

6. THE QUESTION OF MEMORIALS FOR THE INVISIBLE JEWS

Marie Smith Solbakken, Alexandre Dessingue and Hans-Jørgen Wallin Weihe

In 2008 the Memory Studies programme at the University of Stavanger, in co-operation with a researcher at the Maihaugen Museum and Lillehammer University College, took the initiative to register all known Second World War graves and memorials in Gudbrandsdal and Lillehammer in the central inland region of southern Norway. The registration was completed in July 2009 after having visited all the cemeteries and all known memorials in the area, and after having spent considerable time sorting through the War Grave Archives at the National Archives: British, German and Soviet archival sources. The registered material includes both all the war dead named on local memorials or tombstones and those only registered in archival or literary sources. Most of those not named on memorials are the Soviet war dead.

Looking through the material it was soon evident that a number of war dead who either have died locally or had some connection to the local area were not named on either the local memorials or tombstones. Even though a number of Jews had either lived in the area, died as part of war action locally or had been arrested and sent to the holocaust from the local area, none of their names could be found on any local memorials or tombstones.

Our research question is how the presence and fate of the Jews is acknowledged and discussed in historical works, how they are remembered by people locally, or what might be labelled as in oral history, and lastly the issue of acknowledgment in memorials and tombstones. Theoretically our analysis is based upon the works of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913 – 2005) and his work on symbolism and interpretation¹ and standard historical methodology combined with field registrations on all the sites of memorials and cemeteries, both locally and at the Jewish cemetery in Oslo.

The study is focused upon how memories are forgotten, handled in the span of time and in a way reconstructed through time. In a study from Sola in the vicinity of Stavanger, we have discussed several cases of memory connected to a military cemetery. The case of the Jewish war dead provides further material to the discussion of not only memory, but also to a part of history that is not visible in local cemeteries or memorials. The study of memory, or of memories, need not simply lead to remember, but also to reflect on, as Paul Ricoeur argues: "In contrast to a memory that just repeats, we find a memory that creates".²

Holocaust and the inland region

Kristian Ottosen (1921 – 2006), himself a concentration camp inmate, is the writer of a number of historical works on concentration camps, one of them about the deportation of the Jews from Norway. His book contains information on the 770 Jews who were deported, of whom only 26 survived the war³. Even though clearly and extensively researched, Ottosen's work lacks references to literary and archival sources and is not very accurate in the use of

¹ Ricœur Paul, *Eksistens og hermeneutikk*, Oslo:Aschehoug, 1999 and Venema, Henry Isaac *Identifying selfhood: imagination and hermeneutics in the thought of Paul Ricoeur*, Albany: State University of New York, 2000

² Paul Ricoeur. *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*. Ed. Du Seuil, Paris, 2000, page 31.

³ Ottosen, *I slik en natt – Deportasjonen av jøder fra Norge*, Aschoug, Oslo, 2008

oral sources. Still Ottosen gives a wealth of information that seems to correspond very well with historical works by historians.

A study by Tore Pryser, Professor of history, discusses the holocaust and the inland region⁴. Pryser addresses a number of questions, such as the number of Jews arrested and sent to the holocaust, who arrested them, what was known about their fate, the consequences for those who participated in rounding them up, police action leading to the arrest of the Jews and the attitude of the local population towards the Jews. Pryser concludes that about 30 Jews from the inland region, 10 from the local area, died in the holocaust. He further concludes that the attitude of many was that Jews were a separate alien group to the local population and that the action taken against them was forgotten. Thus the fate of the local Jews was largely ignored by the local population and there seems to have been an unwillingness to acknowledge and discuss their fate after the war.

The Jews can be divided into those who settled locally and those who were stateless and refugees. The first group consists of the Karpol family at Hundorp in Sør Fron⁵. The Karpol family came from Lithuania to Sør Fron as refugees from the pogroms of Eastern Europe at the end of the 1890s. Both the parents died after the war, but three grown up children, Klara (born 1899), Samuel (born 1901) and Esther (born 1903), died in the holocaust. The family had settled as small scale farmers at Hundorp. They were seemingly successful as farmers and active locally. At the large memorial stone erected in Kvam in memory of the war dead from the Gudbrandsdal valley neither the sister Klara, the brother Samuel nor the sister Esther are mentioned⁶. Neither are they named on memorials at the Hundorp cemetery. However, they are all listed at the memorial of the victims of the holocaust at the Jewish cemetery in Oslo. Speaking to a local representative of the Norwegian State Church in Gudbrandsdal, we have been told that the issue of acknowledging the Karpol family on the war memorial in Kvam has been discussed, but that the response has been negative⁷.

