

Holocaust roadscapes: Retracing the "death marches" in contemporary Europe

Retracer les « marches de la mort » dans l'Europe contemporaine

Describir las "marchas de la muerte" en Europa contemporánea

Tim Cole

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Article abstract

During the final year of the war, mass evacuations westwards from concentration camps on foot brought the European road network into the orbit of Holocaust landscapes. The routes of these so-called "death marches" that criss-crossed Europe have been followed by a wide variety of pilgrims, ranging from Holocaust survivors retracing former journeys they made half a century before (oftentimes accompanied by family members, and in some cases, documentary filmmakers), through organized groups of Jews and Christians, to visual artists. While motivated by very different concerns, all share assumptions that the encounter with place – an authentic site of wartime atrocity – shrinks time, merging past and present (and future). Such notions of the possibility of direct access to the past are heightened by the haptic and embodied experiences of place that are central to walking. The individuals and groups I examine aspire, quite literally, to follow in the footsteps of the victims, walking on the very same ground they walked. While these attempts at shrinking or "fixing" time have been seen variously as more or less successful, all share an assumption of the potential intersections of past, present and future in these seemingly most ordinary of memoryscapes.

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Tim COLE
Historical Studies, School of Humanities,
University of Bristol
Tim.Cole@bristol.ac.uk

Résumé

Durant la dernière année de la guerre, des évacuations de masse, à pied, à partir des camps de concentration vers l'ouest, ont amené le réseau routier européen dans l'orbite des paysages de l'Holocauste. Des routes qu'on a appelées « marches de la mort » ont ainsi constellé l'Europe. Depuis, toute une gamme de « pèlerins » ont suivi ces routes : des survivants de l'Holocauste retraçant le périple accompli un demi-siècle plus tôt (souvent accompagnés de membres de la famille et parfois de documentaristes) jusqu'aux peintres et autres artistes visuels, en passant par des groupes organisés de juifs et de chrétiens. Bien que motivés par des intérêts très divers, tous partagent l'impression que leur rencontre avec le lieu – un site authentique de l'atrocité de la guerre – sera de nature à comprimer le temps, fondant passé et présent (et futur). Une telle notion de la possibilité d'accéder directement au passé est renforcée par l'expérience physique et concrète du lieu, qui est au cœur de la marche. Les personnes et les groupes qui font l'objet de mon étude aspirent littéralement à marcher dans les traces des victimes en foulant le même sol qu'elles. Alors que ces tentatives de comprimer ou de « figer » le temps s'avèrent plus ou moins réussies selon les cas, tous n'en partagent pas moins l'espoir de potentiels croisements entre le passé, le présent et l'avenir dans ces apparemment banals paysages de la mémoire.

Mots-clés

Paysage, mémoire, marches de la mort, routes, Holocauste.

Abstract

During the final year of the war, mass evacuations westwards from concentration camps on foot brought the European road network into the orbit of Holocaust landscapes. The routes of these so-called "death marches" that criss-crossed Europe have been followed by a wide variety of pilgrims, ranging from Holocaust survivors retracing former journeys they made half a century before (oftentimes accompanied by family members, and in some cases, documentary filmmakers), through organized groups of Jews and Christians, to visual artists. While motivated by very different concerns, all share assumptions that the encounter with place – an authentic site of wartime atrocity – shrinks time, merging past and present (and future). Such notions of the possibility of direct access to the past are heightened by the haptic and embodied experiences of place that are central to walking. The individuals and groups I examine aspire, quite literally, to follow in the footsteps of the victims, walking on the very same ground they walked. While these attempts at shrinking or "fixing" time have been seen variously as more or less successful, all share an assumption of the potential intersections of past, present and future in these seemingly most ordinary of memoryscapes.

Keywords

Landscapes, memory, death marches, roads, Holocaust.



Resumen

Durante el último año de la guerra, evacuaciones masivas, a pie, que parten de los campos de concentración hacia el oeste, han puesto la red de rutas carreteras europeas en la órbita de paisajes del Holocausto. Las rutas llamadas “marchas de la muerte” han proliferado en Europa. Desde entonces, toda una gama de “peregrinos” han tomado esas rutas. Supervivientes del Holocausto (a veces acompañados de familiares, otras, de documentalistas), pintores y otros artistas visuales, hasta grupos organizados de judíos y cristianos rehacen la travesía realizada hace medio siglo.

Bien que motivados por intereses diversos, todos comparten la impresión de encuentran en el lugar – sitio auténtico de la atrocidad de la guerra – algo que permita comprimir el tiempo, amalgamando pasado y presente (y futuro). La posibilidad de acceder directamente al pasado es reforzada por la experiencia física y concreta del lugar, centro de la marcha. Las personas y los grupos, objeto de este estudio, aspiran literalmente a caminar sobre las huellas de las víctimas, pisando el mismo suelo que ellas. Si las tentativas de comprimir o de “fijar” el tiempo tienen un éxito relativo según los casos, todos comparten la esperanza de congregar potencialmente pasado, presente y futuro, en esos paisajes de la memoria, aparentemente banales.

