Norwegian historiography on the Nazi concentration camps

"I am writing on the bus. The bus to freedom." Diary entry from 20th April 1945 by Odd Nansen.

Nansen was one of nearly 8,000 Norwegian and Danish political prisoners rescued by the Swedish Red Cross from several Nazi concentration camps in the north and south of Germany in April and May 1945. Because the first prisoners rescued were mostly Norwegian, and the effort pan-Scandinavian, the mission came to symbolise, in Norwegian memory, both a unique humanitarian success and political triumph, but also a testament to Norwegian courage, unity and perseverance.

The White Buses Rescue Operation may have taken on a life of its own in the public perception and official discourse as a positive event, but it did not altogether dominate the immediate post-war narrative of the camps. In 1945 newspaper listed still missing Norwegian concentration camp prisoner, while others posted obituaries of the dead, mostly from Natzweiler, a particularly harsh camp situated in Alsace. Survivors in newspaper interviews talked about the bestiality and inhumaneness of the camps, alongside gas chambers and hangings. One survivor referred to Natzweiler as the "camp of the silent." Norwegian Jewish Auschwitz survivors spoke of 'soap made of human fat' and of victims being burned alive in the camp. Atrocity, then, emerged as another dominant theme.

The fear that the 'happy homecoming narrative' would override other not so pleasant aspects of the history of the camps was immediate for some. In a newspaper article from November 1945, journalist and historian Bjarne Gran made a telling and nuanced observation: despite the talks about "a Nordic community that saw its most beautiful moment through count Folke Bernadotte, the number of Danes and Norwegians that he could bring home was far smaller than the number the Germans had sent to the camps." Gran hinted to the human cost of imprisonment. The camps were sites of death for many Norwegians who never returned.

Gran's grim backdrop did not end up defining Norway's memory of the concentration camps. As a complimentary theme to homecoming and rescue, the role of former concentration camp prisoners in post-war politics and national rebuilding formed the second part of the immediate public memory of the camps. Einar Gerhardsen, a little-known Labour politician before the war, fled Oslo in 1940, was later arrested, and sent to Sachsenhausen. In 1945 he became prime minister. An anonymous op-ed wrote the following in a newspaper on 9th July 1945: "Our new government led by prime minister Einar Gerhardsen […] who himself returned from several years of imprisonment in concentration camps and straight to the mayor set in Oslo and then became prime minister. This is typical with several hundred (sic) who came from the prison camps. They returned straight to work with life and eagerness, to the rebuilding of the new Norway." Such a glorified view of the concentration camp prisoner turned successful politician fit into a broader narrative of a nation moving forward. The atrocities of the camps with the image of the brutal German occupation regime, and in the wake of it all emerged the unscathed Norwegian concentration camp survivor turned politician.

As in other countries, the survivors themselves put the camps in the public eye. Some notable early translations included Pelagia Lewinska's *Twenty months in Auschwitz*, translated in 1945, the foreword written by former Ravensbrück and Auschwitz survivor, political prisoner Kirsten Brunvoll. Brunvoll herself published her 1947 memoir with one of the largest Norwegian publishing houses. The same year, a fellow Ravensbrück survivor, Sylvia Salvesen, published her memoir *Forgive but do not Forget* with the same publishing house. Benedikt Kautsky's *Teufel und Verdammte* (Devils and the Damned), originally published in German in 1946, was translated in 1949 by Norwegian Ravensbrück survivor Henriette Bie Lorentzen. But the first Ravensbrück survivor to publish in Norway was Lise Børsum. Her 1946 *Prisoner in Ravensbrück* included sobering foreword: the book was written initially for her husband and son, originally written down on sheets of paper, not as a coherent work. Børsum acknowledges the limitations of her book as the Norwegians, like herself, were better off in the camp. Perhaps as an even more explicit symbol of the privileged prisoner, Odd Nansen, son of the polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, published his edited wartime diaries from Grini prison camp in Norway and Sachsenhausen in 1947. The diaries' importance was attested to by Lise Børsum.

