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From Union Square to Red Square: the 6,000 mile Walk for Peace

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From Union Square to Red Square: The 6,000 Mile Walk for Peace
By: Jordan DelFiugo

The Walk

Check yes or no: Would you be willing to commit acts of civil disobedience to gain entry into a European country if permission to enter is denied by its government?

For 22-year-old David Rich, the answer was yes, as he filled out an application to join the Committee for Nonviolent Action on their San Francisco-to-Moscow “Walk for Peace.”

On Dec. 1, 1960, more than 150 people gathered at the walk’s starting point in Union Square to give the team of 10 a sendoff before they began their 6,000-mile journey.

In typical San Francisco fashion, a thick layer of fog covered the city as anticipation hung in the air, but as Rich and the rest of the team entered, a rare glimpse of sunlight washed the square. In his account of the walk, “You Come With Naked Hands,” the committee’s principal organizer, Bradford Lyttle, described the moment as being “by providence.”

It was Rich’s first time in San Francisco. He had driven there from New York in a small red Renault car. As the walk commenced, he stood before the crowd, carrying copies of the U.S Constitution and the New Testament.

In an interview, Rich said his religious beliefs are part of what pushed him toward pacifism. “We’re supposed to love our neighbor as ourselves, just like we love God,” he said. “That led me to question the place of war.”

He packed light, with a simple munition bag containing spare clothes, a toothbrush and a first-aid kit. Other walkers carried backpacks and picket signs with hand drawn peace symbols.

To minimize the risk of burnout, the Committee for Nonviolent Action split the walk into three phases, building a team for each stretch. Those in Phase One walked from San Francisco to Chicago, those in Phase Two walked from Chicago to New York City and those in Phase Three, “the European phase,” walked from England to Moscow.

Rich was the only participant to complete the entire trek on foot. Quitting, he said, was never an option.

“I was prepared to go the distance,” Rich said. “Even before the walk began, I had started studying a little bit of the Russian language and learning how to read Cyrillic.”

Lyttle recalled that as the group began the walk, they did not know whether they would actually be allowed into the Soviet Union. Months earlier, the Soviet defense forces had shot down a CIA-operated U-2 spy plane, confirming Soviet fears of American espionage and effectively collapsing the Paris summit. Cold War tensions were rising, but the committee was determined to make a global statement against nuclear warfare that would be impossible to ignore.

The Summer of Polaris Action

The summer before the walk, the Committee for Nonviolent Action organized a series of demonstrations at a Navy base in Groton, Connecticut, aimed at disrupting the production of nuclear-armed submarines. The campaign was called "Polaris Action."

In a 1960 image depicting one of the demonstrations, two boats sit parallel in the Thames River. One, a U.S. Coast Guard vessel, carries men in crisp white naval uniforms standing tall and protective. The other, a wooden canoe about half its size, carries Lyttle and another committee member leaning over its edge.

Their arms are outstretched as they struggle to help a young man who is submerged neck-deep in the water. According to a 1960 New York Times article, "Pacifists in Small Boats Board Atomic Submarines at Groton," the man had jumped overboard moments earlier, scrambling atop the fin of a nuclear submarine. Sailors on a Navy tug sprayed him with fire hoses before grabbing and tossing him back into the river.

Though the Groton submarine base was littered with signs warning of $15,000 fines and up to 30 years in prison for trespassing, no arrests were made against the group, even as they staged similar demonstrations into October. After each demonstration, Lyttle said the group was told a similar sentiment: "Go tell it to the Russians!"

In beginning the San Francisco-to-Moscow Walk for Peace, the committee decided to rise to the occasion.

Why They Walk

The committee wrote an open letter to the Defense Department's Office of Public Affairs stating their concern: "We believe man has reached a point in history where resort to war and violence would result in suicide for all," the letter said. "In a very real sense, we are facing our final exam. Will we come to terms with each other on the common ground of humanity, or will we accentuate our differences and perish in the fear and hate they so readily generate?"

As the walk commenced, public relations specialists deemed "advance agents" contacted local churches and nonprofit organizations in each city prior to the walkers' arrival to coordinate food donations and sleeping arrangements. Food ranged from low-budget meals to banquets hosted by Quaker and Mennonite communities.

Often, walkers slept in church basements.

"Amazing how comfortable only a sleeping bag between you and a cement floor can become over time," Rich noted on his webpage. "I particularly remember going up into the church sanctuaries and refreshing my soul in the quiet darkness of beautiful places of worship."

In some towns, the American Legion, the nation's largest veterans service organization, alerted citizens to the committee's "pacifist agenda." There, the walkers were not met with hospitality and instead set up camp in open fields, even in torrential rain and sweltering heat.

In Tempe, Arizona, Rich recalled a confrontation with a crowd of roughly 100 college students, who accused the walkers of being anti-American in their mission.

"What do you people think you're doing?" Rich remembered them shouting. "You're enemies of the people who don't love the United States."

Rather than escalating the situation, he said the walkers calmly engaged the crowd through spirited debate and thoughtful conversation.

