

1. DIALECTICS AT A STANDSTILL

The onlookers go rigid when the train goes past.

—Franz Kafka, 1910



1.1 Franz Schwechten, Anhalter Bahnhof, Berlin (1881). *Courtesy of the Granger Collection, New York*

AS THE TERMINUS of the first major, long-distance railway line to open in a German state, the Anhalter Bahnhof has always had more than just an incidental connection to the city of Berlin and its liminal geography as a point of entry to eastern, western, and southern Europe. From the moment it opened in 1840 until its destruction more than a hundred years later, the station served as a testament to the dizzying arrival and violent departure of German/Jewish modernity. In its built forms one could discern the triumph of technologies of modernization, the emergence of Prussian expansionism, the national hopes invested in a unified Germany, the primacy placed on transcendent size and speed, the ideals of cosmopolitanism coupled with fears of transmigration, the reality of an interconnected world of commerce and material exchange, and this world's destructive capacities. Even in its

present ruin it is a witness to both the volatility of the twentieth century and the hopes and fears of the nineteenth. Its history runs straight through German/Jewish modernity, and, recursively, the history of German/Jewish modernity runs straight through its history.

Walter Benjamin certainly recognized the railway station's significance when he immortalized its technological greatness and immense scale in recollecting his childhood in Berlin: "The 'Anhalter' refers to the name of the mother cavern of all railways; it is where the locomotives are at home and the trains have to stop. No distance was further away than when fog gathered over its tracks."¹ To Benjamin the Anhalter Bahnhof was the reality of that marvelous and equally dubious nineteenth-century dream of progress characterized by, among other things, the possibility of connecting to a faraway place. It was where Franz Kafka arrived from Prague when he visited Felice Bauer in Berlin; it is also where Paul Celan stopped over on his way to Paris from Czernowitz on the day after November 8/9, 1938. In the 1930s thousands of Jewish children were sent on trains from Berlin's Anhalter Bahnhof to safety outside of Germany; in 1941–42 the station was used to gather elderly Jewish "transports" who were deported to the concentration camp of Theresienstadt.

If the "arcade" counts as the best material witness to nineteenth-century Paris, as Benjamin famously argued in his massive historiographic fragment, *The Arcades Project*, surely the railway—perhaps Berlin's Anhalter train station—would have to count as the best material witness to German/Jewish modernity. It was, after all, the railway that literally unified Germany in the late nineteenth century and connected Berlin to Western and Eastern Europe in the twentieth—in splendor, emancipation, and horror. In fact, the history of the very first railway line constructed in a German state is punctuated by the entanglement of German modernity and Jewish modernity. In 1835, the year in which a six-kilometer railway track opened between Nuremberg and Fürth, Jews were not allowed to reside in Nuremberg, although they could do business in the town, provided they were accompanied by a German citizen and did not stay overnight. At this time Jews comprised nearly 20 percent of the population of Fürth, a town that also boasted a Jewish university, two synagogues, and a Hebrew press. Encouraged by their local rabbi, Jews from Fürth invested in the railway construction project and became the first commercial travelers to take the train to work in the German town that barred them citizenship. German and Jewish, modernity and mobility became wed to one another.

Over the course of the next century, the railway emerged as an embodied, transitional space emblematic of both the emancipatory hopes and the destructive nightmares of an epoch. Not unlike the latent mythology of the arcade, the rapid expansion of the railway was driven by its unprecedented capacity to produce capital and facilitate transnational material transport. It became a “dream space” of modernity, displaying and exchanging the fetishized objects of a capitalist economy. Both the railway and the arcade thus became the symbols and proof of their epochs: Railways represented progress because they were the technological realization of mobility, speed, and exchange. They also became the first mode of transportation to move the masses, from the formation of mass politics to the implementation of mass deportations. And, finally, both the arcades and the railways eventually fell out of favor, overtaken by some other formation imagined to be faster, more fashionable, more progressive, more opulent, and more destructive.

The heady heydays of the arcades and the railway may be over, but their constitutive dreams are still legible in the surviving remains. The physical ruins of the Anhalter Bahnhof and its varied cultural testimonies may be all we are left with, but it is from these remains that we can map the cultural geographies of German/Jewish modernity. The Anhalter Bahnhof represents a paradigm of modernity, one that is already grafted, as a dialectical image, onto these cultural geographies. In its ruins “German” and “Jewish” are inextricably bound to one another, stretching far beyond the space of Berlin or the German nation, and “modernity” betrays itself as a persistent dialectic of enabling and checking mobility. Through the multiple encounters, strange tensions, and mediated interactions between German and Jewish, the cultural geography of this book emerges on the trains traveling on the tracks running to and away from the Anhalter Bahnhof.

