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From the Pencil to Pixels: Traces of Dutch Presence in Buchenwald

Abstract: This article describes the various ‘waves’ of Dutch prisoners who came to Buchenwald and the remnants they left behind in cultural and personal memory. In the texts, drawings and physical and digital memorials of Buchenwald, we find all three functions of *Mahnmal*, *Denkmal* and *Gedenkstätte*. In the early topdown or institutional memory, such as monuments, an inequality is visible with an emphasis on non-Jewish survivors. Digital archives may offer a more inclusive contribution to memory culture.

Introduction

The names of the Dutch Jewish Buchenwald victims have finally been set in stone, as the city of Amsterdam has erected a huge monument which carries the names of the more than 102,000 Jewish victims of the Nazis in the Netherlands.¹ Why the need for this archival monument in an age of fluid, online, connective memory? Holocaust memory is becoming a partly digital affair. A recent research project has investigated the presence of camps in online Holocaust discourse (Bastian and Makhortykh 2019). The study compares the Wikipedia pages of various languages and shows differences in the subjects presented and in the links between the lemmas. In the image beneath (Figure 1) we see, for example, how Buchenwald jumps out larger than Auschwitz on the Dutch Wikipedia pages, whereas in other languages other emphases are made. Buchenwald is even more present than camp Westerbork, the point of deportation for most Dutch Jews. Apparently, Buchenwald holds a special place in Dutch Holocaust memory. All in all, about 3,300 Dutch men were interned in Buchenwald, and at least 497 died there (Snijders 2001, 12).²

1 See ‘Holocaust Memorial of Names’. Infinite discussion is possible about the criteria that lead to divergent figures.

2 It is impossible to tell from Dutch literature which proportion of the Buchenwald population comprised Jewish men from the Netherlands – neither the total number of prisoners, the number of survivors, nor the number of Jewish men at liberation. However, it is possible to count the dead: the Dutch war graves database lists 551 names, among them 195 of Jewish descent; but this excludes the Buchenwald subcamps.

Many testimonies have been written and monuments erected. In the following, we will provide an analysis to understand this national focus on the camp. How did it become such a major topos of national and online memory discourse? And how do the collective, national memorials relate to individual narratives which have contributed to producing a cultural memory of Buchenwald, the camp that is dominant in Dutch Holocaust memory? Victims left their traces in pencil at first – in both drawings and texts, if taking notes was possible at all. After the war, many of these notes or images were set in ink and published, functioning as testimony, documentation and memorial text all at once. In the following, we will see that contemporary media, too, can assume this kind of two- or threefold function.

Our focus on cultural memory means that we are concerned with the representation of past events in the public sphere. In order to analyze the effects of monuments and testimonies, however, we will need to sketch the social history of the Dutch presence in Buchenwald too.³

The Dutch presence in Buchenwald

Buchenwald has been present in Dutch memory since the Germans launched their occupation of the Netherlands on May 10th, 1940. By July, the first Dutch prisoners had been taken to Buchenwald. These so-called *Ehrenhäftlinge* [honourable prisoners] were captured in retaliation for the imprisonment of German citizens in the Dutch East Indies. The 220 men and women targeted were on leave from their duties in the Dutch Indies.⁴ A second group of hostages taken in September 1940 included members of royal household staff and influential politicians, including Willem Drees, who would later become prime minister. In total this group amounted to around four hundred men and fifteen women. Some of them were released earlier on (the women from Ravensbrück as early as in November 1940; Willem Drees himself on grounds of his health in Septem-

³ As Astrid Erll sketches in the introduction to the handbook *Cultural Memory Studies*, the field is concerned with culture as a three-dimensional framework with social, material and mental aspects, which can never be clearly discerned (Erll 2008, 4). See also Casey 2004, 20–24.

⁴ The men were taken to Buchenwald and stayed in a special block (41), receiving better treatment, Red Cross parcels and medical attention, although fourteen of them died in Buchenwald (among them Barend ter Haar (5856) and Carel Goseling (8016)).

