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Nazi death marches

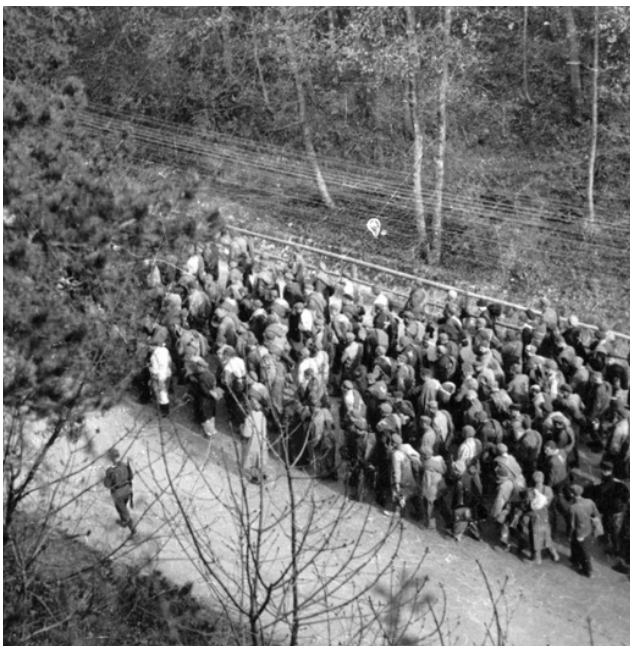
1944 - 1945

A 90' movie directed by **Virginie Linhart**

Produced by **ARTE France & MORGANE Production**

PROVISIONAL DELIVERY : MAY 2021

Why this is a largely-untold story



The death marches have often been treated as an epilog to the Nazis' policy of extermination. But in recent years, historians have been looking into the subject to analyze its workings and specific logic. Their combined research has shown this episode of the Second World War in a fresh light. Now, this documentary sets out to reveal the true story of the death marches, a story which is essential to tell.

How will this story be told?

There are many accounts by survivors of these hellish marches. These come mainly from interviews carried out by Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, which is a largely unexplored source of material. These accounts will be used throughout the film to retrace many of the death marches. This will be counterpointed by statements from camp guards which were filmed during the Nuremberg trials, and which have never previously been analyzed from the point of view of the death marches. The memories of those who witnessed the marches, as recorded by historians, will round out the narrative, helping to paint a picture of that which was not caught on camera.

Many witnesses of the marches speak of silhouettes making their way through fog or snow like ghosts. To capture the atmosphere of these descriptions, the landscapes which the prisoners crossed on foot or by train have been filmed. Images of roads and forests, and the anonymous graves of those killed along the way, will illustrate these accounts.

The graphic treatment of the maps will provide a geographical overview of the itineraries the marches followed.

Archive footage of battles between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army on one front, and between German and Anglo-American forces on the other, will also be used, since the story of the marches is inseparable from that of the collapse of the Third Reich. The prisoners' aimless journey across hundreds of kilometers appears as a symptom of the rudderless regime during its final year.

To treat these accounts with the necessary distance to understand what lay behind such barbarity, the film will draw on French and international historians who are specialists in the death marches, including Daniel Blatman, author of Les marches de la mort, la dernière étape du génocide nazi; Christian Ingrao, specialist in the Second World War and Nazi violence, who is also an advisor on the film; Elissa Mailänder, a student of Christian Ingrao, who has studied day-to-day violence under the Third Reich; and Henry Rousso, historian and head of research at the CNRS, a specialist in wartime atrocities.

