Remapping Cultural History

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Published in association with the Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London

The theoretical paradigms dominant in much of cultural history published in English tend to be derived from northern European or North American models. This series will propose alternative mappings by focusing partly or wholly on those parts of the world that speak, or have spoken, French, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese. Both monographs and collective volumes will be published. Preference will be given to volumes that cross national boundaries, that explore areas of culture that have previously received little attention, or that make a significant contribution to rethinking the ways in which cultural history is theorised and narrated.

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Locating Memory: Photographic Acts
Edited by Annette Kuhn and Kirsten Emiko McAllister

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Claude Lanzmann's film Shoah begins with the scene of a return: in the 1980s, on his journey to Chelmno, the first extermination site of the Second World War, the filmmaker is accompanied by one of only two survivors of that camp, Simon Srebnik. 'It's hard to recognise but it was here', Srebnik says softly. 'Yes, this is the place. No one ever left here again... I can't believe I'm here. No I just can't believe it. It was always this peaceful here. Always... It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now'.

In his nine-and-a-half hour documentary about the extermination of the Jews of Europe, Lanzmann uses no archival camera images. Yet, through the testimony of survivors, the film is built around the confrontation of past and present. The past is recalled often at the very sites of past crimes - places such as Chelmno, Sobibor or the train station in Berlin from which Jews were deported. Or, at other times, survivors' voices, recorded in Israel, or Switzerland, or New York, are heard while the camera pans over the present views of Birkenau or Treblinka. 'Yes, this is the place: ... It was always this peaceful here. Always... Srebnik's unequivocal statement of identification and recognition haunts the entire film. As we look at other sites - sunny fields, dark forests, endless train tracks - we project onto them past scenes of destruction that they both reveal and conceal. Lanzmann makes this palimpsestic structure explicit when, in the second sequence of the film, filmed in an Israeli forest, he focuses on a narrative about the mass graves in the Ponari forest in Poland where Motke Zaidl and Itzhak Dugin, the narrators, were made to dig up the corpses of the Jews of Vilna and burn them. Even then in Ponari, trees and grass hid the signs of extermination. As Jan Piwoski of Sobibor says: 'When [I] first came here in 1944, you couldn't guess what had happened here, that these trees hid the secret of a death camp'. The act of identification and...
familiarity is thus time and time again offset by incredulity and the assertion of change: 'It's hard to recognise'; 'I can't believe I'm here'. It is here, it is the same, it was always this peaceful and, at the same time, it is different, hard to recognise, concealed: it has to be dug up. And in being dug up, literally before our eyes throughout the testimony of survivors, empty, unreadable landscapes are reinscribed with a memory that the Nazis worked hard to erase. In the words of Motke Zaidl: 'The head of the Vilna Gestapo told us: "There are ninety thousand people lying here, and absolutely no trace must be left of them". 3

By juxtaposing the past with the present site of memory, Lanzmann undoes two sets of erasures: the deliberate erasure by the Nazis and the more gradual and ordinary fading caused by the passage of time. In attempting to keep the past alive, he employs a familiar trope in the memorialisation of war and historical trauma. He returns to the place of perpetration and uses it to reveal the effects of time on memory and forgetting. His cinematic act of secondary witnessing illuminates the process of receiving and transmitting historical trauma - the transgenerational act of postmemory.

We refer to Claude Lanzmann's 'return to site' in Shoah to introduce our very different journey in the summer of 2000 across the river Dniester in the Ukraine to the region that during the Second World War was known as Transnistria (figure 6.1). Transnistria, as Julius Fisher so aptly observed in the title of his book, is indeed a 'forgotten cemetery' - nowadays, a geographical 'no-place' that cannot be found in any contemporary geographical atlas. 4

Nor, for that matter, was it ever anything more than an artificial geographical designation, invented during the Second World War for the region in the Ukraine across ('trans') the river Dniester (Nistru in Romanian) - extending west to east from the Dniester to the Bug river, and south to north from the Black Sea and Odessa up to the proximity of the rivers Row and Ljadowa. German and Romanian forces conquered this area in the summer of 1941 following the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In the aftermath of the slaughter of tens of thousands of its native Jewish inhabitants by Nazi-German Einsatzkommandos and their Romanian allies, Transnistria was placed under Romanian control and used as a dumping ground and killing field for the more than 150,000 Jews that were deported there after their expulsion from the recently reconquered Romanian provinces of Bessarabia, Bukowina and northern Moldavia. 5

