

Transformative Landscapes: Liminality and Visitors' Emotional Experiences at German Memorial Sites

Abstract

The atrocities of Nazi Germany included the radical transformation of natural landscapes. At Ravensbrück (Brandenburg), a lakeside setting became the site of the largest women's concentration camp in Germany, processing approximately 159,000 inmates until 1945. Similarly, at Flossenbürg (Bavaria), a picturesque valley in the *Oberpfälzer Wald* housed a large concentration camp with approximately 100,000 inmates over seven years and a granite quarry to support Hitler's extensive construction programme. After the war, part of Ravensbrück became a Soviet Army base, while large sections of Flossenbürg were removed to make way for a new housing and industrial development. Along with other former camps (particularly Auschwitz-Birkenau), parts of these landscapes were developed into memorial sites that aim to provide a liminal experience for visitors – a 'rite of passage'. In attempting to regain a sense of place that evokes the trauma of the past, the landscapes of the memorial sites of Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg were recently altered to resemble their appearance in 1945. For visitors, however, the aesthetic experience of these landscapes lies in stark contrast to the narrative they encounter at both sites; they are surprised to see signs of life, objecting to modernisation at Ravensbrück or the existence of a supermarket next to the memorial site in Flossenbürg. This paper examines the transformative processes of these landscapes and explores how their liminality is constructed, experienced and challenged. Through empirical visitor research conducted at both sites, it provides a critical evaluation of the narrative given to visitors and suggests how these important sites can offer a more engaging 'rite of passage'.

Keywords

Liminality, memory tourism, memorial sites, palimpsest, Germany, visitor research, visitor maps

Introduction

Lennon and Foley (2000) first recognised the phenomenon of rising visitor numbers to sites associated with death and disaster, and introduced the term 'dark tourism'. A range of research projects have since attempted to shine a light on tourists' experiences and understand their motivations for visiting these sites (e.g. Dunkley et al., 2011; Fricke and Nawjin, 2015). More recently, Stone (2018) asserts that societies' inability to deal with death in the public sphere encourages tourists to seek such encounters at memorials and 'death-related' museums. However, such explanations neglect the cultural and social factors that influence tourist activities and ignore the multi-faceted nature of visitor experiences at memorial sites such as Buchenwald. For instance, Volkhard Knigge (2004), Head of the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial site near Weimar, explains that he met a visitor who sought a spiritual experience by praying on the site while another wanted to step into the shoes of former victims by enduring a strenuous nine-kilometre walk from Weimar instead of taking the bus. Reynolds (2018) argues that when tourists travel to a memorial site they seek immediacy through actually being in the space. The transformation from space to place, as a complex of physical, social, cultural, and emotional qualities that is a part of the tourism experience (Rickly-Boyd, 2013, p.684), crosses a threshold that epitomises the concept of liminality. Thus, if memorial sites are to be regarded as liminal landscapes, it is necessary to apply empirical methods of visitor research to understand how such landscapes are constructed.

As an anthropological concept, liminality was introduced by van Gennep (1960) in *Rites of passage*, which focused on the sacred rites of transition from one socially sanctioned stage

to another. The concept was developed further by Turner (1969), who identified the ambiguous status of the individual in their transition between cultural realms of experience. Since tourism inherently involves a process of transition in moving from a space of everyday life to a space of new experiences and encounters, the emerging position of liminality within tourism studies has focused on mobility between spaces (e.g. Shields, 1991; Beckstead 2010). Hence, there is scope for tourism research to explore anthropological perspectives towards the individual tourist at a memorial site, who is influenced by their own cultural and educational background as well as by their own thoughts, emotions and feelings. While Downey et al. (2016) define liminality as an in-between space of potentiality, Beckstead (2010) concludes that a liminal tourist experience occurs at the boundary between an inner construction of meaning and an external confrontation with symbolic objects and landscapes.

Furthermore, Prosis (2003) argues that the concept of liminality is particularly relevant in museum environments, as visitors step out of their daily routine and encounter a highly symbolic environment through a guided experience. A case in point is Ravensbrück concentration camp memorial site. Located in Germany's picturesque lake district of *Mecklenburger Seenplatte*, the local tourism campaign promises *Endlich Ruhe* (finally peace and quiet). Stepping onto the grounds of the Ravensbrück memorial site is, however, no longer an experience of calmness. Within a couple of minutes, the tourist is confronted with remnants of the atrocities committed there. In addition, the visitor has to negotiate between different layers of commemorative design and Ravensbrück's past as a Soviet Army base for over 40 years. As such, present-day memorial landscapes present societies' commemorative attitude at the time (Violi, 2012). The physical remnants, however, provide visitors with an indexical link between the past and the present.

Malpas (2011, p.14) asserts that ‘understanding landscapes means understanding the forms of actions out of which they arise’, hence emphasising the performative aspect of landscapes. This complexity is evident in a sentence projected onto a wall at the museum in Flossenbürg: ‘the landscape is not responsible for what happened here’. It highlights the anxiety of the local community who fear that the landscape is permanently tainted by the memorial site. Indeed, the proposal for the first memorial emphasised that ‘traumatic memories’ should be contained in the natural valley to avoid spilling over to the surrounding area. Hence, the desire was to create a liminal space - a landscape with a defined boundary that would not disturb the local community. As such, the landscape was set aside as a liminal setting that would invite visitors to take part in the ritual process of grieving and commemoration. Yet, visitors to the landscape, be they survivors, or, increasingly, tourists, establish an ambiguous boundary (Casey, 2011) as memories of past traumas travel with them and cannot be contained exclusively within a liminal space.

