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Research report
Spatial Histories of the Holocaust: Mapping the Evacuations from the Auschwitz camp system in January 1945

In August 2007, a group of researchers from history, art history, geography and historical geography met at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC to participate in a two-week summer research workshop, "Geographies of the Holocaust." The conveners, Tim Cole and Anne Kelly Knowles, wanted to explore the possibilities of applying geographic methods such as spatial analysis and visualization to the Holocaust. They were also interested in investigating the extent to which the Holocaust could be anchored to debates in human and cultural geography about "placing the past".[1] The workshop generated fruitful discussion about how the Holocaust was a profoundly geographical event, the spatial dimensions of which have remained largely ignored by historians over the course of six decades of research.[2] One outcome of the workshop was the initiation of a research collaboration of participants under the rubric of Holocaust geographies. The principal objective of this project was to explore the varying scales of the Holocaust's locations of incarceration and experience in sub-projects or case studies.[3] The spatial dimensions of the Holocaust's perpetration, witness and experience were particularly suited to geographical methods of inquiry. The geographical approach would assist in analyzing the distributions of people, places and events in order to uncover the spatial logic of the past. These resulting patterns of distributions would enable the researchers to see relationships, networks and connections that are often obscured in the historical record, with its privileging of the temporal representation of the past.

The first study in the Holocaust Geographies project focuses on the evolution and collapse of the concentration camp system in the Greater German Reich from 1933 to 1945, drawing attention to how a spatial logic was inscribed in the development of the camp system in accordance with ideological and political goals. An extension to this investigation considers the regional scale and local sites in which the *Wehrmacht* and the *Einsatzgruppen* perpetrated

massacres against civilians in the Soviet Union. The second study addresses the case of internally uprooted or displaced local and foreign-born Jews in Italy from 1938 to 1944, examining the spatial distribution, networks, and patterns of Jewish experiences such as internment, confinement and escape. City scale is foregrounded in the study of the Budapest ghetto. Utilizing GIS (Geographic Information Systems), a map of the distribution of the places and uses of public space has been developed to illustrate the fragmentation and clustering of the community that also exposes the porosity of the ghetto's boundaries. An examination of the local scale of Auschwitz I and II is the fourth case study of the Holocaust Geographies project. The extent to which the building plans of the camps exhibited a vernacular architecture is investigated, as is the suggestion that the design of the camps was premised on a vision of victory in war, reflected in the projected uses of leisure, labor and industry. The fifth and final study, the evacuations from Auschwitz, considers the provincial scale of Lower Silesia and the transformations of places and inmates that occurred in the course of one week before the liberation of the camp by Soviet and Ukrainian forces on January 27, 1945. It is this study which will be addressed at length here.[4]

The study on the evacuations from the Auschwitz camp system is guided by several research questions and geographic methodologies. Our principal question is to ask: To what extent were the conduct, course and survivors' experiences of the evacuations shaped, if not transformed, by encounters with the landscape and environment. How was time displaced by place as a memory point in evacuees' recollections? How did former inmates respond to, and orient, their release from the camp? What have been the main challenges involved in reconstructing the course, implementation and impact of the evacuations? How have the methods of geography allowed the design of maps and visualizations which plot the routes of the evacuations and anchored the victims' experiences to them? There are several advantages of a spatial approach in tackling these questions: it is valuable as an organizational tool to record and tell the story of an event from the multi-layered perspectives of its participants (guards, escorts, evacuees and other witnesses), it permits the historical imagination to enter, if not map, the sensory witnessing and memories of evacuees, allowing historians to "place", as Ethington suggests, the past as a relentless collection of corporeal events on a route of suffering and displacement. From the perspective of geography, the spatial approach articulates complex socio-political relationships at a variety of scales and points in time.

