

The chimera

On the 2nd of May 2021, in the middle of the worst peak of Corona third wave in Germany, with the ban of moving among federal states and the curfew, at 4:30 in the morning I left the hostel in Weimar on a cab directed to the Buchenwald memorial. In the pouring rain, with two-meters-visibility dense fog and a couple of hours sleep, I arrived at the memorial in the darkest of dawns. First stretch, thirty kilometres to reach my night stop in Dienstedt.

According to my calculations, I should have started seeing the first tenuous light in the sky before 5AM, then I would have taken my mask out of the plastic bag that was protecting it, worn it on the back of my head and began that forty days journey that I had been preparing for months. It wasn't so.

A heavy blanket of clouds was standing between me and the sky, obscuring the rising sun. And I had to wait some good hour before being able to move a step. An hour dense of phantoms, of expectation. The conjunction between story-telling and experienced reality. A darkness that would only allow to look inside myself, tense between the Now and the Then; where the Then becomes all what is not present, a chimera that, stretching its claws, simultaneously reaches to past and future.

Forty days and over nine-hundred kilometres after, in my irreducible astonishment, I arrived at the Fossoli memorial. It was 8PM, I had had a long, exhausting walk of around 30 kilometres with above 30° temperatures, no shade, no wind, little water availability. A small crowd, anticipated by cameras and journalists approaching me, was the sign that I had made it. The director of the Fossoli Foundation hugging me in tiers, the commotion that broke my voice, the sudden surprise (shall we call it anticipation of nostalgia?) that, indeed, my walk had come to its end.

It has taken some time longer until the work would be officially and definitively over. Distanced myself from the small welcoming group, I had the chance to roam alone, my mask still on the back of my head, among the barracks of the former concentration camp. It was time needed to depart to the mask and to the journey in which, for good and for worse, it had accompanied me. Then in one of the restored barracks, a table arranged with the material about the route, a large printed map with all stops of my path, the contract. I take the two clips that had secured the mask on my head those many days and carefully put it on the table. The hand unintentionally reaches to it, as in a last, private farewell, before the contract is signed and the weight of that mask is taken over, symbolically and not, by the Fossoli Foundation.

The day after, finally dressed in regular clothes, I have been shown the Museo Monumento al Deportato. For a closing interview they had arranged a small set in the Room of the Names. Some centimetres next to my chair, the mask was overlooking from its stand. Too alive, too vibrant, still throbbing. And yet severed.

Memory builds up on the selection we make of our experience of reality. It's a process that can only be induced once the experience itself is concluded. For me, about three weeks after my arrival in Fossoli, this whole material is still too vivid and pulsating to be encapsulated in a memory. Too specific and individualised its parts to be composed in a narration. Speculation and story-telling belong to the Then, to the chimera of the many shapes that is anywhere else but in the Here and Now.