When Buchenwald was liberated in April 1945, 384 Dutch men were still imprisoned there (Snijders 2001). Some of them reported on their experiences in Buchenwald right after their liberation. Both historical knowledge and cultural memory of the Nazi camps were established first and foremost in such first-person documents. The first wave of memory was created by diaries, autobiographies and documentary texts, both published and often unpublished. Whether the testimonials were written down afterwards or composed from letters written in Buchenwald or diaries kept in the concentration camp, they all provide detailed insights into how life in Buchenwald was experienced during different episodes of the war.

The various groups of Dutch prisoners that came to Buchenwald all had their own distinctive experiences to relate. Testimony from the group of *Ehrenhäftlinge* mentioned above, for instance, is more abundant than from the Jewish men deported from the Netherlands. Not only because they had more ways to communicate, but also because a large group survived to write about the experiences.

Compared to famous Buchenwald writers like Elie Wiesel and Robert Antelme, the writings of these Dutch prisoners do not make a particularly impressive literary impact. However, their voices tell an important story, from perspectives that were as varied as the Dutch prisoners in Buchenwald themselves.⁶

Another distinction follows from the time of writing. Was a testimony written right away or after a longer period of time, when the influence of memory and other publications about the experiences have had their effect? Often these camp experiences were published later on, as the people who lived through these experiences became aware of the problems that this episode had caused in their lives (e.g., Caruth 1995; Bond and Craps 2020). Some of the survivors waited thirty or even sixty years, and some texts were published only after the authors had died. All in all 57 publications about Buchenwald were published in Dutch.

Written testimonies

For his Weinberg Lecture (2000), Henry Greenspan compared early testimonies with later ones and found remarkably little difference in terms of the detail of

⁶ Adriënne Baars has compiled a database of the Dutch men and women who have written about their experiences in concentration camps. Most have never been translated and are therefore rather inaccessible to non-Dutch speaking researchers. Stories by Belgian witnesses can be found in the Cegesoma database (see 'Getuigen').

their subject matter, for example. What did change over time though was the responsibility that survivors felt to testify about prisoners murdered and crimes committed. This insistence on the suffering and degrading experiences, and the people who died, are also found in the first Dutch accounts from Buchenwald. They serve as a warning, testimony and act of remembrance in one. Greenspan emphasises that such ‘documentary insistence’ is much stronger in early testimony as:

an expression of survivors’ knowing that they might well be the sole witnesses to certain events (or at least the sole witnesses likely to recount them), and thus their enormous responsibility to make known names, dates, places that have not been known before. (Greenspan 2000, 19)

A second difference that Greenspan notes is that there appears to be more outrage expressed in early testimony, ‘perhaps echoing the wider public condemnations of Germany at this time’ (Greenspan 2007, 19, referring to Seidman 1996).

The only Dutch account of Buchenwald available in translation was written by Jacob Hemelrijk, a Jew. His name translates to ‘Himmelreich’ [kingdom of heaven] in German – and he survived due to sheer luck. His Jewish descent was kept out of the records when he was transferred from Sachsenhausen to Buchenwald. Although Hemelrijk narrates that he found it difficult not to step forward when Jewish prisoners were being ordered to do so, it saved his life. In the English translation his account is titled *There is a Way to Freedom: Seven Months in a Concentration Camp* (2003):⁷

‘Jedem das Seine’ (to each his own) was written in black bronze letters in the centre of the heavy gate through which we entered the camp. I read this only after the liberation when the gate lost its repulsive, satanic effect because of the hasty flight of the guards and we could look at it soberly as if it was an ordinary object (Hemelrijk 2003, 213).

