fled to the mountains with the assistance of EAM,[32] thereby giving a signal of non-compliance to his coreligionists. Faced with this predicament, Stroop issued a decree on October 4, 1943, according to which all Jews in Athens had to register immediately at the synagogue.[33] According to the decree, a Jewish Council ('*Judenrat*') was to be created, a strict curfew was imposed and anyone caught to assist in any way a Jew would be deported. Refusing to comply with the decree carried the penalty of death.

Naturally, Errikos Botton and his two roommates got worried. According to Errikos, they were worried not only because of the decree but also because rumors were starting to circulate from those Jews who had been sent from Salonika to forced labor camps in Central Greece (Karya, Lianokladi and Thebes) in March 1943 and had managed to escape. Indeed, there were quite a few men escaping from the forced labor camp in Thebes.[34] Botton actually commented on these escapees saying that there should have been more. He distinguished the two main factors that could lead to the decision to escape: one factor was willpower, i. e., determination, courage and strength to carry out a tough decision, and the se-

31 For several individual stories of how young male Jews from Thessaloniki joined ELAS, see. Benveniste, Αυτοί που επέζησαν, 47 – 81.

32 Bowman, Agony, 68.

33 Mark Mazower: *Inside Hitler's Greece. The Experience of Occupation*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, 250 – 251.

34 Leon Levy describes his own escape in Michael Matsas: *The Illusion of Safety. The Story of the Greek Jews During the Second World War*, New York: Pella Publishing, 1997, 134 – 137. Moshe Halegoua also mentioned people escaping the same hard labor camp. See Errika Kounio-Amarilio and Albert Nar: *Προφορικές Μαρτυρίες Εβραίων της Θεσσαλονίκης για το Ολοκαύτωμα*, Thessaloniki: Ets-Ahaim, Paratiritis, 1998, 411 – 413. Benveniste, Αυτοί που επέζησαν, 72, 76, 79.

cond one were familial concerns. Those sent to hard labor were 'comforted' by the Germans that their families back in Salonika will be safe (in the sense that they would not get deported) as long as they were still working in the hard labor camps.[35] Little did they know that the deportations had already begun. It was an obvious attempt by the Germans to create an atmosphere of security, to maintain compliance and hence to hinder any possible attempt of escape, while safeguarding their financial interests. Willpower, courage and strength, all possible signs of youth, and the lack of family ties, also a potential sign of youth, describe the circumstances under which one may reach the point of escaping incarceration, according to Errikos. Moshe Halegoua from Salonika agreed with Errikos. When Moshe, who knew that the deportations had already started, was sent to Thebes for forced labor and was asked why he did not try to escape, his answer was: "How? [...] I had my parents in Salonika".[36]

Expressions of regret about missed opportunities of escaping were not exclusive to Botton. Shlomo Venezia, a '*Sonderkommando*' survivor, was asked whether he thought it was actually possible to escape the ambush in the Athens Synagogue in March 1944. He answered:

> Yes, because I knew what had happened in Salonika. [...] We might have been able to force the doors and get out instead of waiting there until it was way too late. We could have, we should have, tried to escape. Some would have lost their lives but we were all walking towards death anyway. People thought that if they obeyed to what they were told, they would not be killed. Unfortunately, the opposite was true.[37]

At first not many Jews from Athens complied with Stroop's decree and as time went by and hardly any arrests were made a false sense of 'trust' was being established.[38] This statement might be somewhat exaggerated, in the sense that trust is too positive of a concept to encompass the range of different and conflicting emotions among Jews in hiding. It is certain that this attitude of inaction on behalf of the Germans gave a false sense of security. Furthermore, it certainly put a lot of strain on those Jews who could no longer afford to remain into hiding because they had run out of money and, as 'outlaws', could not use their food stamps. These conditions are briefly described by Botton himself:

---

35 Kounio/Nar, Προφορικές, 413.

36 Ibid. Translation by the author.

37 Shlomo Venezia: *Sonderkommando μέσα από την κόλαση των θαλάμων αερίων*, Athens: Pataki, 2008, 49. Translation by the author.