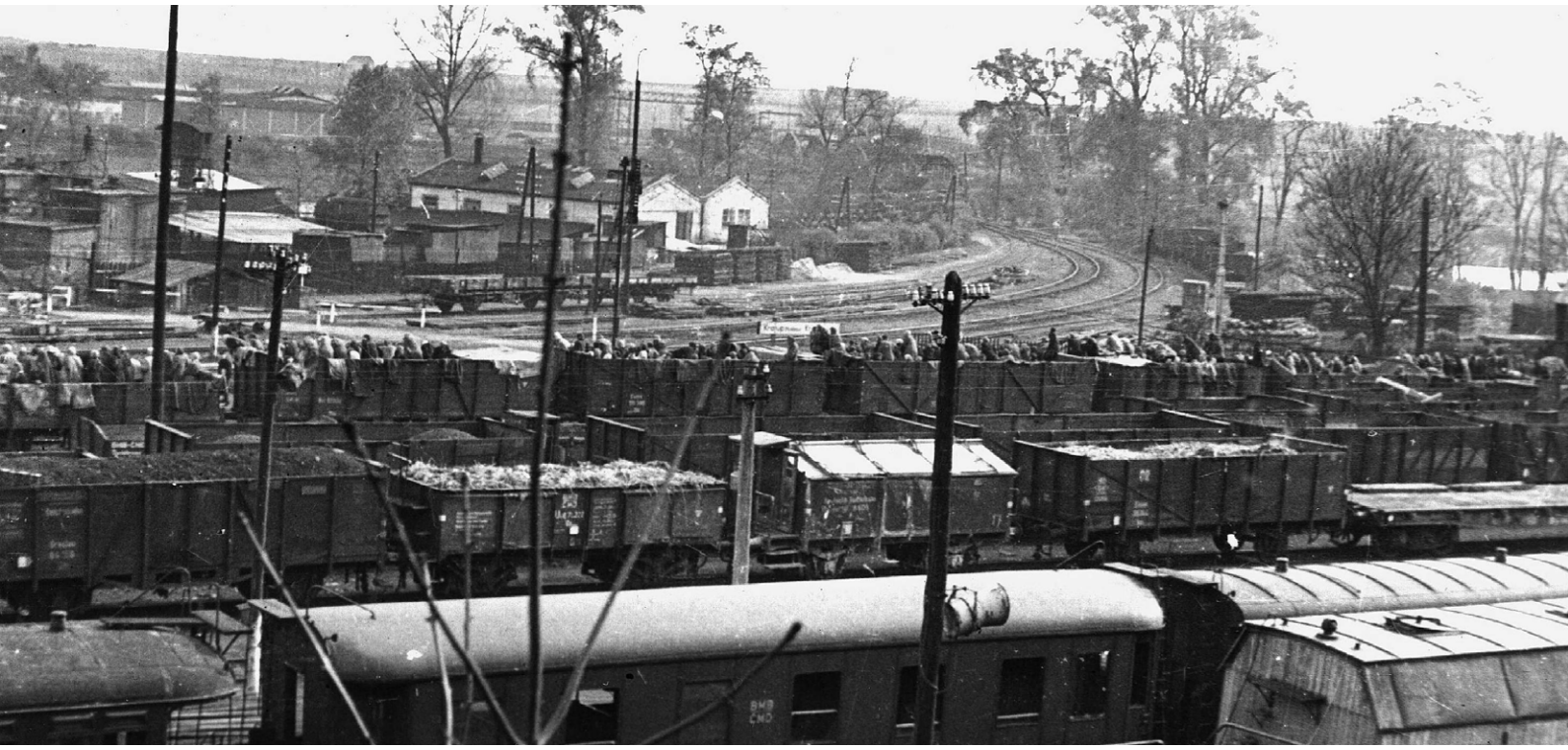
This material will allow us to build a powerful story structured around a collective narrative interweaving multiple accounts. This reconstruction of events comprises oral and written accounts, legal, administrative and personal sources, as well as archive photographs of these marches and contemporary film of the locations where they took place. By way of context, the film will also retrace the disintegration of the Third Reich.

The first marches: Spring-fall 1944

Our story begins on 17 June 1944, when Heinrich Himmler issued orders covering the possible evacuation of the camps. In the wake of the Allied landings in Normandy on 6 June 1944, and with a massive Red Army offensive looming in the Baltic States and Belarus (22 June), for Himmler, the challenge was clear: It was essential to retain control over the hundreds of thousands of prisoners who played a crucial role in wartime production. To achieve this, Himmler put the camps under the responsibility of the SS and the police. From now on, they would decide on evacuations, at a time when the Nazis could no longer maintain regular, centralized communications, nor manage the organization and provisions for hundreds of camps located in far-flung regions in the east of the Third Reich.

During the summer of 1944, the first period of the marches, the Nazi apparatus was still functioning and could manage the evacuation of prisoners from camps in the east in the face of the advancing Red Army. This was done in packed cattle wagons in appalling sanitary conditions, but did not yet involve the brutality which characterized the later marches. After these first marches, the majority of the prisoners had been moved to Auschwitz. When the Red Army liberated Majdanek in Poland at the end of July 1944, they discovered what the Germans had not succeeded in destroying before they fled: The gas chambers and other evidence of the camps' murderous activities. The photographs went around the world. The genocide was now undeniable and known by all.

