

# Sonnenburg and the memory of WW2 in Norway<sup>1</sup>

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“Permission to forget should be seen as one of the basic human rights.”  
– Arne Moi, survivor of Sonnenburg (June 1943–November 1944)

## Introduction

Norway was invaded by Nazi Germany on 9 April 1940. 63 days later the Germans held control of the entire Norwegian territory. The royal family and the Government had managed to escape to England by boat. From London king Haakon and the exile-Government encouraged the Norwegian people to continue the resistance. By 1941, an underground military organization was developed in most parts of the country, except for the northernmost part, and the same was true of civil resistance groups. At the most, almost 400,000 German soldiers were held in Norway to prevent an allied invasion. The German *Sicherheitspolizei und Sicherheitsdienst*, Sipo u. SD, rapidly established their organization with central headquarters in Oslo, four regional headquarters and more than 30 smaller offices. Like in all other occupied countries Sipo u. SD in Norway recruited informers, attracted collaborators and forced local police to help exposing resistance. As a result, more than 43,000 Norwegians were imprisoned by the Nazis during WWII.

Since 1945, there have been published a large amount of books in Norway about the experiences of the Norwegian prisoners: testimonies, diaries, name records, books written by authors and journalists, and scholarly works.

252 Norwegian prisoners were on some point in Sonnenburg, and 44 of them died there.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Sonnenburg is practically invisible as a memory place within a Norwegian context. In this short text I will first try to outline who the Norwegians in Sonnenburg were and why they were sent there. Secondly, I will address the question why so little is known about Sonnenburg in Norway. Finally, I will discuss some new possibilities for commemoration, understanding, storytelling and research following a possible re-establishment of Sonnenburg as a historical memory site seen from a Norwegian perspective.

## Norwegians in captivity

Most of the Norwegian prisoners that were sent to Germany ended up in concentration camps. Practically none of them had been legally prosecuted. When the German investigators in Norway considered a case closed, it was decided whether the prisoner should stay in Norway or was to be sent to Germany. In the most severe cases, the prisoners were categorized as NN-prisoners, and sent to Natzweiler-Struthof in Elsass (Alsace).

When, on the other hand, the German investigators in Norway (Sipo for the most part) decided to press charges against a person, this was done by a German court in Norway. When the trial was

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers are estimated on my own research into the database used as backbone for Ottosen, Kristian (ed.), *Nordmenn i fangenskap 1940-45*, rev. ed., Oslo 2004.

settled the prisoners would normally be sent to Germany to zone penalties from six months imprisonment to lifetime in prison or Zuchthaus. However, big cases involving many persons were often finalized in courts in Germany, most notably Reichskriegsgericht or Volksgerichtshof.

After judgment was delivered most Norwegian NN-prisoners sentenced to Zuchthaus were led to Sonnenburg.

In the German language, as in Norwegian, there are two words for prison: *Gefängnis* (Norwegian *fengsel*) and *Zuchthaus* (Norwegian *tukthus*). The word Zuchthaus dates back to a specific form of imprisonment used in Germany, and other countries, from the late 19th century. In the period 1933-45 the distinction between Zuchthaus and Gefängnis, had practical importance. As a rule, the former was a penalty of longer duration zoned under more strict conditions than the latter.

### Who were the Norwegians in Sonnenburg?

The most important (and most read) text in Norwegian on the subject of Sonnenburg, is to be found in Kristian Ottosen's book about Norwegians in Hitler's prisons published in 1993; one chapter is titled "Zuchthaus Sonnenburg".<sup>3</sup> Here, Ottosen tells the story about the Norwegians that came to Sonnenburg in three rounds from October 1942 to December 1943.