In most of the Dutch texts on Buchenwald, we do see an emphasis on testifying, but not so much the rage that Greenspan describes. More often, there is a tone of ironic distance. One example in point is Karel van Staal’s account, which was published immediately in May 1945, with half a million copies printed (note that the Netherlands only had a population of 9 million at the time). Van Staal, who was a political prisoner, acknowledges that he can only tell the story of the years 1944 and 1945 in Buchenwald, but estimates that nine hundred Dutch men

⁷ His portrait is also included in a publication about intellectuals and artists incarcerated in Buchenwald (Gunnar-Lüettgenau 2003).

passed through the gates in that time and that half of them died. Van Staal gives details about the camp, how entry and work were arranged, about roll call and rations (which steadily decreased), but does not say much about his personal experiences. Although he adopted one of the Jewish orphans in the camp, nothing is said about what happened to the Jewish people in particular. His sarcasm is notable, for example, when he describes his clothes. Prisoners had to wear uniforms from Auschwitz ‘belonging to Jewish prisoners who had died of natural or most of the time unnatural causes’ (Van Staal 1945, 5). In vivid detail, Van Staal describes the final days of the camp, when Jewish prisoners disobeyed the order to come forward. The order to report for roll call was sabotaged by both the *Geuzen*, a group of political prisoners who named themselves after Dutch freedom fighters from the sixteenth-century war against Spain, and by the lucky intervention of an air raid siren.

It is about these *Geuzen* that the most famous Dutch war-text was written, a poem that every Dutch school child has heard: *Het Lied der 18 dooden* [*The Song of the Eighteen Dead*]. It was written by Jan Campert about the execution of eighteen resistance fighters in March 1941, most of whom were part of the *Geuzen* group.⁸ The modern incarnation of the *Geuzen* fought the Nazis by producing pamphlets and reporting on the German army in the Netherlands. Their leader, Bernard IJzerdraat was one of the eighteen dead lamented in the poem (Asscher 2015). This poem was illegally copied and sold during the war to raise money for the resistance. Many other members of the *Geuzen* movement were interned in the Netherlands and later sent to Buchenwald (147 arriving in April 1941; see Paape 1965). Willem Drees compared this group of *Geuzen* to the Jewish victims who arrived earlier and pointed out their differences. The *Geuzen* had a greater chance of survival: they were treated better, they were young and often used to manual labour. Upon liberation in 1945, there were still forty-two *Geuzen* in Buchenwald (Snijders 2001, 32).

When looking at the history of Dutch prisoners in Buchenwald, we can distinguish between several groups or ‘waves’ of prisoners, and some are more overtly present in Dutch memory than others, thus influencing the nature of memory culture.⁹ This depends in part on ethnicity, class and political orienta-

⁸ A modern-day memento is the *Geuzenpenning* – an honorary prize for people who fight injustice and human rights violations (see ‘Stichting Geuzenpenning’).

⁹ And what about the women? So far, Adriënné Baars has found only five Dutch women who were in one of the Buchenwald subcamps. Madelon Verstijnen wrote about her camp experiences as if she was in Buchenwald, but she was actually interned in HASAG Leipzig. Ellen Keith’s novel (2018) about a Dutch woman who worked as a prostitute in Buchenwald is not based on an

tion, and on the role prisoners played in later Dutch history. As said, Non-Jewish prisoners had more chances of survival and therefore better chances of testifying.

Thus, in the Dutch narratives of Buchenwald, we can distinguish some specific traits that have contributed to the cultural memory of this particular camp. The personal notes written by survivors of Buchenwald often provide descriptions of groups, although the individuals within each group could be very different. Groups were either distinguished by nationality (the 'N' could stand for both Dutch and Norwegian prisoners), descent, religion or political affiliation. The Dutch prisoners in Buchenwald were a comparatively large group of well-educated men, of whom a relatively large number survived. Due to their professions after the war, they had the means (as journalists or publishers, for example) to write about and publish their experiences, the result of which was that many books about Buchenwald were published early on. The dominance of Buchenwald in online Holocaust discourse thus reflects the 'importance' of the camp not so much in quantitative terms as in qualitative terms. The more intellectuals that survived a camp, the more 'discourse' was produced around it in later years. The irony of memory means that Buchenwald shows up frequently in online Dutch memory *because* it was a camp with better chances of survival – because it was not an extermination camp.