One of the main challenges of this project is, in brief, to create a geo-historical visualization of an event that involves more than 57,000 individuals, whose varied experiences on the roads of Silesia lasted anywhere between three and twenty-one days. The selection of the evacuations as

our case study was guided by what we have characterized as "certainties": we knew that the evacuations had origin and destination points, and were locatable on a map. The visualization also needed to acknowledge the "uncertainties" that would limit the plotting of significant topical events and attributes of the evacuations. Apart from a few memos and guidelines from December 1944 and January 1945 which detailed instructions for the desired route of the evacuations and supervision of the inmates on them,[5] historians have uncovered little reliable information about their itinerary, form and function, and the inhospitable environmental and surveillance conditions in which inmates were relocated from the camp and into an unknown geography. Most of the data about the conduct and course of the evacuations from Auschwitz in January 1945 comes from the survivors who endured them.

The routes that eventuated did not reflect the original intentions of the SS. There are military cables which illustrate German defensive measures against Soviet attacks in the vicinity of the anticipated evacuation routes in Silesia which provide a geo-political parameter for the traffic of camp inmates in the context of a disintegrating and chaotic command structure.[6] It is precisely this disorder in the command structure which exacerbated the cruelty of the escort guards towards evacuees. Also affecting the conduct of the evacuations was the unusually cold January winter landscape, as reported in newspaper and survivor accounts.[7] Evacuees were expected to endure the rigors of the foot journey with the last vestiges of what they wore and could find in the camp after evacuation orders were announced. Some inmates used cardboard sheets for shoes, and were given a piece of bread, butter and jam for the journey which originated in Auschwitz and terminated in either Gliwice or Wodzislaw two or three days later, sometime between January 18 and January 21, 1945.[8] From these locations, they were transported in open coal freight cars to camps in the Reich.

The evacuations from the Auschwitz camp system represented a spatial redistribution of persecution and incarceration that moved from the fixed location of camps and into the fields and roads of Lower Silesia. The evacuation columns became mobile "places" of memory in a fluid, if not enlarged geography of persecution that exposed inmates to volatile and hostile conditions of German and Soviet military fronts, glacial weather, and the unpredictable behavior of camp guards and escorts. The evacuations in the region of Silesia in January 1945 foreshadowed the more commonly known and studied "death marches," which are associated with the collapse of the camp system, particularly in April and May 1945. "Death marches" are included in some survivor memoirs as a prelude to liberation, and also in historiography as organizationally allotted to the "end phase" of the Holocaust.[9] We use the term "death march" with caution, differentiating

between evacuations as an intended transfer of camp inmates that, despite the terrible and dehumanising conditions, were premised on their survival. This intention, however, has to be qualified in the range of conditions that seriously undermined the possibility of that outcome. The lack of available train transport at designated departure points prolonged the waiting time of inmates who had already walked anywhere between forty and sixty kilometres, some without stopping at a pace that ranged from 2.2 to 2.8 km, from the camp and to the towns of Gliwice and Wodzislaw. The deaths that occurred during the foot journeys, from fatigue and failing to maintain the pace, also affected the terror the evacuees are reported to have felt.

There have been several methodological challenges involved in the reconstruction of the evacuations. As noted previously, the lack of official documentation has impeded the writing of a history of evacuations grounded in empirical evidence and sources. To that end, subjective reports of survivors have provided the principal evidentiary base, in terms of quantitative and qualitative data, for an accurate geo-visualization of the evacuation routes. This visualization maps the actual itinerary (course, stopping points, incidents, landmarks) of the routes through the landscapes of Silesia, and from its departure points to the Reich. Quantitative data refers to precise locations and temporal references, topography, weather, times and locations of departure from the camps, journey stopping points, destinations where the evacuation routes terminated, and intake records of evacuees who arrived in the main concentration camps in the Reich after surviving arduous evacuations initially on foot and then by train.[10] Qualitative data includes the analysis of survivor reports, which highlighted attrition, composition of the columns, coping strategies, and incidents of significance, such as trauma, death, help from observers, and escape attempts. The objective of the maps produced to date is to anchor a visual knowledge of the evacuations that speaks as a text that is both geographically accurate and historically defensible. The first map, "Town of Oswiecim" depicts the location of the Auschwitz camps and surrounding communities, and the yellow lines represent main routes and evacuation paths in January 1945 (see Figure 1). The second map "Evacuations from the Auschwitz camp system" is an initial attempt to geo-locate places of departure, stopping points and destinations on the routes. This map involved the creation of a historical base map, "stitching" together eighty-one topographical quadrants of the 1933 map of Lower Silesia (see Figure 2).[11]