Tourists within these spaces, however, also experience liminality within themselves. Their external senses attempt to comprehend a landscape that bears little resemblance to past atrocities while simultaneously their mind imagines the past (Popescu, 2016). Indeed, Popescu argues that this is a hallucinatory experience as the visitor tries to bridge the gap between the past and the present by using his/her own emotions.

This process is complicated further by the dynamic multi-layered nature of landscapes, particularly memorial sites that have witnessed changes in ownership as well as physical transformation. Landscapes may be regarded as palimpsests that evidence many successive

transformations by human intervention, changing land-use and management, natural succession of vegetation, and also climatological and geological factors (Nijhuis, 2019). The traces or ‘scars’ left by history can enhance the sense of place and allow a multi-faceted experience of landscape that may evoke different emotional responses in the visitor.

Memorial sites therefore present unique challenges in how their landscapes are managed and reinterpreted for the visitor. This includes the maintenance of the material landscape and its aesthetics to construct a particular sense of place. The development of the landscapes of Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg from their liberation in 1945 to the memorial sites of today, each hosting thousands of visitors per year, has involved their material transformation and reinterpretation (and to some extent, their reconstruction). Recent landscape design initiatives have aimed to create a sense of place that evokes the trauma of the past and encourages the visitor to re-imagine the camp at the point of liberation. This aim is also reflected in the designs of visitor maps of both sites, which incorporate wartime aerial reconnaissance photographs. Far from providing passive guides to wayfinding, these maps are designed to actively contribute to the re-imagining of the site. If affective experiences shape our identities (Attfield, 2000), it will serve the interests of site management to construct and portray these landscapes in ways that recognise liminality as part of their function.

This paper explores how visitors to two concentration camp memorial sites in Germany, Flossenbürg and Ravensbrück, experience a ‘rite of passage’ from their ‘ordinary’ lives to the depths of human atrocity. It examines how the development and portrayal of these memorial sites serves to enhance their role as liminal landscapes, thereby supporting the

transition of individual visitors and their response to the changing identity of these memorial sites.

Liminality in Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg

Ravensbrück Concentration Camp Memorial Site

The construction and use of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp until 1990

Initially built to process female prisoners, Ravensbrück concentration camp was constructed near the town of Fürstenberg, 50 miles north of Berlin, and gained its name from the village nearby. The area covered by the camp was mostly uninhabited, agricultural land in the 1930s, while the lake nearby and its beaches attracted bathers in the summer (Plewe and Köhler, 2001).

Construction began in 1938 using male prisoners from the nearby camp at Sachsenhausen. New buildings were required in 1940 to accommodate an increase in the number of inmates, for which extensive earthworks were carried out on marshland near the lake. Köhler and Plewe (2001) remark that the erection of the camp must have been a major eyesore for the local community, yet local newspapers did not include reports about the construction, neither does there appear to have been any local opposition.

In the later stages of Ravensbrück's operation, the camp changed its status as a forced labour camp to an extermination camp with the construction of a gas chamber. A shortage of building materials meant that the gas chamber was not completed before the Red Army arrived, and, consequently, a barracks near the crematorium was used from February to

April 1945. By the time of its liberation in 1945, some 159,000 prisoners (139,000 women and children and 20,000 men) had passed through the camp, of which tens of thousands had died during their internment (Eschebach, 2014).

After the liberation of Ravensbrück, the Soviet Army turned the site into a large military base within the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The former SS guard houses were reused for accommodating military personnel. The barracks were carefully dismantled and re-erected at different locations to house ethnic German refugees from *Sudetenland* (Czechoslovakia) and Silesia (Poland). The Soviet Army built additional housing for military staff in the typical communist-era style on the edge of the camp boundary, including local amenities such as shops. Although the official narrative was one of friendship between the Soviet military and East German civilians, the base was strictly off-limits for local Germans (Jacobeit and Stegemann, 2004). Thus, the area never regained the recreational character it had enjoyed prior to the construction of the camp. The Soviet Army was also less concerned about the site's historical importance. Buildings were significantly altered and adapted for military purposes. The former Youth Protection Camp Uckermark (located two miles north of Ravensbrück main camp) was flattened and used as an exercise area for tanks. Consequently, only a small part of the site was available for the development of a memorial, following intense negotiations between the GDR government and Soviet military officials.

The development of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp memorial until 1990

In April 1948, a delegation of the VVN (the Trust for Victims of the Nazi regime), travelled to Ravensbrück and observed that the camp was in a desolate condition (Schwarz and

Steppan, 1999). The only building considered to be in a reasonable state was the crematorium and it was agreed that the first memorial should be erected adjacent to this building. Consequently, the first memorial consisted of a simple wooden pillar and a 'fire bowl', and opened on 14th September 1948. With the founding of the GDR on 7th October 1949, the potential for developing a permanent memorial arose again. A new committee was formed in the GDR (the committee of the anti-fascist fighters), which set the tone for the future development of the memorial; the focus now was on the communist victims.