The largest group of Jewish prisoners from the Netherlands which arrived in Buchenwald, in February 1941, has left almost no trace. Their fate was very different to that of the *Ehrenhäftlinge* who were already in Buchenwald at the time.¹⁰ The group comprised of 389 Jewish men, victims of a raid in Amsterdam which ignited the famous February Strike. When these Jewish men were deported to Mauthausen in May 1941, only 341 of them were still alive. They did not leave many traces as only two of them survived Buchenwald, Gerrit Blom (prisoner no. 4710) who was called back to the Netherlands to testify at trial, and Meyer Nebig, prisoner no. 3151 (NIOD 290–1158, 312; Sijes 1954). His Buchenwald records, which can be found online in the Arolsen Archives, reveal that he was in and out of hospital from 1941 to 1944, diagnosed with tuberculosis. He then disappears from the records – his number was administratively changed to 7102 – and survived the war. After his return, he was interviewed by someone from the Dutch Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies about his

actual account, although there was a Dutch Jehova's witness working in Buchenwald as a housekeeper while her husband was imprisoned there. Their story is told by Van Staal (1945, 42–43).
10 A listing can be found in War Lives 'Zoeken: Buchenwald', Transport Kamp Schoorl–Buchenwald 27–02–1941, although it only contains 338 names. Recent research has revealed that 152 people were systematically murdered at Schloss Hartheim (De Lang 2021).

camp experiences. His interview has been frequently utilised to tell the story of the aftermath of the February Strike, but it hardly counts as a representation of the entire ‘second wave’ of prisoners. Indirectly, one of the best-known monuments in the Netherlands, ‘De Dokwerker’ [The Dock Worker], might remind us of the group, as it was erected in commemoration of the February Strike, which in turn was inspired by the raid. Around it, the memories of communists, resistance workers and the people of Amsterdam compete (Mooij 2006). Monuments like ‘De Dokwerker’ commemorate the resistance and the collective effort, but like many monuments, they are in need of more framing in order to represent all the stories, and not just the ones we like to hear. The fate of the 389 deported Jews is often not mentioned in this context.

Monuments

The February Strike and its heroes are now part of Dutch and local cultural memory, with an annual commemoration ceremony taking place with the city mayor in attendance. The material and ritual weight of the monument tends to solidify memory – for the Jewish group no such form of commemoration exists. In fact, if at all, the Jewish men are only recognised as a group; their names and individual stories have disappeared. The emphasis on ‘national heroes’ and especially the heroes who resisted the Nazi occupation was the dominant paradigm in the early decades after the war. Little attention was paid to the narratives that did not fit in with this narrative (Van Vree 1995). The first commemorations of the war focused on repression and resistance, and as elsewhere in Europe, it was only in later years that the fate of the Jewish victims was considered of importance for national memory. This can also be discerned in the monuments from the era (Van Ginkel 2011). It was only from about 1965 onwards that monuments were built to remember the Holocaust and its victims, which were increasingly erected in more visible places, not just at Jewish graveyards but in full view, like the Auschwitz monument in Amsterdam, for example. The same holds true for other monuments: the buildings which were used during deportations such as the Hollandsche Schouwburg in Amsterdam and Loods 24 in Rotterdam.¹¹ More material and conspicuous reminders like these were erected to commemorate what happened in Buchenwald as well, mostly from the 1950s onwards (Van Vree 1995; Young 1994).

11 ‘Een Vergeten Geschiedenis. Loods 24 Een Joods Kindermonument Rotterdam’ and ‘Hollandsche schouwburg’; see also Duindam 2016.

The Netherlands does not have a specific monument culture like France and Germany (Carrier 2015, Faro 2005), where individuals are commemorated in their hometowns or where they died during World War I or World War II. The Netherlands does have a few statues for individuals who died in Buchenwald however, most of which have had a local impact.¹² Buchenwald survivor Jacques van Putten, for example, established a remembrance memorial in Eindhoven to commemorate anyone who had been in a concentration camp during World War II, whether they had died or survived. Moreover, a Dutch Buchenwald memorial was established in 1952: it is a grave with a large urn on it, held by two marble hands. According to the inscription, the urn holds ashes collected at Buchenwald from all the ‘places of martyrdom in the Nazi era’. The monument is located at the Amsterdam Nieuwe Ooster cemetery and still issues its ‘warning’. Its caption reads: ‘People, be vigilant.’ This monument served as an excellent site of commemoration each year on April 11th, the day Buchenwald was liberated. These commemorations no longer take place because there are no survivors of Buchenwald able to attend anymore.¹³ This discontinuation marks the problem with monuments, as Young states: ‘Memorials by themselves remain inert and amnesiac’ (Young 1993, xiii). They are dependent on visitors and on rituals for whatever memory they produce.