Palabras claves

Paisaje, memoria, marchas de la muerte, rutas, Holocausto.

Introduction

During the final year of the war, mass evacuations on foot westwards from concentration camps brought the European road network into the orbit of Holocaust landscapes (Blatman, 2010). The routes of some of these so-called “death marches” that criss-crossed Europe were re-walked in the immediate post-war years by field workers looking for burial sites as they sought to identify victims of Nazi Germany as part of the remit of the International Tracing Service. However, it is only within the last two decades that these ordinary roads have been purposefully re-walked by a diverse range of individuals and groups looking for something other than corpses. In this paper I focus in detail on three rather different walkers/marchers, starting with a lone walker – the American-Jewish photographer Susan Silas – before moving on to consider two group marches made up of charismatic Christians (March of Life) and Jewish teenagers (March of the Living). While both Susan Silas and March of the Living have been analysed individually (Stier, 2003; Sheramy, 2007; Kaplan, 2008; Kaplan, 2011), the March of Life has received little attention and there has been no comparative analysis of these differing walkers. The key questions I explore here are what motivated these attempts to rewalk death march routes, how far was authenticity critical to such endeavours and in what ways have past, present and future been seen to co-exist in these simultaneously ordinary – and yet extraordinary – memoryscapes triggered by the act of rewalking?

The memory practices of these individuals and groups occupy a space somewhere between a range of other tourist and memory practices that have been explored – in many cases extensively – in the wider literature. The concerns with accessing and experiencing “authentic” landscapes resonates with wider tourist practices where the significance of “objective” and “existential” authenticity to the tourist encounter continues to be a source of debate (MacCannell, 1976; DeLyser, 1999; Wang, 1999; Steiner and Resinger,

2006; Kim and Jamal, 2007). Moreover, concerns with authenticity of place point to parallels with the practices of so-called “Holocaust” and “dark” tourists (Lenon and Foley, 2000; Pollock, 2003). However, the individuals and groups I explore here differ from Holocaust or dark tourists in important ways. While Holocaust tourists tend to visit a handful of well-interpreted sites (Pollock, 2003), these individuals and groups (especially Silas and March of Life) intentionally focus on un-interpreted and hidden landscapes where they seek to uncover a forgotten past. Moreover, unlike dark tourists who seek an encounter with death in notorious massacre sites (Lenon and Foley, 2000; Stone, 2012), it is not so-much the specific sites of killing en route that are privileged as wider landscapes of forced movement along vast stretches of the European road network. However, it is not just the distinctive destinations that marks these case studies out from Holocaust tourist practices, but also the emphasis placed on the act of travelling on foot as of equal significance as the places travelled along (and not just to).

The emphasis on walking as the mode of travelling shares more with broader mobile cultural tourist and pilgrimage practises than it does with the emphasis on visiting fixed sites that characterises both Holocaust and dark tourism. Walking is more than a way of getting from a to b. It is a particular way of moving through, and engaging with, a landscape (Solnit, 2006). It is not simply a slowing down which leads to a different visual experience, but also a multi-sensory embodied experience which seeks a haptic experience of landscape. In short, walking is about touching and not just seeing the world. That embodied encounter lies underneath what Liedeke Plate has signalled as a broader strand of cultural tourism whereby, “there is hardly a city or town that does not have its walk ‘in the footsteps of’, inviting its visitors to tread on the trail of some world-famous or locally known celebrity.” At the heart of such experiences is a desire “for knowledge that is embodied and located” with walking offering the opportunity for the former and the authentic route followed the experience of the latter (Plate, 2006: 102, 108).

The promise of “embodied and located” experiential knowledge offered by such tourist practices is mirrored in the broader practice of pilgrimage that has been subject to analysis across a range of disciplines. Qualities of pilgrimage identified in that literature share much with the journeys I analyse below. The notion of “*communitas*” central to Turner and Turner’s ground-breaking work on the importance of communal experiences resonates with the practices of the March of the Living which foregrounds Jewish identity formation through highly symbolic marching (Turner and Turner, 1978). However, while the March of the Living does contain two key elements of pilgrimage – a journey and a goal (Morinis, 1992: 2) – alongside the centrality of being a communal experience, other examples that I examine – in particular Silas – emphasise the solitary journey as an end in and of itself.