Fieldwork in Poland was undertaken by Marc Masurovsky in May 2009 and in January and February 2010. The fieldwork adopted a forensic approach. It was necessary to validate the routes of the evacuations, their origins, stopping and destination points and to "revisit" sites of topical events such as massacres and burial locations of evacuees. These locations of departure

included the former camp sites of Auschwitz I, II and III, stopping points of Pszczyna, Mikolów, and Żory, and the destination of Gliwice (see Figures 3-8). Local and state archives in Silesia yielded testimonial and evidentiary records and files unavailable in the United States. The ITS Archive in Bad Arolsen, Germany, holds relevant records on attempts of post-war organizations and military agencies involved in humanitarian relief, and prosecutions. These records attempted to reconstruct the itineraries of the death marches from February to May 1945, and identify those evacuees who had died during them.

We are continuing to develop further cartographic renderings, visualizations, and analyses of the evacuations. One such planned output is an emotional cartography or map of the routes based on the experiences of its principal agents - perpetrators such as guards and commanders, survivors as former evacuees and self-described "marchers", and local witnesses along the routes. The emotional map, as Christian Nold suggests, "…is an experience of [a place] as a series of distinct 'events' within an environment wherein an embodied being actively interacts with people, objects and places. For instance, within this 'event space', a fork in the road causes a moment of indecision which competes for attention with other events taking place at the same time."[12] An emotional cartography of the evacuations extends on this idea, utilizing survivor reports, archival and contemporary photography, and base maps. It anchors memory and media to the landscape to become, as Edward Tufte notes, a "narrative itinerary."[13]

A hypothetical visualization (Figure 9) of the spatial configuration of the columns attempts to show a human-scale representation of the possible relationships or "communities" that evolved during the evacuations. When paired with narrative accounts of evacuees, this spatial composition can help us understand the corporeal experience of an evacuee's position in the march. The endurance of the distances, and the death of other evacuees, led to clustering, of seeking emotional and physical support in the formation of groups of two to three people within the rows. The clustering also provided a point of connection and re-familiarization for individuals who had lost contact either during deportations or after entering the camp. The column formations at departure replicated the density and measured configuration of the camp barrack layout of inmates. The columns retained this barrack-like intensity of closeness and community, at least in the early stages until the stopping points of the journey and attrition terminated the cohesion of the column. The progressive fragmentation of the column was expressed in the formation of clusters between people who were camp strangers and those who had some prior history or contact, for example during deportation, work detail, or even by nationality or camp prisoner status. During the course of the evacuations, individuals formed, by necessity and urgency, what Barbara Rosenwein has termed "emotional communities".[14]

