Het gedenkteken, de plek en de herinnering : de monumentalisering van de Duitse kampen in Nederland
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SUMMARY

Memorial, place and memory

The monumentalisation of the German camps in the Netherlands

During the German occupation several camps were set up on Dutch territory and were used as places of detention. The camps in Schoorl, Amersfoort and Ommen – in order of construction – all had places of detention, otherwise known as ‘concentration camps’. There were special camps for Jews, Westerbork being the largest and most well-known. This was a transit camp for those who were later transported to the extermination camps in Poland. The gate to Auschwitz, as it were. The camps in the Netherlands were part of the Nazi terror network consisting of over 10,000 camps with at least 17 different types. Each camp had its own name, history and memories. Most of the former concentration camps live on today as lieu de memoire. They are a place of refuge for the memories of western civilization. The former camps are not solely places of mourning and contemplation, but are also places of commemoration and education. The former camps in Amersfoort, Vught and Westerbork are now also memorial centres.

It is, however, not a matter of course that the former concentration camps are nowadays places of commemoration. After the war the camps in the Netherlands were used for various purposes. From the seventies a start was made to set up these places in the Netherlands as memorials. Creating national monuments out of the former camps occurred in different phases. This is the process of monumentalisation. Research is specifically concerned with the way in which the public’s memory has taken form with regard to the German concentration camps in the Netherlands at their historical location. The aim of the research is to analyse the course and the structure of the process of monumentalisation. What shape has memory taken in the various periods of time and what did people want to express and commemorate? The memorials in and around the former camps are, as cultural artefacts, the source for research and have been looked into from an art-historical point of view. Research reveals that the marks of memory have been formed by a variety of national myths, dominant political ideals and needs of the time in which they have been created.

Although each (former) camp has its own (postwar) history, the former camps in Amersfoort, Vught and Westerbork have all experienced a similar process of monumentalisation. In short the congealed memory has developed from a traditional monument via a (partially) preserved and reconstructed historical site into a museological form of commemoration. All these different forms show that memory is not a statistic, but a continual process with its own dynamics.

Each place of commemoration has its own character with specific characteristics or features. De Stenen Man (The Stone Man), the statue in the former shooting range at Amersfoort, has been the determining factor in the memory of the camp for many years, and the statue still appeals to the imagination. At Westerbork, the former camp with its tracks and memorials reveals its history and makes it tangible. Camp Vught National Memorial (Nationaal Monument Kamp Vught) is a Memorial Museum. These three determining forms: a memorial, a former camp and a centre of remembrance, all play a central part in this book.
which is presented chronologically and according to theme. The research, titled: *Het gedenkteken, de plek en de herinnering* (Memorial, place and memory) has been based on this chronology and so reflects the purpose of this book.

The first monuments that were constructed in or nearby the camps of Amersfoort, Vught and Westerbork were memorials in the shape of a memorial wall, a statue and ninety metres of railway with a buffer stop. In the first section: *Het gedenkteken* (The memorial), research looks for the answers to the question by whom and for whom these memorials have been set up. Which spot has been selected for them and what is the purpose of these monuments? These three ‘camp monuments’ have been set up in the context of thirteen other national war monuments, and the question is how these memorials relate to national remembrance day. In section II *De Stenen Man* (The Stone Man) is the main subject, in III and IV *Nationale Monument Westerbork* (Westerbork National Memorial). In order to look into the relationship between the camp monuments and national remembrance day, the history of the *Nationale Monument op de Dam* (National Monument on Dam Square) is discussed here.

*De Stenen Man* (1953) and the memorial wall (1947) at the former shooting range in Camp Vught are so-called ‘Fusillademonumenten’ (execution by firing squad monuments) that could be associated with the national and political exposition of suffering, sacrifice and resistance. The national, political and Christian issues – so typical of the first few post-war years – have had their impact on the camp monuments. This has been portrayed most clearly in Vught. The arrangement of names on the memorial wall is virtually a literal reflection of how the victims were subordinated to the interests of the nation. The monument fits perfectly in the great stories of nationalism and traditional religious ideologies where resistance plays a central part and where there is no place for the dead and events that do not fit into the story of heroism and national resurrection. Setting up memorials was directly influenced by social and political circumstances, as the history of *De Stenen Man* in Amersfoort reveals. Slow development was the result of diminishing interest in the war and the efforts to reconstruct a normal way of life as well as the political and ideological theme that dominated the fifties: the Cold War.