In short, the journeys that I examine below do not fit neatly into existing major categories of analysis but occupy a space somewhere between Holocaust tourism and pilgrimage. Rather than examine them primarily in such terms, I seek to situate them here as memory practices that fit within a broader literature on landscape and memory given the complex interactions between time and space that I see playing out in the examples I explore. On the one hand, the very act of walking along these roads means that “the encounter with place unfolds over time” literally one step at a time over hours or days (Rosenberg, 2007: 54). On the other hand, the encounter with place – an authentic site of wartime atrocity – is assumed to shrink time, merging past and present (and future), or what

Karen Till terms giving “a spatial ‘fix’ to time” (Till, 2005: 9). As a number of writers signal, the power of sites (and objects) in contemporary memory practices is that their having been there then (and therefore witnesses of the events) suggests that their being here now affords direct access to the past through place (Azaryahu, 1993; Rosenberg, 2007). Such notions of the possibility of direct access to the past are heightened by the haptic and embodied experiences of place that are central to walking. The individuals and groups I examine aspire, quite literally, to follow in the footsteps of the victims, walking on the very same ground they walked in order to experience “the connection of that touch across time and through space” (Till, 2005: 208). As I want to suggest, while these attempts at shrinking or “fixing” time have been seen variously as more or less successful, all share an assumption of the potential intersections of past, present and future in these seemingly most ordinary of memoryscapes.

Retracing the death marches: The first and second generations

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening up of former Eastern Europe, increasing numbers of survivors – although far from all – made return visits, often with their children or grandchildren, to their former homes and sites of wartime incarceration (Cole, 2013). In some cases, these return visits were the basis for documentary films or memoirs (Olsson, 2008). Far smaller numbers have returned to retrace the steps of the evacuations between camps in the last months of the war. However, one woman who did both is Kitty Hart-Moxon who featured in an award-winning TV documentary that followed Kitty as she showed her son around the most notorious of the camps: Auschwitz (Morley, 1979; Hart, 1981). Over a decade later, a similar format of return documentary saw Kitty retracing her journey from Poland to Germany on foot and by train in the winter and spring of 1945, this time accompanied by the then director of the Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre, Stephen Smith (Nelson, 2002). Another such filmed retracing of evacuations in the final stage of the war formed the basis of Austin de Besche’s *Pilgrimage into the Past* which followed survivor Michael Kraus who re-walked, over the course of three days, the 37 mile death march from Mauthausen to Gunskirchen that he had undertaken in the last weeks of the war (de Besche, 2002). These films – as with documentary films returning survivors to Auschwitz – sought to re-place survivors back into the physical landscapes in order to trigger on-screen memories of the wartime events there.

While the press release accompanying Hart-Moxon’s return to the landscapes of evacuation boasted of the possibility of accessing this past – “while the landscape might have changed beyond all recognition, the details are etched in Kitty’s memory. ‘57 years can go by, but your memory will not fade. Certain events, if they are extraordinary, you never forget them. They stay with you for the rest of your days,’ says Kitty” (BBC Press Office, 2002) – Austin de Besche was surprised how Kraus’ return journey ended up being less about the Holocaust and more about the complex relationships within Kraus’ family. Kraus’ wife Ilana and two daughters Dana and Tamara joined him as he retraced his steps. Filming their conversations as they walked, de Besche realised that

they discovered something during this walk about other members of the family. It certainly wasn’t about learning how to deal with the Holocaust overall (nobody can), but they did learn something about being a family together... I was surprised, I thought it would be mostly about the Holocaust – a return journey – and I knew that the daughters hadn’t been told much about it and wanted to know more. That came up but it was about the family working these things out together, and that was the journey just as much as the physical one was (Rucker, 2002).



Retracing the route of his wartime evacuation became as much about creating a space for wide-ranging conversation among family members as they walked together in the present as it did a site for Kraus to retell his wartime story of the past (to both family and subsequently viewers of the documentary) in the places where it happened.

The timing of these return journeys reflected not only a post-Cold War return to the Holocaust landscapes of the east, but also came in the wake of the re-entry of the death marches into popular historiography with the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's international bestseller *Hitler's Willing Executioners* in 1996 (Goldhagen, 1996). One third of this book was devoted to a case study of the death marches at the end of the war, including a rich description and mapping of one particular march – the Helmbrechts death march.

In the spring of 1998 – two years after Goldhagen's book had brought this particular death march to the attention of an international audience – the photographer Susan Silas retraced the route taken by 580 Jewish women from the sub camp at Helmbrechts to Prachatice in the Czech Republic. Over the course of the 22 days of the original march from 13 April to 4 May, Silas re-walked the same route taken 53 years earlier, pausing each night where the women had stopped. Her choice both of route and time of walking showed a supreme concern with both spatial and temporal authenticity. Moreover as a Jewish woman, herself the daughter of Hungarian survivors, Silas sought to add another layer of authenticity of her own identity onto her retracing of this march by Jewish women that included many Hungarian deportees in their midst.

For Silas,

the art work was my physical presence there – what was important with respect to the marchers and my feelings about them was putting my body in that physical space – the images are a tertiary witness to that act. My occupying space and time I wouldn't have occupied had they not been there before me – that was most significant (Kaplan, 2008: 115).

The importance of the act of walking – the same embodied experience of this landscape as those Jewish women who had followed the same route half a century before – can be seen in Silas' decision not to exhibit a slow-motion film of the journey in reverse by car that she undertook immediately after completing the walk in the original display of the work (Hanas, 2009). Silas chose to privilege one way of seeing the landscape – the slower pace of passing through the landscape on foot rather than speeding by in a car. For Silas, walking offered a way of moving through the landscape such that “all of the details can be readily taken in and retained in memory” (Silas, 2003).