The other Jews that were arrested locally and later died in the holocaust were all refugees from either Oslo or from other countries. Martin Meszansky (born 1904)⁸ and Herman Mesner (born 1911)⁹ from Oslo were arrested in Sør Fron at the end of October 1942¹⁰. A refugee from the Netherlands, Benjamin Leonard Ornstein (born 1868)¹¹, was arrested at Nermo hotell in Øyer, most likely at the beginning of October¹². One stateless Jewish refugee, Karoline Trebitsch (born 1880 in Austria)¹³, was arrested on 26th of November 1942 in Lillehammer together with Mrs. Stepahine Hirsch (born 1875)¹⁴ from Lillehammer and they were both sent to Auschwitz. The stateless Jew named Martha Leopold from Germany¹⁵ was arrested in Lillehammer¹⁶, as was Julia Elias (born 1866)¹⁷. Her son Ludvig Elias (born

⁴Pryser Tore in Johansen Per Ole (editor) *På siden av rettsoppjøret*, Oslo: Unipub Forlag, 2006, page 93 - 129

⁵ The fate of the Karpol family is also described in Ottosen 2008: 347 – 362 (Pryser has published a number of other articles on the subject, however the latest and most comprehensive study is the one quoted)

⁶ Field work notes Kvam and Hundorp the 11th of april 2009

⁷ Oral information Arne Sørbakken 7th of November 2008

⁸ Ottosen 2008:352

⁹ Ottosen 2008:352

¹⁰ Pryser 2006:96

¹¹ Ottosen 2008:353

¹² Smestad Anita in Fåberg Historielag, *Krig og okkupasjon 1940-1945 Fåberg Historielags årbok 1981*, Fåberg: Fåberg Historielag, 1981: 179

¹³ Ottosen 2008:359

¹⁴ Ottosen 2008:344

¹⁵ Ottosen 2008:340

¹⁶ Pryser 2006:102

1891 in Germany) was arrested in Vinstra in the fall of 1942 and sent to Auschwitz. The mother later died at a local hospital, most likely due to the difficult situation and treatment she suffered during the time of her arrest¹⁸. None of the Jewish victims of the holocaust are listed in local war memorials, which only contain names of local Norwegian residents that died during the war.

Other Jewish war dead

As part of the study, we visited the Jewish cemetery in Oslo¹⁹. The cemetery has one memorial for those who died in the concentration camps, as well as individual graves and tombstones for those who are buried at the cemetery. One of the tombstones belongs to a Jewish war dead, Max Ivar Gittelsen (born 1906), who died during the fighting in Dovre in the north of Gudbrandsdal on the 16th of April 1940. At Dombås to the north of Gudbrandsdal a large memorial stone has been erected listing all Norwegian soldiers that died during the fighting at Dovre. Gittelsen is not named on the memorial. The explanation is possibly that he participated as a civilian helper to the Norwegian units and not as a uniformed soldier.

Another Jew who died fighting as a soldier was the pilot and former medical student, Norman Morris Riung (born 1919 in Quebec in Canada), of a Swedish born father and a mother from Oslo²⁰. His father was at the time of his death listed as living in Follebu in Gausdal municipality and his estate was confiscated by the authorities as he was a Jew²¹. Norman Morris Riung himself died on the 4th of July 1944 in an air crash involving an American plane above the northern part of France. Riung is not listed on any local memorials.

An unknown Austrian refugee and volunteer to the Norwegian forces died during the fighting at Segalstad bru in Gausdal²². Most likely he was either a political refugee or a Jewish refugee. The Austrian refugee is not named or mentioned on any local memorials, as they only list Norwegian war dead.

Among the Soviet war dead prisoners of war (976 listed war dead in the area of study), there are most likely additional Jewish war dead. However, in order to survive, the soldiers most likely made their names sound Russian, Polish, Belorussian, Ukrainian or used standard Baltic names. In retrospect it is impossible to tell if any of the Soviet war dead were of Jewish ancestry²³.

Historical methodology

The Prussian historian Leopold van Ranke emphasizes that historians should write history as it really happened, or in German words “wie es eigentlich gewesen”²⁴. In the words of the

¹⁷ Pryser 2006:102

¹⁸ Letter to the Norwegian Army High Command by the Lillehammer lawyer Eilif Moe dated 14th of June 1951 (Krigsgravtjenestens Arkiv archival box 52)

¹⁹ Field work notes the 29th of April 2009

²⁰ Christensen Chr. A., *Våre Falne*, Oslo: Den Norske Stat, 1949, page 715

²¹ Pryser 2006:103

²² Fåberg Historielag, 1981

²³ Jørstadmoen Military Camp (Undated) , *Stalag 303 Avskrift av gravliste*, Undated listing from the German Prisoner of War Camp provided by visiting Russian relatives of one of those that died in the camp.

