

**EUROPALIA**  
**ARTS FESTIVAL**  
**TRAINS & TRACKS**



## **TRAINS AND THE HOLOCAUST**

From a Symbol of Progress to a Genocidal Tool

26 April 2022, Kazerne Dossin

# Trains and the Holocaust

From a Symbol of Progress to a Genocidal Tool



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cover: Irene Awert (1930 – 1984), *The Death Train*, Collection of The Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, Israel, The Art Collection.

## CONTEXT

This event takes place in the framework of EUROPALIA TRAINS & TRACKS, a festival dedicated to railways and their impact on society and arts. With researchers and artists from different disciplines, the festival looks at how the 19th century invention changed society, what role it plays today and might play in the future.

EUROPALIA TRAINS & TRACKS presents from 14 October 2021 until 15 May 2022 more than 70 different projects – mostly new creations and residencies – spread across artistic institutions but also, and especially, to be discovered in stations and on trains, in Belgium and in neighbouring countries. More info on [europalia.eu](http://europalia.eu)

## INTRODUCTION

During the Second World War, 25.490 Jews and 353 Roma were deported from the Dossin barracks in Mechelen, the vast majority to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The tracks next to the barracks have long since disappeared. On the square in front of the current museum stands a goods wagon, a reminder of the last transports from Mechelen.

On 26 April 2022, EUROPALIA organises the conference *Trains and the Holocaust* at this *place of memory*, in collaboration with the Auschwitz Foundation and Kazerne Dossin. Open to a broad public, the conference will examine the role and image of the train, which evolved from a symbol of modernity to an instrument of genocide.

How did the Dossin Barracks function as a transit camp and how was the deportation of these innocent victims carried out? Aspects that will be addressed include the ambush of the 20th convoy in Boortmeerbeek (the only deportation train ever stopped by the Resistance), the responsibility of various public authorities, commemorative practices, and present-day educational projects addressing deportation and trains.

Moderated by Annelies Beck, the lectures and roundtable discussions will be complemented by visual materials, witness accounts and a new text by Alicja Gescinska. In addition, the co-organiser Auschwitz Foundation will present its documentary "Deported from Mechelen to Auschwitz".

## CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

**Kazerne Dossin** (Goswin de Stassartstraat 153, 2800 Mechelen)

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**09:00**  
Registration

**09:30**  
Welcome and introduction by moderator Annelies Beck

### SESSION 1: Departure

The first panel focuses on the point of departure for victims from Belgium and Northern France. Deportations took place from the Dossin barracks, but also from Drancy. What happened exactly and what was the attitude of Belgian officials?

**09:50 – 10:10**  
Deportation from the Dossin barracks 1942-1944 - Laurence Schram

**10:10 – 10:30**  
A lesser - or a greater evil? The National Railway Company of Belgium and deportations during the Second World War - Nico Wouters

**10:30 – 10:50**  
Q&A

**10:50 – 11:10**  
Coffee break

**11:10 – 11:40**  
Three key aspects, characteristics, and events in the deportation of Jews and Roma from Belgium and Northern France:

- Left Behind: the deportation rate of forced slave labourers and their families - Dorien Styven
- Save the children (11 September 1942) - Grégory Célerse
- The attack on the 20th convoy - Koen Aerts

**11:40 – 12:00**  
Q&A

**12:00 – 13:00**  
Lunch break

### SESSION 2: Changing images on trains

Not all associations with trains and deportation are correct or give us the full picture. Most people associate deportation trains with wagons normally used to transport animals or freight. And when we think of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the arrival of trains as well as the selection on the platform, it's the gate with the words "Arbeit macht Frei", the watch towers and barracks that spring to mind. This panel will challenge these associations and lead us to a more historically accurate, but no less tragic, understanding.