Subsequently in June 1956, Will Lammert, an East German artist, was asked to design the sculptures. He proposed two statues. One statue, *The Burdened*, representing a female prisoner carrying another, was erected by the lake and placed upon a two-metre-high plinth in order to be visible from the surrounding landscape (Lammert, 1965). This statue was intended to be supported by a group of mothers, which was, however, not completed due to the premature death of the artist, and was later added at the entrance to the concentration camp (Marchetta, 2001). The other statue, *Group of Women*, was erected near the crematorium. In addition, the former solitary confinement block was transformed into a museum and the former mass grave became a rose bed. Hence, the first GDR memorial was designed to take the visitor on a path 'from darkness to light', symbolising the journey from fascist rule to the GDR. The 'dark' was represented by the crematorium, the execution path and the mass grave; *The Burdened* overlooking the lake with one step forward towards the future, signified the 'light'.

The development of the current Ravensbrück memorial site

After the reunification of Germany, an expert commission formed in the federal state of Brandenburg recommended that the GDR exhibition should be replaced by a new exhibition

called 'History and Memory of the Women's Concentration Camp' (Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kultur Brandenburg, 2009). There were additional plans for the former Youth Protection Camp Uckermark, the nearby Siemens factory, the former SS guard houses, and the actual grounds of the camp to be incorporated into the memorial. However, during its occupation by the Soviet Army, the land was contaminated by chemicals (such as kerosene) and the former camp structures had been significantly altered.

A landscape architecture competition was launched in 1998 with the aim of transforming the site closer to its 1945 appearance without reconstructing its buildings. The architectural collaborative Oswald and Tischer won with a proposal that included covering the former *Appellplatz* with an 'artificial' surface made from clinker, thereby creating raised areas where the barracks once stood. Trees that were planted during the camp's operation remained as 'natural eyewitnesses' (Tischer, *pers. comm.*), while any other vegetation that had grown since 1945 was to be removed. The original landscape design envisaged that significant Soviet Army buildings were to be retained, yet this was rejected by the memorial site management team, the local conservation authority and the survivors (Tischer, *pers. comm.*). Consequently, most Soviet buildings were demolished, including a building which housed an exhibition about the Soviet Army. As no physical evidence remained of the former Uckermark camp, the architects' vision was to set aside the area as a meadow, sown with wild flowers to symbolise the fragility of life (Oswald and Tischer, 1998).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1 Two views of the landscape design model for Ravensbrück proposed by Oswalt and Tischer (1998) (reproduced courtesy of Oswalt and Tischer)

The first stage of the landscape design (laying the clinker surface) has been completed, creating a vast and bleak open space with no formal pathways to encourage visitors to explore the site without restrictions. Although the landscape designers were open to a rewilding of the area, weeds are frequently removed by the memorial management team, ensuring that the traces of the former camp remain visible. Nevertheless, returning the site to its 1945 appearance has removed almost all evidence of the former Soviet Army base, thus almost erasing a 49-year history (between 1945 and 1994). Although Soviet soldiers did not suffer in the same way as per the Nazi victims, the site's post-war history is a significant part of the wider history of the GDR, and its impact on the local community is undeniable.

Furthermore, not all aspects of the former concentration camp are integrated within the current memorial landscape. These include the locations of severe suffering, e.g. the area covered by the tent (erected to house large numbers of prisoners in the most appalling living conditions and also known as the 'zone of misery'), the Siemens factory, and the Uckermark camp. None of these locations appear on the official visitor map either. The current memorial therefore represents a fragmented version of the former camp. Indeed, Ravensbrück's memorial landscape is characterised by constant change and absence. For the victims, the barracks, the medical block in which the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) performed medical experiments, and the areas of forced labour were the spaces of intense suffering; for the visitor, however, these are not recognisable. The former SS female guard buildings, an integral part of the concentration camp landscape, have been converted into a youth hostel and staff offices (Figure 2), while the SS officers' buildings, previously used by the Soviet

Army as officers' accommodation, are in a state of controlled decay, with the exception of the *Führerhaus*.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 2 The former SS female guard house at Ravensbrück, now a youth hostel (Source: Authors)

The visitor map of Ravensbrück, designed by the German company unit-design in 2007 and currently available on-site as a leaflet, incorporates a wartime aerial reconnaissance photograph of the camp taken by the Royal Air Force in 1945 (Figure 3). Although the map serves to list and indicate the locations of various buildings around the camp using the established method of a numbered key, the use of the aerial photograph as the base for the map is significant as a device for supporting the affective role of the site's landscape design. It allows visitors to embody the experience of co-location across time; to orientate and to align their bodies to perceive and imagine the camp at the point of liberation. Far from being a passive tool for wayfinding, the map of Ravensbrück is an active agent for influencing the experience of the visitor towards liminality. The map allows the visitor's own imagination and the site's unique sense of place to combine, transporting the visitor to a reality of 1945 and creating a personal experience for each individual.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3 Ravensbrück visitor map, 2007 (reproduced courtesy of unit-design)

Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial Site

Historical development of Flossenbürg Concentration Camp

Flossenbürg is located in North Bavaria in the *Oberpfälzer Wald* region, very close to the border of the former Czechoslovakia. As Hitler's extensive building programme in the 1930s increased the demand for stone, Flossenbürg, with its extensive granite quarry, became the ideal location for a forced labour camp. The construction of the camp began in 1938 near the existing village. On 12th April the first barracks were erected and on 21st April 'Flossenbürg Labour Camp' opened. Until its liberation in April 1945, approximately 100,000 prisoners were processed at Flossenbürg, of which one third had died as inmates (Benz et al., 2007).