There was no room for the imagination of the prisoners that were not executed. The prisoners in Vught that died from undernourishment, illness and torture, were not commemorated by name. The ‘Fusillade’ monuments in Amersfoort and Vught might not commemorate any victories, but do, on the other hand, follow the tradition of sacrifice and hero worship. Their names are spoken highly of, their statues are on a pedestal, they are an example for us. By constructing these memorials the camps were presented as places where imprisonment was the result of a national harmony whereby the fight against the occupier had started. Suffering and death were interpreted as sacrifices for one’s country. The memorials are evidently not symbols representative of the camp population and their experiences in the camps. Their possibility of identification has, in fact, been limited to a small group of camp prisoners.

The development history of the memorial for Westerbork and the monument itself (1970) reveal that Westerbork was a different camp to Amersfoort and Vught. Although initially an attempt was made to nationalize Westerbork by setting up a memorial alike to that of
Amersfoort and Vught, it quickly became clear that Westerbork was not going to conform to the prevailing national remembrance discourse of the time. As far as the Jewish community was concerned, the former camp at Westerbork was not considered a suitable place of remembrance. The memory of Westerbork and the extermination camps were delicate matters and furthermore, the previous history of the camp and the way in which the Dutch government had become camp owner after the war, did not contribute in having the camp serve as a place of commemoration for the Jewish community. That place was Amsterdam. Partly as a result of this, it took a long time for Westerbork to get its own memorial. Moreover, the history of Westerbork did not fit in with the prevailing national remembrance discourse. No community likes to be confronted with what they have neglected as a result of their failures. At the time there was no room for this.

The Westerbork Monument is a memorial, that, contrary to those of Amersfoort and Vught, reveals the reality with which all the camp inmates of Westerbork were confronted, that of deportation. The monument shows no glorification, no worship, no dockworker rebelling against the persecution of Jews. The monument lies in a vertical position, like a grave, in the ground, only the extremities of the rails curling inquiringly upwards. The monument is a sign of shame and sense of guilt, constructed by those who felt they had failed in their assistance towards the Jewish population.

The fifties may no longer be called a time of peace and quiet. As far as the process of monumentalization of the former camps is concerned, the fifties and sixties were the decades in which all traces of the past were wiped out as thoroughly as possible. A new layer of history literally surfaced on the sites of horror. The camps in the Netherlands were unsuitable for national war commemoration as there was no basis to conserve them. The sinful places actually had the power to enfeeble key social values. The ‘fusillade’ sites and their monuments took the place of the camp grounds as places of remembrance. In the hierarchy of the national memorials the fusillade monuments were of marginal significance. The actual places for the national war memories had to be created, like the honorary cemetery at Bloemendaal, the Nationaal Monument op de Dam (National Monument on Dam Square) or De Dokwerker (The Dockworker) in Amsterdam.

The second section: De plek (The site) is about the former camp grounds as historical location. When the camps at Amersfoort and Westerbork were threatened with demolition, attempts were made to conserve what remained of the original camps. Not much could be saved. The barracks in both Amersfoort and Westerbork were completely demolished, foundations and all. Directly after the demolition of Westerbork, plans were formed to make the historical location available to the public. In V the prime concern is how the former camps fared after the war. What was the significance of the camps for ex-prisoners and those dear to them? What attention did they get in the media? Only in Westerbork was it possible to organize the former camp location as a memorial centre. What was the purpose of reconstructing the camp into a historical site? As Westerbork is the only former camp in the Netherlands where the camp grounds have been reconstructed, in order to understand the design in a better way, the site is compared with Buchenwald, Dachau and Bergen-Belsen in VI. These are also camp locations whose former barracks were also demolished and later reconstructed as memorials.
The years round about 1970 can be considered a turning point in the monumentalization of camps. If we characterize the years between 1945-1970 as the period of remembering and forgetting, then these years form the period of rediscovering the camps. The realization of Nationaal Monument Westerbork (National Westerbork Monument), the discovery of the mural in Amersfoort and the attention for Camp Vught were the first steps on the road to creating national memorial centres. Due to the embattled historical picture in which the persecution of Jews and victimization formed the heart of the war story, it was possible to build the monument for Westerbork in 1970. Rediscovering the camps was possible in the wake of becoming familiar with the concentration camp syndrome and the experiences of the camp survivors, who stepped into the limelight by testifying, their story often being told on the actual site itself.