The first group of Norwegians arrived in Sonnenburg in October 1942. They belonged to a clandestine group in the Bergen area called the Alvær group after the young leader Roald Alvær, a journalist and radio student at Bergen Navy School, from which a variety of resistance activities – such as espionage, illegal flyers, secret military organization and weapons training, and organizing North Sea crossings between England and the western coast of Norway – were organized already from 1940.<sup>4</sup> The Alvær group was exposed in February 1941, and the Gestapo arrested more than 40 persons. By November there was no more prisoner capacity in the Bergen area. When the Stein organization was exposed, the Alvær group had to be transported to Grini outside Oslo, the largest camp in Norway. Three of them managed to escape from Grini. Thus, the rest was sent to a high security prison in Oslo. On 3 April 1942 the group was deported to Germany by the troopship MV "Drechtdijk". On arrival in Polizeigefängnis Tegel in Berlin the group counted 34 men. The trial was conducted at the Reichskriegsgericht in Witzlebenstrasse. The verdict fell on 6 June 1942. 14 were sentenced to death, 17 were sentenced to long-term Zuchthaus penalties, and three were sentenced to 3 years in prison.<sup>5</sup> Those who were sentenced to Zuchthaus are the ones that ended up in Sonnenburg. On 6 October 1942 14 members of the Alvær group were executed in Berlin, among them the leader Roald Alvær. The eldest member of the group, also one of its leading figures, Zakarias Bryn, was surprisingly "only" sentenced to four years Zuchthaus. Bryn was 62 when he entered the gate in Sonnenburg. He was a former navy officer and the headmaster at Bergen Navy School at the outbreak of the war. He died in Sonnenburg. Zakarias Bryn was also an author, and published both a collection of poems and a play before 1940.<sup>6</sup>

The second relatively large group of Norwegians in Sonnenburg were sent here because of their participation in an attempt to reach England by sea from Gothenburg, Sweden on 31 March 1942.

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<sup>3</sup> Ottosen, Kristian, *Bak lås og slå: norske menn og kvinner i Hitlers fengsler og tukthus*, Oslo 1993, pp. 240-268.

<sup>4</sup> Ottosen 1993, pp. 240-1.

<sup>5</sup> Ottosen 1993, p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> In the 1970s the musician Ivar Bøksle released an album with songs based on Bryn's poems. Ref. Ivar Bøksle, *Foran masten. Seilskuteviser*, 1978 (NORLP 321).

Two ships actually reached England. Eight ships were sunk, scuttled or forced to return.<sup>7</sup> 235 were taken alive, among them 177 Norwegians, including seven women.<sup>8</sup> Two of the arrested were Dutch, one was Polish, the rest were British citizens. They were all sent to Germany as NN-prisoners. 43 of the Norwegians died in captivity. The crew from the so-called Kvarstad vessels (literally meaning “the ships that were held back”; i.e. in neutral Sweden after the outbreak of the war in Norway) were, after a brief stop in Fredrikshavn, where the Kriegsmarine had established their main HQ in Denmark, rapidly sent to Marlag und Milag Nord near Bremen, a camp for allied navy personnel (*Marine-Lager*, Marlag) and merchant sailors (*Marine-Internierten-Lager*, Milag). In Milag the Kvarstad gang was registered as prisoners of war. However, their status as prisoners was unclear from the beginning. Hence, they were isolated in an own barracks separated from the rest of the camp by a barbed wire fence. For the next months, there was an ongoing tug-of-war on German top level between Grossadmiral Erich Raeder and Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler.<sup>9</sup> To whom did the Norwegian prisoners from the Kvarstad vessels belong? Raeder argued that the Kriegsmarine had fought a battle at sea and defeated the enemy, and that the prisoners taken belonged to him. Himmler, on the other hand, argued that these Norwegians had violated the law given by Reichskommissar Josef Terboven against leaving the country without permission and with the intention of joining allied forces. That meant treason. Himmler got what he wanted. In February 1943 the Kvarstad crew was transferred to Preussische Strafanstalt zu Rendsburg for being prosecuted. They were placed in the wing named NN Untersuchungshaft. Shortly afterwards the trial was conducted by the Sondergericht of Schleswig-Holstein in Kiel. In Kiel, the Kvarstad gang met the members of the Stein organization. In the Kvarstad case 158 Norwegian citizens were sentenced to between one and eight years in Zuchthaus for “landesverräterische Feindbegünstigung”.<sup>10</sup> 151 of them ended up in Sonnenburg in June 1943.<sup>11</sup> The Norwegians from the Stein case didn’t follow to Sonnenburg until the end of the year.

In the former exhibits in the museum at Sonnenburg there was a memory plate dedicated to a group of Norwegians in Sonnenburg.<sup>12</sup> All the names mentioned in this plate belonged to a quite famous resistance group based in the Bergen area. The leader was postal worker Kristian Stein. The organization, called the Stein organization, was revealed in October 1941. The Gestapo in Bergen didn’t manage to close the case before they got a new big case on their hands in May 1942, the Telavåg affair. As a result, 204 Norwegians involved in the Stein case were sent to Kiel as NN-prisoners. In Germany the case was handed over to the Volksgerichtshof. The problem was that there was no court big enough to house all the accused at the same time. Therefore, the case was split up in several smaller cases and conducted by different local courts. Kristian Stein and eight others were executed in Germany. 46 of the others died from other reasons.<sup>13</sup> The members of the Stein group

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<sup>7</sup> Andresen, Alf Pahlow, *I natt og tåke mot England. Kvarstadbåtene – beretning fra en mann om bord*, Oslo 1992.