These early memoirs and translations are indicative of the networks formed inside the camps and the continuation of wartime discourses. Survivors writing in the 1940s did so to document camp atrocities, but writing also served as a psychological response to liberation. The framework remained on the fate of their own group, hence why the focus was on internal unity as much as vividly describing the atrocity against other groups of non-Norwegians. The memoirs were international in their scope, because it was one way to account for the Norwegian's 'better-off' position in a transnational environment, their unity, and bringing German crimes to light.

It is also evident that networks existed within the smaller and larger printing press. For instance, the first memoir published by a Norwegian Jewish survivor came as early as 1949, by Moritz Nachstern and was printed with the same publishing house as several political survivors of Sachsenhausen. But it was not his survival, nor the racial persecution that was at the forefront of the framing of his book. Titled *Counterfeiter in Block 19*, the book was about the counterfeiter operation in Sachsenhausen. A former prisoner in Norway's most notorious camp, Grini, Nic Stang wrote the introduction, and he had previously engaged himself in other camp memoirs as an enthusiastic commentator on the topic.

There was no collective silence then, but there was a selective silence. Those who published early on typically belonged to the middle class and were either affiliated or members of the Labour party, or prominent within the main Norwegian resistance movement. Most of these early voices were survivors of Sachsenhausen. In contrast, only one Night and Fog prisoner and Natzweiler survivor, published in 1945.

This narrative of the politically important and unshaken survivor held steadfast for many decades, as reflected in Norwegian history writing and published books. The camps themselves were presented as "otherworldly" in this period. This was a continuation of the genre that survivors published early

on, and the camps appear as a form of horror. Examples include excerpts from survivor memoirs depicting scenes such as Norwegians walking into a room with dead prisoners, and finding a fellow Norwegian buried alive amid the dead.

As the camps were 'othered', and some of the survivors operated in the public's eye, in 1957 the newly formed union for the war disabled requested a group of doctors, psychiatrics (including Holocaust survivor Leo Eitinger) to investigate the longitudinal effects of war traumas on their present ability to work. Survivors mobilised around the "KZ syndrome" (coined by Eitinger in 1958) as part of their ongoing struggles with accessing war pensions and disability allowances. Several publications by survivors in the 1960s and 1970s included more accounts of life *after the* camps and survivors appeared as more complex actors in their own books. Oscar Magnusseon in the epilogue to his 1967 book *I want to live*, admitted to being "disabled", that he suffered a breakdown and that he struggles with ongoing health problems. The book also addressed "The ongoing war against a Norwegian society that have not given people the necessary help when they needed it the most." This was typical for several publications in the 1960s through to the 1980s, revealing a new complexity of the camp memoir that included the social, physical, and psychological effects of imprisonment.

Even if survivors emphasised mental and physical hardships, the content of their books did not significantly deviate from earlier decades. In Sverre Løberg's (Labour Party politician) 1966 book included several atrocity photographs, such as US military personnel looking at a crematoria oven and surviving emaciated prisoners in and outside barracks. The book also includes clandestine photographs taken by an Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* prisoner of burning bodies without explicitly naming the camp, but the caption reads gas chambers and crematoria.

Still, the period between 1945 and the 1970s was a time where the atrocity aspect of the camps continue to dominate, together with the particular Norwegian framework of unity and resistance. Einar Gerhardsen's 1970 memoir begin with the recognition that "many have asked me to write", and that he did not even contemplate including the wartime years. When he did so, it was to show the "role of coincidences" in his life that set him on the path to become prime minister. The title of his memoir, *Unity in War and Peace,* signaled how the book remained true to form. In this way, Gerhardsen —referred to by some as as the *Pater Patriae*, Father of the nation — interpreted his own and the country's general behaviour through the lens of moral and political continuity.

Memoirs and translated reports on imprisonment gave way to the idea that knowledge of the camps was now widespread. In his unique 1972 study (based on his 1952 doctoral thesis) on Norwegian perpetrators in Serbian prisoners of war camps in Norway, sociologist and criminologist Nils Christie cited Nansen, Lise Børsum, the Norwegian translation of Kautsky's book, the 1946 German book *the SS Stat* by Eugen Kogon, Theodor Adorno's *Authoritarian Personality*, and Bruno Bettelheim. This was a particular psycho-social and scientific way of approaching the concentration camps. At the same time, Christie noted the weakness of using Norwegian camp literature, owing to the fact that "the

Norwegian's relative better-off position and experiences of imprisonment," indicating the prevalent view of the time.