38 Michael Molho and Joseph Nehama: *In memoriam: hommage aux victimes juives des Nazis en Grèce*, Salonika: Nicolaïdès, 1948, 222.

> This was a great lure for the poorer families that didn't have the means to support themselves in hiding, pay large amount of money in rent and probably even supporting the hosts who were starving. Hence, these poor people timidly started registering to the community's offices and spreading the word that there was no danger.[39]

In addition, survivors mention that people did not know how to react to the constantly tightening cord,[40] i.e., did not know which survival strategy would work best. It is important to highlight this notion of oscillation felt by the Jews in Athens before deciding to register to the Synagogue. It is also vital to keep in mind the constantly changing atmosphere of uncertainty in order to better understand the range of choices available to the persecutees as well as the circumstances under which these choices were finally made.

For his part, Errikos had managed to provide himself with a false ID card from the police station, a potential life-saving document. According to his testimony, he went to a police officer at Koumoundourou Square, where he knew they were issuing false papers and got one under the surname Dimitriadis.[41] Along with his roommates, he decided to flee from the neighborhood where they were staying and were recognizable, and search for a "secluded area, where no one knew them".[42] They reached Nea Elvetia, a suburb northeast of Athens at the foot of Mount Hymettus. However, they did not stay for long there. They moved to another refugee suburb in southern Athens, Nea Smyrni.

The fact that Botton had a false ID card, whereas his roommates did not, empowered him to move freely and, in turn, be responsible for getting bread.[43] Thus Botton was among those Jews who had actively sought and succeeded in obtaining false papers and contrary to Stroop's decree decided not to present himself to the Synagogue every week and thus avoid the March 24, 1944, round up. On that day, the Germans arrested approximately 800 Jews. Thereafter, the Germans continued sporadically to arrest Jews who remained hidden. Botton and Sam Nehama[44] mentioned that around 200 people had been arrested this way.

In early June 1944, a known collaborator, David Cohen, who had been baptized and went by the name Christos Michailidis, arrested Botton at a bakery for fraud and dragged him to the Gestapo headquarters in Merlin Street to check his papers. The German officer saw the papers, reacted rather nonchalantly and told

---

39 Typescript, 2. See also Fortunoff Archive, 3017. Translation by the author.

40 Errikos Sevillias: *Athens – Auschwitz*, transl. Nikos Stavroulakis, Athens: Lycabettus Press, 1983.

41 VHA interview, 42858.

42 VHA interview, 42858. Translation by the author.

43 Fortunoff Archive, 3017.

44 JMG/OHA 070.

him to wait. However, the Recanati cousins, Pepo and Ino, the infamous Jewish collaborators[45] that happened to know him from Salonika, recognized him and betrayed him to the Germans. Thereafter, he was arrested and imprisoned in Chaidari concentration camp, located eight kilometers west of central Athens,[46] where he claims to have spent at least one month, if not more.[47] However, it does sound peculiar that Michailidis dragged him to the Gestapo Headquarters without knowing he was a Jew. If indeed he was taken to Merlin at first, most likely Michalidis already knew he had arrested a Jew, as arrested Jews in Athens were taken directly to the Gestapo headquarters. In any case, Botton did not miss a chance to characterize his arrest as an avoidable mistake and a mere foolishness.[48]

Along with the 200 other people in hiding arrested in the wider area of Attica in spring/summer 1944, there were the Jews from Rhodes and Kos (the two of the Dodecanese Islands that were not yet part of the Greek state) who had been arrested and also held at Chaidari. On July 18, 1944, Jews from the island Rhodes had been ordered to gather with all their valuables at the city center. Five days later, all members of the community, more than 1,700 people, were forced to go to the harbor and from there they were brought by the Germans to nearby Leros. Another ship carried 120 Jews from Kos. These ships travelled for eight days under horrible conditions and finally arrived at the port of Piraeus. The human cargo was transferred to Chaidari, where they spent several days there performing forced labor and being tortured.[49] Botton described their chaotic arrival at the camp as "a first step towards Dante's hell",[50] an often-cited reference

