

The Invisible Jews of Gudbrandsdal and Lillehammer

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None of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust are listed on the local war memorials in Gudbrandsdal and Lillehammer, located in the central inland region of southern Norway. Moreover, the name of one civilian Jew who died as part of a local action during the Second World War does not appear on any local memorials or tombstones.

These and other omissions gradually emerged as 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 graves and memorials connected to the Second World War in the region. We completed the registration in July 2009 after having visited all the cemeteries and all known memorials in the area, and after having consulted the war-grave archives at British, German, and Soviet archival sources. The registered material includes the war dead named on local memorials or tombstones as well as those only registered in archival or literary sources. Most of those not named on memorials are Soviet war dead.

This lacuna led us to investigate specifically how memorials and tombstones have failed to acknowledge these Jews and, more generally, to consider how historical works acknowledge and discuss the presence and fate of the Jews. We have gathered our data by field registrations of all the sites of memorials and cemeteries, not only in Gudbrandsdal and Lillehammer, but also at the Jewish cemetery in Oslo. Furthermore, our theoretical analysis is based on the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's work on symbolism and interpretation.¹

This study raises questions of how memories are dealt with and reconstructed through time. The fading of Jewish war dead of Gudbrandsdal and Lillehammer offers insights not only into the notion of memory, but also into a part of history that is invisible in local cemeteries and memorials.

The study of memory, or memories, is not necessarily limited to the remembrance of certain persons and events, but it can also engender reflection. As Ricoeur argues: "In contrast to a memory that just repeats, we find a memory that creates".² Thus, memories are not merely creative, but they also offer a kind of navigation through the present and the future.

As the Danish authors Claus Bryld and Anette Warring³ and the Norwegian Anne Eriksen⁴ have noted, people have had to relate their memories of the war to a variety of subsequent experiences. Collaboration with the enemy, personal relationships, love affairs, and perhaps most commonly indifference, were all condemned. At the same time, people also had to relate to memories of heroism

and of those who became victims, perhaps due to the unsavoury combination of action and indifference from the other members of their communities.

Co-operative actions with German authorities during the war that at the time seemed expedient became potential war crimes after the war. All the same, as Tore Pryser illustrates in his work (for end notes Pryser in Johansen 2006: 93-129), local communities often strongly supported those who were prosecuted for collaboration, and the courts' rulings on war crimes seemed largely to have ignored the collaboration of the local police and authorities. With time, awareness of the Jews' fate receded into ignorance to the point that many of those who collaborated with the occupying power and participated in the arrests of the Jews were recast as citizens of high standing.

Holocaust and the inland region

Kristian Ottosen, a concentration camp inmate, was a writer of a number of historical works on concentration camps, including one on the deportation of the Jews from Norway. His book contains accounts of the 770 Jews who were deported, of whom only 26 survived the war.⁵ Even though it is clearly and extensively researched, Ottosen's work lacks references to literary and archival sources and is not very accurate in its use of oral sources. Still, Ottosen has provided a wealth of information that seems to correspond with the works by academic historians.

A study by Tore Pryser deals with the effect of the Holocaust on the inland region.⁶ Pryser addresses several questions, such as the number of Jews arrested and sent to concentration camps, who arrested them, what was known about their fate, the consequences for those who participated in rounding them up, the police actions leading to the arrest of the Jews, and the attitudes of the local population towards the Jews. Pryser concludes that about 30 Jews from the inland region, ten from the Gudbrandsdal area, died in the Holocaust. He further concludes that the general local attitude was that Jews were a separate, alien group and that the action taken against them was forgotten. Thus, the local population largely ignored the fate of the local Jews, and after the war there seems to have been an unwillingness to acknowledge and discuss their fate. In a way, they were forgotten for the sake of the future, and not making them visible might be understood as part of that process.