<sup>8</sup> The number 235 (or 234) is based on critical reading of Andresen 1992, Dahl et al. 1995 and articles in the two encyclopedias *Store norske leksikon* (digital version: <http://snl.no>) and Wikipedia: <http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kvarstadb%C3%A5tene> (retrieved 19.12.2013).

<sup>9</sup> Ottosen 1993, p. 248f.

<sup>10</sup> Moi, Arne, *Leiren*, Oslo 1977, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> According to Ottosen 1993, p. 244.

<sup>12</sup> A photo of this plate No. 13 has been sent to me by Mr. Kamil Majchrzak.

<sup>13</sup> Dahl, Hans Fredrik et al. (ed.), *Norsk krigsleksikon 1940-45*, Oslo 1995. Digital version of this Norwegian WW2 encyclopedia is available here: <http://mediabase1.uib.no/krigslex/register.html>.

who were sentenced to Zuchthaus were sent to Sonnenburg in December 1943. At the most, there were 80 Stein members in Sonnenburg at the same time.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the members of the three groups Alvær (October 1942), Kvarstad (June 1943) and Stein (December 1943), a few Norwegian prisoners came to Sonnenburg alone or in groups with mixed nationalities. Some of them hadn't got a sentence before arriving in Sonnenburg. In these cases, they would be tried at the Kriegsgericht in Sonnenburg, situated in the chapel.<sup>15</sup>

### Arne Moi: a Muselmann in Sonnenburg

One of the few prisoner's memoirs in Norwegian that actually mentions Sonnenburg, is Arne Moi's *Leiren* ("The Camp") from 1977, in which he reflects upon his experiences as a concentration camp prisoner. Although he is primarily focused on Bergen-Belsen, he also touches upon his 17 months in Sonnenburg from June 1943 to November 1944. Before he ended up in Bergen-Belsen in February 1945, Moi also spent three months in Sachsenhausen. Arne Moi belonged to the Kvarstad gang. In his book the reader will find fragments of stories from Sonnenburg here and there. He describes the *Hausordnung* – from which he was able to learn by heart one paragraph only, because of the long German sentences – he recollects that the working hours were rigorous, the food awful and the portions too small; he tells about *Scheisserei*, lice-cracking and friends who suffocated from laryngeal tuberculosis between his hands.

Most of his time in Sonnenburg Moi spent in the Revier:

I worked in the Kabel in the attic of the old monastery building. Went through a round of scarlet fever and was pretty klein afterwards. One morning I was told to stay behind in the eighteen-man room we slept in, and was occupied with arranging the staple of wood wool-mattresses when he came, the Kalfaktor from Revier, and roared that "Du bist ja tuberkulos, du!" and this bottomless and ice-cold fear struck me while he waded around and splashed disinfectant liquid all over. Then I had to take Schüssel and spoon and stroll over to Revier and was locked in the tub. They used to live three weeks in there. I was there for nine months. Thirty of my comrades from the Kvarstad gang were brought into this room which was intended as an eight-man infirmary, but where we quickly reached forty to fifty. How many of the other prisoners that came in, I can't say. We were five in all who came out alive.

I didn't want out, by the way.<sup>16</sup>

Arne Moi was certain that a transport would kill him, and tried to avoid transport to Sachsenhausen in November 1944. What he didn't know then, was that only weeks later all the remaining prisoners in Sonnenburg were killed. By the time Sonnenburg was evacuated, Arne Moi was a shadow of a man. He had become a Muselmann. He could grasp around his thigh with his thumb and index finger. On his arrival in Sachsenhausen, he was immediately placed in the Revier and given little chance to survive. But somehow he did make it. In comparison with Sonnenburg and Bergen-Belsen, Moi described Sachsenhausen as "a paradise"; in only three months in Sachsenhausen he gained 18 kg (which he, by the way, quickly lost again having been sent off to Bergen-Belsen in February 1945).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ottosen 1993, p. 255.

<sup>15</sup> Ottosen 1993, p. 251.