45 The Recanati cousins were among those coreligionists arrested, tried and convicted for collaborating with the Germans in 1947 for threatening and abusing Greek citizens of Jewish faith. Michailidis was not arrested, he was tried in absentia. Molho, In memoriam, 326 – 327; Philip Carabott: "Να εξαφανισθούν οι καταδότες από το πρόσωπον της γης: Εβραίοι 'δοσίλογοι' και η σκιά της προδοσίας (1944 – 63)", in Evangelos Chekimoglou and Anna Maria Droumbouki (eds.): *Την επαύριον του Ολοκαυτώματος*, Salonika: Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, 2017, 102 – 122.

46 On Chaidari, see Anna-Maria Droumpouki: *Μνημεία της Λήθης. Ίχνη του Β΄ Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου*, Athens: Polis, 2014, 147 – 190.

47 VHA interview, 42858.

48 Ibid. There is no description of his arrest in the typescript. This 'omission' might be accounted for in this context of feeling his arrest being an 'avoidable mistake'. And hence he did not want to include it in his memoir, while in the interviews he can not avoid answering the interviewer's question.

49 Anthony McElligott: "The Deportation of the Jews of Rhodes 1944: An Integrated History", in Giorgos Antoniou and Dirk Moses (eds.): *The Holocaust in Greece*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 58 – 85.

50 Typescript, 4. Translation by the author.

to provide identification with an epic voyage and a descent to the abyss.[51] What is also very peculiar in Errikos' case is that he was not deported with the twenty-first transport, which left Athens on June 21, even though he had been already arrested and taken to Chaidari.

All these arrestees formed the twenty-second and last deportation transport from Greece that left Athens on August 3, and arrived in Auschwitz on August 16, 1944. It consisted of approximately 2,500 Jews, out of which only 600 were admitted to the camp; the others were murdered in the gas chambers upon arrival.[52] As mentioned above, that is the fate that Botton actually managed to avoid; either death upon arrival or – given his age – most probably a life as a slave laborer where chances of survival were next to nothing.

A Small Window of Opportunity

On August 3, 1944, Botton was crammed in a cattle wagon of the twenty-second transport. One day before arrival at Auschwitz, near the border region of Slovakia and German-occupied Poland he escaped along with three other men: the street vendor Alfred Isaac Abraham (born Sofia 1921), the plumber Samuel Joseph Asseas (born Athens 1917) and the pharmacist Nissim Elias Azouvi (born Larissa 1906). Botton chooses to describe the conditions in the cattle wagon in a composed manner, without failing to spare his readers/listeners of the horrible details:

> We were all crammed in the train at gunpoint. Entire families. Crowded with practically no food. Loaves of moldy bread, a bag of raisins mixed with dirt and several onions. What a chaos? [The despair continued] for two or three days and then the crying subsided. [The temperature reached] 45 degrees. Everyone took his clothes off. [We were] full of lice. That was the worst. The lice had nested in the boards. A constant crying [was heard]. Women undressed themselves to avoid the lice.[53]

Indeed, his words sound sober and controlled, especially when compared to other emotionally overwhelming moments, such as his bursting into tears

51 Simone Gigliotti: *The Train Journey. Transit, Captivity, and Witnessing in the Holocaust*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2009, 96.

52 Bowman, 80 – 93. Danuta Czech: *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939 – 1945. From the Archives of the Auschwitz Memorial and the German Federal Archives*, New York: Owl Books, 1997, 688.