Visual testimony: Pencil, photographs and video

Written testimonies, especially diaries, are personal and authentic. A similar effect is produced by drawings of the camp. What drawings and diaries have in common is that they are strongly indexical and imply that the author or artist was present in the camp. The proximity of the writing hand adds even more aura and authenticity to the drawings. This effect can be seen in Henri Pieck’s Buchenwald drawings.

Pieck was a communist and a spy for the USSR long before the war started. His twin brother Anton, who would later become the designer of the Efteling – a famous Dutch fairy tale park – was not allowed into England because of the illegal activities of his brother, who shared his date of birth and visual appearance. Henri Pieck was arrested for printing illegal newspapers, and was sent to Buchenwald in April 1942, where he received prisoner number 3156. He

¹² For instance, for D.M.J.C. Otterman in Wachtum (1946); for Antoon Timmermans in Maasbree (1948), and a monument for sixteen resistance fighters in Drachten (1955), among them Johannes Martinus Boleij and Johannes Bartholomeus Tichelaar, who both died in Buchenwald.

¹³ They have been replaced by the Dutch national commemoration of World War II on 4 May.

made himself popular with the SS men by drawing their portraits and painting landscapes.¹⁴ The camp doctor Hoven ordered him to experiment with vaccinations against typhoid fever, and (again according to his biographers) the rabbits which were intended for tests, were often used for consumption instead. The drawings Pieck published after the war showed a different side of camp reality: the people in the *Kleines Lager*, the hunger-stricken faces and the Dutch prisoner looking longingly at potato peels. They provide a visual impression which complements the written accounts and has a different effect. It can serve as evidence, just like photos – but there is a difference.

Photographs have a stronger ‘evidential’ function but are less personal and were seldom made by inmates. Those taken by the American liberators have also made a contribution to the presence of Buchenwald in the memory landscape, not just in the Netherlands. One of the most famous pictures, taken by photographer Elizabeth Miller, shows Elie Wiesel (second row, seventh from the left),¹⁵ but also the Dutch Jewish men Harry Leefsma and Max Hamburger. Max Hamburger (just below Elie Wiesel) weighed only twenty-eight kilos at the time. He came from Ohrdruf on a death march after surviving Auschwitz, where his mother was killed. In Buchenwald he received number 137348, although the Buchenwald documentation about him is scant (Van der Heijden 2011). After spending a considerable period of time recuperating from tuberculosis and the atrocities of war, he became a psychiatrist with some influence in the public sphere. He continued telling people about his experiences and counselled other victims of persecution, although he admits that he never found anybody who could counsel him on his own trauma. He died in 2012 (De Waard 2012). He is one of the few Dutch men of Jewish descent who provided a videotaped interview about his camp experiences. He was interviewed in 1996 for the Spielberg project and again in 2002 for a Dutch research project that yielded thirty-eight interviews with ex-Buchenwald inmates (‘Nederlandse oud-gevangenen van kamp Buchenwald’). Most of the interviewees were interned for acts of resistance: one because he was a Jehovah’s witness (*Bibelforscher*) and others for attempting to avoid mandatory labour – *Arbeitseinsatz*. This imbalance in the documented experience is also discernible in the publications: only five out of forty-five writers were of Jewish descent, two of whom managed to hide their true identity and were treated as resistance inmates.

¹⁴ According to his biographers, he managed this quite easily – because of his knowledge of German, French and Russian, and because he knew other communists (Arnoldussen and Olink 2008).

¹⁵ See the image ‘Former prisoners of the “little camp” in Buchenwald stare out from the wooden bunks in which they slept three to a “bed”.’