The deportations and the extermination of Jews could hardly be represented in a more moving manner than by showing the tracks, debris, remains and fragments of the crimes. The damaged rails lie like a scar in the former camp grounds at Westerbork. These ‘tracks’, however, do not appeal to everyone’s imagination. They are silent witnesses. They show a part of a past long gone but say little about what actually happened there. At the unveiling of Ralph Prins’ monument, the younger generation immediately considered the monument insufficient in clarifying what had taken place at this site. Consequently, the former camp grounds were made into a historical location. Barracks were not rebuilt, even though it was known that there were still some in existence. Reconstructing them was considered unreal or even ‘kitsch’, partly because the bare heather landscape of war times had now made place for lush woodland. It was sufficient to apply symbolic ‘tracks’ to the landscape and in this way show where the barracks had been. Rebuilding a historical location meant creating a contact zone with the past. The symbolic reconstruction, however, also shows that the past has gone for good and that the atmosphere and the fear of the war years cannot be relived. Westerbork followed the examples of Dachau and Buchenwald with this ‘symbolic commemoration’, in which the contours of the barracks long gone were conveyed by concrete borders. This makes you feel the emptiness caused by annihilation.

Besides the monuments and the reconstructed camp locations, memorial centres were built on and near the camp grounds - in Westerbork (1983) even before the camp grounds were reconstructed - in order to be able to tell the history of the camps. In this way the monuments got minds of their own. The final section: de herinnering (the memory) is about the realization of Camp Westerbork Memorial Centre and specifically Camp Vught National Memorial. In VII the ideas that underlie the styling of the Camp Vught National Memorial are looked into and the story that is told to visitors and how that is done. Special attention is paid to the way the exhibition in Vught is set up and how visitors experience this. The last section ends answering the question about the role of former camps today in the light of national war commemoration.

In the new perspective of commemoration in the seventies and eighties, in which the notion of war traumas was apparent and heroic stories made room for self-critical and self-reproaching views, there was, apart from more thought for persecution of the Jews, also an increased interest in the experiences of other groups. The human rights theme dominated war memories, as is clearly reflected in the Camp Vught National Memorial. The monument, disclosed in 1990, matched current themes and pointed out to visitors that dictatorships still
exist in our world and that vigilance was required. It soon became clear that this significance linked to Camp Vught did not run parallel with the needs of former prisoners. In their eyes the story of the war and the persecution of the Jews and other groups should not be made too abstract and get too much publicity. The function of the monument for former prisoners was to reveal tangible and familiar memories, and acting on these grounds they wanted a place for their traumatic stories which until now they had not been able to take anywhere. In the course of the nineties Vught made room for these wishes; this resulted in the new monument in 2002.

That the personal and pluralistic stories of the former prisoners were finally emphasized was not only interpreted as a token of respect for their experience, but was also an expression of the awareness that witnesses are an extremely effective means of keeping memories alive, also as part of education. For the government, in connection with the charismatic site of a former camp, this was a reason to let the former camps play a significant role in its amendment in the eighties: Jeugdvoorlichtingsbeleid over de Tweede Wereldoorlog in relatie tot het heden (Youth education policy on World War II in relation to the present).

In the years surrounding the fortieth commemoration of liberation day there was a second turning point in the process of monumentalising former camps. It is the period of restored memory that took place in the late nineties of the twentieth century and in the early years of the present century. This last phase is characterized by its museological form and institutionalization of memorials. Professionalizing memorial centres has mainly been made possible due to financial assistance from national government. The government’s financial involvement in the former camps more or less kept pace with other developments surrounding war heritage. The eighties and nineties were the overture for a gesture of apology for the awkward treatment of survivors, their next of kin and the financial settlement involved. Amazement at society’s failings acts as a drive wheel for keeping memories alive, like a sign for the lasting solidarity of postwar generations with this period in time. Nowadays, former camps rank among the most important places for keeping memories alive and where, in addition to the story of sacrifice and resistance, there’s room for experiences of other groups of victims. The memory is more and more in the service of continuous education in citizenship and democracy.

A memorial site has to commemorate, the actual history has to be evident, it has to inform, interpret, identify and legitimize. A memorial site has to educate, make an impression and at the same time attract visitors. A memorial site is the visual reproduction of historical consciousness of a community. It is not surprising that all these functions are at odds with each other. Former camps have been transformed into talking grounds where memory and commemoration change to historical experience. Due to the way it is directed there is danger of the view of historical reality fading further and further away in favour of a simple, visually attractive narrative and esthetic story. Basically, the same course is followed as is started with the ‘fusillade’ monuments, whereby it is not a question of clarifying analytical insight into complex historical processes, but first and foremost a question of symbolism, experience and empathy for camp history and its victims in favour of a current ideological message. In VIII it is apparent that former camps are transformational sites, focused on the visitor’s change of character in favour of a higher purpose.
Vertaling M.C. Lomas