The Jews in Gudbrandsdal and Lillehammer during the Second World War can be divided into those who settled locally and those who were stateless and refugees. An example of the first group was the Karpol family at Hundorp in Sør Fron.⁷ 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 survived the Second World War, but three of their children, Klara (born 1899), Samuel (born 1901), and Esther (born 1903) all died in the Holocaust. The family had settled as small-scale farmers at Hundorp. They were apparently successful as farmers, and one was active in the local community as a journalist. Still, neither are the Karpol siblings mentioned on the memorial stone in Kvam honouring the war dead from the Gudbrandsdal valley⁸ nor 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. A local representative of the Norwegian State Church in Gudbrandsdal told us that the issue of acknowledging the Karpol family on the war memorial in Kvam has been discussed, but that the response has been negative.⁹ The official reason is that only those who died as soldiers in combat are acknowledged as participating in the war effort. Other war dead are, then, by definition passive victims, given the status of civilian war dead and not named at the war memorial.

The other Jews who were arrested locally and later died in the Holocaust were all refugees, either from Oslo or from other countries. Martin Meszansky (born 1904)¹⁰ and Herman Mesner (born 1911),¹¹ both businessmen from Oslo, were arrested in Sør Fron at the end of October 1942.¹² According to the manager at the hotel they were staying at, they had been warned that they would be arrested, but they waited for their arrest because they were afraid of reprisals against their families.

A refugee from the Netherlands, Benjamin Leonard Ornstein (born 1868),¹³ was arrested at Nermo hotell in Øyer, most likely in early October 1942.¹⁴ He was aware that he was likely to be arrested, but did not run away. According to one local source, his reply to suggestions that he should flee to Sweden was “What will happen, will happen”.¹⁵ Also, the stateless Jew Martha Leopold from Germany¹⁶ was apprehended in Lillehammer November 7, 1942.¹⁷ Her son managed to escape arrest.

Another stateless Jewish refugee, Karoline Trebitsch (born 1880 in Austria),¹⁸ was arrested 26 November 1942 in Lillehammer together with Mrs. Stephanie Hirsch (born 1875)¹⁹ from Lillehammer, and they were both sent to Auschwitz. Karoline Trebitsch stayed at the local guest house, Mjøsblikk, whereas Stephanie Hirsch lived in a private home. Mrs. Hirsch is remembered locally as living an ordinary life for a single old lady.²⁰

The Jewish refugee and lawyer, Ludvig Elias (born 1891 in Germany), was arrested in Vinstra in the fall of 1942 and sent to Auschwitz. His mother Julia

Elias (born 1866)²¹ stayed in Øyer and was arrested about a month later. She was first transported to Oslo where she stayed for a while at a hospital. She was released from this hospital February 25, 1943. She later died at a local hospital close to Lillehammer, most likely owing to the difficult situation and treatment she suffered at the time of her arrest.²² Ludvig and Julia Elias were friends of a local lawyer, Eilif Moe, who later came to care for her estate.²³ Both of them had lived for some time in Lillehammer, where they stayed at Mjøsblikk.

The local memorials, which in most cases only contain names of local Norwegian inhabitants who died during the war, do not list these Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Yet, at least one of them, Stephanie Hirsch, was thought of as being a member of the local community. Ludvig and Julia Elias had local friends, and all the rest had some kind of connection to the locals. Nevertheless, these connections were not sufficiently strong to have made them visible on the memorials or remembered today by the local community. The scattered fragments of the memory of their presence and fate are found in a few old local residents who still remember them and what exists in archival sources and historical works. Their memories are in a way like all other refugees or immigrants coming to a country and then disappearing from sight for one reason or another.

Other Jewish war dead

An important part of this study was our visit to the Jewish cemetery in Oslo.²⁴ The cemetery has a memorial for those who died in the concentration camps, as well as individual graves and tombstones for those 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 April 16, 1940. At Dombås in the north of Gudbrandsdal, a large memorial stone that lists all the Norwegian soldiers who died during the fighting at Dovre has been erected. Gittelsen is not named on this memorial. The explanation is possibly that he participated as a civilian helper to the Norwegian units and not as a uniformed soldier. Discussing this case with us, one man related that Jews were rejected from serving in the army because they were declared unfit in the years prior to the war. This was not a rule, but a practice by the admittance board that declared all Jews to be flat-footed and thus unfit. While such information is obviously of a rather anecdotal nature, it nevertheless illuminates a general attitude towards Jews that might provide an explanation as to why Gittelsen was not included in the war memorial.²⁵