**13:00 – 13:20**  
From "passenger car" to "wagon": the misleading deception of deportation - Johan Puttemans

**13:20 – 13:30**  
Q&A

**13:30 – 13:45**  
Audience moving to Zachor-room

**13:45 – 14:10**  
**INTERVENTION** by Alicja Gescinska

**14:10 – 14:25**  
Audience moving back to museum

**14:25 – 14:50**  
Q&A

**14:50 – 15:10**  
Coffee break



### SESSION 3: Roundtable on the representation of trains and stations in Holocaust memory

Train tracks can be powerfully symbolic. This panel will explore how tracks and traces carry very different memories, including within Jewish memory. What is the impact of the tracks themselves and how can we address Holocaust memories when the tracks are no longer there? What kind of traces remain and how can they play a role in the memorialisation of deportation? How do different initiatives and organisations work with the traces of so many lost lives? What are we conveying about this history to future generations and how are we doing so?

#### 15:10 – 16:00

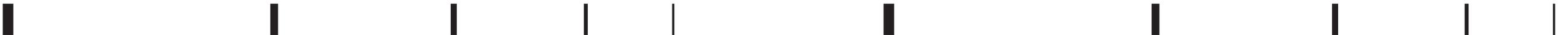
- **From a symbol of progress to a genocidal tool** - Frédéric Crahay
- **Tracks and traces of deportation** - Veerle Vanden Daelen
- **The train of 1000** - Hannes Vanwymelbeke

#### 16:00 – 17:00

**The importance of witnesses and screening of the Auschwitz Foundation's documentary "Déportés de Malines à Auschwitz – Gedeporteerd van Mechelen naar Auschwitz"** - Frédéric Crahay

#### 17:00 – 17:15

**Closing remarks** - Annelies Beck



## ABSTRACTS & BIOGRAPHIES

### SESSION 1: Departure

09:50 – 10:10

**Deportation from the Dossin barracks 1942-1944** - Laurence Schram

#### ABSTRACT

On 27 July 1942, the Nazis opened a transit camp for Jews in Kazerne Dossin (Mechelen). From 4 August 1942 to 31 July 1944, around 25,000 Jews and 350 Roma were deported from the barracks to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Five special transports brought 218 Jews with enemy or neutral nationalities to other camps. The sole purpose of this transit camp was to gather racial deportees for genocidal deportation. By 1945, only 5% of these victims had survived.

This lecture focusses on the planning, organisation, and preparation of racial deportations from Kazerne Dossin. Based on archives and witness accounts, the different periods of the camp are analysed. The Nazis first tried to summon Jews to the barracks before organising large-scale round-ups. The last period is characterised by denunciations and manhunts. The rhythm of transport departures was strongly influenced by these periods. At the time of the summons and round-ups, some 1,000 deportees embarked in third-class passenger coaches week after week. Afterwards, the Nazis had more difficulty in gathering deportees. The transports became less numerous and less crowded. From convoy 20 onwards, the Nazis used freight wagons. Some deportees threw messages out of the wagons, thus leaving behind their last signs of life.

#### **BIO Laurence Schram**



Laurence Schram, Doctor of History and graduate in Political Sciences (Université libre de Bruxelles), was the closest collaborator of Dr. Maxime Steinberg, the Belgian historian who specialised in the study of Judeocide. She participated in the creation of the Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance (1995) and that of the Belgian Exhibition at the Auschwitz State Museum (2006). Since 2010, she has contributed to the setting up of Kazerne Dossin, Memorial, Museum & Documentation Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights. As a Senior Researcher, she is the author of studies on racial persecution (Jews and Roma) in Belgium and Northern France. She gives numerous lectures and accompanies groups on study trips to Krakow and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Her PhD on the history of Kazerne Dossin (2015) was awarded the Natan Ramet Prize and the Jacques Rozenberg Prize (Auschwitz Foundation) in 2016. It was published in French in 2017 and in Dutch in 2018.

10:10 – 10:30

**A lesser - or a greater evil? The National Railway Company of Belgium and deportations during the Second World War** - Nico Wouters

#### ABSTRACT

In January 2022, the Belgian Senate and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Mobility Georges Gilkinet gave CegeSoma/State Archives the assignment to investigate the role of the National Railway Company in Belgium in the deportations of Jews, Roma, Political Prisoners and Forced Labourers in Belgium during WWII. Without anticipating the results of this historic research and the final report, Nico Wouters (who leads the investigations) will give a brief overview of the approach, challenges, objectives and timing of this research.

