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Death March

Imagine running through a dense forest in the middle of winter with no shoes, minimal clothing, being severely dehydrated, and malnourished. On top of that picture not being able to stop from fear that you'll be shot by an SS soldier, or trampled by hundreds or thousands of people. This horrifying scenario was all too real for many of the Jews slaughtered during these "Death Marches". People need to know about what happened here so that these horrible acts never happen again.

When I first started writing this paper I didn't know much about death marches. Everything I knew about them I learned when we read the book *Night* in class. I knew that these marches took place over several days and that the prisoners would have to run up to 50 miles non-stop. I also knew that many of these people were sick or injured. Many people on these marches had a disease known as dysentery which caused them to have diarrhea and become severely dehydrated. Some prisoners such as Elie Wiesel had infections and broken bones which made these marches even more difficult. Another fact I knew about death marches was that the SS guards were very strict. If anyone became too weak to run or were injured and couldn't run the Nazi guards would shoot them without any hesitation. Lastly I knew that the Jews were not given enough food or water so they were already very weak and most likely just didn't have any reason to keep going.

We had three main points we wanted to find out through this project where the death march ended, how many people died, and the weather, physical, and mental conditions of these marches. We wanted to know where this death march ended not only for Elie Wiesel but for the thousands of other that were apart of it. Second we wanted to know how many people died in this death march to show statistically the number that started and the number the finished. Lastly we tried to find what the conditions were like during this march. We wanted to know what the weather was like so we could better understand what these people went through over these dreadful days, the second thing we looked up was the physical conditions that these prisoners were pushed through day after day, and we also wanted to find out the mental turmoil that this march had on the people involved.

With the help of these three questions I was able to write a research question around my entire paper: *What are the major byproducts of "Death Marches"?* The answers were quite simple really. The death marches moved a massive number of jews all over Germany, killed thousands of innocent people, and both mentally, and physically, changed these peoples lives forever.

When I began researching this topic i was surprised at the minimal information I was able to find. Many of the stories i found were all very similar and talked about pretty much the same conditions. I then realized that this made perfect sense many people who survived these marches would not want to think back to these terrible times, and there wasn't much diversity in the stories because all these marches were relatively the same. These people were all treated like they were worthless and were pushed to their breaking

points. They were plagued with disease and injury but no one cared to help them. If they stopped they'd die, that was the only thing keeping them alive the entire time.

We started out by picking a certain date to focus our research on, this was what led us to our first major finding. We chose the date January 18th, 1945 which we later found out was the same march that Elie Wiesel was on. This made finding information slightly easier because we had already read the book he wrote. However he did only paraphrase the march in his book so we could not use it as the sole resource for our paper. He did talk about the conditions he experienced on the march, “ [Rabbi Eliahou’s son] had felt that his father was growing weak, he had believed that the end was near and had sought this separation in order to get rid of the burden, to free himself from an encumbrance which could lessen his own chances of survival.” This quote shows how someone could just leave their own father behind to ensure that they would survive.

The next major finding we had was where the people ended up after the death marches. The death march we were researching started at Birkenau and brought the people to Gleiwitz in Southern Poland. From there they were loaded on to cattle cars and shipped to various death camps throughout Germany. The main camps the prisoners were sent to were Flossenburg, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Mauthausen in Austria. Many of the prisoners in these camps were finally liberated when the allied troops arrived in January 27th, 1945, however many did not make it out of these camps and died while still imprisoned. A quote from *Night* on Elie’s thoughts on just letting himself die, "The idea of dying, of no longer being, began to fascinate me. Not to exist any longer. Not to feel the horrible pains in my foot. Not to feel anything, neither weariness, nor cold, nor anything."

The next question we answered was the number of people that started on the death marches and the number of people that died on them. On January 18th, 1945 the SS troops marched nearly 60,000 troops from the death camps at Auschwitz. On the trip to Gleiwitz alone, which Elie Wiesel was on, nearly 3,000 people died or were killed within several days. In all the marches from Auschwitz an estimated 15,000 people died before reaching the end of the march. So from these numbers an estimated 25% of the prisoners that started on the death marches died either from hunger, dehydration, disease, or being shot.

My last question was about the conditions of the march both mental and physical. Quote from *Night*, "An endless road. Letting oneself be pushed by the mob; letting oneself be dragged along by a blind destiny. When the SS became tired, they were changed. But no one changed us. Our limbs numb with cold despite the running, our throats parched, famished, breathless, on we went." The weather conditions for these marches were awful. They ran in the middle of winter with no shoes and very little clothing making them vulnerable to frostbite and disease. These marches made people go insane and changed their ways of rational thinking. People were leaving loved ones behind to ensure their survival and not looking back to regret it. They were also pushed to their very limits physically. They would run until they literally collapsed from fatigue or dropped dead from the small amounts of food they were given.

Through this project I have learned a lot about human nature and the immense suffering of the prisoners in the holocaust. I now know not to take what I have for granted and not to complain about my little problems. This has shown me how much worse it could be and what others have endured and lived through above all odds. I have also

learned something about human nature from this project, if someone is pushed far enough they can do things that they never thought they would ever do, such as kill a loved one or leave them behind. So I feel we need to remember these death marches because if we don't learn from our history it can be repeated and no one wants to see this repeated.