"We weren't there to antagonize," Rich said. "We were there because we saw people just as civilians. As people who, somewhere within them, want what is best for them and for everybody else."

By the beginning of spring in 1961, several hundred people had joined the walk for varying lengths of time, with many students marching briefly through college towns along the route. According to the Committee for Nonviolent Action's "Walk Log," the youngest participant was 18 and the oldest was 47. Rich, then 22, was the second youngest walker.

As the group reached Pennsylvania, author and activist Barbara Deming decided to join in an attempt to understand why so many young people were putting their lives on hold for the cause and what they hoped the movement would achieve. Some walkers had left college midyear, others had left jobs they could not easily return to and many had become estranged from their families.

Rich's parents, longtime Eisenhower republicans, told the Fort Lauderdale News in May 1961 that they felt "deep sorrow" when they first learned of their son's plans to participate.

Deming described Rich as a "special figure" with the qualities of a natural leader. Each night, participants held strategy meetings. Deming recalled that on several occasions, Rich would close the discussions with the demeanor of an exasperated parent.

"May I announce that it is bedtime?" he would yell out in an anguished cry.

Each day, the group walked an average of 20 to 35 miles, giving walkers time to get to know one another. Two participants even fell in love and stopped in Chicago to marry, with Lyttle's father serving as officiant.

"We were a diverse group, which led to great debates, learning a lot and occasional arguments," Rich recalled. "Wonderful memories."

Love was a major theme of the walk, with the word appearing frequently in the Committee for Nonviolent Action's literature. In notes preserved at Boston University's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Deming initially described feeling "dubious" about the movement's emphasis on love.

"I could see too many readers smiling at it and tossing the leaflet away," she wrote.

But as the group entered Maryland, spring began to change the landscape, along with Deming's perspective. Apple trees and magenta Judas trees bloomed, and some walkers, moved by the beauty, left the path to walk through fields and orchards.

"Watching them, I thought that this, too, is what the walk is about," Deming wrote in an early draft of her essay, "Why They Walk," archived at the Gotlieb. "It takes note of and celebrates the natural world in which we are all in danger of laying waste."

Deming left the group during the final stretch of the third phase, just before the team of 13 flew to England on May 31.

"The 'pacifists' were the only freely active people I have met in a long time," she later wrote. "Becoming face to face with them was, in fact, like entering a new world."

Crossing the Iron Curtain

By the summer of 1961, the political geography of Europe still reflected the aftermath of World War II. Germany remained divided between the democratic Federal Republic of Germany in the west and the Soviet-backed German Democratic Republic in the east. Poland and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic existed behind the Iron Curtain as part of the Communist bloc.

In early June, the team joined 4,000 British "Ban the Bomb" demonstrators in London's Trafalgar Square. After the demonstration, some audience members joined the group as they walked to Southampton to catch a ferry to France.

At the time, France was under a state of emergency following an attempted military coup in Algeria and the group was denied entry at Le Havre. Remembering their pledge to commit acts of civil disobedience, they jumped into the English Channel to try to swim to shore.

The group began swimming toward the dock, but were intercepted by members of the Battalion of Gendarmes, a branch of the French armed forces.

Several walkers, including Lyttle and Rich, were sent to a French jail for three days before being deported back to England.

From there, they continued through England, Belgium, West Germany and East Germany, arriving in a northern suburb of East Berlin in August 1961, just as tensions surrounding the Berlin border escalated.

The walkers arrived the day before East German authorities closed the border between East and West Berlin in preparation for the construction of the Berlin Wall.

The group initially hoped to continue walking through East Germany, but Communist officials refused permission. According to Rich, walk organizers negotiated with East German authorities to allow the marchers to travel by bus across the German Democratic Republic toward Poland and the Soviet frontier.

The walkers resisted at first, uncertain whether they would be detained or expelled.

"We didn't know what was going on, so we refused to get on that bus," Rich said. "They eventually dragged us onto [it] and dumped us in no man's land between East and West Germany."

Eventually, negotiations allowed the group to continue through Poland and into the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, then part of the Soviet Union.

Though the walkers feared arrest or deportation, Communist officials ultimately permitted them to continue their journey. In "You Come With Naked Hands," Lyttle noted that the Communist officials the group encountered were often "helpful, reasonable, and sometimes

downright permissive" toward the walkers despite Cold War tensions. Because the marchers criticized both American and Soviet nuclear testing, officials may have viewed them as less threatening than explicitly anti-Soviet activists and as an opportunity to project an image of openness to international peace dialogue.

As the group moved deeper into the Soviet Union through the Byelorussian S.S.R. (present-day Belarus), organizers dramatically increased the pace of the march in hopes of reaching Moscow on schedule after weeks of delays at European borders. Walkers, who had previously covered roughly 20 to 30 miles per day, were suddenly expected to travel nearly 50 to 60 miles per day.

"I could do it for about two days," Rich recalled. "And then I just collapsed."