Another Jew who died fighting in the armed forces 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 Oslo.²⁶ Norman Morris Riung died on 4 July 1944 in an air crash over the northern part of France. Riung is not listed on any local memorials. Even though he had local residence through his father, he was most likely always thought of as an outsider belonging either to Oslo or perhaps even to Canada. At the time of Riung's death, his father was listed as living in Follebu in Gausdal municipality and his estate was confiscated by the authorities because he was a Jew.²⁷

An unknown Austrian refugee and a volunteer in the Norwegian forces died during the fighting at Segalstad bru in Gausdal.²⁸ Most likely he was either a political refugee or a Jewish refugee. The Austrian refugee is neither named nor mentioned on any local memorials, since they only list Norwegian war dead. Unlike the others, not even his name is remembered, and he is only mentioned in a short passage in a publication by the local historical society.

Among those Soviet prisoners of war who died (976 listed war dead in the area of study), there are most likely additional Jewish war dead. However, in order to survive, these soldiers most likely made their names sound Russian, Polish, Belorussian or Ukrainian or used standard Baltic names. The existing list was made by the German authorities. In retrospect, it is impossible to tell if any of the Soviet war dead were of Jewish ancestry.²⁹

Historical methodology

Leopold von Ranke exhorted historians to write history as it really happened – “wie es eigentlich gewesen”.³⁰ In our case we are not only dealing with the past, but also with monuments, memorials, and tombstones involved in the transfer of meaning and presence for the future. In other words, we are writing about the present not only as visualized through 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 lies ahead of us.

The British philosopher of history, Roger Collingwood, has argued that all history is the history of thought.³¹ Without going as far as Collingwood, we may nevertheless recognize the centrality of thought in historical investigation, as evidence is not given meaning unless we use our thought processes. On the one hand, graveyards, tombstones, and memorials are just a collection of stones or wooden constructions; on the other hand, functioning as objects endowed with meaning, they are also evidence of our past. And even distorted historical understandings are relevant phenomena, to which the historian, and all of us, have to relate.

The interpretation and perspectives of war graves and memorials presents another highly emotional and political challenge for historians. Historical works focusing upon memorials and tombstones entail the writing about important symbols of the nation, local communities, families, military units, and individuals. The question of what the memorials represent, and who should be included, will remain highly emotional and sometimes of great political controversy.

Issues of memory are on most countries' agenda. The UK and France are working through their colonial past, Eastern European countries are struggling with the legacy of Communism, Germany is dealing with both its Nazi and its Communist past, and the Scandinavian countries are reassessing and debating their history as well. Among examples are the Swedish debate on sterilization and racial research, and the debates among Norwegian and Finnish historians on their countries' perceptions of their own roles in the second world war. This article as well as our research are part of the global reflection dedicated to Memory Studies.

Memorials and tombstones of the dead

Anders Gustavsson has defined tombstones as symbols for emotions, thoughts, and ideas in our own time.³² The symbolic and emotional importance of memorials might have been different in the past, and this must have particularly been the case at the time of the setting up of the tombstones and memorials. The archaeologist Howard Williams has described memorials as “constructing social memories by creating links between the past, the present and the future”.³³ 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 German forces won the battles in April 1940, they no longer exist in any local cemeteries or with any war memorials. Thus, with regard to symbolism, one could argue that the British and the Norwegian forces are the ones who remain remembered after their death. The others are ignored, or made invisible because they belonged to the enemy. Hence in death the dead Jews share the same fate as the German war dead and those Norwegians who fought with them.