It is telling how the Norwegian Jewish experience did not fit into this "atrocity and resistance" paradigm. In 1976 the second book about the experiences of Norwegian Jewish Auschwitz survivor, Herman Sachnowitz, was published. It was an instant success. Sachnowitz died two years later. What contributed to its popularity? Arnold Jacoby who authored the book, emphasised how he had to soften the "horror and brutality […] Dwelling on the sadistic and repulsive details had to be avoided." The focus had to be on engaging young readers through "giving the material a sense of humanity and necessity." Making the story digestible but realistic was clearly important.

This may indicate a trend that in the late 1970s and 1980s a turn towards universalising the history of the concentration camp and the Holocaust. In a review of Oskar Mendelsohn's 1986 second volume on *The History of Jews in Norway* covering the wartime years, one reviewer commented that the book triggered questions such as "what does hatred mean for humankind", ending the review with a rhetorical and universalising question "For in the light of Auschwitz, has it not become such that either everyone — or no one — can appear as a chosen people?"

As survivors and the public were asking these broader questions, however, the concentration camps were still given marginal attention in official history books; nor were they objects of academic enquiry beyond Christie's study on the Norwegian camps. There were clear limitations to what autobiographical works could achieve. At this time, critical voices in the historical profession, those born after the war, had since the 1970s challenged the "hegemonic narratives" and overemphasis on resistance for nation building purposes. The gap in knowledge of imprisonment and structural conditions in the concentration camp was acknowledged in a seminar in Oslo in 1986 with the fitting title *Is Norway's wartime History Fully Told?* Those invited were historians as well as veterans, broadly conceived. Kristian Ottosen, himself a Sachsenhausen and Natzweiler survivor and former resistance fighter, summed up the state of the field on Norwegians in captivity as consisting of independently published books, memoirs, and encyclopedic entries. It is interesting to note that in the following discussion of Ottosen's presentation the following points addressed the current gap in knowledge: relating to subcamps, the role of unity, the role of racial hierarchies within the camps as the Norwegians were treated better due to their supposed "racial standing" and Night and Fog as a particular phenomenon within the camp system.

Concluding the debate, historian Ole Kristian Grimnes stated that "the history of the prisoners are among the most poorly covered topics in the literature of the occupation. If one ignores the memoir literature. This must be an area of enquiry for professional historians." Further lines of connectivity had to be established: the health effects of the camps (which we know was problematised by survivors and psychiatrists in the mid-1950s), a sociological analysis of the conditions of the camps to highlight that "the camps led to the unity among different types of people; to gather the strength for continued solidarity and unity; to establish friendship and mutual trust that lasted well beyond the war years; to

form the basis for leadership styles who in other circumstances would not have had the opportunity to unfold." The camps themselves had to be placed in the "rightful" perspective of the prison and repression regime of the German occupation regime.

These remarks are important and highlights the long lines of continuity in Norwegian history writing up until the 1980s, with its emphasis on reinforcing a positive national identity and nation-building. No historian assumed the challenge, and Grimnes's own 1983 book did not mention the camps. As more topics were included in the multivolume "Norway at War" from the mid-1980s, including a whole volume dedicated to the 'everyday life', the geographical reach of these works remained in occupied Norway. Perhaps as a follow up to the 1986 seminar, Kristian Ottosen published his first of many books on different Norwegian victim groups in the camps. The first book came in 1989 and was titled *Night and Fog: the story of the Natzweiler prisoners.* In the preface for the pamphlet series published in 1997 onwards by the "Natzweiler group", consisting of children of survivors and the successor group to the original Natzweiler committee, expressed a generational need to write a collective biography of the fate of Norwegian prisoners. Little attention had up until then been given to Natzweiler. We may speculate as to why. Half of the approximately five hundred Norwegians deported as Night and Fog prisoners died, in addition to the camp being mentally and geographically peripheral compared to Sachsenhausen with its many survivor politicians. One review of Ottosen's book stated "Ottosen's book is in many respects different than other books that we have already, because it touches on more sides to the life in the concentration camps." In a revealing final sentence, the reviewer stated "It is frightening to see [in the book's personal registry] how many of them died in the concentration camp." It was not common for the public perception of the camps to think of them as places of death for Norwegians. In this way, the camps were brought closer to the Norwegian imagination and not the removed "places of the macabre" as they had been before.