#### **BIO Nico Wouters**



Nico Wouters is Head of CegeSoma (Belgian State Archives - Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij / Centre d'Études Guerre et Société) and specialises in the political and administrative history, and the politics of memory of the Second World War. He was involved as a researcher in the project Belgique Docile/Gewillig België, commissioned by the Belgian senate to look into Belgian responsibility for the persecution of the Jewish population in Belgium.

11:30 – 10:50

### Three key aspects, characteristics, and events in the deportation of Jews and Roma from Belgium and Northern France

#### Left Behind: the deportation rate of forced slave labourers and their families - Dorien Styven

The forced deportation as slave labourers of 2,252 Jewish men from Belgium to Northern France in June-September 1942 had an immediate impact on the survival chances of the families they left behind. This contribution illustrates their trajectories in time and space, describes the consequences of slave labour imposed by Organisation Todt, and the train as a symbol for the moment when communication stopped.

#### BIO Dorien Styven



Dorien Styven holds an MA in history at KULeuven and an MA in archival sciences at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). Since 2010 she has been a researcher and archivist at Kazerne Dossin, where she is responsible for the online accessibility of archival collections and the implementation of digital humanities techniques. She is co-chair of the Working Group on Sustainable Publishing of Metadata within the Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities (DARIAH) and participates in the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) and the Vlaamse Vereniging voor Bibliotheek, Archief en Documentatie (VVBAD). Her research focusses on hidden children, Righteous among the Nations, and the impact of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) on Holocaust commemoration for which she won the Ger Schmook prize in 2019. Her research for the Left Behind project focusses on the personal stories of families of Jewish slave labourers from Antwerp, the collection and mapping of geographical data regarding their whereabouts, and the implementation of geographic information systems (GIS).

#### Save the children (11 September 1942) - Grégory Célerse

On 11 September 1942, the German authorities, supported by elements of the French security forces, arrested hundreds of foreign Jews and their children across Northern France, many of whom were born on French soil. This operation was planned on the eve of Roch Hachana, the Jewish New Year. The arrested Jews were gathered in a local triage train station in a popular neighbourhood of Lille called Fives. Members of the SNCF (French National Railway Company) working on the spot that day spontaneously decided to act. A minority belonged to the French Resistance. Most of them did not belong to any underground organisation. A recently found four-page report by Jean Mabilie, the stationmaster, provides a detailed account of the events. Twenty-five identified members of the SNCF participated in what is today considered by Serge Klarsfeld as the largest rescue of Jews from a deportation train destined for Auschwitz. The USHMM in Washington DC considers this unplanned operation as one of the most important in occupied Europe from 1942-1944. Thirty-nine people have been identified as having been rescued that day. Some witness accounts mention up to 60 people being saved.

#### BIO Grégory Célerse



Grégory Célerse is a French historian and researcher for the Resistance Museum (Bondues, France) and Rails et histoire (Paris, France). After specialising in the German repression system, he worked on the 11 September 1942 events in Lille-Fives. His research took him to the United States, Israel, Belgium, and Germany, where he collected testimonies and photos of the SNCF members involved. He wrote a book about these events (*Sauvons les enfants*) in October 2016. In April 2020, he finished a documentary for the French broadcaster, France 3, on this story (*Le sauvetage oublié*).

#### The attack on the 20th convoy - Koen Aerts

The ambush of convoy 20 contains all the narrative elements of a film. It is a unique act of true heroism, never before seen or since imitated. The facts of 19 April 1943 leave much room for dramaturgical and scenographic imagination. But how can the fictionalisation in film of this real life event be both an impoverishment and an enrichment of historical consciousness? What are the advantages, what are the disadvantages? Can concessions to the facts lead to greater insights or is it the complete opposite? What position should the historian take? Should he collaborate or resist?