<sup>16</sup> Moi 1977, pp. 15-16. The translation is mine.

<sup>17</sup> Historical Archives of Stiftelsen Arkivet (HASA), Video interview with Arne Moi, 1999.

## The fate of the Norwegians in Sonnenburg

Altogether 44 Norwegian prisoners ended their lives inside the gates of Sonnenburg.<sup>18</sup> Between 25 and 30 more died during transport from Sonnenburg after June 1944.<sup>19</sup> Eleven Norwegians from the Kvarstad gang were part of a thirty-man group from the so-called *Sättlerei* Kommando who were sent away from Sonnenburg to Zuchthaus Wolfenbüttel in Braunschweig in June 1944. In Wolfenbüttel they met up with two fellow Norwegians from Sonnenburg. They stayed here until 8 April 1945, when they were sent to Magdeburg and then Brandenburg-Görden, where they were liberated on 27 April 1945.

In August 1944, a transport left Sonnenburg with 70 prisoners. 23 of them were Norwegians, most of them from the Stein gang. Only one survived, Oskar Magnusson. The transport lasted from August 1944 to May 1945. During these 10 months, the prisoners had to endure endless marching, transport in cattle wagons, a stay in Zuchthaus Brieg, several days in a crowded prison cell in Breslau without daylight, food or water, casting building blocks in Langenbielau (a Brieg satellite camp), a one-week march to the Czech border, railway transport to Auschwitz, march from Auschwitz to Gross-Rosen – across Czechoslovakia – then further on to Mauthausen in Austria, from there to Eger near the Bavarian border, and Flossenbürg. By now, there were five Norwegians left alive. They were ordered to continue marching north, towards Dachau outside Munich. Only three of them managed to walk. Two were still alive in Cham when they were liberated on 6 May 1945, but one of them died shortly afterwards.

180 Norwegian NN-prisoners were saved from Sonnenburg through transports to Sachenhausen from late 1944; 14 from the Alvær group, 105 from the Kvarstad gang, the rest from the Stein group.

## Why so little is known about Sonnenburg

Disregarding the two books mentioned above (Moi 1977, and Ottosen 1993) practically nothing is written on Sonnenburg in Norwegian.<sup>20</sup> In fact, it is hard even to find relevant information in the Norwegian language on the Internet. The most prestigious encyclopedia, *Store Norske Leksikon*, has no article on Sonnenburg, and the article on Wikipedia is only a stub.<sup>21</sup>

This indicates that Sonnenburg has no status as a memory place regarding Norwegian pain and suffering during WW2. There is a very strong tendency in Norway to underestimate the meaning of the prisons as an important experience of the prisoners who also passed the more notorious

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<sup>18</sup> According to the database used as backbone for Ottosen 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Ottosen suggests 70 as the total number. See Ottosen 1993, p. 267.

<sup>20</sup> Sonnenburg is mentioned in two books by former Sonnenburg prisoner Bjørn Egge, *De ga oss en dag til å bruke* (Oslo 1996) and *En kriger for fred* (Oslo 2004). Egge played an important role in the demanding work documenting the atrocities committed in Sonnenburg after the war. He took part in the Norwegian delegation that was sent to Sonnenburg in 1947 in order to identify Norwegian death victims buried at the prison cemetery. Also, it was thanks to Egge that the notorious Zuchthaus doctor, Dr. Eduard Seidler, was found and arrested. However, Seidler committed suicide before he was brought to court. See Ottosen 1993: 268. In his book from 1996 Egge explained why he didn't describe in detail what he had experienced in Sonnenburg, "the worst hell": "the words aren't there, they lack in the vocabulary" (Egge 1996, p. 13). Eight years later he was able to tell a little bit more (Egge 2004, pp. 67-80). Ingrid Juell Moe, daughter of Sonnenburg prisoner Christopher Juell Moe, also writes about Sonnenburg in her book *Bakteppe: to brødre og krigen* (Kristiansand 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Digital version of *Store Norske Leksikon*: <http://snl.no>;  
[http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnenburg\\_konsentrasjonsleir](http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnenburg_konsentrasjonsleir) (retrieved 3.1.2014).

concentration camps.<sup>22</sup> Hamburg-Fuhlsbüttel is another example. This was the prison with the highest total number of Norwegian inmates from 1940 to 1945, but is largely unknown to Norwegians today. One reason why the prisons seem to have been forgotten on behalf of the camps, undoubtedly, is that many of the prisons continued to be prisons after 1945, meanwhile the camps turned into instant museums and memory places. There was no continuity in the spatial practice; when the war ended, the camps were liberated, too. Regardless of whether the prison continued as prison or not, what was left after the former prisons had a more permanent “nature” than the remains of the camps, which quickly became associated with something that belonged exclusively to the Nazi period 1933-1945.

