

### 3.3. “Arrivals, Departures” by Charlotte Delbo

*Charlotte Delbo, a French nonJew, was imprisoned in Auschwitz in January 1943 as a political dissident and spent the remainder of the war in concentration camps. A writer of prose and poetry, Delbo managed to survive. She died in 1985. “Arrivals, Departures” uses the arrival and departure at a train station as a metaphor for Auschwitz.*

*Source: Charlotte Delbo, Auschwitz and After (Yale University Press, 1995). Used with permission.*

People arrive. They look through the crowd of those who are waiting, those who await them. They kiss them and say the trip exhausted them.

People leave. They say good-bye to those who are not leaving and hug the children.

There is a street for people who arrive and a street for people who leave.

There is a cafe called "Arrivals" and a cafe called "Departures." There are people who arrive and people who leave.

But there is a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving, a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those who have left never came back.

It is the largest station in the world.

This is the station they reach, from wherever they came.

They get here after days and nights

having crossed many countries

they reach it together with their children, even the little ones who were not to be included.

They took the children because for this kind of trip you do not leave without them.

Those who had it took gold because they believed gold might be useful. All of them took what was most valuable because you must not leave what is valuable when you take a long trip.

All of them brought their life, because above all it is your life you must take with you. And when they arrive

they believe they have arrived

in Hell

possibly. And yet they did not believe it.

They had no idea you could take a train to Hell but since they were there they got their courage up and got ready to face what was coming

together with their children, their wives and their old parents with their family memories, and family papers.

They did not know there is no arriving in this station.

They expect the worst—they do not expect the unthinkable.

And when the guards shout to line up five by five, the men on one side, women and children on the other, in a language they do not understand, the truncheon blows make them understand and so they line up by fives expecting anything.

Mothers keep a tight hold on their children—they tremble at the thought they might be taken away—because the children are hungry and thirsty and disheveled by lack of sleep crossing so many countries. They have arrived at last, they will be able to take care of them.

And when the guards shout to leave their bundles, comforters and memories on the platform, they do so because they must be prepared for the worst, and do not want to be surprised by anything. They say: "We'll see." They have already seen so much and are weary from the trip.

The station is not a station. It is the end of the track. They look and are distressed by the desolation around them.

In the morning, the mist hides the marshes.

In the evening floodlights reveal the white barbed wire as distinctly as astrophotography. They believe that this is where they are being taken, and they are afraid.

At night they wait for the day with the children heavy in their mothers' arms. They wait and wonder.

With daylight there is no more waiting. The columns start out at once. Women and children first, they are the most exhausted. After that the men. They are also weary but relieved that their women and children should go first.

For women and children go first.

In the winter they are chilled to the bone. Particularly those who come from Candia, snow is new to them.

In the summer the sun blinds them when they step out of the cattle-cars locked tight on departure.

Departure from France the Ukraine Albania Belgium Slovakia Italy Hungary Peloponnesus Holland Macedonia Austria Herzegovina from the shores of the Black Sea the shores of the Baltic the shores of the Mediterranean the banks of the Vistula.

They would like to know where they are. They do not know that this is the center of Europe. They look for the name of the station. This is a station that has no name.

A station that will remain nameless for them.

Some of them are traveling for the first time in their lives.

Some of them have traveled in all the countries in the world, businessmen. They knew all the landscapes but did not recognize this one.

They look. They will be able to say later on how it was.

All want to remember the impression they had and how they felt they would never return.

This is a feeling one might have had already in one's life. They know you cannot trust feelings.

Some came from Warsaw with large shawls and tied-up bundles  
some from Zagreb the women their heads covered with scarves

some from the Danube wearing multi-colored woolen sweaters knitted through long night hours  
some from Greece, they took with them black olives and loukoums  
some came from Monte-Carlo  
they were in the casino  
they are still wearing tails and stiff shirt fronts mangled from the trip  
paunchy and bald  
fat bankers who played keep the bank  
there are married couples who stepped out of the synagogue the bride all in white veiled all wrinkled from having slept on the floor of the cattle-car  
the bridegroom in black wearing a top-hat his gloves soiled  
parents and guests, women holding pearl-embroidered handbags  
all of them sorry they could not stop home to change into something less delicate.  
The rabbi holds himself straight, heading the line. He has always been a model for the rest.