Re-walking the route taken by a group of Jewish women 53 years earlier can be seen in the context of a set of broader artistic and Jewish-American practices. Silas herself positioned *Helmbrechts walk* within a longer tradition in conceptual art of the act of walking itself as the art work pioneered by artists such as Richard Long. But Silas's work can also be seen in a broader attempt by those Dora Apel dubs “secondary witnesses,” “to work through their relationship to the past by retracing the lives of their parents, grandparents, or unknown ancestors in some way, or even performing the role of Nazi victim” (Apel, 2002: 108). In her attempt at re-enacting the time and space of the Helmbrechts death march, Silas attempted to (re)perform of the role of Nazi victim.

However, despite these attempts at authenticity in re-placing her own Jewish female body into the very places occupied by hundred of other Jewish female bodies over half a century ago, Silas confessed to a “monumental failure of the imagination” (Kaplan, 2008: 115) and that at journey’s end she “didn’t find it easier to imagine the plight of these women but harder to imagine” (Apel, 2002: 149). As she was all too aware, being there now, was not the same as being there then. Indeed, her photographs of these mute landscapes can be read as recording that experience of mismatch between these places then and now where the traces of the past lie hidden. In some cases, this was something made explicit by Silas in the text that accompanied the photographs. On Day 16 she mused:

On the map Klaus [a student who had studied this march] gave me my route is represented by a thick red line. Next to the line intermittently there are thick black dots – sometimes one or two, sometimes many. They represent the deaths of women along the march route. There are no markers in real time and space along the route that corresponds to these black dots. There are, however, indications of other deaths. I encounter crucifixes on plaster and cement pedestals with increasing frequency. Some are quite beautiful and contain painted or engraved imagery – others more simple. Isolated from the town cemetery, I wonder how it is that they came to be buried by the side of the road (Silas, 2003).

It seemed to Silas that this Jewish landscape had been erased by, and covered over with, a more recent Christian landscape.

But, in a more marked sense the epilogue that gave one of the survivors of the march the last word, can be read in juxtaposition with the entirety of the forty-eight images that proceed it. Here, Silas used a survivor’s words to suggest a radical mismatch between what the group of Jewish women experienced in 1945 and what she herself had experienced in 1998. In the epilogue, Silas revealed that

Halina Kleiner walked from Helmbrechts to just short of Prachatice in the spring of 1945. I met her in 1998. She was seventy but didn’t look it. I asked her if she remembered what it looked like there, in the Sudetenland: that swath of the Czech Republic that bounced back and forth between Germany and Czechoslovakia so many times. She remembers a great deal about her experiences. They are still vivid. She remembers the biting cold. She remembers the harshness of the guards. She remembers her friends. To my question about what things looked like – “you mean the scenery” she asked – she didn’t have a visual memory of the landscape or her immediate surroundings. Perhaps under such conditions it is not possible to look too far – to either side or ahead. She did recollect being marched by houses that were lit inside and wondering what the people in those warm houses were thinking about and doing at that moment (Silas, 2003).

As the forty-eight images that precede this closing text eloquently revealed, Silas (and we her readers and viewers) saw something that Kleiner never saw: the landscape on both sides of the road.

Tellingly, the one point where Silas confessed to the strongest emotional response to the landscape she walked through came when she descended into a bunker found near the former camp in Zwodau. As she wrote in the accompanying text,

I am paralyzed in there. The air is thick, too cold. I have read too many books. I stand there for a very long time but my eyes never become accustomed to the dark. It is left to Rebecca [her research assistant] to describe the interior space to me: two mildewed stuffed chairs, a table and a few burned down candles... (Silas, 2003).

It was here, in a bunker constructed for Nazi defence against Soviet attack, rather than on the road, that Silas appears to have come closest to Kleiner's experience of not seeing, but only feeling the cold and fear. In short, she confesses to us that she felt something closest to the authentic in the wrong place – somewhere the marching women never went.

Moreover, in choosing only to display an external shot of this bunker interior, Silas ensures that we never to get to see this affective site that she herself never properly saw but only felt. Instead, we only see – as she herself did – the landscapes on the sides of the road that the survivor Kleiner cannot remember seeing. The contrast is clear. Silas (and by extension, we her viewers) see differently from the survivors, in large part because of the different nature and circumstances of motion through this landscape. Silas walked alone and looked around. Fifty three years earlier Kleiner marched through this roadscape surrounded by others. While Erin Hanas sees Silas' renaming of the Helmbrechts march for her artwork as the "Helmbrecht walk" as an attempt "to emphasize the difference between her personal decision to retrace the historic death march and the prisoners' lack of agency" (Hanas, 2009: 32), I read it as a more significant suggestion by Silas of a radically different experience of this landscape. Silas – through her re-titling – tells us that while she walked the same roads between Helmbrecht and Prachaticze, she was not marched along this route.

