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## **The Holocaust and the Ethics of Remembering**

*Draft*

*Those who cannot remember the past  
are not condemned to repeat it,  
but simply to forget it.*  
Lawrence Langer

[*This paper is at the present stage a work in progress, at least I hope so – that I will be able to make progress on it before the seminar in Åbo. The paper will give a reading of a biography, Espen Sjøbye: Kathe, Always Been in Norway (2003), with a view to bringing out the ethics of remembering that I take this work to be articulating. At the seminar I will open the paper with a short discussion of the notion of the form of a text. This part of the paper is not included in this document, but let me just summarize a few of the points that will be central to it:* Instead of defining form by taking recourse to the traditional contrast between form and content, I will suggest that we take the form of a text to be the way it is organized as this particular act of communication. According to this notion of form – which is inspired by the notion of the text's rhetorical design – we cannot describe the form of a given text independently of a grasp/description of it regarded as a communicative act. It takes a reading (an interpretation) to decide which stylistic features, compositional structures and other devices are part of the form and which are not. This notion of form gives no priority to patterns, structures, devices or modes of expression typically found in literary works, nor does it assume that we may interpret texts in which such elements occur on the basis of generalizations about the function(s) of such patterns, structures, elements or modes of expression: in order to identify their contribution to the form of the text in question we have to identify their function(s) within the organization of this particular act of communication. It also allows references to the extra-textual world to enter into the form of the work, in so far as elements which contribute to organizing the text as an act of communication contain such references. Finally, this conception of form allows us to see the readerly engagement that the text requires as a function of its form: it implicitly or explicitly invites the reader to participate in the text in a particular way, and the communicative force of the text will depend on how the reader responds to this invitation.]

## **A biography emerging from statistics**

*Kathe, Always Lived in Norway* is a source-based biography published in 2003, telling the story of the life of a Norwegian girl, Kathe Lasnik, born on the 13th of October 1927 as the daughter of Jewish Immigrants from Vilnius. She grew up in Oslo, and on the 26th of November 1942, at the age of 15, she was deported with *MS Donau* to Stettin together with 532 other Jews in Norway, and then sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She was gassed soon after arrival on the 1. of December 1942.

Before Sjøbye published this biography, Kathe Lasnik was unknown to the Norwegian public. The story of how Kathe came to the author's attention is integrated in the narrative: it is central to one of the three lines of action (or story lines) of which it is composed. The core story line – the story of Kathe Lasnik's life (for convenience I will refer to this as the Kathe Lasnik line) – is flanked by two subordinate story lines. One of these, the one preceding the Kathe Lasnik line, accounts for the author's research into Kathe Lasnik's life and his troubles with finding the necessary sources (the research line). The other subordinate story line is placed just after the core line both chronologically and compositionally. It recounts Norwegian state's war time participation in and post-war response to the by and large successful attempt by the Nazis to extinguish the Norwegian Jews.

It is crucial to the composition of the work that these different story lines interact so as to shape the communicative significance of each one of them and of the work as a whole. One of the functions of the "flanking" story lines within the overall organization of the work is to supply the story of the biographee with a fairly rich historical, historiographic and cultural context, thus making that background central to the readerly engagement in the text. (I will return to that.) But especially the research line – the story of how Kathe Lasnik came to his attention and his struggle with finding sources on which to base his biography of her – gives us important clues to the description of the biography as a communicative act and to the readerly engagement it requires.

Here is a brief summary of the tale the text tells about how Espen Sjøbye became the biographer of Kathe Lasnik. Being a philosopher by training, he worked for many years in *Statistics Norway* [the Norwegian Central Bureau of Statistics]. In the late nineties, while still employed by *Statistics Norway*, he was approached by a colleague on behalf of a historian at Bronx University, William Seltzer. Seltzer was doing research into what role statistics had played when Jews were identified, located and arrested during World War II, and he wanted

Søbye to comment upon the portion of his paper dealing with Norway. Søbye discovered that the Norwegian historiography of WWII had little to offer on this issue: it had hardly been dealt with at all, as if this issue had been of no interest to Norwegian WWII historians. He decides to do the research himself in order to be able to report back to William Seltzer.