Remembering in the digital age

Digital archives can provide a means of counter-balancing unequal canonical memory. Archives contain the possibility of producing many different narratives, which is perhaps why they have become popular as spaces of remembrance. The Arolsen Archives, for example, were opened to the public recently. The digital information on prisoners in Buchenwald offered there is very rich and includes notes about their valuables, their health situation and their correspondence. This is because the Buchenwald administration was not destroyed at the end of the war, unlike others such as the administration at the Scheveningen prison, the Oranjestad, which was often the first place where Dutch prisoners were incarcerated during World War II. But documentation on its own is difficult to value without the personal experience expressed in testimony. Both sources of information produce cultural memory in different ways and need to be viewed with reference to each other.

Digitalisation offers possibilities to melt the amber of a solid national memory culture and its annual rituals. The digitalisation and open access to the Arolsen Archives means that it is now possible to take a fresh look at the victims who never ‘made it’ into official memory in the post-war years. The names of all Jewish men can be pulled up on the screen, and their Buchenwald registration cards offer new insights into the existing history. However, while physical places create a space for memory and culture – traditionally hosted in buildings and archives – archives and other institutions of memory are losing their physical foundations in the new medium of memory: the Internet. Is the risk of invisibility and obsolescence not even greater there than it is in the public space?

This remains to be seen. The large Dutch digital ‘Jewish Monument’ manages to function as a ‘real’ memorial. Somewhere between an archive and a website, this digital monument lists 104,000 Dutch Jews who perished during the war.¹⁶ The names of the 245 Jewish men who died in Buchenwald are also immortalised here and can be found using the website’s search engine (‘Search: Buchenwald’). The idea for the website came from the Jewish proverb that a person stays alive as long as he or she is remembered – there are now more international examples of such memorial archives that are not exclusively Jewish.¹⁷ The Dutch site is also

¹⁶ As well as people who died helping Jewish people in hiding.

¹⁷ The Imperial War Museum, for example, hosts a site about the Commonwealth victims of the First World War (‘Lives of the First World War’). Dutch examples include the Honour Roll, which is displayed in the Dutch Parliament, of which there is now a digital version, where a flower can be placed by visitors to honour the fallen (‘The Honour Roll of the Fallen 1940–1945: A Brief

available in English and provides information in four layers: information about the specific person, their dates and places of birth and death, their last listed address, and any known family relations. This space is an example of collaborative memory production, too. Memory culture is no longer a strictly institutional or top-down domain. In fact, members of the public can supply the archive with a fifth layer when they upload, for example, short stories about the circumstances of the person's arrest, information about whether other family members survived the war and sometimes photos. Visitors and family members have reported that, for them, it really does work as a place of remembrance (Faro 2015, 139; see also: Van Dijck 2007). This monument therefore serves a triple purpose, as a place for disseminating information, for gathering it, and as a memorial (Werkman 2017). The online list has an offline space as well: all the family names are listed on a wall in the interactive remembrance space called the 'Hollandse Schouwburg' (Duindam 2016).

Nevertheless, Amsterdam's Jewish community has insisted that a complete list of names should be erected as well. Daniel Libeskind offered to design this wall of names, which is now erected in the space of a contested 'gratitude monument'.

Conclusion

There are three German words that can be used to describe 'memory set in stone': *Denkmal*, a monument to memorialise a person or an event; *Mahnmal*, which reminds of the past to warn the public against violence in the future; and *Gedenkstätte*, a place of remembrance (Casey 2004, 42). In the Dutch memory of Buchenwald, all three functions can be found. The effects and emphases may be different across text, (video)testimony, drawings and digital memory, but all in turn have an impact on public memory. If Buchenwald can maintain its presence in the Netherlands, it will keep functioning as *Mahnmal*, *Denkmal* and *Gedenkstätte* all at once.

History'). It lists only victims who fought as resistance fighters and those who served in the Dutch army, navy or abroad – some 18,000 names in total. It includes 248 Dutch men who died in Buchenwald. Another example is the website of the Netherlands War Graves Foundation, where it is possible to add information or photos to an existing entry. A recent example is the War Lives initiative, which lists 1,291 names for Buchenwald, although some names are mentioned more than once; it is a work in progress, based on all available archives ('Zoeken: Buchenwald').

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