As Tim Ingold points out, there is a very different experience of seeing and being in a landscape when marching rather than walking. For Ingold,

Marching is the form of pedestrian movement that approximates most closely to transport. Unlike the wayfarer whose movement continually responds to an ongoing perceptual monitoring of the country through which he passes, the pedestrian on the march notices nothing. Before his steadfast, unswerving gaze, the country passes unobserved, while his straightened legs and booted feet beat out a purely mechanical oscillation (Ingold, 2010: 137).

While Kleiner, along with several hundred other Jewish women, was marched along these same roads in a transport evacuating the camps during the chaotic last months of the war, Silas chose to walk these same roads with her eye constantly on the side of the roads which form the focus of her photographic study of the landscape of the road. With her choice of title and by giving Kleiner the final word, Silas makes quite clear that despite her best attempts at authentic identification she is well aware that she was a lone walker in 1998 and not a group marcher in 1945.

Indeed it was her experience of being a single woman walking these roads alone that presented Silas with her own greatest sense of vulnerability. In the accompanying text, Silas recalled how on day one she had to flee from an angry farmer. The next day a car drove past her, circled around, and stopped. After the male driver asked her a series of questions he finally drove away leaving her reflecting how "at times I felt like a sitting duck, moving slowly, out on the road six to ten hours each day." The following day, she was mistaken for one of the prostitutes standing along the side of the road and "a small orange car tries to wave me down" (Silas, 2003). As Silas was all too well aware, rather than being marched as part of a group of hundreds of women, her own experience of these same roads half a century later was a solitary – and isolated – one.

The final artwork is striking in drawing attention so explicitly to the gap between those women prisoners who were on the Helmbrechts march in 1945, and Silas' own experience of walking those same roads towards Helmbrechts in 1998. While the landscape may

seemingly have changed little, Silas highlighted both the radically different circumstances of her and the women's journeying, and the chronological (and not only experiential) distance between then and now. In her careful titling of the final artwork – a limited edition boxed set of 48 prints entitled *Helmbrechts walk, 1998-2003* – Silas made explicit not only a very different experience of movement through the landscape but also dated her journey quite clearly in the present, rather than the past. Moreover, this present focus was reinforced through the decision to juxtapose each of the images Silas took along the route, with snippets of news from that day's copy of *The New York Times*. In doing this, she drew attention to the journey as one being taken in the recent, rather than more distant past. Given the failure of Silas' attempt to resinsert her body into the chronological and geographical specificity of this place – literally a failure to reach back to the past here – Silas shifted her gaze to include the present elsewhere – including press reports of contemporary violence in places as far afield as Rwanda, South Africa, Iraq and Indonesia. In part this can be seen as a universalization of the Holocaust into an ongoing and far-reaching story of global violence. In moving the story of these roads into present time and place, Silas was not alone. That is something seen in two organised groups of death march re-enactors who very much had their eye on present and future as well as places far beyond the road networks of central-Europe. But I see in Silas a more profound and explicit questioning of the possibility of giving “a spatial ‘fix’ to time” through encountering these landscapes (Till, 2005: 9). And this is where she differs markedly from more optimistic attempts to walk in the footsteps of the victims that lie at the very heart of the annual mass marches that have been organised by March of Life and March of the Living in the 1990s and 2000s.

March of Life and March of the Living

In the spring of 2007, a group of charismatic Christians from the Tübingen-based TOS International Ministries led by Jobst Bittner embarked on their first re-tracing of the route of some of the post-war death marches through Germany (Bittner, 2012). Over the course of three days, groups walked sections of the route taken by prisoners evacuated from one of the so-called “Operation Desert” labour camp at Bisingen to Dachau in April 1945 in a “prayer and memorial march” that was intended to “leave a mark” on the landscape and connect the region with Dachau (and so its traumatic past) through a series of “power marches” (TOS, 2007: 5, 7, 29). There was less concern with the precise geographical and chronological authenticity evidenced in Silas' attempt to faithfully adhere to the exact route and timings of the Helmbrechts march. While groups of prisoners had left Bisingen – the starting point of the march – for Dachau on 12 and 14 April 1945, they had been evacuated in open freight cars, rather than on foot. Moreover, those prisoners who did leave Bisingen on foot, were not headed for Dachau. Therefore when they left Bisingen on 12 April 2007 on foot, those taking part in the March of Life were not following a single group of prisoners on their historical and geographical itinerary in the same way that Silas sought to retrace the Helmbrechts March. Instead they were engaged in a more symbolic act of retracing multiple journeys on foot and by train as prisoners were evacuated from labour camps in the Swabian Alb by rewalking “part” of the routes taken half a century before (TOS, 2007: 29).