53 Typescript, 5 – 7. Fortunoff Archive, 3017. Translation by the author.

when mentioning the executions of partisans at the Chaidari camp or the assistance offered to him by unknown Slovakians after his escape.[54]

There are three descriptions of his escape. Each description highlights a different aspect. The interview in the Fortunoff Archives offers a calm description:

> During the first hours and days of the train journey, when someone would say that they were going to try and escape, people reacted because they were under the impression that the Germans kept records of how many people were in each carriage. They thought they would have to suffer the consequences of the escape and that they would be punished by the Germans. So, they refused to let us escape in the beginning. Around the tenth or eleventh day, they were so tired that they could not react anymore. And that is how three men and I managed to escape. [...] Our escape took place around midnight. One of them was about forty years old, and was a pharmacist. The other, he was well-built. The third was called Freddy Abraham, and now lives in Israel. We had not actually planned the escape together. I escaped last. I noticed that they had torn the wire of the window, and they escaped. I was left last and I decided to follow them. I fell on the rails, on the rocks. Unfortunately, I did not run into the three others in Slovakia, and I was by myself all the time. The train was not too fast. There were two engines: one in the front and one at the back. It was in the mountains [when we escaped]. The window was high up, and they actually stepped on the people who were sitting beneath it. It was not too difficult. I got hurt when I fell on the ground. I was very poorly dressed. I was wearing a pair of trousers, and a shirt. I did not have any shoes, because they had taken my sandals away from me.[55]

The typescript description is more sentimental:

> I cannot recall the exact date of my escape. [...] What I remember the most was the freezing cold; I was barefoot and was wearing only a pair of trousers, underpants and a shirt. [...] For a moment, the thought crossed my mind that I had done the fatal and last mistake of my life. Maybe my fellow passengers would have found bearable conditions upon arrival at the concentration camp. However, instantly the thought, that one may not yearn for survival and freedom waiting passively for the executioner's mercy prevailed. It's better to have fought with whatever force you may have for your survival, while being free, and lose [rather than not to have fought at all]. These are not just hollow words.[56]

As is also the VHA description:

> I had not done any previous arrangements. When I saw the others jump, I also jumped. We either live or die. [I jumped] unprepared, on an impulse. Almost naked. We were all in the same boat. The carriage did not stop. That was very important.[57]

54 VHA interview, 42858.
55 Fortunoff Archive, 3017. Translation by the author.
56 Typescript, 23. Translation by the author.
57 VHA interview, 42858. Translation by the author.

All three descriptions reveal agency, a struggle for life, a firm response to racial persecution; in short: they reveal a survival strategy.

Escaping the Death Train: A Survival Strategy

The fact that Botton characterized his arrest as an avoidable mistake obviously does not reveal the actual responsibility he had over his arrest. Far from it. It reveals the agency he still felt after all these years; the fact that in other crucial moments he managed to evade mortal danger. My use of the verb *evade* is deliberate. In a sense, it encapsulates a large part of his Shoah experience. By remaining in Athens after the outbreak of the war and the German occupation of his native city, he *evades* the first phase of deportations. By participating in the organized resistance and having a fake ID he *evades* the Synagogue round-up of March 24 (and the arrest for the second time). By escaping from the death train to Auschwitz, he *evades* death, despite the fact that the Germans had arrested and deported him.

In categorizing Jewish behavior during the Shoah, evasion was one of the survival strategies that describe any attempt to escape persecution by hiding, fleeing, assuming a false identity or even jumping from a moving train.[58] Historian Evgeny Finkel proposed a typology of survival strategies in which the Jews could and did engage during the Holocaust: cooperation and collaboration, coping and compliance, evasion, and finally, resistance. Finkel distinguishes, and rightly so, 'evasion' from 'resistance',[59] but as we realize – more often than not – analytic categories do not match perfectly actual realities and should not be used as rigid monolithic categories, but rather as intertwined paths. Botton's case could also be placed in the category of resistance, if the focus was on his participation in the youth resistance organization.[60] Botton's escape from the death train constitutes just a part of a wider survival strategy, one choice, – as crucial as it was – that led to his survival, which was accomplished in the end thanks to a number of structural and circumstantial factors, a number of people and a number of individual choices.