In July, the Red Army's progress through the Baltic States led to the evacuation of the Ostland camps in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, which contained some 8,000 Jews. That summer, the main enemy of the prisoners during transports was thirst. ***"They allowed us to drink on the banks of the Vistula. Some wanted to go in deeper, and they were shot at."*** (Prisoner account.) After three days' marching, the cortege arrived at a station where the prisoners were loaded into open-top freight wagons. After another four days of rail transport, the convoy arrived in Dachau, southern Germany. Between August and September 1944, around 12,000 Latvian Jews were evacuated in several convoys to provide forced labor for the Germans, most being sent to Stutthof in Poland.



That same summer, on the western front, the progress of the US and British armies prompted the evacuation of the concentration camp at Natzweiler-Struthof in Alsace, which housed 23,000 detainees. Through to the end of September 1944, all the labor camps on the western side of the Rhine were emptied, their inmates transferred to other camps in Germany. Prisoner accounts suggest there were no barbaric acts during these marches. The fact that the convoys contained neither Jews nor Gypsies no doubt goes a long way to explain why these marches did not degenerate into massacres.

At the end of the summer, some 40,000 Jews selected from Auschwitz and Stutthof were taken to the two major satellite camps of Dachau, outside Munich. But when, in the fall of 1944, the head of Dachau saw how hundreds of the Jewish prisoners sent as labor were unfit for work, he sent them back to Auschwitz. Many of those sent back to Poland would die there in the gas chambers. In October 1944, the Germans took control of Hungary after the president surrendered. **Some 50,000 were forced to march from Budapest to Vienna**. The aim was for them to build fortifications around Vienna to defend the Austrian capital. Thousands died from exhaustion or brutal treatment, while others were shot by German guards. **This displacement of 50,000 people can be considered the first major death march.**

Tipping point in winter 1945: The abandonment of the major camps in the east

On 12 January 1945, the Red Army launched its great winter offensive, eventually taking Berlin. The Soviet offensive sparked the hasty exodus of the German populations in the territories concerned. But Hitler would not countenance any tactical withdrawal and made no plans for military redeployment to more realistic defensive lines, despite the fact the German army was starting to fall apart. At the start of 1945, hundreds of thousands of people were forced onto the highways and railroads of western Poland, eastern Prussia, and Silesia. That winter, the eastern front became an immense traffic jam. Against this backdrop of debacle and chaos, with millions of civilians, soldiers, and Nazi officials accompanied by their families on the road heading west, the evacuation was carried out of the three main concentration camps in what is today Poland: Auschwitz, Groß-Rosen, and Stutthof.

In mid-January 1945, nearly 56,000 prisoners left Auschwitz, while a further 8,000 sick detainees stayed in their shacks. And it was in a near-deserted Auschwitz that was liberated on 27 January 1945 by the Red Army, those who remained only left because they were too weak to serve as labor for the Third Reich. ***"The Germans had vanished. The watchtowers were empty,"*** wrote Primo Levi. As they went out through the camp gates, the deportees further swelled the ranks of fugitives, both soldiers and civilians. In this large-scale disorder, **the Auschwitz inmates went from the status of valued economic resource to that of obstacle to security**. In these apocalyptic conditions, the guards soon adopted the habit of eliminating prisoners who could not walk, those who tried to escape, and those identified as trouble-makers. There was no question of seeking permission from superiors before shooting. **Any guard marshaling the column of prisoners had the authority to kill**. After the conflict, they could offer no other explanation for their acts than their feeling of exasperation in the face of a situation that had been imposed on them, along with a strong wish not to be taken prisoner themselves.

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In February 1945, orders were given for the evacuation of Groß-Rosen Buchenwald, Mittelbau-Dora, and Flössenburg. The first had become the transit point for those evacuated from Auschwitz and its satellite camps. On the eve of its evacuation, Groß-Rosen had become the biggest camp ever to have operated on the Reich's territory. The evacuation took place gradually. The train journey to camps inside Germany lasted several days and was another deadly chapter in this tragedy. Hundreds of prisoners died in the wagons in appalling conditions, packed in with nothing to eat or drink.