What demands do the evacuations from Auschwitz present to the visualization of pain, emotion and encounters between witnesses, guards and civilians? Can the experiences of the evacuees be mapped as a narrative of displacement, journeying and suffering? Is the mapping of evacuees' experiences simply an extension of the longstanding debate about the Holocaust and its representation, or does cartography add a neglected dimension to its spatial logic? Oddly, geography has been marginalized as offering methodological and mapping possibilities of the Holocaust's perpetration and experience. This project aims to return the Holocaust to the ground level, to the local landscapes and memories of its persecution, witness, and death.
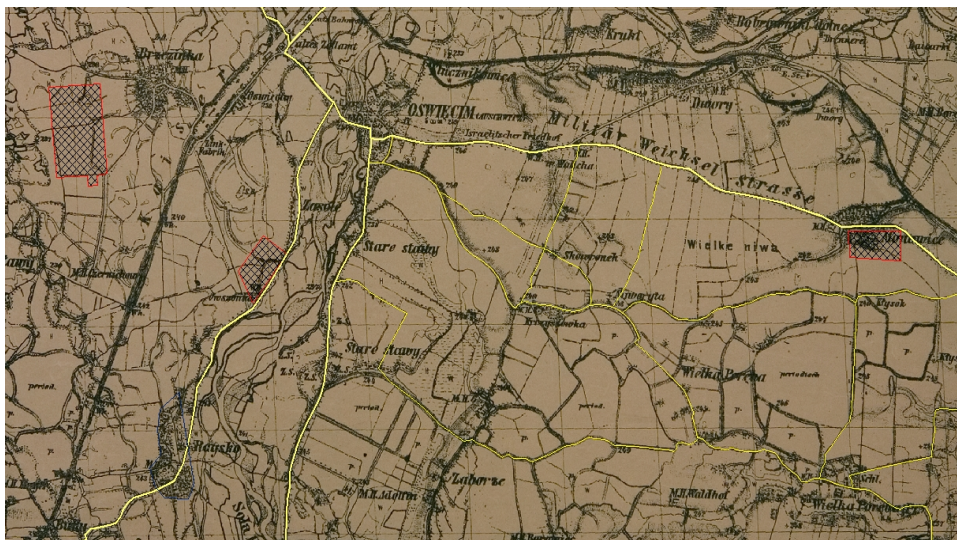

Figure 1: Town of Oswiecim. Yellow lines represent roads and paths of evacuees. The red boxes are the exact locations of Auschwitz I, II, and III. The base map was produced in 1933 by Wojskowy Instytut Geograficzny, Warszawa, 1933, PAS 48-SLUP 28-OSWIECIM, 1:25000, G6520.S25.P6, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, DC. Cartography by Andrew Fomil.

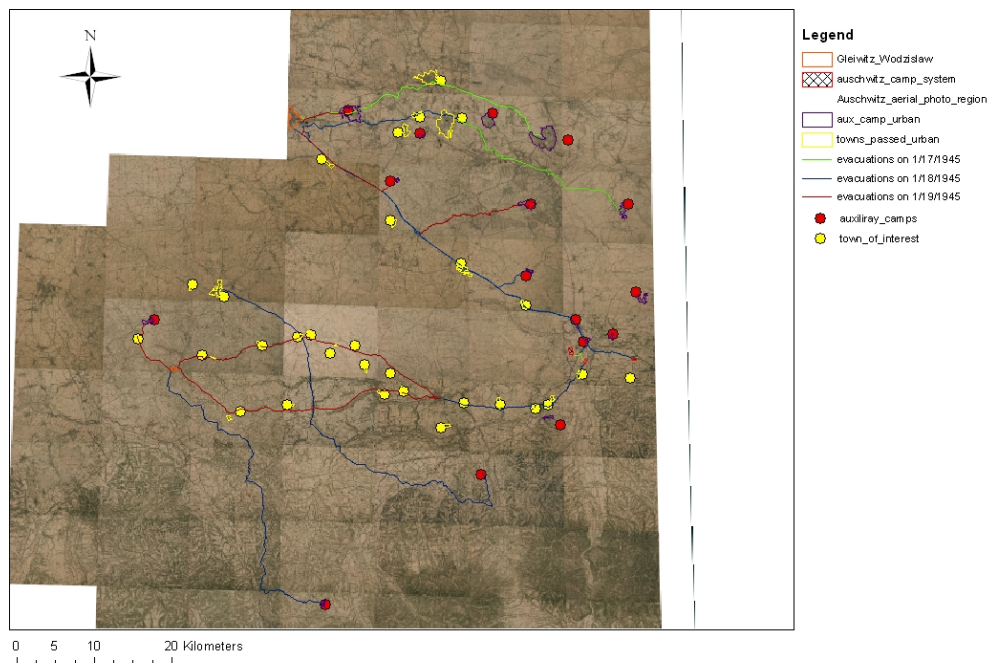**Evacuations from Auschwitz-Birkenau and Affiliated Subcamps**