Going through the bundle of forms that all the Norwegian Jews were asked to fill out in the autumn 1942, "Questionnaire for Jews in Norway", 1419 forms altogether, one particular form catches his attention, that of a fifteen-year-old girl, Kathe Rita Lasnik. On the question "How long have you lived in Norway?", she had responded, in her young girl's handwriting: "Always lived in Norway." He makes a copy of her form and brings it home to his own archive. Being not quite able to forget it, Søbye picks out the form from his archive long after his initial research project is finished and starts looking for more information about her. He finds her name on a commemoration relief at her school, Fagerborg, a relief dedicated to those who "gave their life for Norway during the war 1940–1945". Her name is also on the memorial of the altogether 620 Jewish Holocaust victims from the Oslo area in the Jewish cemetery at Hølsfyr. Finally he reads a short notice about her in the Norwegian state's four volume work, *Our Fallen*, which officially commemorates the Norwegian war victims. Apart from that, he finds few traces of her.

Søbye decides to ask to see her file in the National Archive in which confiscated assets of the deported Jews were kept. The file, however, turns out to be empty. Nothing whatsoever is kept in the box carrying Kathe Lasnik's name: not a small collection of books, no toys, no birth certificate, nothing at all. Reflecting on the sadness of a person's being remembered only for the way she died – "I thought it was terrible that she was remembered only as a victim." (6) –, Søbye responds to this empty file by deciding to find out everything he possibly can about Kathe Lasnik, and to tell her story. *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway* is the outcome of this decision. And it is this urge to remember her (not only as a victim) that I take to be most decisive in giving shape to this biography regarded as a communicative act: it is an act of remembrance that we as readers are invited to relate to and participate in.

### **The Holocaust and the difficulty of reality**

As I read this biography it is crucial to this act of remembrance that Kathe Lasnik is brought to the author's attention through his work on the role of statistics in the Norwegian persecution of the Jews. Emerging out of statistics in this way, *Kathe, Always Lived in*

*Norway* highlights and confronts a difficulty in our response to the Holocaust victims. The difficulty can be characterized thus: On the one hand the unbelievably high number of victims seems an obstacle to our encompassing in our mind the fact that each one of them is an individual. Each one of the victims, each name on the commemoration reliefs etc., seems to "drown" among the many. On the other hand the significance of the high number of victims cannot be grasped unless we insist on trying to grasp that each one of them is a particular human being. To understand what kind of difficulty this is we are helped, I think, by turning to Cora Diamond's essay "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy". Explaining the first phrase in this title, she talks about "the experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something that it encounters" (Diamond: 44); "experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its explicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its explicability" (Diamond: 45–6). There are several aspects of the Holocaust that seem to fit this description, one crucial aspect being just this demand on us to take on board the enormous numbers of victims and in the same effort of the mind to recognize the fact that each one of them is an individual human being, requiring attention as such. To seek to *resolve* the difficulty by distinguishing between a statistical and an individual perspective on the Holocaust seems to do justice neither to the individual victim nor to the statistics. Again: if we are to encompass in our mind the fate of *each one* of the victims we have to remember that he or she perished as one among millions; this was an aspect of her fate. If we wish to hear what the *statistics* tells us, we must make an effort to remember each one of the many is a particular human being.

Emerging from statistics, *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway* confronts the reader with this difficulty of reality. The subject of the biography belongs with the 1419 Norwegian Jews which had to fill in the forms that eventually facilitated their deportation; she belongs with the 532 other Jews that were deported to Auschwitz on *MS Donau*, she belongs with the 620 other Holocaust victims that are named at the commemoration stone at Helsingør. She belongs to these contexts in the narrative composition. Nevertheless she is singled out. The author seeks to remember her not only as a victim. Victimhood is exactly what she shares with all the others on the ship, in the camps, on the commemoration plaques. Her own history is what individualizes her, it is crucial to her being this particular person. Seeking to tell her story is an effort to remember her as this particular person.