Moreover, the timing of the march was less about the authenticity of the date of departure than it was about the symbolism of the date of arrival at Dachau on 14 April 2007. Rather than the history of 1945 solely shaping the timing of this memorial march in 2007, there



was another symbolic chronology at play – that of post-war Israeli Holocaust memory. The next day – on the evening of Sunday 15 April, a closing service for the TOS marchers coincided with the beginning of *Yom HaShoah* – the Israeli state day of Holocaust commemoration. The connections being drawn between these acts of commemoration on the roads of Germany and acts of commemoration simultaneously taking place on the roads of Israel was made clear through the scattering of prophetic texts from the book of Isaiah foretelling the restoration of Israel throughout the guide given to marchers and the celebrating of the end of the march with an “Israeli-style buffet” (TOS, 2007: 7-9, 21, 28-29). Multiple chronologies and multiple geographies were at play.

This sense of retracing the route of the death marches as an act of marking out a symbolic geography and chronology was even more marked with the follow-up March of Life scheduled for August 2008. Beginning on the evening of the Jewish holiday of *Tish B’Av* – a fast day remembering the destruction of the First and Second Temples – this march symbolically inscribed a Star of David onto the road network of former East Germany, ending with a service on the Teufelsberg (Devil’s Mountain) made up of the rubble of wartime Berlin. Each day teams walked about seven miles, but the focus was more on visiting a series of significant sites such as former concentration camps and the Wansee Villa where plans for the European-wide implementation of the “final solution of the Jewish question” were discussed in January 1942, rather than on retracing specific evacuation routes. The assumption was that the roadscape of former East Germany was “literally covered” with the routes taken by prisoners being evacuated and therefore “almost all bigger roads and highways” were appropriate spaces for retracing. As participants were informed, “due to the huge number of camps in Eastern Germany, a detailed reconstruction of the routes of the death marches is impossible and we have to assume that nearly every road is ‘covered in blood’ ” (TOS, 2008: 10-15, 30).

In this follow-up march, it was clear that the organisers were less interested in a careful retracing of the route of a series of specific evacuations. While they persisted with the methodology of marching, they were more interested in the static landscapes of a number of Holocaust sites, albeit connected via a road network that was seen to be implicated in more or less its entirety by dint of the mass evacuations in the final months of the war. This shift from specific evacuation routes to a more general concern with marching along unspecified roads that connected a number of significant Holocaust sites was extended further with the more general retracing of Holocaust landscapes by marches that expanded into the Ukraine in August 2010 and Latvia and Lithuania in July and September 2011.

What did remain constant through these changes was an insistence on the importance of walking. The series of “power marches” through Holocaust landscapes undertaken by TOS was imagined as an act of “reconciliation, forgiveness and restoration” through rewalking what was seen as tainted soil (TOS, 2007: 7, 29). Such practices drew on wider charismatic Christian practices of prayer walking and marching as acts of repentance and intercession. But they also drew on a specifically German context of generational encounter with the Holocaust, and specifically its perceived silencing. As Jobst Bittner’s book *Breaking the Veil of Silence* which described the genesis of these marches showed so clearly through both its title and cover image of a grandfather, father and son silencing successive generations, the act of retracing was also seen as an act of uncovering a hidden past (Bittner, 2012). This silencing was seen as particularly

pressing in the territory of the former East Germany where “two dictatorships in a row” had “formed a double layer of concrete” that the 2008 march sought to symbolically break up through ritual marching (TOS, 2008: 11). But it was part of a broader German generational response which characterised the focus of “the ’68 and ’79 generations” on the traces of the Holocaust within the German landscape and “assume the role of detective in their search for the truth because the state and their parents ... silenced and covered up the evidence of past violence” (Till, 2005: 208).

But it was not only East German repression of the National Socialist past that TOS sought to undo through mass symbolic marching in 2008 but also a more recent history of the anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism of the East German State (TOS, 2008: 40). As was clear in both the 2007 and 2008 marches, the act of retracing the route of some of the death marches and visiting sites of murder and incarceration was more than simply a concern with generational undoing of decades of suppression. Walking the roads of Germany was not only act of repentance, but also act of identification with, and support for, the Jewish state rooted in a restorationist theology.

An even more explicit connection between marching the roadscapes of Europe and support for the state of Israel was drawn by another very different group of marchers. First held in 1988, and then repeated bi-annually until 1996 and annually ever since, the March of the Living brings thousands of Jewish teenagers to Poland to re-enact a highly symbolic march (Stier, 2003). Like the first TOS march, the March of the Living drew on the Israeli ritual calendar. On *Yom HaShoah* thousands of Jewish teens, accompanied by Holocaust survivors, march hand-in-hand in silence the three kilometres from the main camp at Auschwitz to the death camp at Birkenau. This march is intended to evoke an experience of time travel “back in time to one of the darkest chapters in human existence, to one of the most terrifying times in Jewish history” through its claims of occupying authentic space – literally walking “in the footsteps of the 6,000,000” (March of the Living, 2012a). The underlying assumption is that by returning to past place it is possible, in some sense, to also return to past time.