²⁴ Ranke, L., *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischer Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, Berlin, 1824, Ranke, L. *The Theory and Practice of History*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973 and Day Mark *The Philosophy of History*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group 2008

historian Mark Day: “The historian should be responsible to the sources, not embellishing with detail that could not possibly be known”²⁵. In our case we are not only dealing with the past, but also with monuments, memorials and tombstones engaged in the transfer of meaning and presence. In other words we are writing about the present not only from the point of view of the memorials and their symbolic meaning, but also from the point of view of their emotional impact and what they represent for those living today. Even more so, we are pointing to the future or what is ahead of us.

The British philosopher of history Roger Collingwood argues that all history is the history of thought²⁶. Another historian, Mark Day, rejects that suggestion, but argues that all historical evidence is derived from thought²⁷. The argument might seem abstract and theoretical to many, but still it emphasizes that evidence is not given meaning unless we use our thought process. Still, physical existence and historical occasions exist independent of thought. Graveyards, tombstones and memorials are on the one hand just a number of stones and perhaps wooden constructions; on the other hand they are also evidence of our past. The latter requires the physical objects to be given meaning. The past after all influences us, our collective understanding and, through historical interpretation, our identity and understanding of our culture.

Writing a history based on archival sources is using standard historical methodology to try to interpret sources, criticize the validity of those sources and relate them to other kinds of historical knowledge and even to other fields of science. In the case of The Second World War and later wars it is even possible to use oral sources. Such sources will, of course, have to be scrutinized and understood from a critical perspective. Both those that at one time have produced written sources and oral sources might be understood from the perspective of their context and in many cases whatever interest they might have for a certain way of understanding and presentation. Sometimes, of course, both oral sources and written sources might include grossly misleading and even false information. The work of the historian is naturally to be critical of his sources and sometimes to face the fact that what first started as a lie, after some time might be part of the identity of the individual. In some cases this happens to such an extent that the person will no longer be able to distinguish between fantasies, lies or just distorted memories of what happened. Still the myth that exists will in a way be true to its existence as a myth. Thus even the existence of distorted historical understanding is interesting as a phenomenon to which the historian, and all of us, will have to relate. The most important thing is then to understand how understanding is established and created and not necessarily to illuminate what is defined as objective valid historical truth. We acknowledge the importance of good painstakingly researched historical work as the foundation of historical interpretation, but emphasize memory, symbolism and interpretation²⁸ as important dimensions, not only of the past, but also of the present and the future.

In the words of the British historian Ian Kershaw: “debate and controversy are the very essence of historical study, the prerequisite for progress in historical research”²⁹. We believe that he is right when he states that interpretations are framed “by the inevitable merging of three dimensions, - a political-philosophical, a political- ideological, and a moral dimension –

²⁵ Day 2008:7

²⁶ Collingwood R. G. *The Idea of History*. Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1994

²⁷ Day 2008:126-129

²⁸ Ricœur 1999 and Venema, 2000

²⁹ Kershaw Samuel D. *The Nazi Dictatorship*, London: Hodder Arnold 1990:1

which are inseparable both from the historian's subject matter and from the historian's daily role and task in studying and writing"³⁰. Kershaw writes of the problems and perspectives of the interpretation of the Nazi dictatorship. The interpretation and perspectives of war graves and memorials presents another highly emotional and political challenge for the historian. Historical works focusing upon memorials and tombstones mean writing about important symbols of the nation, local communities, families, military units and individuals. The question of what they represent, and who should be included, will remain highly emotional and sometimes of great political controversy.

Knowledge about the past and knowledge about how the past is interpreted, transmitted and used for political purposes, just to name one example, is of extreme importance for society as a whole. Researchers within arts, social sciences and humanities have always in one way or another dealt with the issue of memory; yet the last decade has seen a dramatic increase in interest in them. Humanities speak about the memory turn, and our work is clearly a part of this new area of research called Memory Studies. Its clearest reflection was the creation in 2008 of the international interdisciplinary review of Memory Studies.

Issues of memory are on the agenda of most countries. The UK and France are working through their colonial past, Eastern European countries struggle with the legacy of Communism, Germany is dealing with both its Nazi and its Communist past, and the Scandinavian countries, too, are reassessing and debating their history. A couple of examples among many are the Swedish debate on sterilisation and racial research, and the debates among Norwegian and Finnish historians on their countries' perception of their own role in World War II. Our work, and this article, are a part of this global reflection dedicated to Memory Studies.