Figure 2: Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp System and Places of Transit
(cartography by Andrew Fomil)

Figure 3: Auschwitz II: This is the road along BII-A that leads to the main gate of Birkenau. This
is the path that evacuees most likely used to leave the camp. (Photo by Marc Masurovsky)

Figure 4: Brzezinka - this is the road that leads from Birkenau to Auschwitz I, and from there to the road which evacuees took to Wodzislaw. (Photo by Marc Masurovsky)

Figure 5: Main square, Pszczyna. This square was most likely a temporary stopping point for women evacuees from Birkenau (Auschwitz II) on the way to Wodzislaw. See Nadine Heftler, *Si t'en sors, Auschwitz, 1944-1945*, 142 (Paris: La Découverte, 1992). (Photo by Marc Masurovsky)

Figure 6: Photo of fork in the road after leaving Pszczyna. This fork separated the march of approximately 30,000 people from Birkenau (mainly women) and parts of Auschwitz I (mainly men) into two sub-marches going in the direction of Wodzislaw. The groups reconnected before reaching Wodzislaw. (Photo by Marc Masurovsky)

Figure 7: Abandoned brick factory in Mikolów on the road to Gliwice where evacuees from Auschwitz III stopped overnight (for no longer than six hours). This contemporary photo of the factory is most probably not dissimilar to its condition in January 1945. (Photo by Marc Masurovsky)
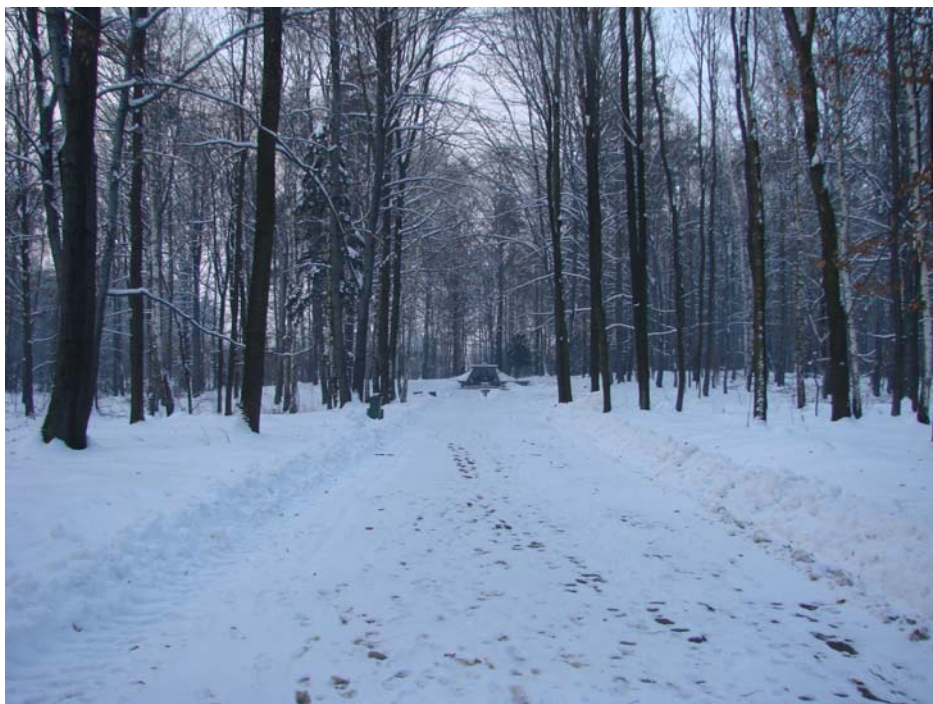
Figure 8: Memorial to women prisoners from Birkenau (Auschwitz II) who died during the evacuation, most probably on January 19 and 20 1945, crossing Suszec forest after Pszczyna. The distance from the road (where the women most likely died) to the memorial is approximately two hundred meters. (Photo by Marc Masurovsky).
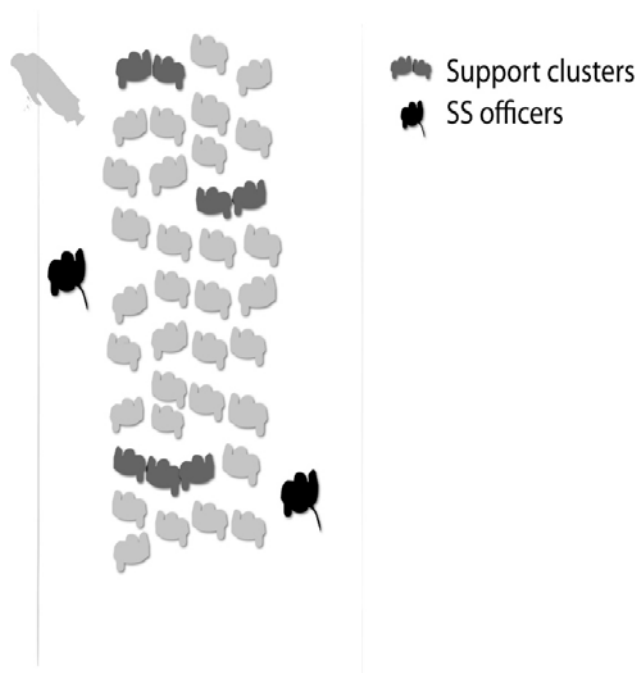

