

**Testimony of Leo Bretholz
Holocaust Survivor and SNCF Victim
On Behalf of the Coalition for Holocaust Rail Justice**

Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

November 16, 2011

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Berman, and members of the Committee, my name is Leo Bretholz, and I am a Holocaust survivor. After World War II, I immigrated to the United States and settled in Baltimore where I still reside. I am 90 years old and retired, but I still speak regularly to school groups and organizations about my experiences during the Holocaust, the darkest chapter of our history.

I first would like to thank the Committee for providing me with the opportunity to be here today to testify about the atrocities that I experienced personally at the hands of the French rail company, SNCF. I would also like to thank Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, Senator Schumer, the Congressional delegation from my home state of Maryland, and the many legislators who have made certain that I, and SNCF's other victims, are not forgotten. I am also deeply honored to be here with Donald Shearer. Mr. Shearer is not Jewish, but found himself as a U.S. Prisoner of War on an SNCF train bound for Buchenwald. He experienced the same horrors that I did, and more. It is because of the courage of Mr. Shearer and the members of our military, many of whom didn't return from the War, that I am sitting here today. I will never forget this courage and sacrifice, and for this I am grateful every day.

Ten days ago, November 6, 2011, marked the 69th anniversary of the night I jumped from an SNCF train bound for Auschwitz carrying 1,000 innocent victims, yet I still remember that haunting night as if it was yesterday.

I grew up in Vienna, Austria. In 1938, when Germany annexed Austria and my mother's worry that they would come for me became too great, she forced me to leave her and my sisters behind and flee into Luxembourg. Across a river, and under cover of night, I started to run. And I would continue to run for my life for the next seven years.

In October 1942, I ended up in the internment camp Drancy, outside of Paris. Drancy was the waiting room for trains bound for Auschwitz, later referred to as the antechamber of Auschwitz. I was there for only two weeks before the order came to gather our belongings for our deportation. The deportation train to Auschwitz was owned and operated by SNCF. They were paid by the Nazis per head and per kilometer to transport innocent victims across France and ultimately to death camps like Auschwitz and Buchenwald. They collaborated willingly with the Nazis. In the end, they transported 76,000 Jews, and thousands of others as well, with no regard for age, gender, or physical condition. Of the 76,000 Jews deported, only 2,000 would survive. Here I have, in my hand, a copy of an invoice sent by SNCF seeking to be paid for the services they provided. They pursued payment on this bill after the liberation of Paris, after the Nazis were gone. This was not coercion, this was business.

Famous Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld made a log of all the SNCF transports which contains the names of all 76,000 Jews on those trains, including over 11,000 children. The oldest person in the convoys was 94 and the youngest was not even a day old. The elderly were herded on like cattle and infants were thrown in the cars in crates, often

without their mothers. And in this book appears my name, Leo Bretholz, on SNCF convoy number 42, containing 1,000 people, fifty to a cattle car, twenty cars.

SNCF carried out the transports with precision, efficiency, and deception. We were marched into the station where they would count us off – one, two, three ... forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty – into a cattle car. There was no flexibility and no compromise. In the car in front of me, a family counted off and the fifty-first person was the young son. The boy began to scream and the father pleaded to allow them to stay together, but with cold precision the boy was shoved into one car, his family into another. I believe that was the last time they saw each other.

Our belongings were taken from us in Drancy, and we were given a voucher. This is the deception – we were told to hold on to our vouchers, so we could get our belongings when we arrived where we were going. They knew we would not be getting our belongings back but created the deception of resettlement. We knew that no one returned from where we were headed.

For the entire trip of many days' duration we were provided only one piece of triangle cheese, one stale piece of bread, and no water. There was hardly room to stand or sit or squat in the cattle car. And in that car there was one bucket for us to relieve ourselves in. I'll leave it to your imagination as to how long that bucket actually served its purpose. Within that cattle car people were sitting and standing and praying and weeping and fighting – the whole gamut of human emotions. And this was the situation in the cattle cars where buckets overflowed with human waste.

We sat the entire first night in that putrid cattle car. Finally, in the morning the train began to move, and we were provided with some relief as fresh air finally began to

flow through the two barred windows at either end of the car. My friend Manfred said that if they could do this to us in France, the land of Victor Hugo and Voltaire, then we definitely didn't want to test it where they were sending us. So, we immediately began to try to figure out a way to escape.