From the memoir of Dr Arthur Kessler, one of the deportees:

There's a big table and at one end sits the chief of the secret police. Cucacuia, the most feared man in the city. The lists are typed, with different rubrics ... they enter our names here, erase them there ... Without judge or trial, years of detention are ordered. ... The reserved freight car is already standing at the freight railway station. It is night, dark, our guards are standing in groups, smoking cigarettes. ... We already know that we're not going to a nearby Lager, but across the Dniester to Transnistria and that that can mean extinction for us. 6

We travelled to what had been Transnistria for two reasons. We are working on a book focusing on a number of Jewish families from Czernowitz (now Chernivtsi, Ukraine), before, during and after the Holocaust, and members of two of these families had been deported to this region in 1941 to 1942. Marianne [Hirsch]'s parents just barely evaded this deportation by getting official authorisations permitting them to remain in their native Czernowitz. 7 For them and others in her family, Transnistria was that place of horror to which they were almost sent, and from which they might never have returned. As a child of Jews who survived the war in Eastern Europe, Marianne was thus making a journey that her parents had never made, driven by a pull to see and know that dreaded place they had so often spoken about - by nightmare images of a fate that could have been theirs, and that might have resulted in her never having been born.

We were also travelling with David Kessler, the son of Arthur Kessler, a medical doctor and member of one of 'our' four families who had been sent to Transnistria and who had spent almost two years there, one of them in the notorious Vapniarka concentration camp. We wanted to see

Figure 6.1 Romania, 1941-42, showing Transnistria. From Radu Ioanid, The Holocaust in Romania: The Fate of Jews and Gypsies in Fascist Romania, 1940-1944. Washington, 1999.
the area that had been Transnistria - to view some of its towns and places, and to establish some concrete physical connection with them. We especially wanted to locate the Vapniarka camp (in or near the present town of Vapniarka, now in the Ukraine). This desire (or, perhaps, need) had become especially powerful for David Kessler ever since his father, Arthur, had developed Alzheimer's disease and steadily lost touch with the world. David had grown up with the legacy of Vapniarka as an inherited postmemory - a secondary, belated memory mediated by stories, images and behaviours among which he grew up, but which never added up to a complete picture or linear tale. Although his father had written a lengthy memoir in German, based on notes taken in the camp and detailing his experiences there as an inmate-doctor, David had been unable to read it: their common language in Israel, where he had grown up, was Hebrew. And yet for David, the camp's existence had been constituted fragmentarily in numerous other ways: through his father's fractured stories, his encounters with other survivors, and through the whispers and silences that had surrounded him and fuelled his own imagination and fantasies:

I knew about this mysterious place called Transnistria and that there is some place called Vapniarka there, that it was a camp. But nothing specific. You could not not hear about it. There was a string of people coming to our house on crutches. I knew the people. We were surrounded by them. They had special cars, built especially for them. My dad took care of them. It was all part of my surroundings. And my father would say in German, 'There are some things children should be spared knowing. One day the story will be told' ... In my imagination it was someplace over there that doesn't exist any more. It was always in black and white of course, very unreal, it belonged to the old old past. It had to do with old people.

Our journey to this long-ago abandoned camp in the no longer existent Transnistria thus sought to link postmemory to place - to transform a black-and-white image and to endow it with colour, reality, concreteness. In addition to living out mediated familial and cultural postmemories, we also hoped to create memories of our own, in the present, at the present site of the past.