Figure 9: Hypothetical visualization of clustering (visualization by Erik Steiner).

Authors:

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[1] The themes of "place" and "spatial theory in history" were recently explored in the journal *Rethinking History*. In this issue, Philip J. Ethington's article, "Placing the Past: 'Groundwork' for a Spatial Theory of History" was of particular inspiration to the authors of this article. See Rethinking History, Vol. 11, December 2007, No. 4, pp. 465-493.

[2] For a summary of the 2007 workshop's genesis, and research themes, see Beorn, Waitman/Cole, Tim/Gigliotti, Simone (et al): Geographies of the Holocaust, in: The Geographical Review, Vol. 99, October 2009, No. 4, pp. 563-574.

[3] The project "Holocaust Geographies" received funding from the National Science Foundation in the United States from August 2008 to August 2010. A book based on the project is also anticipated, as are additional scholarly articles and cartographic outputs. The principal investigators on the National Science Foundation grant are Anne Kelly Knowles and Alberto Giordano. The investigators on the sub-projects and their institutional affiliations are as follows (in alphabetical order). Case One: the evolution and collapse of the camp system (Paul B. Jaskot, DePaul University, Chicago, USA and Anne Kelly Knowles, Middlebury College, Vermont, USA); associated project: the *Wehrmacht* and *Einsatzgruppen* in the Soviet Union (Waitman Beorn, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA); Case Two: displacement and transports in Italy (Alberto Giordano, Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, USA and Anna Holian, Arizona State University, Phoenix, Arizona, USA); Case Three: the Budapest Ghetto (Tim Cole, University of Bristol, UK and Alberto Giordano); Case Four: Building and Architecture at Auschwitz (Chester Arthur, Middlebury College, Vermont, USA, Paul B. Jaskot, and Anne Kelly Knowles); Case Five: The Evacuations from Auschwitz (Simone Gigliotti, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, Marc Masurovsky, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC, and Erik Steiner, Stanford University). Numerous work-in-progress presentations have been held at the USHMM since funding began and a final presentation of the NSF Holocaust Geographies Project will take place in late October 2010. As a content provider, the USHHM will host a website that contains the research findings, maps and visualizations of each project. The Spatial History Project at Stanford University hosts a website on Holocaust Geographies, and other research projects utilizing cartography, history, and geography. See http://www.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/project.php?id=1015 [06.09.2010].