#### BIO Koen Aerts



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Koen Aerts is specialised in the history and memory of conflicts in society, and of the Second World War in particular. Affiliated to both the History Department of Ghent University and CegeSoma (Belgian State Archives- Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij / Centre d'Études Guerre et Société), he is working on a social history of the 1940s. From a fundamental view of the reciprocal relationship between university and society, he pays special attention to the science of communication and public history, including collaboration with TV, documentary, and film.

## SESSION 2: Changing images on trains

13:00 – 13:20

**From “passenger car” to “wagon”: the misleading deception of deportation** - Johan Puttemans

### **ABSTRACT**

People from all over Europe were transported to the Nazi concentration camps and killing centres in third-class railway carriages and animal wagons. Johan Puttemans details the ruses employed by the Nazis to bring people to these places, which were always designed to avoid revolt and panic. In the Treblinka II killing centre, the SS built a fake train station to make the death trap look as innocent as possible.

#### BIO Johan Puttemans



Johan Puttemans studied philosophy and history and then spent a number of years working in education. He is currently a pedagogical coordinator at the Auschwitz Foundation, where he mainly communicates the history of the Holocaust through conferences, guided tours, and articles.

13:45 – 14:10

**INTERVENTION** by Alicja Gescinska

### **ABSTRACT**

Alicja Gescinska will present a collection of poetic meditations triggered by her personal thoughts about trains and the war and the horror of the Holocaust. In these meditations, Gescinska reflects on good and evil, the grey areas in between, the need to commemorate, the possibility of moral progress and our reluctance to learn from the past.

#### BIO Alicja Gescinska



Alicja Gescinska is a Polish-Belgian philosopher, novelist and poet. As an academic, her main areas of expertise are political theory, continental philosophy, and the history of ideas. She obtained her PhD at Ghent University, and was previously affiliated to Warsaw University, Princeton University and Amherst College. She is currently the director of the Philosophy by Research Programme at the University of Buckingham and VUB Fellow. Apart from her academic work, Gescinska is also one of the leading public intellectuals in Belgium and the Netherlands, and has written books on several topics, several of which have been awarded. In 2011 she published her critically acclaimed book *De verovering van de vrijheid* (The Conquest of Liberty), which was nominated for several book prizes, and awarded the Mens.nu Prize for the best non-fiction book. In 2017, she won the Debut Prize with her first novel, *Een soort van liefde* (A Kind of Love). Her book *Intussen komen mensen om* – about the social and political responsibility of intellectuals – won the Liberales Book Prize. In 2021, her first collection of poems, *Trojaanse gedachten* (Trojan Thoughts) was published. In 2022, she debuted as a playwright with a monologue in which Apaté, goddess of deception and lies, returns to earth with a plea in defense of the moral value of lying and deceit.

## SESSION 3: Roundtable on the representation of trains and stations in Holocaust memory

15:10 – 16:00

**From a symbol of progress to a genocidal tool** - Frédéric Crahay

### **ABSTRACT**

From the train as a vehicle towards a better life – a new start for migrant (Jewish) people from the East – to the train as a tool of deportation to forced labour, concentration camps and killing centres. Modern historians suggest that without the mass transportation enabled by the railways, the scale of the ‘Final Solution’ would not have been as huge. Statistics estimating the total number of victims are still based in part on the shipping records of the German railways. How did the train evolve from a modern means of transport to an efficient means of deportation and what impact did this have on the image of the train after 1945?

#### BIO Frédéric Crahay



Frédéric Crahay studied history at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and international politics at the University of Antwerp. Since 2010, he is working for the Auschwitz Foundation, of which he has been director since 2015.

## Tracks and traces of deportation - Veerle Vanden Daelen

### ABSTRACT

Train tracks can be powerfully symbolic. This presentation will explore how tracks and traces carry very different memories, including within Jewish memory. What is the impact of the tracks themselves and how can we address Holocaust memories when the tracks are no longer there? What kind of traces remain and how can they play a role in the memorialisation of deportations from Kazerne Dossin? How does the current Kazerne Dossin memorial, museum, and research centre work with the traces of so many lost lives?