All these observations, of course, are made with the benefit of hindsight and should not conceal the fact that choosing a survival strategy, i.e., making a life

58 Evgeny Finkel: *Ordinary Jews. Choice and Survival during the Holocaust*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017, 126–158.

59 Ibid. 159–190.

60 For the youth resistance organization (EPON) with references to the Jewish participation, see Varon-Vassard, Η ενηλικίωση μιας γενιάς, 331–514.

or death decision without knowing the end result is an unthinkable or even unbearable situation; a decision that might be seen within the range of Lawrence Langer's 'choiceless choices'.[61] Despite the fact that Langer was referring to camp life, where morality and human dignity were completely absent or inversed, his term could be loosely applied to the death trains as well. Death trains constitute literally the transition from the illusion or deception that deportation may suggest survival to the realization of the death camp; from relocation to murder.[62] The journey was the transition to a place where human dignity and morality had been altered so much that a new language had to be constructed, as Primo Levi put it:

> If the lagers (camps) had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, and wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing near.[63]

However, the train journey itself was part of the genocidal process called 'Final Solution'. The terrorizing conditions of compressed space and indeterminate journeying were chosen explicitly to break morale and hinder any thought of resistance or escape.[64] The deportees were literally dealing with severe hunger, deteriorating health and unhygienic conditions, and the overpowering and choking stench of excrement, urine and vomit.[65]

Langer, when talking about 'choiceless choices', was basically talking about impossible moral choices between 'dreadful' and 'impossible'.[66] Although Botton's choice does not have a moral dimension, this does not make it any less impossible. Jumping from a moving train with no shoes and no orientation was indeed a jump into the unknown. It is now in retrospect that we know that this was the 'correct' decision to take; correct in the sense that it led to the path of survival. However, in that moment there, things might not have been that clear. Mo-

61 Lawrence Langer: "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps", in *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4/1, 1980, 53–59; reprinted in John K. Roth and Michael Berenbaum, (eds.): *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications,* New York: Paragon House, 1989, 222–232.

62 Gigliotti, Train Journey, 4.

63 Primo Levi: *Survival in Auschwitz. The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, 123.

64 Gigliotti, Train Journey, 4.

65 Ibid., 97.

66 Langer, Dilemma, 226.

ments after he jumped, Botton questioned his decision: "Up in the mountains the cold was such that my moral was shaken. Maybe it was a mistake, [maybe it was] madness to escape!"[67] In our noble and academically vital willingness to depict survivors as active agents, we should not forget that these viewpoints on agency are given by survivors with the benefit of hindsight and their will to protect their image as self-determining human beings.[68] Escaping the train was just one decision that led to survival and as important and crucial as it was, it was definitely not the only one.

Botton does not mince his words when referring to three basic reasons that made him take the decision to escape: a) The specific circumstances; b) His will to survive; and c) The fact that he was alone, having responsibility for nobody. "If I had a family, I would never have tried to escape",[69] he mentions in both his interviews and the typescript. The circumstance that he saw three other men jumping from the train was the sparkle that motivated him to do the same. The barbed wire covering the narrow slot in the wagon had been removed, so there it was, 'a window of opportunity' leading, possibly, to freedom and survival. Botton seized the chance, jumped and managed to survive. This attitude was definitely not exclusive to Botton. Undoubtedly, Botton had realized the unthinkable moral dilemma involved in this situation on the edge and the subsequent moral burden of his decision to escape, as family ties were seen as an insurmountable obstacle:

> I would never have decided to escape if I was in the wagon with a member of my family. [...] How to leave your old parents and underage siblings to get lost into the unknown while you were saved. What can you do with such a life? The family bond within the Jewish family was not only strong but indestructible. So, being without the presence of my own family in the coffin-carriage, I was able to play with my life.[70]