But our journey to place and past was different from that taken by Claude Lanzmann, or by other second generation 'returnees'. In the absence of an actual survivor who could guide us through the former ghettos and camps of this region - now composed of bustling towns and bucolic villages replete with geese, chickens, goats and cows - the three of us were accompanied only by a Ukrainian driver, Russian and a translator, Luda, a young Ukranian university student from Chernivtsi. David Kessler had also brought along some visual materials on our trip that he hoped would help us in our search: a photocopy of a copy of a detailed German Luftwaffe map of the region that Dr Arthur Kessler had acquired from a historical archive after the war; and a photocopy of a photograph of a cardboard model of the Vapniarka camp that had been built from memory by a survivor (figure 6.2; the model was displayed at Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot in Israel - a kibbutz museum dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust).

While Claude Lanzmann had Simon Srebnik to tell him that 'yes, this is the place', our own journey had to depend on photocopies of images and objects that themselves were already mediated by memory and imagination. Children of survivors often find themselves having to rely on such artefacts and facsimiles - some, seemingly only indirectly connected - in order to imagine a past that is not theirs, but which nevertheless has impacted on and affected their life history. Our photocopy of a photograph of a cardboard model was about as far removed from the 'real' as one can get, but we considered it as a potentially appropriate guide to identify whatever might remain of the Vapniarka camp, a place to which no survivor seems to have made a recorded visit since it was abandoned by the Romanians in 1944. Indeed, this mechanically reproduced facsimile, with its attenuated indexicality, became both a vehicle and a figure of postmemory for us: a vehicle that helped us search for and find the site, and a figure for understanding the mediated relationship of a second generation, born elsewhere, to a history

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Figure 6.2 Model of Vapniarka. Courtesy: Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot Museum.
that has lost its location through the wilful erasures of politics and the inadvertent ravages of time.

The present town of Vapniarka is located some seventy kilometres east of Moghilev, the city on the Dniester river which was both the transit centre for many of the thousands of Jews deported to Transnistria during the war and the location of one of the region's largest wartime Jewish ghettos. For us, Moghilev was the entry point into the region that had been known as Transnistria. There, overlooking the town, in the midst of a sprawling Jewish cemetery holding the remains of an ancient, sizeable and, at one time, thriving Jewish population, is a large, empty, grassy spot, the site of mass graves from the early 1940s. A stone monument, adorned with a large Jewish star, a menorah and a marble plaque in Yiddish and Ukrainian, memorialises the years between 1941 and 1944 when thousands of Jews died here, victims of outright killings, or from hunger, typhus and the ravages of freezing winters. Its placement there by Jewish Holocaust survivors from abroad marks Moghilev's Transnistrian past.

In the centre of the town, set unobtrusively on a sidewalk in front of an ageing, Soviet-built residential block with laundry hanging from its balconies, we found another, smaller monument, also with a bas-relief star of David, a menorah and a Yiddish and Ukrainian inscription. It too was erected by international Jewish organisations. At its base, inscribed in Cyrillic script, are the names of some of the central deportation sites, ghettos and camps in Transnistria. Here, we found the name 'Vapniarka', our intended destination, carved into the marble.

Our drive from Chernivtsi to Vapniarka through Moghilev, on a gloriously beautiful summer day, and on a road edged by grain fields and cattle farms, was relatively easy and quick. Despite a required detour within the southern Ukraine around the northern edge of the Republic of Moldava (for which we had no transit visas), our drive there took no more than six hours - an astounding contrast in time and comfort to the gruelling, torturous, nearly two-week journey in cattle-cars endured by Vapniarka deportees like Arthur Kessler.

And, of course, unlike us, Dr Kessler and the other deportees did not know where they were being taken until shortly before their arrival. Even then, their information was distorted:

Now we learn of our destination. The soldiers are gendarmes who guard the Lager Vapniarka. [Rumours fly:] There are beautiful houses, everything is prepared for 4,000 people, we'll even get food. Vapniarka? There are some who know Slavic languages, and who translate: lime-pit. ... I have to write down the name or I can't retain it. ... In the afternoon we pull into the Vapniarka station. ... The road takes us through a long village, walled in houses with tile roofs, small mud huts with straw roofs, just like our villages, few people, uninterested in guarded trains like ours, dull, jaded."