We figured that if we could just pry the bars on the windows apart a couple inches more, we could slip through. Many in the cattle car, fearing the guards would punish everyone if we were found out, urged us not even to try. I also was beginning to doubt our plan when an elderly woman on crutches spoke out. She wielded that crutch like a weapon and pointed it at me and said "You must do it." "If you get out," she said, "maybe you can tell the story. Who else will tell the story?" I can still see her face and hear her voice today.

So Manfred and I set out to pry apart the bars on the windows. First, we tried belts, but they slipped off. We needed rope. Then someone suggested, take your sweaters off and dip them into that human waste on the bottom of the car, so we did and then we could twist the sweaters – like when you wring a wet towel, it gets tighter and tighter. We kept twisting and twisting like a tourniquet. The human waste from the sweaters dripped down on our arms and our rolled up shirt sleeves. We kept going for hours, alternating pulling on the bars.

We were about to give up when we noticed tiny red flakes starting to appear on our arms. It was the rust from the bars of the cattle car window. We were moving the bars. We kept alternating pulling the top bar up and the bottom bar down until finally there was enough room for us just to squeeze through.

It was night and time for us to attempt our escape. I went first and Manfred helped me climb out the tiny window and stand on the small ledge on the outside of the car. He followed me and I made room for him as he came out, moving around towards the coupling. We held on tight, so as not to slip and fall beneath the train, and waited for the train to take a curve and slow down, which would also provide more protection from the spotlights the guards used to make sure no one escaped. We finally felt the train slow and head into a curve, and then Manfred and I jumped to our freedom. That night, Manfred and I were sheltered by a Righteous Gentile, a priest who fed us and hid us.

Of the 1,000 people with me on SNCF convoy number 42, only five survived the War. If I had not jumped from that train, I am certain I wouldn't be here today before you. As a survivor, it is my duty and responsibility to speak out on behalf of those who did not survive, such as the old woman on the train who pushed us to escape. And for my family that did not survive. Today I am here before you, seeking justice for those who were not as fortunate.

SNCF willingly collaborated with the Nazis. Had the company resisted, even to a small degree, the number of those killed from France would have been greatly reduced. Had SNCF not imposed those horrific conditions, many lives could have been saved. In the almost 70 years since the end of the War, SNCF has paid no reparations nor been held accountable. The company did not even publicly apologize for its role until last year, when SNCF was criticized for pursuing high-speed rail in the United States without fully accounting for its role in the Holocaust. As it was during the Holocaust for SNCF, so it is now – all about money.

SNCF has been using every available legal and PR tactic to suppress the truth and avoid its responsibility to the victims of the deportations. For SNCF, this is an inexpensive price to pay if it means it can continue to escape accountability. While SNCF works to whitewash its image, and while SNCF pursues its public relations spin campaign, my fellow survivors and I will continue to tell the story and to fight for justice. The Holocaust Rail Justice Act is the last opportunity many of us will have to see justice within our lifetimes. The survivors seek only to have an opportunity to have our day in court for the first time, to publicly hold SNCF accountable for its actions, and to finally allow justice to be done.

As my 91st birthday approaches in the coming year, I can only hope that the many dedicated lawmakers who have worked so diligently to move this legislation forward will redouble their efforts to pass this legislation during this Congress. Seventy years is far too long to wait for a company to accept responsibility for the death and suffering they caused.

Sitting here before you today I am as proud as I was the day I first set foot in this great country. I have the utmost faith in our country, in our legislators, and in you. I am greatly encouraged by the actions of this Committee, but I urge you, please pass the Holocaust Rail Justice Act this Congress – before it is too late.

Thank you very much for inviting me to share my story with you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

“TRUTH IN TESTIMONY” DISCLOSURE FORM

Clause 2(g) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives and the Rules of the Committee require the disclosure of the following information. A copy of this form should be attached to your written testimony and will be made publicly available in electronic format, per House Rules.

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Name: | 2. Organization or organizations you are representing: |
| Leo Bretholz | Ad Hoc Coalition for Holocaust Rail Justice |
| 3. Date of Committee hearing: | |
| Wednesday, November 16, 2011 | |
| 4. Have <u>you</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? | 5. Have any of the <u>organizations you are representing</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| 6. If you answered yes to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets. | |
| | |
| 7. Signature:  | |

Please attach a copy of this form to your written testimony.