Just a few hundred miles west of Moscow, Rich — who had already walked more than 5,000 miles and had previously said he would "walk until he dropped" — announced that he could not continue.

In his book, Lyttle wrote that a combination of sun, fatigue and the strain of the forced march had become too much for Rich, who had also begun experiencing digestive and intestinal problems.

"Watching him walk with painful joints, blisters and illness, we developed a profound admiration for his determination and willpower," Lyttle said. "The marchers were moved and gathered around him to shake his hand" before Rich boarded a bus to a nearby hospital.

Rich was later transferred to a hospital in Minsk, where he was treated for severe dysentery, an inflammatory intestinal infection.

"I just wanted to get better," Rich said. "I made it a point to walk around the hospital room back and forth until I got my strength back."

After 13 days of recovery, he regained enough strength to fly to Russia aboard a noisy Soviet DC-3 aircraft.

"It rattled and creaked and banged the whole way from Minsk to Moscow," Rich said. "But I made it."

Moscow

After months of uncertainty, the walkers finally crossed into Russia. Rich recalled a surprisingly warm reception from many citizens.

"We didn't know what to expect," he said. "We were treated very nicely. We were put up in places where we could sleep comfortably and eat well."

Still, the Soviet government tightly managed many of the group's interactions with the public. On Oct. 3, Rich led the group into the capital. He was still weak and shaky, but, as Lyttle noted, "he held the pace and did not complain or quit."

Twenty Europeans had joined along the way. The group, now consisting of 33 walkers, marched into Red Square, chanting "peace and friendship" in accented Russian as they distributed translated leaflets.

Though they hoped to speak in the square, they were stopped by Soviet officials 100 yards from its center. The officials warned that giving speeches was forbidden, despite advance assurances that a rally would be permitted.

Their luck changed when Moscow University staff offered them an opportunity to speak . Led by Lyttle, the group addressed 200 students in a lecture hall. In communications with Deming archived at the Gotlieb, Lyttle noted that after an hour, during which the group criticized both U.S. and Soviet nuclear testing, staff attempted to end the session, but students objected. They banged on desks and shouted, “Let them go on!”

The group was subsequently granted an additional 90 minutes.

As Lyttle spoke, a student passed the group a note: “My dear friends, we are with you.”

Lyttle’s final message urged students to not be afraid of questioning authority.

The response was, “We will do this!”

The speech ended in a standing ovation.

As the group left the University, Lyttle said that one walker broke down in tears. When asked why, she said, “They just wanted peace so badly, but had no idea how to get it.”

Three days later, Nina Khrushcheva, wife of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, agreed to meet a small group of female walkers for tea at the Moscow House of Friendship while her husband was away.

While sharing apples and chocolates, the walkers expressed concern about Soviet nuclear testing and their hopes for disarmament. At the end of the meeting, one asked her to relay their concerns to her husband.

“I most certainly shall,” she said. “We are also concerned.”

The walkers returned to the United States in mid-October 1961.

Where are they now?

After the walk, Rich remained in Europe for a few weeks, staying with friends in Berlin he made along the walk, before returning to the United States.

His parents eventually changed their view of his participation.

“Our objections turned to respect for his adult and carefully considered opinions,” they told the Fort Lauderdale News. “We have released him from our concern to his own way of working for the promotion of world peace.”

He has spent most of his life advocating for peace, civil rights and environmental justice. Now age 87, he lives in Vermont.

Reflecting on the walk 65 years later, he said, “I miss it all.”

Lyttle continued organizing with the Committee for Nonviolent Action throughout the 1960s, taking part in a series of major anti-war campaigns. The group eventually merged into broader pacifist networks, but Lyttle remained active in peace organizing for decades afterward. Now age 99, he resides in Chicago.

The Walk's Lasting Impact

The Cold War did not end after the group's efforts, continuing until 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Decades later, in 2011, the U.S. and Russia signed the New START Treaty to reduce nuclear weapons and improve safety for both countries.

In February of this year, that treaty expired amid worsening U.S.-Russia relations and ongoing conflicts in Europe, raising concerns about a renewed nuclear arms race and growing uncertainty about future arms control efforts.

In the face of renewed nuclear anxiety, the walk remains a reminder of the impact civic action can have. As Deming wrote in The Nation in an essay titled "Why They Walk," it was not difficult to understand the walkers' motivation for participating in the movement.

"It means: we are not just mouthing words. We care enough to stir ourselves."

Even though the group did not end the Cold War or achieve international nuclear disarmament, they drew significant attention to their cause and helped broaden public awareness of peace activism. The walkers often emphasized that their effort was not about assigning blame to any single nation, but about confronting a shared global danger.

As Deming wrote in her 1961 essay: "No sole nation is to blame, rather only one question is relevant now: how are we to escape from the trap in which we are all caught?"

April 1961, Photo Courtesy of the Committee for Nonviolent Action. *The photo is an original in the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University Libraries. Duplications to be used only for private study, scholarship, or research as described under U.S copyright law (Title 17, U.S Code).*