Flossenbürg concentration camp played a significant role within the whole concentration camp system. It was at the centre of an extensive network of 90 subcamps reaching as far as Saxony and Czechoslovakia. Flossenbürg was also the model for subsequent forced labour camps and is thought to have been the first site where the slogan *Arbeit macht frei* (Work sets you free) was displayed (Stier, 2015). Yet, after its liberation, it vanished from people's memory and became known as the 'forgotten concentration camp' (Skriebeleit, 2011).

The development of the first memorial and the deliberate destruction of historical evidence

After the liberation of Flossenbürg concentration camp, the US Army established a Prisoner of War (POW) camp for 4,000 German soldiers that was maintained by 800 US guards from July 1945 to April 1946 (Heigl, 1989). With the closure of the POW camp, the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) used the barracks as a 'Displaced Persons' (DP) camp. By the time of the camp's closure at the end of 1947, between 1,500 and 2,000 DPs, predominantly of Polish origin, were living in Flossenbürg.

Whilst the camp was in use as a POW and DP camp, an executive committee for erecting the monument and chapel at Flossenbürg concentration camp had been formed, consisting mainly of Polish DPs who had not been imprisoned at Flossenbürg (Skriebeleit, 2009). Polish Catholics dominated the committee to the exclusion of Jewish members who had little influence on the development of the first memorial. A local architect was tasked with the design of a Christian chapel, which was supposed to commemorate the victims of different nations who had suffered at the hands of the Nazis. He proposed a 'memory landscape' that would include the crematorium and the mass grave located in a valley which avoided compromising the significance of the existing landscape (Skriebeleit, 2009). Thus, the 'valley of death', designed as the way of the cross with a descent into hell (crematorium) and an ascent to salvation (chapel), provided the natural backdrop for the memorialisation process (Skriebeleit, 2016). It also functioned as a container, with the dense surrounding woodland creating a barrier between village life and the memorial itself.

The construction of the chapel commenced on 1st September 1946, near the former mass shooting area and the crematorium, and opened on 25th May 1947. The chapel's name *Jesus im Kerker* (Jesus in prison) shifted the focus away from the individual victim to the Christian symbolism of Jesus as a victim. Hence, the early commemoration at Flossenbürg was centred around the Catholic influence of the Polish group at the UNRRA camp and completely ignored the other victim groups.

In 1947, American Property Control (the owner of the site), decided to lease the quarry and the surrounding factory buildings for five years (Skriebeleit, 2009). According to the parish council, this provided vital employment opportunities and much-needed accommodation for the new refugees from *Sudetenland* who had settled in the area (32% of the local population

were now *Sudetendeutsche*). The decision to lease the quarry formed the basis for the ‘deliberate forgetting’ of the atrocities on site. It also suited the parish council, who had adopted the stance of the victim, i.e. the concentration camp was forced upon them and they had to live side-by-side with criminals and anti-socials.

By November 1948, 93 families were living in the former camp, most of whom were refugees from *Sudetenland*. The desolate condition of the buildings was no longer considered to be appropriate housing for these refugees and the council began to formulate a house-building programme (Skriebeleit, 2009). It was convenient on two levels: the ugly reminders of the concentration camp (the barracks), would finally be removed and erase the traces of the atrocities, while the refugees, although ethnic Germans, were considered to be foreigners and could be housed on the edge of the village. The former SS accommodation was much more luxurious and was built to blend in with the landscape, thus was not regarded as part of the concentration camp landscape and had already been sold off as private residences.

In 1958, the house-building programme finally commenced and all barracks were removed. In the meantime, the control of the first memorial (the chapel and the cemetery), was transferred to the new *Staatliche Schlösser, Gärten und Seen* (the government department responsible for maintaining castles, gardens and lakes), which was administered by the Bavarian Finance Ministry. This transfer set the precedent for the future development of the chapel and cemetery; the focus being the beautification of the area, largely through the removal of derelict buildings.

In 1962, a proposal to remove the camp prison was objected by the Lutheran Church, as it was thought to erase the legacy of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A compromise was reached in 1964 to preserve the place where Bonhoeffer was hanged in 1945 and to erect a small exhibition commemorating his life, but resulted in the removal of up to 80% of the historical fabric of the former camp. Bonhoeffer's increasing popularity led subsequently to an increase in international visitors. Whilst the memorial had previously been regarded as an eyesore it now became an important part of Flossenbürg's tourism landscape.

The development and integration of a new memorial, 1970-2007

In 1979, the veil of silence over Flossenbürg began to lift as the first historical study of the camp was published by Toni Siegert, a local journalist (Siegert, 1979). The project coincided with the broadcasting of the US TV series *Holocaust* in West Germany. Slowly, West Germany's attitude towards the Nazi period and its legacy began to change. Finally, in 1984, it was decided to develop a new exhibition, and whilst it was a considerable improvement compared to the 1960s, it did not involve any specific pedagogical intervention by the museum.