After 1945, some concentration camps were rapidly labeled as “Norwegian camps” due to the relatively high number of Norwegian inmates. These were camps like Sachsenhausen, Natzweiler, Stutthof, and Ravensbrück. It is fair to believe that this helped shaping certain “nodes” in the structuring of the Norwegian prisoners’ memory of their own experiences.

While *the concentration camp* as a figure has become one of the most powerful symbols – if not *the* key symbol – within the memory culture of WW2, produced through history books, language, popular culture, art and politics, it is doubtful whether the reference to a Zuchthaus or “just” a prison in this context will evoke any connotations at all, except for among survivors and maybe their relatives, and historians. One way of overcoming this “knowledge gap” within the German language area seems to be the novel convention to put the term KZ before the names of prisons as well as camps from the Nazi era, which certainly suggests that the actual place was a camp, not a prison. Within the context of commemorating the suffering of the victims of Nazi brutality, the KZ notion communicates very well. However, the distinction between a camp, a Zuchthaus and a prison, is not entirely an analytical one. It also had concrete, practical significance. Here, different national perspectives may be in conflict. All Norwegians that passed Sonnenburg were sentenced to Zuchthaus. For prisoners from other countries, this is not necessarily true.

Nevertheless, the oblivion regarding Sonnenburg is clearly not just a Norwegian phenomenon, but should be seen in close connection to the present absence of an established memory place on the historical premises in Słońsk.

### **The importance of memory places**

Today, documentation and learning centers, museums, exhibitions and historical memory sites in all parts of Europe offer the possibility of commemorating the pain and suffering of the victims of Nazi persecution. It is hard to overestimate the meaning of these memory places. Many of these sites have contributed to the knowledge level and policy making in European societies, managed to link lessons from the past with present-day challenges against democracy, human rights and human dignity, and have engaged in international network building and thus helped shaping and maintaining a common European peace project.

This is very true when it comes to the experience of Stiftelsen Arkivet in Kristiansand in the south of Norway. The center is situated in the building – called “Arkivet” – used as regional headquarters by the Gestapo from 1942 to 1945. The former archive building was taken over by a private foundation

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<sup>22</sup> In the Norwegian reference article «Leirene», published by The Center for the Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities in Oslo, the historian Einhart Lorenz gave an introduction to the Nazi concentration camp system, without mentioning the existence of prisons and Zuchthaus at all. See Lorenz 2007.

in 1999, only to see the present peace center open the next year. Some of the leading figures in this transformation process were former prisoners at Arkivet. Since then, tens of thousands of school pupils, students, teachers, researchers and other visitors – including former prisoners and their relatives – have been visiting Arkivet and the permanent exhibition in the basement, where there used to be interrogation cells and a torture chamber. In recent years, Arkivet has gradually become a destination for international visitors and a visible entry point for public inquiries about local war history. Relatives of former perpetrators also come visiting. On our website we have launched a record of names of people that were imprisoned in Kristiansand during WW2.<sup>23</sup> Stiftelsen Arkivet also engage in different projects with other similar institutions in Norway and abroad. Why am I writing all this? None of this – not one bit – would have happened if it weren't for the efforts and commitment made by a handful of idealists and enthusiasts in the years 1998-2000.

A re-establishment of a historical memory site in Słońsk is highly welcome, and would certainly mean a lot to the understanding of the stories of the Norwegians NN-prisoners as well. Aside from the obvious advantages for the Polish community on a local and national level, another important asset would be the new possibilities for sharing stories and exchange competence across national borders and to allow an even greater understanding of the KZ system as a whole, and the relationship between the given structures and the collective and individual stories.

Sonnenburg survivor Arne Moi suggested in his memoirs that the permission to forget should have been a basic human right. It is easy to want to allow survivors to forget. Moi was haunted by memories from Sonnenburg and the other camps and prisons he had passed on his three-year prisoner's journey for the rest of his life. We who were not there, however, are obliged to the contrary. To remember as much as possible. In memory of the victims of Nazi persecution, and for the sake of our common future.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.stiftelsen-arkivet.no/fangeregister>.