This 'will to survive' included the will to escape, whenever possible, which brings us to a sociocultural observation made by Botton himself regarding his constant choice to react as part of his survival strategy. When he was in the carriage, he observed his coreligionists and noted that after the chaos of the first few days "a veil of death"[71] had covered everything and had silenced all screaming and fighting over space or food. Some of the elderly carried with them prayer books and

67 Typescript, 11. Translation by the author.
68 Langer, Dilemma, 223.
69 VHA interview, 42858. Translation by the author
70 Typescript, 22. Translation by the author.
71 Ibid., 5. Translation by the author.

started praying as the only hope for survival. Botton found this stance of 'believing in a miracle' as destructively fatalistic and condemned it:

> I never believed that divine forces follow peoples' and societies routes. That's why I was aiming to escape. To keep these 80 people alive, we found in the carriage a bag of black raisins which had 25% of dirt in it, some 10 loafs of moldy bread, a bag of onions and a barrel of 200 liters of water. Most had given up their portion. I ate everything and the moldy bread didn't bother me at all.[72]

His observation on religion and its correlation to a more passive response towards persecution and deportation is obviously a personal one and does not necessarily correspond to specific reactions deportees had. In his typescript, he notes that he was "completely ignorant" of the Jewish faith and hence he became "free of ghosts and prejudices".[73] However, his views do raise the question of how religious beliefs could have shaped choices and survival strategies. It is certain that spiritual comfort through praying provided a psychological refuge inside the self and within the community and protected the individual's cultural identity despite incredibly hostile circumstances.[74] In that sense, this praying in the death train could also be interpreted as an act of spiritual or passive resistance. Instead for Botton it was a manifestation of passiveness and inactiveness; a manifestation of the exact opposite response Botton wanted to follow and actually did follow. His stance, seemingly, was typical among partisans who focused of the futility of such gestures.[75]

Furthermore, this was Botton's specific cattle wagon. In other wagons, the situation might have been quite different. Leon Cohen, who was arrested in Athens in March 1944, deported on April 2 and forced to work as a member of the '*Sonderkommando*' in Birkenau, described a journey full of "ridiculous quarrels and insults", instigated by those who "thought that they were entitled to home comforts".[76] This diversity in circumstances within each wagon of different transports brings to the fore the role and importance of incidental conditions that led Errikos Botton to make the specific decision. Were these circumstances so unique and exceptional that no one else was found in the same situation? Or can we trace the trends that could lead incarcerated people to attempt to escape?

---

72 Ibid. Translation by the author.

73 Typescript, 22. Translation by the author.

74 James Glass: *Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust. Moral Uses of Violence and Will*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 103–119.

75 Ibid., 7.

76 Leon Cohen: *From Greece to Birkenau: the Crematoria Workers' Uprising*, Tel Aviv: Salonika Jewry Research Center, 1996, 14.

In other words, how unique is Botton's story? He was definitely not the only Greek Jew escaping from a death train. First of all, there were at least another three deportees who successfully escaped from Botton's wagon. Second, there is the case of Dino Uziel from Salonika,[77] a well-known professional boxer.[78] He had escaped Salonika dressed as a railway worker and then failed twice to flee to the Middle East. In April 1944, he was arrested and transferred to Chaidari, where he did some plumbing work and stole some tools and a rail worker's cap. I mentioned earlier the cases of arrestees escaping the forced labor camps in Central Greece.[79] Furthermore, there were the people who escaped from Salonika's ghettoes and avoided deportation. Then there are known cases of escaping the death camps. It is also certain that there were other cases of escape that may have gone unregistered. These are different kinds of escaping a place of incarceration – a death train, a forced labor camp, a ghetto and a death camp – in the sense that different kinds of skills were needed, different conditions and other risks were possible. One thing is common, though: the decision to take matters into their own hands; agency.