In 1999, the opportunity arose to re-establish the camp outline and provide a new permanent memorial in situ. Building work commenced in 2004 by demolishing the old factory buildings and returning the site to its 1945 appearance as closely as possible. Figure 4 demonstrates how the *Appellplatz* was reinstated by removing buildings and trees to create a barren landscape. The locations of the former barracks were indicated by white lines and the camp boundary was reinstated by using white concrete fence posts (Figure 5a and 5b). There is, however, one issue that Flossenbürg will always find difficult to resolve: the housing development on the foundations of the former barracks.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 4 The redevelopment phases of Flossenbürg Concentration Camp memorial after 2003 (Flossenbürg Concentration Camp memorial, 2015; reproduced courtesy of Flossenbürg memorial site)

[FIGURES 5a and 5b ABOUT HERE]

Figure 5(a) Former camp boundary wall prior to site development in 2003 (Flossenbürg Concentration Camp memorial, 2015; reproduced courtesy of Flossenbürg memorial site); 5(b) reinstatement of former camp boundary after 2003

Due to the removal of buildings and the re-use of the Flossenbürg concentration camp for industrial purposes after 1945, there is little evidence of the conditions at the camp during the Nazi period. As such, the current memorial does not reflect the typical atmosphere a visitor might expect. Indeed, one could say that the beautification process of the 1960s and 1970s was successful, as it created a 'sanitised' version of a concentration camp. Whilst the current memorial site attempts to present the former camp and its history, even winning the Museum of the Year Award of 2014 for its brave exhibition on Flossenbürg after 1945, it is, in its current form, a fragmented site. The quarry, where prisoners experienced daily hardship, is not integrated into the memorial site as it is still in use. Although visitors can see the quarry from a viewing platform, hardly anyone does. Much like Ravensbrück, the visitor at Flossenbürg only gets a glimpse of the sheer scale of operation at a concentration camp.

The visitor maps at the memorial site of Flossenbürg also include a black-and-white wartime aerial reconnaissance photograph (Figure 6), which is wall-mounted separately from the map of the site. The use of black-and-white photography brings a sense of continuity to images taken at the time of the camps' operation (Charlesworth and Addis, 2002) and the aerial photograph introduces a sense of objectivity and authority in portraying how the camp looked at the point of liberation. Unlike the leaflet available at Ravensbrück, however, the photograph does not serve as the base for the visitor map for Flossenbürg and is not portable. Consequently, the map and the photograph here act more as reference points for the visitor and less as agents that reinforce their perception and re-imagining as they explore the site.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 6 Visitor sign in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp memorial incorporating a map and wartime aerial image (Source: Authors)

Investigating the Emotional Experiences of Visitors to Memorial Sites

Method

Buchenwald memorial's manager, Volkhart Knigge, pleaded for caution in 2004 with regard to visitor research at memorial sites. He argued that standard museum research methodologies cannot be transferred to a concentration camp memorial. The smallest physical intervention, e.g. a sign, can cause serious upset, which is unheard of at 'normal' museums. He recalls, for instance, the visitor who screamed at him for using gaseous pesticides at the memorial site. Equally, Küblblöck (2012) explains that researching visitors at memorial sites is beyond the skill set of most social scientists. The complex interplay of cultural and personal backgrounds, collective memory narratives and emotions are,

according to him, difficult to capture through the standard repertoire of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and requires an interdisciplinary approach.

Pereiro (2010) highlights that anthropological research can reveal the complex social realities of tourism activities and Light (2017) emphasises that researchers need to get close to tourists in order to develop an understanding of how they experience 'dark' sites. In particular, ethnographic research is able to highlight the meaning-making processes which are essential when investigating tourism at memorial sites. For example, Sumartojo (2019) demonstrates the importance of sensory experiences at memorial sites by asking tourists at a concentration camp memorial in France to take photographs of locations that resonate with them. The subsequent video-taped interviews reveal the meaning of these sites and how they are understood by the visitor.

Thus, in order to gain an understanding of the visitor experience in situ, ethnographic research in the form of open participant observation (Herbert, 2000) was conducted at each location over a four-week period in June and July 2016. The visitor research undertaken at Flossenbürg and Ravensbrück formed part of a wider project to investigate visitor responses at German memorial sites. Including school visits, in 2018 Ravensbrück memorial site received approximately 100,000 visitors while Flossenbürg recorded 90,500 (Das Gupta and Sandkuhl, 2019). This paper focuses on the interaction between the visitor and the landscape, and discusses the results of the qualitative research.

During open participant observation, the researcher can 'join in', allowing him/her to record visitor behaviour as and when it happens (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002). As such, the researcher is able to record activities in their natural setting, gaining an understanding of

social phenomena (Kawulich, 2005). Whilst participant observation is an established method within anthropological research, often studying cultural groups in their 'original' settings over extensive periods of time, it is not usually adopted for research at memorial sites. Hence, the relatively short stay of visitors on-site (on average two hours) required trust to be established quickly in order to gain insights into the visitors' reactions.

Open participant observations may also be disadvantaged in that the research subject can alter their behaviour in the presence of the researcher. Nightingale (2008, p.107), however, emphasises that 'to produce good qualitative research, accurate observation has to be combined with communication and exchange of information and ideas'. Indeed, how visitors respond to a landscape, especially emotionally, can only be established through conversation. Hence, despite the disadvantages of open participant observation, it was considered to be the most appropriate research methodology in this case.

Individual visitors were approached at random on arrival at each memorial site (n = 52). At Ravensbrück (n = 25), most visitors were German (19), while others originated from the United States (2), Belgium (1), Poland (1), Switzerland (1) and the United Kingdom (1). Similarly, at Flossenbürg (n = 27), most visitors were from Germany (20), in particular from the local federal state of Bavaria, followed by visitors from the United States (4), often stationed at the nearby army base, and visitors from Sweden (2) and Belgium (1). At Ravensbrück, the most common age groups were 50 to 60 years old and over 70 years old, with only two visitors in the 20 to 30 age group. By contrast, at Flossenbürg, most participants were in the age groups of 20 to 30 and of 60 to 70 years old, although the age groups of 30 to 40 and of 50 to 60 years were also represented. Conversations with visitors were conducted in either German or English, thus excluding those whose language ability

provided a barrier. As the research took place at the height of summer, weather conditions were often sunny and very hot which could have affected visitors' perception of the wider memorial landscape more positively.