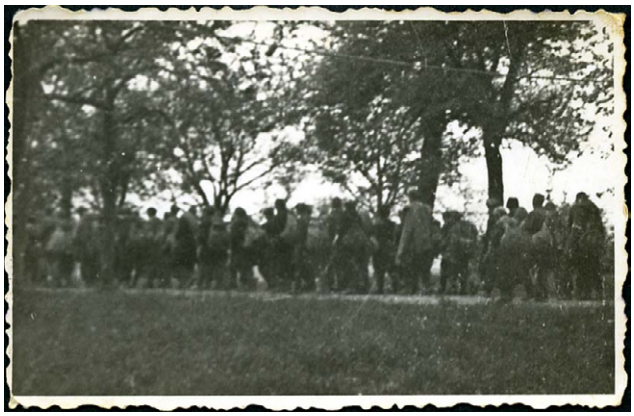
The last major evacuation from occupied Poland was that of the Stutthof complex. Located in the Danzig corridor that was incorporated into the Reich in 1939, by January 1945 the camp was threatened with being overrun by the Red Army. After the withdrawal from the Baltic States in October 1944, meetings to prepare the evacuation of this camp were held. These even addressed the question of how to deal with prisoners who died along the way: The bodies should be gathered in a single place and buried together. The main camp at Stutthof held 46,331 prisoners, including many Jews. The camp was finally liberated on 9 May 1945.

Between January and February 1945, around 113,000 prisoners were evacuated from concentration camps in Poland. **Some 15,000 died due to evacuations from Auschwitz, and a further 9,500 died from Stutthof.** The number of victims caused by the evacuation of Groß-Rosen remains unknown. One thing, however, is certain: Between a quarter and one third of the men and women who embarked on these infernal journeys did not survive.

The final stage: The marches of spring 1945

In February 1945, it became clear that the hundreds of thousands of prisoners pouring out of concentration camps in Germany posed a logistical problem which the Nazi system had failed to anticipate. On top of this, the regime's bureaucracy was in chaos. Himmler organized a tour of the camps to inform camp chiefs that the lives of Jews must now be preserved, and they should be treated correctly. In fact, Himmler's new stance was linked to diplomatic efforts to negotiate a possible end to the Reich in exchange for saving those Jews who had so far survived. This was in contradiction with Himmler's previous orders that the evacuations should leave no prisoner capable of working in enemy hands. This lack of clarity once again had fatal consequences: The decision to eliminate prisoners was, de facto, transferred to each individual who was directly in contact with them. It was the camp guards and those who escorted prisoners on the evacuation routes who ultimately decided their fate.

On German soil, a second type of mass killing during the death marches was carried out by the members of the Volkssturm – the "people's storm". This national



militia was intended to provide a massive force to protect German territory, and had been created in the fall of 1944 composed of men unfit for military service because they were too old. They considered the camp prisoners as an enemy to be killed. During the evacuation of a Hungarian camp near the town of Eisenerz in Austria, between 6,000 and 8,000 prisoners crossed the region on 7 April 1945 on their way to Mauthausen. The local Nazi Party chief decided to murder all the Jews who were part of the convoy. This was carried out by the Volkssturm unit from Eisenerz; **civilians who killed 250 Jews in cold blood.** This was an unprecedented situation, with a civilian body, not police or SS, taking a decision to perpetrate mass killing.

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While Berlin was preparing for the final showdown, the Führer sheltered in his bunker under the chancellery, as more than a million shells fell on the capital. Meanwhile, the evacuation of the camps continued. Nearly one third of the inmates in Buchenwald would be killed or would die as a result of the death marches in less than three weeks. In the final days of combat, the fate of prisoners was more-than-ever in the hands of arbitrary individual acts. Only the signature of the capitulation on 8 May 1945, made possible by Hitler's suicide on 30 April, brought an end to these out-of-control massacres.

What is striking about the death marches is the diversity of the identity of the killers. One finds hardened Nazis, opportunists seeking to advance their own cause, individuals obsessed by the idea of getting home before the Third Reich fell apart, and ordinary civilians caught up in a situation they could never have imagined. The common point between all these executioners, as with all massacres carried out in the framework of a genocide, was that they considered their victims as a group stripped of individual human characteristics. Throughout the years of the Nazi genocide, never had so much power been placed in the hands of such a large number of individuals, authorizing them to exercise their own judgment to decide whether to kill or not. This was radically different to the operation of the concentration camps, under which the act of killing was a bureaucratic matter. It was an ideology of killing which broke with that of the camps, since it made the victims uniform and individualized the killers, whilst giving rise to a series of practices and nihilist beliefs which were no longer based on the general principles hitherto observed. **The chaotic backdrop of these hellish marches that left some 250,000 dead was known, but until now we had no little knowledge of the identity of the killers and their motives. Now, we know.**

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