[4] Research on the evacuations from Auschwitz is ongoing and any results conveyed in this brief article are tentative. The research and visualizations on this project have been greatly facilitated by the support of GIS-Science interns, Andrew Fomil and Dayana Elhazari, and cartographer, Erik Steiner. Lucia Barbato, Associate Director of the Center for Geospatial Science, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, provided a digital elevation model of Lower Silesia which was used as the basis for a three-dimensional rendition of the topography of the region.

[5] On the chronology of the gradual evacuation of Auschwitz from August 1944 leading up to January 1945, see Strzelecki, Andrzej: The Evacuation, Dismantling, and Liberation of KL Auschwitz (trans. by Witold Zbirohowski-Koscia), Oswiecim 2001, pp. 59-119.

[6] See: RG 15.129M: Selected records of Rejencja Katowicka (Regierung Kattowitz), 1939-1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Archives.

[7] An Australian-based newspaper reported that the weather on the Polish plains in Silesia was four degrees below zero during the January evacuations. See "Swift advance on Main Highway to Berlin," in: The Argus (Melbourne, VIC, 1848-1954), Monday 22 January 1945, p. 1. Other reports corroborate the weather conditions. The temperature was -20 degrees Celsius in Auschwitz I, enveloped by fog, with a glacial wind chill. Cited in Assinov, Myriam: Primo Levi, ou la tragédie d'un optimiste, JC-Lattès, 1996), p. 329.

[8] See, for example, Oppenheimer, Jean: Journal de Route, 14 mars-9 mai 1945, Le Manuscrit, 2006; Michel, Ernst: Promises to keep. One man's Journey against incredible odds, New York 1993.

[9] Information on the evacuations from Auschwitz in January 1945 is mainly derived from Czech, Danuta/Klodinski, Stanislaw/Lasik, Aleksander/Strzelecki, Andrzej: Auschwitz 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp, Vol. 5, Oswiecim 2000, and Strzelecki, Andrzej: The Evacuation, Dismantling, and Liberation of KL Auschwitz, Oswiecim 2001. The topic of "death marches" is often mentioned in general histories and overviews of the Holocaust, although Daniel Blatman's work represents the first lengthy treatment of the phenomenon. See Blatman, Daniel: Les marches de la mort. La dernière étape du génocide nazi, été 1944-printemps 1945, Paris 2009. An English translation is forthcoming with Harvard University Press. For the purposes of this article, we have restricted our references to the January 1945 evacuations, rather than compiling a comprehensive bibliography of all evacuations and death marches.

[10] See ITS Digital Archives, Central Name Index, USHMM. See also various records at USHMM Archives: Acc. 1996.A.0342: Captured German Documents from the National Archives, College Park, MD; RG 04.006M Records of Nazi Concentration camps, 1939-1945; RG 65.001M: Selections from the Le Centre d'Etudes et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines Archives (CEGES).

[11] See Figure 2: Evacuations from the Auschwitz Camp System, produced by Wojskowy Instytut Geograficzny, Warszawa, 1933, PAS 48-SLUP 28-OSWIECIM, 1:25000, G6520.S25.P6, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, DC. We are grateful to the Chief of the Geography and Map Division for facilitating access to and use of the maps. Digital photography by Miriam Lomaskin and cartography by Andrew Fomil.

[12] See "The Greenwich Emotion map" by Christian Nold, in Nold, Christian (ed.): Emotional Cartography: Technologies of the Self (Accessed from http://www.emotionalcartography.net [06.09.2010]).

[13] Tufte, Edward R.: Envisioning Information, Cheshire 1990), p. 101.

[14] From a large literature on the topic of emotions in history, see Rosenwein, Barbara H.: Pouvoir et passion: Communautes emotionnelles en Francie au VIIeme siècle, in: Annales HSS, novembre-decembre 2003, No. 6, pp. 1271-1292, and Rosenwein, Barbara H.: Worrying about Emotions in History, in: The American Historical Review, Vol. 107, 2002, No. 3., pp. 820-845.