What might be labelled as our “cultural landscape” tells stories both of the past and of the present.³⁴ Memorials might be said to function as interpretations of the past and to bewitch the future.³⁵ How the present relates to and emphasizes the cultural memorials of the past has varied considerably through time. The dead and their current importance could be 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 to communicate both with us in the present and those in the future. In some cases, the attempts are so offensive that a nation might choose to move or to destroy memorials. That fate was meted out to many of the memorials built by the Nazis after the Second World War, and more recently to

memorials from the Franco era in Spain, the memorials of the communist area in the east, among others. On the other hand, new memorials arise as a revision and sometimes a critique of what had been done in the past. Spain, the Baltic countries, and Finland are examples of this kind.³⁶

Conclusions

According to Mark Day, “the only way to bring history to life is to bring the past into the present”.³⁷ His argument is very much the same as Collingwood’s: “... 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”.³⁸ 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’s interaction with what will be in the future, and thus they are part of what Ricoeur refers to as a memory that creates.³⁹ The collective memory of a local community that was indifferent to the fate of their local Jews, like the Karpol family at Hundorp in Sør Fron, indicates that Jews were not of local concern, even if that particular family had been active members of the community for nearly a generation. They were still “outsiders”,⁴⁰ and the fate that met them was one chosen to be ignored and forgotten. Max Gittelsen, who died during the fighting in Dovre, has not been included owing to the fact that he participated without being a member of the armed forces. In addition, of course, he was a Jew and from another part of the country. Thus he was neither the concern of the local community nor of the armed forces. The other Jews had even less attachment to their local communities. In this regard, the issue of their remembrance is more of a national responsibility than a local one.

The symbolism of that ignorance of the presence of Jews in Gudbrandsdal sets into relief the attitudes towards outsiders. The absence of Jews on war memorials in Gudbrandsdal and Lillehammer contributes to their invisibility to new generations, and new generations will absorb the attitudes of the past on who should be included in and who do not matter to the local community. Each year, on the Norwegian Constitution Day (17 May), the Day of Liberation (7 June), the day of the German occupation or other anniversaries related to the War, there are ceremonies at many of the memorials. The names are read out in recognition of their heroism and sacrifice. Yet, the same might be said about Max Gittelsen who died as a civilian helper during the fighting at Dovre in the days of the invasion. As it stands, he has been made invisible as a member of the national resistance against the invaders, and has thus never once been mentioned in the many ceremonies held at the war memorial. As the war becomes more distant, the truth that is made visible and present in the local communities ossifies into the accepted and undisputed truth. The scholarly

articles and critical historical works that offer more nuanced accounts mostly remain in the bookshelves and read by the selected few, but have little impact on local communities.

Thus the message of the past is not only repeated, but the creative element of memory takes a more unpromising direction: outsiders become rejected and ignored, and their fate continues to be of concern neither to the local communities nor to the nation. Philosophers of history, such as Roger Collingwood,⁴¹ Benedetto Croce,⁴² and Hayden White,⁴³ use the picture of “the living” and “the dead” in their writings. The use of such pictures might strengthen the awareness that war graves and memorials, and for that matter history, are as much about us and those living as they are about the dead and the past.

For some nations the past is difficult to identify with, because it represents values and structures that are different and often conflicting with those of today. Nazi Germany is an obvious example, and all the people from other nations who fought for and believed in 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 points to the tendencies of small societies to reject, to ignore, and perhaps even to 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 regard the war and the Holocaust as seemingly a matter not concerning the inland region of Norway. Even more so, we have to recognize the presence of anti-Semitism in order to avoid similar racism and attitudes dominating in the future.

At the very least that aim should be our message for the future. If society chooses to let the Jewish war dead remain invisible, it means that society decides to neglect those who were not traditionally 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 alienation from the rest of society might be a real hazard.

Even though historical works acknowledge the consequences of the Holocaust, we also need to understand the effects of the Holocaust in local communities and to recognize the presence on memorials symbolizing the victims of the war. The opposite course is tantamount to a denial of the Holocaust at the local level, and thus an acceptance of a society that chooses to be part of the all-too-

common denial of the Holocaust.⁴⁴ Even more, a nation that chooses to let local rejection and ignorance dominate its understanding of the past and of itself is actively participating in creating a collective memory that might produce and sustain the very attitudes we need to reject.