When we arrived in the small town of Vapniarka, we stopped on its main street and began to search for some signpost to direct us to the site of the concentration camp where Arthur Kessler and so many thousands of others had been incarcerated during the war by Germany's Romanian allies. Not finding any, Luda, our interpreter, approached a middle-aged woman walking with a young child - seemingly a local resident - and in Ukrainian asked her if she might know where the former Lager was located. If not, could she direct us to someone who might help us find its site? The woman shook her head negatively and pointed in the direction we had come from. 'There was never a Lager here', Luda translated her response. 'She says no Lager was here. There was a Jewish ghetto in Tomaspol, twenty kilometres away'.

We drove further through the town's few streets looking for a sign or a memorial marker, or some type of official building where we might inquire and get assistance, and soon found ourselves stopping by a small, cluttered, marketplace near the rail terminal. Although it was already early afternoon the place was still quite busy with customers. But no one Luda approached here to ask about the location of the 'old Lager' or, alternatively, the existence of a Lager memorial or plaque, seemed to know what she was talking about. Repeatedly, we got blank looks, negative headshakes.

We looked around some more. Near the marketplace, on an adjacent square, an old pharmacy was the only open store. Inside, responding to Luda's query, the pharmacist also shook his head negatively, waved his hand dismissively, and pointed a finger in a gesture that implied 'outside of the town'. From their exchange, we made out the words 'Lager' and 'ghetto' and 'Tomaspol'. 'No, no camp was here, never', he told us through Luda. When we showed him the picture of the model of the camp, he glanced at it quickly and repeated, emphatically, 'No camp was here'. He had no other information to give us. If we want more, we should ask someone else, perhaps at the militia building across the street.

That building, however, was locked up. But at the northern edge of the town's main street, opposite the railroad terminal, David Kessler and the two of us had been staring at a set of large, three-storey, brick buildings that we now decided to inspect more closely. As far as we could see, these were the only brick buildings in the town. Could the Lager actually have been here, closer to the centre of the town, in a place that over the years was now incorporated within the town itself? Could the cardboard model of the camp, with its two-storey buildings, have been wrong? The memory of the survivor who constructed it for the Kibbutz museum in Israel could well have been unreliable, faulty, recalling two storeys rather than three. Could we really trust as accurate evidence the photocopy of a
photograph of a model built years later by someone who may have been traumatised in a fascist concentration camp?

We quickly learned, however, that the three-storey brick buildings were built shortly after the war as apartments for older people. A few townsfolk in a group of elderly men and women who were sitting nearby under a large walnut tree told Luda that fact. We had approached them to ask about the Vapiñaţarca Lager and, at first, got the familiar head shaking and pointing in the direction of Tomaspol and its ghetto. But then, almost unexpectedly, when David Kessler showed them the Xerox of the camp model, they provided us with our first positive response. One of the women recognised the buildings in the picture as former army barrack in the nearby military encampment. There was, unfortunately, also bad news: she believed that these buildings had been torn down some years ago. In any case, she gave Russian, our driver, careful directions to the site of these former barracks. And it quickly became clear to us that without our photocopy picture of the camp model we would probably never have found any traces of the Vapiñaţarca camp in Vapiñaţarca itself. Its very existence in the past and connection to this place was unknown to many (if not most) of the town’s present-day inhabitants. Or, suppressed and forgotten, its existence had been erased from memory and the surrounding landscape. Even the one old woman who recognised the buildings as ‘former army barracks’ did not associate them with the forced labour concentration camp that they had once been - with a time of German/Romanian rule, of the persecution of Jews and political dissidents, of misery and crippling disease. If, as she believed, the buildings had indeed been torn down, our best hope now was that we might perhaps find some bricks in a field. Dejected by this prospect, we returned to our car.

Although Arthur Kessler’s memoir had mentioned the ‘military city’ of Vapiñaţarca, we were amazed when, after a few minutes’ drive, we pulled up at the entrance to what appeared to be an enormous and still active Ukrainian army training camp, surrounded by a tall fence. In approaching its large closed gate and guard-post we decided to leave our cameras in the car, convinced that we might be more likely to gain entrance without them. But we brought the photocopy of the model along, hoping to use it as a way to certify the purpose of our presence and the genuineness of our search.