However, this attempt to return to the past through occupying a particular place eschews the attempted authenticity of Silas’ *Helmbrechts walk* by merging two journeys – that of deportation into the camp and the reverse journey of evacuations – or death marches from the camp in January 1945 – within a highly symbolic march that seeks to rewrite as much as commemorate the past. As teens enrolling on the programme are told,

As one of the Marchers, your steps will be in direct contrast to the Nazi enforced Death Marches, during which countless numbers of people perished toward the end of WWII. This time, however, there will be a difference. It will be a March of the Living with thousands of Jewish youth, like yourself, marching shoulder to shoulder, along with survivors and their liberators. You will participate in a memorial service in the vicinity of the gas chambers/crematoria in Birkenau, which will conclude with the singing of *Hatikvah*, reaffirming *Am Yisrael Chai* – The Jewish People Live (March of the Living, 2012b).

Singing the Israeli national anthem in the shadows of the gas chamber and marching dressed in the blue and white of Israel and carrying Israeli flags, the Zionist story of rebirth is embodied by these teens who march into this place of destruction and then exit again.

Exiting Auschwitz is particularly important. The March of the Living enacts a symbolic connection between Israel and Auschwitz not only through the timing of the march on Israel’s Holocaust Memorial Day and the carrying of the Israeli flag, but also



makes that connection material by physically taking marchers from Auschwitz to Jerusalem. The March of the Living sees young Jews enter and then in a sense keep on walking. Jewish teens do not leave Birkenau and head home as TOS marchers did as they left Dachau in 2007. Rather, they are taken to Israel – portrayed as the true home of Jews – where they celebrate the two days that follow *Yom HaShoah* in the Israeli ritual calendar: *Yom Hazikaron* (Remembrance Day for those who died in the War of Independence) and *Yom Ha'atzmaut* (Independence Day). If this march is a pilgrimage the ultimate destination is not Birkenau but Jerusalem.

As one marcher so clearly articulated it, the experience is meant to be one of two contrasting (and yet also linked) communal marches, first on the road between Auschwitz and Birkenau and then on the streets of Jerusalem leading to the holy site of the Western Wall. As Dani Palter later reflected,

The two highlights of my trip were the Poland March and the Israel March. There is no way to describe the sense of connection you have while participating in these two marches without being there. In Poland, on *Yom HaShoah*, everyone marches in silence with the people on your own contingent from Auschwitz to Birkenau. It is a HUGE sense of connection. Everyone is wearing their blue MOL jackets, and no one is talking. The Israel march was probably the best day of my life. It takes place on *Yom Ha'atzmaut* ... It starts off at City Hall in Jerusalem, with a huge party. Then, people slowly start marching from City Hall to the *Kotel*. This time it is the complete opposite of the Poland march. No one is with their own contingent – everyone is making new friends from around the world. Everyone is singing songs, both English and Hebrew. It is a just a massive celebration all day long. For the last 24 hours of the trip, I don't think I saw a single face without a smile... (Palter, 2011).

Generating such an experience of contrasts is highly intentional and reflects a broader Zionist politics of Holocaust commemoration, which sees in the Holocaust both the reason for the creation of the Israeli state and its dramatic counterpoint.

In transporting thousands of Jewish teens from Poland to Israel, the March of the Living follows a well-trod itinerary by Jewish-Americans in particular. As Michael Berenbaum suggests, “in our generation, pilgrimage has returned as an essential religious act, along a new path. If an ancient generation went from Egypt to the Promised Land, we, their descendants, follow the tortured path of modern Jewish history from Auschwitz to Jerusalem,” a ritual itinerary he himself undertook with his son Lev as they made their way from “Treblinka to the Western Wall” (Berenbaum, 1996: vii, ix). This journey of contrasts means that the places visited – and the manner of visiting – are radically different in Poland and Israel. March of the Living participants are not alone in only getting to do the fun stuff of the regular tourist once they are in Israel, while restricted to visiting former ghetto sites and camps where they walk in silence when in Poland. As Jack Kugelmass muses, “Most tourists go places to ‘have a good time’... But when Jews go to Poland, leisure does not figure in their calculations of distance, sites, and expenditures of time” (Kugelmass, 1993: 411). Rather, the sites visited are those which generate, and reinforce, a negative sense of place (Lehrer, 2012). No wonder then that marchers experience arrival in Israel as arriving in paradise and feel – as the organizers hope – that they have come home. Walking on Israeli soil is experienced differently coming as it does so soon after walking on very different soil: the tainted soil of Auschwitz.

