

Written in Transport:  
Deportee Letters and the Influence of an Iconic Poem

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the expressions of personal collapse articulated by Holocaust victims inside deportation trains. Looking at transport through both a historical and a literary lens, it examines letters written on trains to concentration and death camps alongside Israeli Dan Pagis' "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car." What is the relationship between a letter that someone threw from a train car and this renowned poem by Dan Pagis? If "Written in Pencil" destabilizes us, leaves the reader dazed, should we conclude that deportees were similarly rattled? If, for instance, Pagis disrupts the flow of time in "Written in Pencil", do archival testimonies of transport convey similar disruption? My primary intention is to probe how a fusion of historical and literary lenses can enrich present understanding of victims' deportation experiences. An interdisciplinary examination of Holocaust transport also enables a reflection on what each discipline cannot do in isolation, and as such what each lens—the poem and the letters—brings the other. Investigating the mutuality and limits of these lenses is the study's secondary aim.

In Holocaust historiography, the subject of deportation has centered mostly on the logistics involved in coordinating train departures and arrivals—a manifestly bureaucratic campaign integral to the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." As such, it has been chronicled predominantly from perpetrator's perspective and consigned victims' deportation experiences to the margins. While Simone Gigliotti's recent groundbreaking work, *The Train Journey*, sheds much light on physical and psychological trauma inside the train car, her scholarship draws mostly on postwar survivor testimony: recollections that muddle the circumstances (and chronology) of deportation. In an attempt to investigate victims' changing sensibilities in transport, this thesis is anchored in real-time testimonies of witnessing—postcards, notes, and letters—victims wrote on (and later threw from) deportation trains.

The tightly compressed, disorienting language Dan Pagis employs in “Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car” engenders strong emotional responses. Despite (or perhaps as a result of) its creative license, the poem has come to dominate popular representation of transport during the Holocaust—to a degree overshadowing its historical context. Yet this study does not aim to reverse the trend by simply dismissing “Written in Pencil”: that the poem has attained iconic status internationally reflects its capacity to provoke the reader into contemplating victim train journeys. As a point of departure, I contend that “Written in Pencil” offers a deeper vocabulary with which to approach letters written in transport; its discursive interpretations are thus interspersed with an analysis of deportee texts.

The letters examined in this thesis evoked themes in a rich dialogue with those in Pagis’ poem. While the poet suggests Eve’s train exists in collapsed time, actual letters negate such a reading by attesting to victims’ tenacious grasp of time on the train. Concurrently the letters propose an alternate collapse that expresses itself in emotional disorientation rather than in a loss of physical cognition. However, deportee texts also suggest that human agency could be accessed through language, recovering elements of powerlessness in the face of mounting despair. Deportee letters studied demonstrate that, to a noteworthy degree of consistency, victims’ expression and extent of tumult mostly reflected the degree and accuracy of their knowledge of the transport’s true destination. Yet, regardless of deportees’ awareness, processes of familial disintegration—typically associated with arrival scenes at the death camps—already commenced on the transport, exacerbating the earlier trauma of separation. Mothers, fathers, children and siblings mirrored Pagis’ Eve in mourning what was already lost as a result of deportation—before they knew with any certainty what awaited them.