Notes

- ¹ Ricoeur 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 Ricoeur, Paul: *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*. Paris, Editions du Seuil 2000: 31.
- ³ Bryld, Claus and Anette Warring: *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring: historie og traditionsforvaltning af krig og besættelse 1945–1997*. Fredriksberg, Roskilde Universitet 1998.
- ⁴ Eriksen, Anne: *Det var noe annet under krigen: 2. verdenskrig i norsk kollektivtradisjon*. Oslo, Pax 1995.
- ⁵ Ottosen, Kristian: *I slik en natt – Deportasjonen av jøder fra Norge*. Oslo, Aschehoug 2008.
- ⁶ Pryser, Tore: "Holocaust i innlandsregionen" in Johansen, Per Ole (ed.): *På siden av rettsoppgjøret*. Oslo, Unipub 2006: 93-192.
- ⁷ 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).
- ⁸ Field work notes Kvam and Hundorp 11th of April 2009.
- ⁹ Oral information Arne Sørbakken 7th of November 2008.
- ¹⁰ Ottosen 2008: 352.
- ¹¹ Ottosen 2008: 352.
- ¹² Pryser 2006: 96.
- ¹³ Ottosen 2008: 353.
- ¹⁴ Smestad, Anita: "Jødene under okkupasjonen" in Smedstad, Anita, Tord Buggeland, Ola Matti Mathisen and Ivar Olstad: *Fåberg og Lillehammer. Krig og okkupasjon. Fåberg historielags årbok 1981*. Lillehammer, Fåberg historielag 1981: 179.
- ¹⁵ Smestad 1981: 179 and Pryser 2006: 103.
- ¹⁶ Ottosen 2008: 340.
- ¹⁷ Pryser 2006: 102.
- ¹⁸ Ottosen 2008: 359.
- ¹⁹ Ottosen 2008: 344.
- ²⁰ Personal information from Halvor Mørk (born 1927). Halvor Mørk lived in Lillehammer close to where Stepanie Hirsch had her place of dwelling.
- ²¹ Pryser 2006: 102.
- ²² Letter to the Norwegian Army High Command by the Lillehammer lawyer Eilif Moe dated 14th of June 1951 (Riksarkivet (RA): Krigsgravtjenestens arkiv, archival box 52).
- ²³ Letter to the Norwegian Army High Command by the Lillehammer lawyer Eilif Moe dated 14th of June 1951 (RA, Krigsgravtjenestens arkiv, archival box 52).
- ²⁴ Field work notes, 29th of April 2009.
- ²⁵ Oral information from Ole Mic Thommesen (born 1956).
- ²⁶ Christensen, Chr. A.: *Våre Falne*. Oslo, Den Norske Stat 1949: 715.
- ²⁷ Pryser 2006: 103.
- ²⁸ Smestad 1981.
- ²⁹ 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).
- ³⁰ Ranke, Leopold von: *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischer Völker von 1494 bis 1514*. Berlin, 1824; Ranke, Leopold von: *The Theory and Practice of History*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill 1973;

Day, Mark: *The Philosophy of History*. London, Continuum International Publishing Group 2008.

³¹ Collingwood, R. G.: *The Idea of History*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 1994.

³² Gustavsson, Anders: *Gravstenar i Norge och Sverige som symboler för känslor, tankar och idéer i vår egen tid*. Oslo, Novus forlag 2003.

³³ Williams, Howard: *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006: 145.

³⁴ Selberg, Torunn and Nils Gilje: *Kulturelle landskap, sted, fortelling og materiell kultur*. Bergen, Fagbokforlaget 2007.

³⁵ Frykman, Jonas and Billy Ehn: *Minnesmärken*. Stockholm, Carlssons 2007.

³⁶ Frykman and Ehn 2007.

³⁷ Day 2008: 124.

³⁸ Collingwood 1994: 158.

³⁹ Ricoeur 2000: 31.

⁴⁰ Pryser in Johansen 2006: 96-101.

⁴¹ Collingwood 1994.

⁴² Croce, Benedetto: *On history*. New York, Harcourt 1921.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Cohen, Stanley: *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge, Polity 2001; Weiss-Wendt Anton and Larsen Bård: "Folkemordfornektelse: Akademisk uredelighet og politisk agenda" in *Etter Lemkin. Tidsskrift for studier av folkemord og politisk assevold*, no. 1, 2009: 68-83.