Memorials and tombstones of the dead

The Swedish professor Anders Gustavsson writes about tombstones as symbols for emotions, thoughts and ideas in our own time³¹. The symbolic and emotional importance of memorials might have been different in the past. That must have particularly been the case at the time of the burial, putting up the tombstones and memorials. The archeologist Howard Williams writes about memorials "constructing social memories by creating links between the past, the present and the future"³². War memorials and war graves can serve to promote memories of the war, the individual soldier, military units and battles in certain ways. Even if the invading forces won the battles in April 1940, they no longer exist in any local cemeteries or with any war memorials. Thus from the point of view of symbolism one could argue that in death the British and Norwegian forces are the ones who remain visible on the battle fields.

What might be phrased as our "cultural landscape" tells stories both of the past and the present³³. Memorials might be said to represent interpretations of the past and to bewitch the future³⁴. How we relate to and emphasize the cultural memorials of the past in the present has

³⁰ Kershaw 1990:2

³¹ Gustavsson Anders (2003) *Gravstenar i Norge och Sverige som symboler för känslor, tankar och idéer i vår egen tid*, Oslo:Novus forlag, 2003

³² Williams Howard, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006:145

³³ Selberg Torunn and Gilje Nils (2007) *Kulturelle landskap, sted, fortelling og materiell kultur*, Bergen:Fagbokforlaget, 2007

³⁴ Frykman Jonas and Ehn Billy, *Minnesmärken*, Stockholm:Carlssons, 2007

varied considerably through time. The dead and their importance in the present are in a way communicated by how we relate to their memorials and tombstones. At the same time we relate to the memorials as attempts made in the past of communicating both with us in the present and the future ahead of us. In some cases such attempts are so offensive that a nation might choose to move or to destroy memorials. That was what happened with many of the memorials built by the Nazis after The Second World War, and that was what happened recently to memorials from the Franco area in Spain, the memorials of the communist area in the east, and so on. On the other hand, new memorials arise as a revision and sometimes critique of what has been done in the past. Spain, the Baltic countries and Finland are examples of the latter³⁵.

Conclusions

According to the British historian Mark Day “the only way to bring history to life is to bring the past into the present”³⁶. His argument is very much the same as Collingwood; “...it should be a living past, a past which, because it was thought and not a mere natural event, can be re-enacted in the present and in that re-enactment known as past”³⁷. Tombstones and monuments are both about the past, the present and the future. In a way all those memorials, and the history they relate, are about the past interaction with what will be in the future.

Philosophers of history, such as Roger Collingwood³⁸, Benedetto Croce³⁹ and Hayden White⁴⁰, use the picture of “the living” and “the dead” in their writings. Using such pictures might strengthen the awareness that war graves and memorials, and for that matter history, is as much about us and those living than the dead and the past.

For some nations the past is difficult to identify with, as it represents values and structures that are different and often opposing to those of today. Nazi Germany is the most obvious example and all the people coming from other nations that fought with and allied themselves with the values of that ideology are other examples. Still there are other more conflicting values embedded in most nations, such as nationalism, military symbolism and anti-Semitism. One case or two of Jews not mentioned on memorials is possible to explain, but the systematic invisibility of all Jews has a rather different taste. It simply points to the tendencies of small societies to reject, ignore and perhaps even fail to accept outsiders as part of their communities. For the future it is necessary to make visible those the past made invisible. We simply cannot let the past rule how the future should understand the war and the holocaust as seemingly a matter not concerning the inland region of Norway. Even more so, we have to relate to anti-Semitism in order to avoid similar racism and attitudes ruling in the future. That at least should be our communication with the future. If society chooses to let the Jewish war dead remain invisible, that means that society decides not to care for those who are not traditionally not a part of it. Thus immigrants, refugees, and those living among us who are not integrated, and even those who are just different, will face a situation where their difference from the rest of society might be a real hazard.

³⁵ Frykman and Ehn 2007

³⁶ Day 2008:124

³⁷ Collingwood 1994:158

³⁸ Collingwood 1994

³⁹ Croce Benedetto, *On history*, New York:Harcourt, 1921

⁴⁰ White Hayden, *Metahistory*, Baltimore:Johns Hopkins Press 1973 and White Hayden, The value of narrativity in the representation of reality, in *Critical Inquiry*, 7/1, 1980:5-27

Even though the consequences of the holocaust are acknowledged in historical works, we also need to relate to the holocaust in local communities and to acknowledge the presence on memorials symbolizing the victims of the war. The opposite means denial of the holocaust locally, and thus society choosing to be part of the all too common denial of the holocaust⁴¹.

⁴¹ Cohen Stanley, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, Cambridge: Polity and Weiss-Wendt Anton and Larsen Bård, *Folkemordfornektelse: Akademisk uredelighet og politisk agenda*, in *Etter Lemkin Tidsskrift for Studier av Folkemord og Politisk Massevold*, nr 1, 2009, page 68 -83