Since there are no prescribed routes at either memorial site, visitors are free to choose which locations they visit and in which order. Visitors were therefore accompanied (but were not guided) across the memorial landscape, although historical questions were answered, e.g. what happened in the crematorium. During these observations, the visitors' comments, their emotional reactions and the locations they visited were all recorded in field notes and were subsequently analysed using NVivo software. This provided sufficient distance from the data to develop a reflective interpretation (Berger, 2015).

Results and Interpretation

At the Ravensbrück memorial site, a German male visitor commented: 'It is perverse; this morning I had a great breakfast in my hotel, then I look at this [Ravensbrück], then you forget everything and carry on with your cycling tour'. Most individual visitors at both memorial sites engaged with what could be described as tourist activities; they were either on holiday in the area or were on a day trip. Thus, they were in a transitional stage, away from ordinary day-to-day life to one marked by new experiences. These experiences are usually characterised by positivity, e.g. Sun, beach, relaxation. Yet in the case of memorial sites, it is a transition into negativity, into the depths of the human psyche. Often within a space of minutes, the visitor suddenly encounters a world of destruction and mass murder. Once s/he leaves these areas of violence, however, s/he is re-entering an ordinary space that subsequently feels inappropriate. The visitor's remark above stresses the importance of those transitional periods that are either hindered or supported by the landscape itself. Yet

these landscapes are often characterised, as shown previously, by absence. The murder and violence that had taken place is no longer visible; a feeling often expressed by survivors.

‘Nature has overgrown all suffering; I only found the area where Siemens docked their ships on the River Havel and some remains of the *Sonderblock* that my daughter unearthed’ (Gedenkort KZ Uckermark Online, 2018). This comment is from Maria Potrzeba, a survivor of the Youth Protection Camp Uckermark. Maria describes what so many survivors experience when they return to Ravensbrück: a feeling of alienation on encountering a picturesque lakeside setting at a site where the most horrific atrocities had taken place and where their lives had been changed for good. The landscapes themselves, however, appear to be indifferent to the former suffering (Rapson, 2015).

For some visitors, the landscapes remain contaminated. One female German visitor commented at Ravensbrück: ‘These places have a dark and mystical atmosphere that will always hang over them’ and a German male visitor concluded that ‘The longer one stays in these places, the more depressing they become’. Such sentiments are also evident in buildings that symbolise the Nazis’ industrial management of death, i.e. crematoria. Some visitors at both Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg were hesitant in walking into these buildings or started to tremble. It was almost as if the visitor attempted to take on the emotions of the victim, which of course they cannot. A female German visitor commented on encountering the crematorium at Ravensbrück: ‘I’ve had enough now, this industrial processing unnerves me’, whilst a German teenager suggested when viewing the ‘execution path’ that ‘This is too sad for me’. These reactions highlight the performative aspect of traumatic landscapes. Although suffering and death are no longer visible, the meaning of the landscape evokes a sense of place in visitors that goes beyond the material evidence.

It is, however, not only the buildings of mass murder that are tainted. At Flossenbürg, visitors frequently remarked that the residential houses built on the foundations of the barracks 'looked sad' and they could not understand how anyone could possibly live there. One German visitor at Ravensbrück complained about the modern addition of the visitor centre which 'does not fit into the landscape'; whilst another visitor encountering the clinker surface argued that 'These places should not be cleaned up'. In this case, the visitor did not realise that the surface had only been installed recently, yet for her the 'bleakness' symbolised historical evidence. Hence, pathemic restoration (Violi, 2012), designed to engender emotions in visitors, can affect their overall experience of the site. However, signs of life, such as residential homes or new buildings, appear to disrupt the visitors' expectation (or need) to encounter a bleak atmosphere. Indeed, the aesthetically pleasing elements of the landscape, like the lake at Ravensbrück or the valley in Flossenbürg, work against the visitors' experience, as the serenity of the landscape stands in contrast to the atrocities that happened.

Keats (2005) notes during his visitor research at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Poland) and at Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp memorial site (near Berlin) that visitors 'filter their experiences through a cultural lens' (p.180), i.e. they will interpret the site according to their own frame of reference. For example, one Swedish visitor admired the natural landscape of Flossenbürg, enjoying the birdsong and commented 'Every nation has done something bad'. Clearly, this visitor was less disturbed by the site than the German visitors mentioned above, and s/he could therefore approach the memorial in a more emotionally detached way. This supports Violi's (2012) claim that emotional reactions at memorial sites are influenced by the positioning of the visitor. The more knowledge visitors have about associated historical

events, the deeper the emotions they are likely to experience. As Klüger (2003, p.94) suggests about journeys to Auschwitz, 'He who thinks something could be found there, has brought it with him in his luggage'.

It was not just buildings of mass murder that provoked feelings of unease. At Ravensbrück, some visitors who had stayed overnight in the youth hostel in the former SS female guard houses experienced sleepless nights. One German visitor stated, 'I slept well the first night, but not anymore afterwards'. Another German visitor noted that 'One cannot shake off the fact that one sleeps in a former SS building'. Furthermore, the contrast between the SS houses, the lake, and then the camp, brought the malicious nature of the Nazi system to the fore, as one German visitor concluded. Hence, not only the atrocities are projected onto the landscape; the entire Nazi system is palpable.