### BIO Veerle Vanden Daelen



Veerle Vanden Daelen is deputy general director and director of Collections & Research at Kazerne Dossin, Memorial, Museum and Research Centre on the Holocaust and Human Rights. She holds a PhD in history from the University of Antwerp. Her dissertation examined the return and reconstruction of Jewish life in Antwerp after the Second World War (1944-1960). She has held fellowships at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies (University of Michigan) and the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies (University of Pennsylvania). Besides numerous articles, she has authored two books, *Vrouwbeelden in het Vlaams Blok* (Ghent, 2002) and *Laten we hun lied verder zingen. De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap in Antwerpen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog (1944-1960)* (Amsterdam, 2008). Veerle coordinates the work package Identification and Investigation for the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) and is a member of the Belgian delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). She is also affiliated to the University of Antwerp, where she has taught courses on migration history, Jewish history, and other topics.

## The train of 1000 - Hannes Vanwymelbeke

### ABSTRACT

The Train of 1000 is a joint initiative of the War Heritage Institute and the Auschwitz Foundation to commemorate the victory of democracy over Nazi Germany. The idea was born in 2008 on the occasion of the international commemoration of the liberation of Buchenwald concentration camp. Each edition invites 1,000 young people from all over Europe to visit the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps in Poland, with the aim of raising their awareness of the atrocities committed during the Second World War and to talk to them, of course, about the Holocaust. The next edition of the Train of 1000 is planned for 2023.

### BIO Hannes Vanwymelbeke



Hannes Vanwymelbeke studied journalism and is currently head of the Memory Service of the War Heritage Institute.

16:00 – 17:00

### The importance of witnesses and the screening of the documentary by the Auschwitz Foundation: “Déportés de Malines à Auschwitz – Gedeporteerd van Mechelen naar Auschwitz” - Frédéric Crahay

### ABSTRACT

The documentary *Déportés de Malines à Auschwitz. Des témoins racontent / Gedeporteerd van Mechelen naar Auschwitz. Getuigen vertellen*, is the third DVD in the collection produced by the ‘ASBL Mémoire d’Auschwitz / vzw Auschwitz in Gedachtenis’ on the basis of audiovisual testimonies collected by the Auschwitz Foundation. This documentary, based on interviews with survivors of the Nazi camps selected from those collected by the Auschwitz Foundation in the 1990s, recounts the deportation from Mechelen to Auschwitz-Birkenau of six survivors.

They describe the conditions under which they were transported to their destination (escape attempts, fear, promiscuity) and their arrival at the Birkenau camp, where they were selected as soon as they got off the train. Separated from their families, they were part of the very small minority deemed fit for work and entered the camp where, stripped of their identity and deeply humiliated, they became numbers. This is the beginning of the so-called ‘quarantine’ period, during which everything is done to break them morally and physically.

With: David Mandelbaum, Felix Lipszyc, Sarah Goldberg, Paul Halter and Marie Pinhas.

The documentary is in French with Dutch subtitles.



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**BIO Annelies Beck**


Annelies Beck is a Flemish journalist and writer. She studied Contemporary History in Ghent and obtained a Master's degree in Brazilian Studies at the University of London. As a teenager she started working in the radio programme Van Kattewaad tot Erger and later in the youth news, which was the start of a career with the Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting Corporation. She has presented just about all major news shows on the public broadcaster and also worked as national and international reporter for Terzake. She has also presented Terzake on the Canvas channel for many years now. In 2017, she won the Grote Prijs Jan Wauters for excellence in the Dutch language.

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**WORKING TEAM**

**Curators:** Veerle Vanden Daelen, Frédéric Crahay and Laurence Schram

**Moderator:** Annelies Beck

**Project coordinator EUROPALIA:** Eva Bialek

**Artistic Director EUROPALIA:** Dirk Vermaelen

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**Proofreading:** Liz Morrison

A production by Kazerne Dossin, Auschwitz Foundation and EUROPALIA ARTS FESTIVAL.

Special thanks to all participants, curators and venues for their involvement and trust in this project.





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KAZERNE  
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MEMORIAAL, MUSEUM  
EN ONDERZOEKSCENTRUM  
OVER HOLOCAUST  
EN MENSENRECHTEN