Conclusion

In her study on escapes from deportation trains from Belgium, France and the Netherlands, historian Tanja von Fransecky poses two basic research questions: one concerns the overriding structural factors that enabled or hindered escapes regardless of the situation; the other concerns the key incidental factors within the cattle wagon with regard to the decision of escaping or not.[80] In the case of

77 Philip Carabott, "Το νέον κέντρο του εβραϊσμού. Αθήνα 1941–1947", lecture (22.03.2018) in a ten-lecture series organized by the Workshop on the Study of the Jews of Greece and the Netherlands Institute at Athens under the title "The Jews of Greece and the Netherlands: Destruction, reconstruction, restitution" in 2018.

78 The Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki has organized an exhibition on "Greek Jews in Sport: The Contibution of Thessaloniki". The exhibition's catalogue, one may find a lot of information on D. Uziel. Available at: http://www.maccabi.gr/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/history.pdf. Last accessed: 08.07.2021.

79 Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas: "Karya 1943 – Tödliche Zwangsarbeit im besetzten Griechenland". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIqXAN8aXlQ. Last accessed: 08.07.2021.

80 Tanja von Fransecky: *Escapees: The History of Jews Who Fled Nazi Deportation Trains in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands*, New York-Oxford: Berghahn, 2019, 4.

Botton, who was one of the persecuted European Jews that attempted to flee from the trains of death,[81] Fransecky's approach seems to fit.

Botton was a young, clever, healthy, strong man with a fighting spirit. These features urged him to take his fate into his own hands and seek contact with the organized resistance. He was a self-made young man with an impressive curriculum vitae in terms both of academic excellence and his proficiency in no less than four languages (Greek, French, Italian and Ladino). And on top of that, Botton had an extra reason to be confident and endeavoring, for he had acquired all these assets without enjoying any economic support from his impoverished family. His decision to escape was consistent with his whole story and experiences during the war.

Last but not least, Botton was a lonely fighter, a man carrying responsibility for absolutely no one else. Most of his immediate relatives from Salonika had already been deported and murdered in Auschwitz during the first wave of deportations in spring and summer of 1943. Even though Errikos did not know exactly what had happened to them, it is certain that he had not heard from them since spring 1943. This tragic fact gave him a kind of grim 'privilege', which the overwhelming majority of persecuted Jews, who were deported along with their entire families, never had. Moreover, the setting of his escape was much more than a stroke of circumstance. It was a conscious decision; part of a series of decisions constituting his survival strategy during the Shoah. The window in the cattle wagon was already open. There were three other men, who made the herculean step to jump off the moving train first thus inspiring Botton to attempt the same. The speed of the train was not high, so his escape did not necessarily equal a suicide attempt.

It goes without saying, that Botton's story is unique, at least in as much his survival strategies met with success, and highlights individuality. It demonstrates a series of distinct and, in his case, successful decisions that led to survival, made by a man who was particularly clever, daring and courageous as well as fully conscious of the surrounding conditions of his existence. Essentially, his very story is an exemplary story of a textbook survival strategy. And probably, the same qualities of his character accompanied him also throughout his life after the Shoah, for, as we listen to his interviews, one is struck by the same comprehensive, critical and thorough spirit of his descriptions. But what does this particular story of a single individual tell us about the deportations to the death camps or the Shoah in general? If we look at the historical events from the perspective of the victims, as Yehuda Bauer and Saul Friedländer call us to do, with-

81 Ibid.

in these horrible transports we do not just witness victimhood. Instead, we see individuals with different experiences and backgrounds, as well as men, women and children with some excruciating difficult moral choices in front of them. This particular story gives us a glimpse into that specific train. This particular story reframes the deportees' experiences as experiences of active agents, of people with conscious thoughts, unfulfilled wishes, hidden fears, moral courage rather than passive victims taken to their deaths by force.