Aspects of nature, such as trees, inspired visitors to reflect on the victims' experience. One visitor from the US remarked 'It is so calm here, when one considers the atrocities that have taken place', while a German visitor said that for him, 'Every stone is a destiny'. Even the trees were transformed into witnesses of violence, as one German visitor pondered 'The trees would have been here' (referring to Flossenbürg's time as a concentration camp).

At times, the memorial landscape functioned as the backdrop for dealing with one's own traumatic memories. A German male visitor at the beginning of his visit to Flossenbürg stated 'I know what a concentration camp is like, I had one at home'. He was referring to his abusive father who had been an avid supporter of the Nazi regime. A female German visitor at Ravensbrück was flooded with memories as she walked across the landscape: 'When I walk around here, all these memories are coming back. My grandfather dying after he was

released from Neuengamme concentration camp and my father returning disabled from World War II'. Another German (but having grown up in Australia) female visitor at Flossenbürg explained on arrival that her father had survived Mauthausen concentration camp and subsequently emigrated to Australia. He had never talked about his experiences. For her, the visit to Flossenbürg was marked by a commemoration of the victims and by coming to terms with her father's silence. She concluded the visit by saying 'I have to emotionally distance myself from the visit, otherwise I won't cope'. Feelings of emotional distancing in order to cope were frequently expressed by visitors and also amongst those who had no direct connection to the concentration camp system. In addition, a recurrent theme amongst German visitors was 'My relatives never talked'. Hence, the memorial site can also be a form of individual German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past).

While tourists in other contexts desire an emotional bond, especially at museum and heritage sites (McIntosh, 1999; Biran et al., 2011), German memorial sites appear to promote the opposite; a safe distance, so that one does not get emotionally overwhelmed (Yair, 2014). Moreover, these findings reveal that visitor experiences at concentration camp memorial sites are highly subjective and influenced by a number of factors, including their cultural background and the physical environment. This supports Light's (2017) view that only by getting close to the visitor can one understand the visitor experience at 'dark' sites.

Other visitor comments suggest that these landscapes seem to become almost sacred spaces. When one German female visitor overheard a tour guide explaining to another group that the GDR had to flatten the ashes to build the first memorial at Ravensbrück, she reacted in horror: 'I can't believe I'm walking on ashes now'. The sacredness of the site was also

mirrored in another situation observed during fieldwork. Some canoeists who had anchored their boats next to the Ravensbrück memorial statue (having paddled across the lake from the nearby town of Fürstenberg) were immediately reprimanded by the water police and were asked to leave in their canoes. Eschebach (2011) explains that since 1945, there is a common belief that human ashes were dumped into the lake, thus for survivors it is a grave. The lake's dual function as a graveyard and as a water sports area resulted in a division into a 'sacralised' space (marked by buoys) and a 'leisure' space. Although canoeists have long been demanding a landing stage, this is rejected by survivors and the management team as a 'profanation of the site' (p.140). It nevertheless appears to be somewhat paradoxical, given that the Ravensbrück site houses a youth hostel where visitors can enjoy barbeques and parties.

The landscape also functions as evidence for the crimes committed. Visitors are increasingly influenced by either the representation of the Holocaust in films, such as *Schindler's List* or *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Cole, 1999; Alexander, 2002), or by previous visits to other memorial sites, particularly Auschwitz. Some visitors therefore suggested that they did not get the gruesome feeling they had experienced when visiting Auschwitz or Dachau. This was mainly due to the absence of former camp structures and by the overwhelming feeling that 'Auschwitz had been much worse'. For instance, one German female at Flossenbürg said 'I could not eat anything after a visit to Auschwitz, while here I quite happily go to the cafe'. Another German visitor argued that Auschwitz was more emotional, as 'You could still see the electrical fences which you are confronted with immediately after arrival'. Indeed, four young German visitors suggested that 'Auschwitz was more interesting because one could still see the scratch marks on the wall'. Whilst this is an extreme example, it emphasises the power of the media which clouds visitors'

perceptions of what a concentration camp memorial ought to look like. Zelizer (1998) poignantly argues that we are on our way 'to remember to forget'. The results of this research support her argument, as visitors tended to recall the artefact rather than the historical facts.

Tourists at memorial sites are often criticised for their shallow behaviour which manifests itself, for instance, in taking inappropriate photographs (including 'selfies'). However, this research found that German visitors did not tend to take photographs at memorial sites, and those who did usually took panoramic shots. In contrast, visitors from the US specifically focused on the material evidence of the site, e.g. by taking photographs at Flossenbürg of the watchtowers, barbed-wire fence posts and the memorial plaque of the US Infantry Division who had liberated the camp in 1945. Thus, tourists to concentration camp memorial sites cannot simply be described (e.g. by Cole, 1999; Pollock, 2003) as shallow or voyeuristic. German visitors appeared to experience a psycho-cultural barrier that prevents them from taking photographs. For US visitors, capturing these physical remnants operated as proof for preconceived or stereotypical images; in a sense 'seeing is believing' and even comforting.

