

A Secret Path Along Which Death Made Its Escape Introduction by Hans van Houwelingen

The Vijfhuizen Fort was built at the turn of the twentieth century as part of the Defense Line of Amsterdam that surrounds the Dutch capital. This military system made it possible to flood the countryside surrounding the ring of 45 forts if an enemy attempted to capture the capital. The forts were then to control all access roads along the dikes. The Vijfhuizen Fort itself was built, 'to block and defend access provided by the orbital canal system of the Haarlemmer Lake and its dikes and quaysides, together with the Spieringweg and the western edge of the permanently dry areas of the reclaimed land at Haarlemmer Lake.'

Any visitor to the fort is bound to be impressed by the starkness and monumental scale of the concrete construction. Everything here suggests a history of conflict and countless deaths in battle. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, because not one of these forts ever saw military conflict, not a single enemy appeared and not a drop of blood was spilt. The arrival of the age of aviation coincided with the completion of the fort; its strategic purpose was lost and the forts were rendered militarily obsolete.

The ring of forts was left in peace and in 1996 the defense system was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Vijfhuizen Fort became a contemporary art museum. A century ago, it was 'the enemy' that justified its existence; now it is art that must bear the burden of responsibility for its present and future.

This hardy nineteenth century fort in its romantic setting, with ramparts that never sheltered soldiers from artillery fire, now confronts the visitor, paradoxically, with death. Obviously no one fell in battle here and no one was buried at this place. On my visits there, it is this very absence of death that brought about a keen awareness of its existence. The fort is brimming with death's absence – something that is as remarkable as it is intangible. In this setting, the meaning of death finds a striking parallel in the fort's own unheralded non-existence. Now, recycled as it has been to serve a contemporary semantics, I wondered where death had gone.

A few years ago, I was confronted with the efficiency of death. First, at the care home that so quickly and effectively dispatched my mother to the afterlife, and then by my encounters that followed with the Dutch economy of death, which will only allow temporary use of a grave, for ten or twenty-year rental periods; eternal rest comes to an early and irrevocable end if you cannot come up with the next payment. Death, that profound mystery and inexhaustible source of inspiration for life and for art, has become a commodity in a ruthless market economy. Being dead is expensive. So death usually does not last long. 'Rest In Peace' is not to be taken too literally. Death is no longer one of life's certainties. What will it be like when death ceases to exist altogether? No death is certain. What is the meaning of the moment death ceases to exist? With these thoughts in mind I set out draw a secret path along which death made its escape.

The ramparts that form the external defense of the nineteenth century Art Fort at Vijfhuizen are now traversed by a path made up of hundreds of tombstones from exhumed graves - tombstones have a longer life than death. Surviving relatives made the gravestones available for this purpose over the past two years. Each of them had given up their claim to a personal monument so that the stones could be recycled to create a single work of art – a work that calls attention not only to death, but also to its absence. Countless individual life stories have been fused together into the secret path as a way

of giving death a tangible identity. The cemetery accommodates the processing of private grief, but my intention was to create room for death itself.

A Secret Path Along Which Death Made Its Escape took over two years to complete and was inaugurated on 10 May 2009. This was marked with an afternoon of events and the opening of an exhibition entitled *Ruhezeit Abgelaufen* (The time for peace is over). This title comes from a notice placed on graves in Germany to indicate that the grave rental period is over and that it is time for the departed to depart. The inscription has something almost cheerful about it, as though the occupant's overextended lunch break has ended and an afternoon's work still beckons. It typifies the paradoxical circumstances that beset death nowadays: apparently a point must come when we have to take leave of death.