From the memoir of Arthur Kessler, recalling his arrival here:

On the left barbed wire and houses upon houses, an entire city, the military city of Vapiñaţarca. ... A few steps further there is a small and a large gate with wooden doors that leads to an area enclosed by three barbed wire fences where three barracks line up surrounded by several small buildings. This area must be the Lager.

Luda and Russian approached two young Ukrainian military guards and informed them that we had come from America and were trying to find a Second World War Lager at Vapiñaţarca. They showed them our photocopy. The response: again, negative headshaking, fingers pointing, and some mention of a ghetto in Tomaspol. This is an army base, the guards repeatedly emphasised: the gates are locked, we cannot not go in. But our translators were insistent. They implored the guards to call and consult with their superiors. And, amazingly, they succeeded. After a half-hour wait, two uniformed officers arrived in a vehicle.

They listened to our story, which Luda and Ruslan now jointly recounted, but also started to shake their heads almost immediately. There was never a German camp here, they claimed. In fact, they declared, neither Germans nor Romanians had ever controlled this territory.

From the account of Matei Gall, a Vapiñaţarca inmate:

We march through a small village with low houses with tile roofs. ... On the side of the streets lie the bronze heads of the broken statues of Lenin and Stalin. At the sight of these fallen bronze heads, I had an uncanny feeling: the statues of the idols that incarnated our ideals lay in the dust of the road."

This had been Soviet territory and, in fact, a Soviet army base continuously since 1918, one of the Ukrainian officers insisted. We respectfully disagreed, pulled out the copy of our Luftwaffe map of Romanian-controlled Transnistria, which included the very place where we now were standing. And we showed them the picture of the camp model. These images were all we had; as tenuous a link as they were able to provide, we had to rely on them to serve as evidence and to authenticate our quest. What is more, we also invoked them with the hope that they might serve as conduits to pull the past into the present, thus saving the past from oblivion. We were just about to give up hope when, suddenly, one of the officers’ eyes lit up - he recognised something in the picture. Still insisting that there had been no Lager here, he admitted that there was one building inside the base that resembled the three depicted on our photocopy. But the other two had been torn down a few years ago.

This acknowledgement changed the mood. Suddenly everyone seemed friendlier, less forbidding, more relaxed. We retrieved our cameras, and were told we could take photos and video. But the officers still did not know whether we could go inside - after all, it was an army base; we came from the U.S.; there might be secret installations we might have to pass by on our way. We agreed to wait by the gate while they went back inside to inquire.
Finally, the two officers, plus a third one, returned, and we were driven into the military base through a back entrance. And there - amazingly - in the midst of a complex of high-rise buildings fronted by lawns, in the vicinity of a children's playground with jungle gyms and clothes lines with hanging laundry, we found a large redbrick building that had been one the three residential structures for inmates in the former Vapniarka concentration camp (figure 6.3). 'This now is our base kindergarten', one of the officers told Luda.

We were allowed to photograph and to videotape it and its surroundings. And as we wandered about, under the bemused gaze of the Ukrainian officers, we tried to imagine the place where we were now standing more than a half-century earlier.

From the memoir of Arthur Kessler:

The three buildings are neglected, no windowpanes, no window frames, the floors are dirty, broken, doors are missing and even those that are there have no locks. ... There are pipes in two places in the yard, but no water.14

Admittedly, we had to work hard to connect what we had read and heard about the camp with the place where we now stood. Time and space seemed out of joint, though David Kessler, standing in front of the one remaining building to have his picture taken - the building in which his father had been interned - tried bodily to enact a link that had so definitively been severed (figure 6.4).

Almost reverently, the three of us walked around traces of the demolished foundations of the torn-down camp structures, picked up shards from old bricks, and waited for ghosts to emerge from the cracks in the pavement. As we strained to recapture an ever more distant 1942, daylight was now beginning to fade in the hazy late afternoon.