Ottosen continued to publish books on specific Norwegian victim groups for the next five years. His second book from 1990, titled *Life and death. The story of the Norwegian Sachsenhausen prisoners*, was early on referred to by one historian as a tale of suffering "in the Norwegian context," while maintaining the themes of solidarity and unity. The book's combined approach of documenting the lives of the Norwegian prisoners highlighted the suffering in the camp, while also writing the story of the group into a wider framework of the history of the concentration camps. According to historian Anette Storeide, Ottosen's book came to define "the history of the Sachsenhausen camp" in a Norwegian context.

Ottosen's other books included the 1991 book on the history of the Ravensbrück prisoners and the 1994 book on the history of the Deportation of the Norway's Jews. All the books follow the same structural logic that required the creation of new primary sources through interviews and letter exchanges with survivors. The person-oriented narrative elucidated many unknown survivors and their personal histories. Every book included lists of documented camp prisoners and their fate. The works were the first collective representations of camp life that included engagement with archival sources

from former camps, without constituting a break with the resistance framework and gallery of "personalities;" while also introducing new facets to the life and death of Norwegians in the camps. The Holocaust around this time in particular became a "domestic" topic in Norway, impossible to ignore at a time where three Auschwitz survivors published their memoirs between 1986 and 1995.

Ottosen's books were works of documentation, aimed at a general audience, which served as popular education that to this day has not been surpassed. Ottosen's work enabled other scholars to acknowledge the camps and imprisonment as their own historically stand-alone topics, which was now included in the 1995 'Norwegian war encyclopedia'. Major camps as well as survivors who published also received their own individual entries.

In the public sphere the point itself was not so much to historicise the camps but to document and to convey them as historical examples of injustices, of the dangers of racism and prejudice. The camps came to serve as warnings, not necessarily as objects of historical and critical enquiry. Not only did the survivors organise trips to the former sites from the 1970s onwards, but an organisation called the "White Buses to Auschwitz", founded in 1992, opened up the former camp sites as physical places to visit and engage with for Norwegian youth. Through organised trips, emulating rescue and homecoming some fifty years earlier, the folklorist Anne Eriksen argued in 1995 that in this way camps were to be experienced in their "full emotive and sensory contexts, leading to identification and reflection with the main virtues and takeaway from the lessons from World War Two". It is also clear that the organisation, by adding Auschwitz to the former camps to visit – besides Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück – extended the traditional Norwegian story of the Second World War, the fight against evil (Nazism) and its moral pedagogy, to these sites. In doing so, the organisation connected the national story and the previously marginalised Jewish Norwegian victims to an emerging global site of Holocaust remembrance.

With these new organisational practices, the inclusion of the camps in the school curriculum and the growing body of survivors taking on a public role, the focus shifted away from the association of camps to atrocity and resistance, to the human cost of resistance and persecution. These processes further decontextualized the history of camps by prioritising the extrapolation of universal lessons from individual survivors, without necessarily encouraging a deeper understanding of victim experiences. The difficulty of the survivor's position was problematised by Anette Storeide in her 2006 doctoral thesis on the written testimony by Norwegian Sachsenhausen prisoners. Storeide argued that survivors rejected the resistance fighter identity in the camps positioned themselves as more passive and distant, as they did not conform to more heroic images of the active resistance fighter. But rather they suffered degradation, illness, maltreatment, and forced into a state of military and political inaction. Storeide, alongside literary scholar Jakob Lothe, interviewed the few surviving male and female Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz survivors residing in Norway in 2006 and 2013. Lothe and Storeide introduced the now widely used concept of *tidsvitner,* "time's witness" and were among the first to take an interest in survivor testimonies and their preservation for posterity.