Rapson (2015) noted that curatorial decisions on memorial landscape design are rarely considered in academic research and that research on visitor responses is even rarer. These findings reveal the complex interplay between visitors' identity, the memorial space, cultural memory and emotions. Crucially, tourists are not distant spectators (Knudsen, 2011). The memorial landscape is more than just a backdrop, since visitors actively engage with tangible and intangible aspects of the site. In fact, it is their own imagination and interpretation that often creates the meaning. Thus, as Crouch et al. (2001) suggest, tourism

needs to be considered as an active encounter rather than a passive activity. Visitors to memorial sites can be secondary witnesses to the trauma they take with them when they leave (Reynolds, 2018). The visit is therefore a transitional, liminal process and although this visitor research has cast light on the transition phase, knowing precisely how such visits ‘transform’ the individual before they re-enter ordinary life remains elusive.

More generally, visitor experiences of these memorial sites indicate how the sites’ sense of place is embodied. The immateriality that characterises these experiences appears to enhance the effect on the visitors’ bodies; sleepless nights in the on-site youth hostel or trembling when engaging with near-empty spaces in this context. The gaps are filled by the visitors’ imaginations in their perceptions of bleak, dehumanised landscapes. That the sites’ visitor maps (and most on-site signage) are devoid of colour provides a sense of continuity with wartime imagery (Charlesworth and Addis, 2002), but also reinforces these re-imaginings and perceptions, that in turn evoke a sense of place that creates liminality.

This construction of liminality is further complicated by the multi-layered history and function of memorial sites such as Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg. The changing owners of the landscape have each left their mark and so the sites in effect become palimpsests that bear witness to the different phases in their development. The recent active landscaping of these memorial sites in an attempt to revert to their 1945 appearance, and thereby attempting to erase different layers of their past, raises serious questions regarding the preservation of the historical integrity of these sites. How the process affects the sense of place is potentially a subject of future visitor research.

Conclusion: Connecting Visitors to Transformative Landscapes

The changing political narratives of memorialisation are inscribed into the landscapes at the memorial sites of Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg. Hence, these landscapes have had to adapt to Germany's changing attitudes towards its Nazi past, especially after 1990 as a re-unified country. At Flossenbürg, this required a reinstatement of the original camp structure by demolishing factory buildings that had been built after 1945 and indicating the location of former barracks by white concrete lines. At Ravensbrück, Soviet Army buildings were demolished in order to recover traces of the former camp.

However, returning the landscapes to their former appearance is not without its shortcomings. At Ravensbrück, the process almost erased a fifty-year history of the Soviet Army which had a significant impact on the local community and their perception of the site. At Flossenbürg, the removal of the factory buildings opened up the view to the housing development, which is now considered to be inappropriate.

These findings have demonstrated that being in the space of former suffering is an integral part of the visit to such an extent that signs of new life are experienced as disturbing. The spaces that caused the strongest emotional reactions were those locations where death was processed (e.g. the execution areas and crematoria). However, visitors overlooked the fact that suffering did not just occur in these places; the real suffering was the daily struggle for survival of the appalling working and living conditions at both camps.

Landscapes are palimpsests of memory which 'go beyond individual experience; [combining] memory and history, objective and subjective, in a blend of perception and meaning-making' (Manning, 2010, p.237). Yet, visitors at both concentration camp memorials remain largely unaware of the changing nature of these landscapes. A better way

to introduce this for visitors may be to embrace the landscape as a palimpsest that brings the visitor closer to experiencing the different layers. One example of this approach is adopted at the Gusen subcamp memorial site of the former Mauthausen concentration camp. Apart from a memorial erected in the 1960s and a visitor centre which opened in 2004, nothing remains. Much like Flossenbürg, the former barracks were removed and replaced by an Austrian housing development. Through an audio tour, however, visitors are guided through the village where the voices of survivors, residents, and actors representing SS staff and guards interplay with specially designed soundtracks. The visitor only hears fragments of those voices; hence it is not a complete historical analysis of the Gusen subcamp. However, by featuring those different perspectives, the visitor gains a sense of the complexity of how a memorial site comprises a multi-layered landscape.

The use of maps at memorial sites can actively encourage visitors to re-imagine past landscapes as palimpsests, whilst also supporting the aim of evoking a sense of place and enhancing liminality. The potential of other methods to encourage exploration of the sites' history and to allow visitors to discover otherwise hidden aspects should be an integral way of memorial site management. After all, a space cannot just be read as a fixed point in time, but one must be aware of its transformation (Massey, 2005).

Cole and Giordano (2018) suggest the introduction of a place-based GIS (geographical information system) that combines qualitative with quantitative data, e.g. the visitor would either see past images or historical documents that are connected to a specific location. The creation of a 'soundscape' at concentration camp memorial sites would be a sensory method for engaging visitors at sites where there are few visible remains. Whilst such developments must be sensitive to ethical boundaries, audio tours have the ability to create a form of

'embodied listening', forcing people to negotiate the current landscape while also engaging with the 'memoryscape' (High, 2013). Thus, memory is able to 'cut through the layers' and show the timelessness of a place (Klüger, 2005).

The management at both memorial sites envisages the re-integration of areas which formed part of the concentration camp landscape (the 'zone of misery' at Ravensbrück and the quarry at Flossenbürg). At Ravensbrück the 'zone' is merely a grassland as there is no physical evidence remaining, while the quarry at Flossenbürg is still in operation. Ironically, this expansion mirrors that of the sites' original growth and physical transformation of natural landscapes. Yet, in regressing these spaces to landscapes of trauma, defined solely by one layer of their history, they become liminal for visitors. Curatorial decisions regarding memorial sites should therefore not only focus on their museum spaces, but also on the management and design of their wider landscapes and the associated ethical considerations.

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