Discussion and conclusions – Redemptive itineraries and narratives of authenticity

Here, for all their differences, are overlaps between Silas' rewalking of the route of the Helmbrecht's death march, the March of Life's retracing of the symbolic roadscapes of Germany and the March of the Living's symbolic march between Auschwitz and Birkenau (and then on to Jerusalem) as well as a host of other contemporary representations of the Holocaust. Within what can be seen as redemptive itineraries, Holocaust sites – including the death march roadscapes – are given a socially redeeming nature. As Jack Kugelmass suggests, "as representations of evil they are really secular visions of Hell... Their radical negativity enables us to locate the true centre of our lives. And this is why the 'missions' that serve to reinforce the idea of Israel as the centre of Jewish life begin not in Israel but in Poland; not in the shtetl but in the death camps" and we might add on the road (Kugelmass, 1993: 437-8). But it is not only the March of the Living that seeks transformation through encountering Holocaust landscapes. It is certainly the most explicit in encouraging participants to engage in "an exciting experience, one that may just change your life...afterwards, you may never be the same! And you may like what you will become" (March of the Living, 2012a). However, in their own ways both the March of Life – with its promise of "breaking the veil of silence" – and even Silas' *Helmbrechts walk* which drew connections between the Holocaust and contemporary human rights abuses and genocides, sought redemptive transformation in and from Holocaust roadscapes as a kind of negative other. In doing that, they mirrored practices in Holocaust museums far removed from the sites themselves. Whether virtual landscapes in museums in Jerusalem, Washington, DC and London, or physical landscapes like the European road network, Holocaust landscapes offer individuals, organisations and states a potent counter geography (Cole, 2004).

But there is, in all three cases that I have looked at in this essay – Susan Silas' photographic retracing of the Helmbrechts March, the March of Life and the March of the Living – a profound sense in which the act of physically going there seeks an authenticity of place (the place where *it* happened) that cannot be achieved by simply visiting Holocaust museums much closer to home. As I have suggested, these three acts of retracing the route of the evacuations or "death marches" varied in the nature of the authenticity they attempt and claim for themselves. As Bruner notes, "authenticity" means different things in different heritage practices. These range from an attempt to simulate the original, through attempts to mimic the original to claims to the authoritative original (Bruner, 1994). In the cases that I have examined, it is clear that the kind of topographical, chronological and identity authenticity attempted by Silas has not been mirrored by either the evolution of the March of Life from an attempt to retrace a series of evacuations to a connecting of significant sites, or the highly symbolic route taken by the March of the Living.

However, even with the latter two examples there is an assertion of an authenticity that lies at the core of their projects. In part it is the act of marching that is seen as important precisely because it seeks to evoke and mirror the evacuations – or death marches – that took place half a century earlier. In part it is the route that is marched that is seen as important given the assertion that these very roads were walked by Jewish prisoners half a century earlier. Taken together, the assumption is that there

is an authenticity to both the mode of travel and place of travel that provides some sort of connection with the moment of travel in 1945. In short, claims for authenticity of place are seen to have the potential to shrink chronological distance and in some way make the past present in and through space.

But these marches are not simply intended to evoke or mirror the death marches that took place on the road network of Europe in 1945. They are also intended to overturn and undo those earlier death marches and thereby in a sense rewrite the past and not only commemorate the past. The very titles of both – March of Life and the March of the Living – are evidence of this. But more significantly, looking into the motivations of the organisers of both marches it is clear that the act of mass marching is intended to achieve a real transformation, whether spiritually in the case of March of Life or in terms of reshaping Jewish teen identity in the March of the Living. For such acts of transformation to take place, the claims to authenticity of the landscapes of enacting are highly significant. In both cases, authenticity of place operates as narrative “vehicle” (DeLyser, 1999: 624). Purposeful marching along the roads where it happened are, for the organisers of March of Life and March of the Living, powerful ways of telling a series of stories about past, present and future. Here they share a broader practice of what Till terms “emplacing ... social dreams and hopes for the future” in, on and through contemporary memoryscapes (Till, 2005: 9).

The claims of authenticity of place central to the March of Life and March of the Living do, however, come under scrutiny if we turn back to consider Susan Silas’ own experience and artwork. As I have argued here, Silas sought out the very highest degree of authenticity – simulation – as she retraced the route of one of the most infamous of the death marches that took place in the final months of the war. However, in the process Silas became strikingly self-aware of the impossibility of replicating the experience of the Jewish women whose footsteps she sought to so faithfully retrace. Through both her titling of the final artwork – *Helmbrechts walk, 1998-2003* – as well as the choice of images and accompanying texts, Silas brought the experiential distance between then and now and them (the original group of women prisoners being marched) and her (a lone walker) to the fore. By stressing chronological and experiential distance, Silas ultimately called into question her initial assumption – and one that is much more widely shared – that the one thing that remains constant is the earth underneath our feet with its promised of providing direct experiential access to the past. The experience of those women in that past remained stubbornly elusive despite Silas careful planning and good intentions. Ultimately for Silas going back there to try to uncover the traces of the past in that authentic landscape, caused her to shift her gaze from seeking the past there, to looking further afield at the present elsewhere. This experience of moving from past to present and from there to here is striking. For Silas, I would suggest, authenticity of place does not “give a spatial ‘fix’ to time” (Till, 2005: 9). Despite attempts to shrink time in space, the past remains, resolutely, “another country” (Lowenthal, 1985).

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