

The Nazi Death Marches  
Prepared for the  
Holocaust March of Remembrance—Kingwood, TX  
May 7, 2016

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Photo of a death march from the UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM IN DC, taken by a civilian who watched it.

When I first mention the Death Marches in class, many students are understandably puzzled: “What’s a death march?” They naturally think of marches as parades, bands, drill teams, etc. They are startled to hear the term “marching” linked with death. Of course, some students and older members of the audience do know about death marches, especially the Bataan Death March in 1942 during WWII, when American and Filipino POWs were marched often to death on the way to prisoner-of-war camps in the Philippines. However, many earlier generations are also unaware of the Nazi Death Marches of hundreds of thousands of primarily Jews and other victims of the Holocaust.

The Nazis had been using the combination of train transports with forced marches to relocate prisoners to different camps and slave factories since 1941. But the death marches intensified toward the end of the War in the summer of 1944 as the Nazis marched Soviet Prisoners (thousands died), and then they conducted forced marches

estimated in number around 60 during the winter of 1944-45 from camps in Poland, the Baltic States, and Germany: including Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, and many others. The Allies were advancing—the Americans from the West and the Soviets from the East—in a pincer move that had the Nazis desperate to hide their prisoners and monstrous crimes against humanity, desperate to evacuate the camps in the East, kill thousands outright, and force-march the rest of their victims to Germany: often for as long as six days.

But the more insidious purpose was to kill their prisoners—often women—through starvation, exhaustion, illness, freezing. The Nazis' purpose on the marches, as they became increasingly desperate, also included beating to death and shooting prisoners who could not keep up, driving others into pre-arranged areas along the route, down into ravines and lakes where they were machine-gunned. In addition to the survivors' stories of the marches, some civilians took pictures of these marches now archived in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in DC and Yad Vesham Museum in Jerusalem. However, few made any effort to help the victims.

It was the prisoners of the camps and the survivors of the death marches who gave these torturous walking pogroms the term *Death March*, used by both victims and historians to this day.

But, as I always include in my Holocaust Literature classes, stories exist of compassion, selflessness, and heroism on the part of Jews and other victims on the death marches, just as there are similar stories from the ghettos and camps. Some prisoners helped others walk, even if they were beaten or shot themselves. Others slipped their own saved morsels of bread to their companions. Still others resisted or fought back, at the risk of their own lives. Some were successful and able to escape into the woods to hide or join the partisans—fighting the Nazis. In a few cases, the partisans killed the guards and rescued the prisoners. By the end of the war in April 1945, the surviving prisoners of Buchenwald took over the camp and were in control when the Americans liberated. Later in April, the Americans also liberated the valiant survivors on a death march from Dachau.

Deniers of the Holocaust, as Gen. Eisenhower—a liberator of the camps—warned would happen, are of course willfully ignorant of archived Holocaust history. The Nazis had the diabolical system, took the pictures, and kept the records. Civilians and prisoners also took clandestine pictures and kept their own records—oral histories and journals. Artist-Prisoners left us their sketches and drawings of the camps and marches. American and Soviet forces liberated the camps, death marches, and remaining transport trains. And residents throughout Eastern Europe—in towns and villages near the camps; in areas along the train tracks; and in homes and farms along the death march routes—witnessed what was happening. They knew. Most did nothing: perhaps because they were afraid, perhaps because they were collaborators. Later, these witnesses were forced by the liberators to admit they had stood by when hell was unleashed, and they were then forced to bury the tragic dead.

These dead were at least twelve-million mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, grandparents, children—and babies; millions of teachers, artists, musicians, dancers, doctors, scientists, and skilled workers; millions of plans, dreams, hopes, love stories, and joys; millions of possible cures for diseases that plague us, inventions that could have helped the paralyzed walk again, discoveries that could have stopped or even prevented global crises, and philosophies that might have changed the world for the better. Millions of lives and stories extinguished: lost to the world as well as to themselves and their loved ones. The liberators were horrified and infuriated by what they found in the wake of the Nazis' fury and madness; they, too, took pictures and wrote about what they witnessed. And they sobbed in anguish when few in the world they saved had shed a tear.

Eisenhower was right; however, the testimony of the liberators became a vital part of the history of the Holocaust. The Jews and other victims of the Holocaust did not go like lambs to the slaughter as some have smeared them: they were abandoned by the world. Thus the Nazis could force the elderly, men, women, and babies into ravines like Babi Yar; into ghettos like Warsaw—where in the Uprising, Jews fought the Nazis for almost a month--and into concentration camps, where they also fought back at Auschwitz and Sobibor. And as the world stood by, the Nazis also could force them to march for days across Eastern Europe while most civilians watched and did little, but the victims tried to help one another. And when they couldn't, they marched on at gun point. Though thousands died—the figures vary from one-third to one-half of the prisoners on the marches perished—others survived, and survival is resistance.

Today, we grieve for the millions who perished in the Holocaust and honor their memories. But we also celebrate the rescuers, partisans, prisoners who tried to help one another, and survivors. These resisters and survivors of the Holocaust, including the Death Marches, in the most horrific genocide in the history of a world gorged on mass murder, fought the Nazis virtually alone, yet they are mostly unsung heroes.

This is what my students learn and what I share with you: The Holocaust never could have happened in a world where people are taught to love one another unconditionally and to feel empathy for one another: because no one is born hating others. The Holocaust also never could have happened if the whole world had acted. Only the comparative handful of courageous rescuers of the victims we do read and hear about intervened, and some like Wallenberg gave their lives to save people who were trapped within the Nazi system built on propaganda, lies, hate, and fear. If more in the world had done the same, millions would have been saved.

As the Irish statesman Edmund Burke warned us in the eighteenth century: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

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**Sources for Additional Reading on the Holocaust and the Death Marches:**

The Jewish Virtual Library / The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum / Yad Vesham