There are boarding-school girls wearing identical pleated skirts, their hats trailing blue ribbons. They pull up their knee socks carefully as they clamber down, and walk neatly five by five, as though on a regular Thursday outing, holding hands, unaware. What can they do to little boarding-school girls shepherded by their teacher? The teacher tells them: "Be good, children!" They don't have the slightest desire not to be good.

There are old people who used to receive letters from their children in America. Their idea of foreign lands comes from postcards. Nothing ever looked like what they see here. Their children will never believe it.

There are intellectuals: doctors or architects, composers or poets. You can tell them by the way they walk, by their glasses. They too have seen a great deal in their lifetimes, studied much. Many made use of their imagination to write books, yet nothing they imagined came close to what they see now.

All the furriers of large cities are gathered here, as well as the men's and women's tailors, and the manufacturers of ready-to-wear who had moved to western Europe. They do not recognize in this place the land of their forebears.

There is the inexhaustible crowd of city dwellers where each one lives in his own beehive cell. Looking at the endless lines you wonder how they ever fit into the stacked-up cubicles of a metropolis.

A mother slaps her five-year-old because he won't hold her hand and she wants him to walk quietly by her side. You run the risk of getting lost if you are separated in a strange, crowded place. She hits her child, and we who know cannot forgive her for it. Yet, were she to smother him with kisses, it would not make a bit of difference.

There are those who having journeyed eighteen days lost their minds, murdering one another inside the boxcars and

those who suffocated during the trip when they were tightly packed together  
these will not step out.

There's a little girl who hugs her doll against her chest, dolls can be smothered too.

There are two sisters wearing white coats. They went out for a walk and never got back for dinner. Their parents still await their return anxiously.

Five by five they walk down the street of arrivals. It is actually the street of departure but no one knows it. This is a one-way street.

They proceed in orderly fashion so as not to be faulted.

They reach a building and heave a sigh. They have reached their destination at last.

And when the soldiers bark their orders, shouting for the women to strip, they undress the children first, careful not to wake them completely. After days and nights of travel the little ones are edgy and cranky

then the women start to strip in front of their children, nothing to be done

and when each is handed a towel they worry whether the shower will be warm because the children could catch cold

and when the men enter the shower room through another door, stark naked, the women hide the children against their bodies.

Perhaps at that moment all of them understand.

But understanding doesn't do any good since they cannot tell it to those waiting on the railway platform

those riding in the dark boxcars across many countries only to get here

those held in detention camps who are afraid of leaving, wondering about the climate, the working conditions, or being parted from their few possessions

those hiding in the mountains and forest who have grown weary of concealment.

Come what may they'll head home. After all why should anyone come looking for them since they harmed no one

those who imagined they found a safe place for their children in a Catholic convent school where the sisters are so kind.

A band will be dressed in the girls' pleated skirts. The camp commandant wishes Viennese waltzes played every Sunday morning.

A blockhova shall cut homey window curtains out of the holy vestments worn by the rabbi to celebrate the sabbath in whatever place, no matter what.

A kapo will masquerade herself by donning the bridegroom's morning coat and top hat, with her girlfriend wrapped in the bride's veil. They'll play "wedding" all night while the prisoners, dead tired, lie in their bunks. Kapos can have fun since they're not exhausted at the end of the day.

Black Calamata olives and Turkish delight cubes will be sent to ailing German women who don't like Calamata olives, nor olives of any kind.

All day all night

every day every night the chimneys smoke, fed by this fuel sent from every part of Europe

standing at the mouth of the crematoria men sift through ashes to find gold melted from gold teeth. All those Jews have mouths full of gold, and since there are so many of them it all adds up to tons and tons.

In the spring, men and women sprinkle ashes on drained marshland plowed for the first time. They fertilize the soil with human phosphate.

From bags tied round their bellies, they draw human bone meal which they sow upon the furrows. By the end of the day their faces are covered with white dust blown back up by the wind. Sweat trickling down over the white powder traces their wrinkles.

They need not fear running short of fertilizer since train after train gets here every day and every night, every hour of every day and every night.

This is the largest station in the world for arrivals and departures.

Only those who enter the camp find out what happened to the others. They cry at the thought of having parted from them at the station the day an officer ordered the young prisoners to line up separately

people are needed to drain the marshes and cover them with the others' ashes.

They tell themselves it would have been far better never to have entered or found out.