'Some things you forget. Other things you never do', Sethe says in Toni Morrison's Beloved. She goes on:

Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my remembrance but out there in the world. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there - you who never was there - if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.15

For Morrison the return to place creates repetition, reenactment. The past is there, in the place, in the present, in the form of a picture. We looked at our photocopy of the camp model, and at the building, still standing, still used in the present. The picture had helped to lead us to the place and to verify its authenticity. Indeed, the place was 'still there', 'waiting for [us]' - for the knowledge we could bring to it and the understanding and feelings we could take away.

Although we had not known about them at the time, we later acquired some remarkably detailed and powerful contemporary images of the Vapniarka camp and Lager - not photographs, of course, but woodcuts and engravings made by inmates - that helped us to visualise and fill out the fragmentary history we had heard and read about, and whose site we had now been able to visit (figures 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, 6.8).16
Figure 6.5 Transport to Vapniarka. Moshe Leibel, 1943. Courtesy: David Kessler.

Figure 6.6 Vapniarka gate. Moshe Leibel and He, 1943. Courtesy: David Kessler.

Figure 6.7 Vapniarka gate. Moshe Leibel, 1943. Courtesy: David Kessler.

Figure 6.8 Vapniarka building. Aurel Marculescu, 1943. Courtesy: Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta’ot Museum.
Vapniarka was first established as a detention camp in Transnistria's Zugastru district in the early autumn of 1941. Some one thousand deportees were initially brought there, mainly from Odessa, including Jews from Bessarabia and the Bukowina who had tried to flee to Russia in advance of the German-Romanian invasion of the Soviet Union. Within a few months of their arrival, about half of these inmates died from starvation, the freezing winter and a typhus epidemic.\(^\text{17}\)

Arthur Kessler cites camp commander Major Murgescu:

As to the people who were here before you, you can see 550 graves on the hill behind the Lager. They died of typhoid. Try to do better if you can.\(^\text{18}\)

The remaining inmates from that first group were forced to abandon the camp, marched to the outskirts of the village of Koslova, and shot by Romanian gendarmes. But Vapniarka was again employed not long afterwards to imprison individuals accused of various 'economic crimes' (such as blackmarketeering) and to fulfil what was to become its main purpose: to hold and punish suspected Communist sympathisers, Trotskyists, socialists and political dissidents. Nonetheless, the vast majority of those deported to the camp were Jews, and about 20 percent of all the inmates were women - among them a few who were interned along with their children.\(^\text{19}\)

In August and September 1942 some twelve hundred Jewish deportees were brought there from Bucharest and other core areas of 'Old' Romania (the Regat), but also from Czernowitz, the Bukowina region and other Romanian annexed areas. Although for the most part arbitrarily arrested, all were considered 'politics', people who had been active Communists or suspected of Communist leanings, and one of these was Dr Arthur Kessler - whose 'crime' it had been to be the Medical Director of the Czernowitz Hospital during that city's year-long spell (1940 to 1941) under Soviet control.\(^\text{20}\)

Conditions at the camp were initially atrocious. Inmates were subjected to extremely harsh forced physical labour; their water supply was shut off at the whim of the camp commander; their daily ration of food consisted of about seven ounces of straw-filled bread and a bowl of soup brewed from chickling peas (grasspea or chickling vetch) that local farmers (even under the worst of circumstances) had only mixed into horse-feed; and then, only in very small quantities. At the end of December 1942, about six weeks after the prisoners had been introduced to this pea-soup diet, the first among them showed the symptoms of a strange illness: paralysis of the lower limbs and loss of kidney functions (figure 6.9). Within a week, hundreds of others were also paralysed. By late-January 1943, some one thousand inmates in the camp were suffering from this disease in its early and intermediate stages; 120 were totally paralysed; ten had died.\(^\text{21}\)

It was Arthur Kessler who deduced that the epidemic was directly connected to the peas in the soup ration:

We are eating poison and we will die of it. Something has to be done immediately. ... As a result of our report to the outside world, a doctor and friend smugly passed a passage from a 13 volume 1936 textbook into the camp. We now know that we have been eating *Lathyrus sativus* fruit and that we are suffering from *Neurolathyrismus*.\(^\text{22}\)