It was in the early 2000s that a definite institutional shift away from pursuing a "patriotic narrative" organised around resistance occurred in Norway. The founding of the Holocaust centre in Oslo in 2001 was a result of the state settlement to Norwegian Jews, and all over the country followed the establishment of peace and human rights centres. Some were located at historically significant sites, such as the former Gestapo headquarters in Kristiansand (my current workplace) and at the former SS camp Falstad in Trondheim. Consequently, more documentation on domestic camps have occurred, diversifying the very notion of "camps." Interrogation of Norwegian memory culture and scrutiny of the gaps and silences in public history and academic research occurred at this time too, with the result of the Holocaust becoming a dominant theme of Norwegian wartime history and memory practices.

One perhaps subtle change is who is writing books about the concentration camps, and who are interested in writing them. One example is journalist Sven Egil Omdahl's 2022 book on the Sachsenhausen prisoners, which among other things explores tensions and conflicts among the Norwegians. Still, as the full title suggest *The Nazi death camp and the prisoner's dream of a better Norway* clearly operate within a national framework and its particular political legacy. Typically, those engaging with this history have a close proximity to the survivors and the survivors' families and the genre remains a mix of documentary and memoir books. Consequently, part of these familial and generational dynamics rests on debates and controversies that go unsolved, that do not connect to broader historical questions and approaches. Still, they raise important issues that the historical profession should integrate into their historical analysis, such as the legacy of political conflict between the Social Democrats and Communists in Sachsenhausen.

My own research emphasised the transnational context of the Nazi camp system and prisoner society and built on new international approaches to the Nazi concentration camps and the 'geographical and spatial turn' in Holocaust studies. The global outreach of Holocaust research since the 1990s means sources concerning Norwegians often end up in archives far away, like the Shoah Foundation Archive, which have rarely been used by Norwegian researchers.

Conclusion

Recent trends suggest an increase in interest regarding camps and their victims. More attention is being given to prison camps *inside* Norway, interactions between camps on the European continent and the Norwegian SS and Prisoner of War camps; research on marginalised victim groups such as the Norwegian Roma and those targeted for homosexuality in occupied Norway; and the evolution of Holocaust memory has prompted more critical reflection on national narratives.

Yet, it is hard to see a complete overhaul of the basic narratives of the concentration camps as sites of suffering and national unity. The life of Norwegian concentration camp victims remains somewhat abstract or portrayed through a series of overarching events: arrest, deportation, imprisonment through the themes of unity and solidarity, rescue, or death. This tension between the "ideal types" such as Gerhardsen, and the more anonymous mass of "Norwegian prisoners" is most evident in the fact that the Holocaust is not integrated into the broader historiography. It is still unclear where those deported

as Jewish sit within the larger framework of understanding the Norwegian experience in concentration camps. When they appear in published works it is often in highly racialised situations, through the lens of others, or through the framework of perpetrator policies.

Moreover, my work with the person-centered database, *Norwegian Digital Prisoner Archive 1940-1945*, www.Fanger.no has made it possible to uncover not only biographical details of individual concentration camp prisoners, but also their wartime trajectory in the camp system. Nevertheless, much remains unknown, and we are currently developing a project focused on the geographies of deportation.

Another gap worth exploring is the role of survivor networks. An exploration of networks formed inside and outside the camps and their impact on survivor memory could reveal more about the choice of documenting and publishing their experiences. To what extent did participating in national and or transnational networks help survivors make sense of their camp experience?

Returning to Odd Nansen's diary entry from 20th April 1945. Around three hundred thousand school children have since 1992 essentially 'retraced' his and thousands of other Norwegian prisoner's journeys and continue to do so every year. This reversal, going from the joyous moment of return and freedom, to plunging into the depths of human experiences of the camps, remain a cultural and moral vehicle to maintain the memory of the Nazi camps in Norway — however flawed we think this memory to be.