### **The significance of remembering the Holocaust victims**

The idea of *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway* as an act of remembrance places it in the middle of the huge Holocaust commemoration culture, the significance of which may be understood in view of a comment by Primo Levi about the Nazi regime. In *The Drowned and the Saved* he suggests that "[T]he entire history of the brief 'millennial Reich' can be reread as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of reality, negation of reality." (Levi 1988: 18) This description is helpful in our attempt to grasp the logic of oblivion that seems inherent in the Holocaust; the way it weakens the memory, the very capacity that our grip on this particular feature of reality depends on, and the fact that this attack on memory, this negation of reality to some extent was part of the malicious intentions of the Nazis.

The many aspects of this logic of oblivion are well known to anyone familiar with the huge literature on the Holocaust, but let me just give a reminder of a few of them: the fact that the perished victims cannot tell their own stories, leading some to claim that there are in fact no true testimonies from the Holocaust (in the words of Agamben: "[T]estimony contain[s] at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to." (Agamben: 13)); the Nazis' destruction of evidence, the crematoriums that were used to burn dead bodies being used also to burn the files and documents that could prove the facts, cf. the famous statement by Himmler that the Holocaust was "a page of glory in our history which has never been written and which will never be written" (quoted after Stark: 192); the unwillingness of the perpetrators to face up to their participation in the atrocities, the men closest to Hitler claiming to the bitter end that neither they nor *der Führer* knew what was going on; and finally, the "traumatic impact" (Stark: 197) of the Holocaust on its victims, the survivors finding it hard to articulate in words what happened without being crushed by those very words, in some cases not even trusting his or her own memories. In the words of the Israeli author Aharon Appelfeld, himself a Holocaust survivor: "Everything that happened was so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator to himself." (quoted after Hartman: 124).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> And clearly the survivors who did break the silence were not helped by the attitude of the audience they encountered: the sheer lack of interest, anticipated in the collective dreams of the prisoners that Levi famously recounts in *If This Is a Man* (cf. Levi 1987: 66).

In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi invites us, as I read him, to see efforts to remember what happened in the concentration camps as acts of resistance or counteracts in this war against memory, and consequently as moves towards protecting both reality and our sense of it. The ethical importance of remembering the victims as individuals becomes all the more pressing in light of the efforts of the Nazis not only to kill them, but to *obliterate them as individuals*, as human beings who are to be remembered as such: giving them numbers instead of names, robbing them of all personal belongings, etc.<sup>2</sup> The empty box carrying Kathe Lasnik's name in the Norwegian Archive may be seen as emblematic of the relative success of the Nazi attempt to obliterate her in this sense. However, it is important to bear in mind the sense in which such a project *cannot* succeed; that there is no way in which Kathe Lasnik or any other perished victim of the Holocaust could be obliterated as individuals for whom there is such a story to be told. Whatever treatment they are given they remain human beings who are entitled to be recognized as such. To seek to remember Kathe Lasnik by telling the story of her life is an acknowledgement of her status as an individual, not an act which seeks to rescue her humanity. Only the acknowledgement of her humanity by rescuing her from oblivion is at stake, not her humanity as such.

### **Undermining the high moral ground**

If the research line contributes to bringing out the ethical significance of telling the story of the life of the individual victim, it also raises a question of a different kind, addressing the Norwegian WWII historiography: How come the fate of the Jews has played such a minor part in Norwegian historians' concern with the war? Sjøbye's answer to this question is given in the the third story line, the other flank in this three-partite compositional structure, the line of action recounting for the preparation for and the carrying out of the deportation of the

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<sup>2</sup> This is probably one of the factors that have given *the testimony* such a central place in the Holocaust literature. In a combination of words from Hartman and Appelfeld: "Testimony [...] considered not just as a product but also as a humanizing and transactive process, [...] works on the past to rescue 'the individual, with his own face and proper name' [quote Appelfeld] from the place of terror where that face and that name was taken away." (Hartman: 155) Hartman has in mind the recorded testimonies at Yale, and he emphasizes the importance of the *voice* in these recordings: "Though speech may stumble, get ahead of itself, temporarily lose its way, it is a *voice* as well as *memory* that is recovered from the moments of silence and powerlessness." (*Ibid.*) Being able to speak in one's own voice is here envisaged as an overcoming of powerlessness, the testimony embodying the victims's capacity to mark his or her own status as an individual.