It was subsequently revealed that this particular kind of chickling pea was known by local peasants to be toxic for humans and, over a longer term, for animals. Indeed, a steady diet of the *Lathyrus sativus* pea had brought on paralysis in many areas of the world - and recognition of its hazards was fairly widespread among rural peoples in the regions where it grew. As Arthur Kessler later observed:

In Central Europe, reports about stiff legs following the consumption of bread containing flour from *Lathyrus* pea, and laws to prohibit such adulteration, date back to the seventeenth century. In India, North Africa (Algier) and in Southern Russia, larger epidemics of lathyrism have regularly been observed in times of famine amongst the poor ... Malnutrition and low temperatures favored the onset of the disease.\(^\text{23}\)
It is significant to note that neither Vapniarka's Romanian camp officers nor its military guards were fed the toxic peas - only the inmates. Yet when Dr Kessler and other leaders among the prisoners appealed to the camp command to change their diet and to be given medical supplies to treat the sick, they were ignored. 'What makes you think that we are interested in keeping you alive?' responded the camp commandant at the time, Captain Buradescu, to a delegation of inmate-physicians who pleaded with him. The inmates then embarked on a hunger strike and would perhaps have been forced to make the 'choiceless choice' between paralysis, poisoning, or starvation had the camp, coincidentally, not been visited by the governor of Transnistria, Georgiu Alexianu. Alexianu's tour of Vapniarka eventually led to the confirmation of Dr Kessler's diagnosis and to some efforts to halt the epidemic. By the end of 1943, with the war in Eastern Europe turning increasingly against Germany and the Romanian military suffering massive casualties, Romanian authorities began to reevaluate their support of the Third Reich and to moderate some of their policies against Jews and other 'enemies of the state'. Among the consequences of this, it was decided that Vapniarka would be closed down. Dr Kessler and other surviving inmates were then 'released', either immediately or in the course of the next few months, but were forced to remain in Transnistria - placed in 'ghettos' or other camps throughout the territory (figure 6.10).

What, no doubt, had contributed immensely to the ability of Vapniarka's inmates to resist and to survive the deprivations of the camp and the epidemic that threatened them with paralysis and agonising death, was the effectiveness and power of their internal organisation. Largely because so many of the camp's inmates were political prisoners - Communists and others who had once been active in underground activities and who were highly educated, politically and academically - it was perhaps easier for them to organise within the camp and to maintain discipline among their fellow prisoners. An underground political committee, composed of former political activists and political leaders, in effect 'ran' a significant segment of the camp in a sub rosa manner, instituting measures to distribute food fairly, control against lice and the reappearance of typhus, staff the makeshift infirmary, and repair the broken-down inmate residential buildings. They were eventually also able to establish contact with people outside the camp and, through them, with Jewish community authorities in Bucharest. Indeed, the internal organisation of Vapniarka camp attested to the fact that even in a case of extreme physical and mental brutality and danger such as this, disciplined resistance by inmates could in some rare instances break through the walls of despair and depression within which captors attempted to crush them. And yet their acts of resistance have been largely forgotten, even by the communist state that evolved from the movements of which so many of them had been a part.

As we drove back from Vapniarka towards Chernivtsi, our emotions were mixed. We were excited by our adventure, by the impression that we might have been the first to visit this place since the war, and by the sense that we might well be the last outsiders to see the one remaining building that housed inmates in the former concentration camp. This structure, the three of us agreed, will surely also be demolished in the not too distant future. And yet our ability to locate that last standing Vapniarka building, and to gain admission to what had been the camp itself, clearly filled us with a sense of satisfaction, if not elation. We travelled there; we found the place; we saw it, and we touched it.

When we returned home to the United States not long after, however, we began to wonder what our trip had actually accomplished. In visiting the region that had been Transnistria, we had intended to connect memory to place. But we visited places so emptied of memory that our object seemed a failure. No one we encountered during that long afternoon in Vapniarka asked us anything about the history of the Vapniarka concentration camp. The Ukrainian officers accepted our gift of the photocopy of the Luftwaffe map for the army base museum, but they were remarkably incurious about the details of a past whose existence they were still reluctant to acknowledge. At best, we might think of our appearance as an intervention, an act of witnessing in
retrospect. If, through our visit, we brought the memory of its past back to the place, then that gesture was as evanescent as the hazy daylight that summer afternoon. It was an act, a performance that briefly, fleetingly, replaced history in a landscape that had eradicated it. But can that one-time act in itself be remembered? Does our telling the story, writing about it, confirm and concretise that encounter and memorialise it?

