

IRIS CAN OOIJEN

Dutch WWII Camp as Contested Space: Dissonant Collective Memories of Camp Westerbork in a Global Age

In December 2008, the exhibition Internment Camp Westerbork 1945-1948 opened at the Remembrance Centre of Camp Westerbork. Situated in the remote east of the Netherlands, Camp Westerbork was opened by the Dutch authorities in the summer of 1939 to receive Jewish refugees arriving from Germany. During WWII, it was a transit camp for more than 103,000 Jews sent to extermination camps in Poland. Within 14 days after the liberation of the camp – most of the remaining Jewish prisoners were still there – the camp was assigned a new function, as an internment camp for members of the Dutch National Socialist Movement (NSB) and others suspected of collaboration.

The exhibition informed visitors about the history of the NSB, the public hatred of suspected collaborators and the consequences for their children. It led to a flood of highly emotional reactions. Several Jewish organizations and resistance committees stated that it did not belong in the Remembrance Centre. These groups experienced the former camp as their place; there was no room for collaborators. Meanwhile, many former NSB members and their children came to the exhibition, not during the regular opening hours but in the evenings, as they were ashamed and afraid of being recognized.

Ironically, in the post-war decades, Camp Westerbork was far from being a Dutch symbol of Jewish suffering. Neither the remaining Jewish community nor civil society wanted to remember what had happened there en situ. Nowadays, however, many individuals and groups, from survivors and their descendants to religious communities and contemporary visitors view the camp as their heritage.

Besides material decline, camps are protected from claims by others. This raises the question: who has appropriated the heritage of Westerbork? In other words, who owns Westerbork? Interrelated with the 'owners', collective memories are continuously subject to change. Elaborating on Levy and Sznajder's *The Holocaust and memory in the global age*, my paper focuses on the distinctive forms of collective memory of Westerbork in the age of globalisation and how the appropriation of the camp has been related to the constitution of identities that led to the clash of opinions about the exhibition in 2008.

Thus, my paper explores Westerbork from a plural perspective. It focuses on the public treatment of the Holocaust trauma by Jewish and non-Jewish camp victims as well as post-war detainees. It deals with how Westerbork has been turned into an icon of atrocities in the Nazi attack on Europe – like Verdun, Normandy and other WWI and II battlefields – as represented in literature, film and other media. Finally, the paper analyses the camp's meaning

as a 'national site' in terms of the international Holocaust memory boom, a status which brings it, more than other places of memory, in a field of tension involving personal memories, public commemoration, and the 'tourist experience'.

About the project: The PhD project 'Dutch WWII Memorial Camps as contested space' (2010-2014) is funded by NWO (Dutch Scientific Research) and supported by the Memorial Centres Westerbork, Vught and Amersfoort. The resulting dissertation will also become the guide line for a joint exhibition at these former campsites on the afterlife of Nazi terrorscape in national, European and Jewish memorial culture.