Photography helped us to perform and carry out such a memorial act. We recorded our visit in still image and video. Even when the last remnant of the camp is removed, our pictures, together with a narrative version of this account, can serve as testimony to the lives of those who were interned there, and to our own effort to understand and transmit their stories. Our photos and videos, however flat, partial and fragmentary, however limited by their frame, do record and memorialise the fleeting reconnection that transpired between memory and place. They prove our 'having been there', as Roland Barthes might say.26 And they provide some small compensation for the images that could never have been taken of the camp itself.

And yet, for us, even this indexical connection seemed not to be enough. Upon leaving Vapniarka, the three of us - David, Marianne and Leo - each took a stone along. Now a stone from one of the torn-down buildings of the camp is in our house in Vermont (figure 6.11) and another is in David's house in Rochester, New York. We did this unthinkingly, and when were writing this chapter we asked ourselves what this gesture meant to us. When Jews visit a gravesite they customarily place a small stone on it. Symbolically, this is meant both to help the dead to rest by 'aiding' their return 'to dust', and to mark the fact that someone has been there. In our case, instead of leaving a marker of our visit, we carried a fragment of the place away with us. If through our fleeting presence there we could not hope to re-place its history into the landscape, we made a gesture to displace it. We brought a physical fragment from the demolished camp back to our present world to serve, along with the photographs and the videos, as concrete evidence - substantiation both of a past we want to memorialise and of our own efforts to locate that past. Together, these physical testimonial remnants reflect our transformation into co-witnesses, carriers of a memory we have adopted - a memory we ourselves will now transmit and hope to pass down.

Notes

2. Lanzmann, Shoah, p. 6.
6. Arthur Kessler, 'Ein Arzt in Lager: Die Fahrt in's Ungewisse. Tagebuch u. Aufzeichnungen eines Verschickten', (typescript memoir, David Kessler Collection), pp. 3-4. All Arthur Kessler quotes in this essay are from his memoir, based on notes taken in the camp and written not long after the war. An English translation by Margaret Robinson, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, edited and with an introduction by Leo Spitzer and Marianne Hirsch, is in preparation.
7. Approximately forty thousand Jews were deported from Czernowitz, but some, deemed necessary for the continued functioning of Czernowitz, including civil engineers like Carl Hirsch, were authorised to remain in the city to maintain its essential services. They were initially moved to a section of the city marked off as a Jewish ghetto but were later permitted to return to their homes.
Chapter 7

The Space Between

Photography and the Time of Forgetting in the Work of Willie Doherty

Andrew Quick

A few years ago I stumbled across an exhibition of British art in Sydney, Australia. I did not plan to visit the gallery but had intended to 'take in' the city: the practice of the well-seasoned traveller. I felt confident in an urban environment described in my guidebook as being safe, able, at first, to locate myself in the water-front walkways and often familiar shops that appeared to reflect a global culture that, if not always European, is constantly Western in its configuration. My retreat into the space of the gallery, at least in my recollection of this visit, was provoked as much by a sense of anxiety that had built up during my walk about the city as by the desire to get to 'know' Australia culturally.

This anxiety undoubtedly drew its energy from the fact that everything around me felt both known and alien at the same time. Perhaps it was the haunting of a British colonial past that unnerved me: a sense that everything I was encountering felt familiar - in the design of public buildings, in the accent and lilt of people's speech, in the appearance of the British monarch's head on banknotes that were washable but could not be folded, in the constant reference to a history which, for a certain, seemingly dominant section of society, begins with James Cook's 'discovery' of Australia in 1770. Perhaps, it was the confident assertion of a nation's identity with reference to a version of a colonial past that made me feel uncomfortable. It is an unease that might arise from the realisation that the investment in national identity has been so problematic in Europe and the fact that the often enforced creation of