Norwegian Jews and the way the men responsible for the deportation was treated by the Norwegian judicial system after the war. While both the historiography and the more popular historical memory of the WWII in Norway have ascribed the moral high ground to the Resistance movement and regarded collaboration with the Nazis a matter of treason, Sjøbye shows that bringing the Jews into the equation modifies the picture considerably. He makes Knut Rød – the head of the state police force in Oslo and in charge of rounding up the Jews in Norway – into the central figure of this story line and the treason trial after the war against him its dramatic high point. Rød was acquitted in the treason trial because he was presumed to have given practical support to the Norwegian Resistance movement. The fact that he had played a major role in the deportation of the Jews was described as a relatively minor offence compared to the actions he had taken to save ethnic Norwegian lives. Men with a high position in the Resistance testified in his favour. Having examined the outcome of the treason case, the various arguments Rød, his defence council and some witnesses brought to his defense, Sjøbye more than suggests that both the court and the Resistance revealed an attitude to the Jews that was perhaps not as far removed from that which motivated the Holocaust as one would want to think.<sup>3</sup>

The closing story line thus interacts with the opening story line in that it gives at least a partial explanation of the fact that no Norwegian war historians had cared much about the role of statistics in the persecution of Jews: as a nation and as a people we have had our own quite specific motivation for letting the fate of the Norwegian Jews during WWII fade into oblivion. *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway* responds to this by allowing a sense of shame and guilt for our indifference to the fate of the Norwegian Jews during the war and after, to surface. It is internal to the way in which the biography invites us to remember this particular perished victim that it confronts that indifference and gives voice to that sense of shame from within the Norwegian post-war collective consciousness it thus characterizes.

### **Moving from failure to failure**

So far my analysis of the narrative has focused on the two story lines by which the story of the life of Kathe Lasnik is flanked, in order to bring out the specific character and

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<sup>3</sup> He quotes the court sociologist Knut Sveri to this effect: “In my view it raises the most uncomfortable thought that the court did not view Norwegian Jews as equal to other Norwegians.” (155)

significance of the communicative act the reader is invited to participate in. Looking more closely at the core story line itself, we realize that the conditions that give significance to the story's telling also *conditions* the telling. The empty file that fuels the author's urge to explore Kathe Lasnik's life, to find out everything he possibly can about her, turns out to be emblematic of the obstacles the project will meet. It is as if the biographee has withdrawn from the author already at the outset and that the impulse to write her story is a response to this withdrawal. As he starts looking for oral sources that can provide him with the clues to the telling of the story, Sjøbye discovers that hardly any of his his potential candidates have much to say. Kathe Lasnik's school mates, her friends and nearest neighbours are all incapable of saying very much,. Basically they find it hard to remember her. The author asks: "Why was it so difficult to remember Kathe Lasnik? The act of remembrance was difficult for her friends too. Had the Holocaust also eliminated other memories? It seemed that way." (12). It was as if "the weight of what happened" (Hartman: 27) had worked directly on their capacity to remember, as if the logic of oblivion had affected them too. This turns out to be all the more true for Kathe Lasnik's two sisters, whom Sjøbye traces in the USA and in Israel respectively:

Also the two sisters of Kathe still alive turn out to be rather unhelpful as sources, not because of a lack of good will, but because talking about her turned out to be too painful. Kathe Lasnik's two sisters answered my questions, but it was difficult to probe. I could feel the pain of once again having to recall the memory of the little sister and the time they had spent together. I had not been prepared for this – that my efforts to find out as much as possible about Kathe Lasnik would be hindered by the pain of remembrance. (10)

Thus the hope of being able to obtain the information needed to tell Kathe Lasnik's life story is time and again frustrated by the dynamics of oblivion inherent in the Holocaust. Sjøbye seems to move from failure to failure. What are the consequences of this lack of sources on which to build a biography for the project of remembering her and thus acknowledge her existence as this particular person? Is the value of his attempt limited to providing insight into the difficulty of doing so? In my view the answer is no, and the clue to this answer lies in the use to which the lack of sources is put.

Sjøbye's general method is to respond to the difficulties of finding informative sources by sticking very closely to those that he finds, to glean as much as he can from them and to



stop there. He knows very little, and he adds virtually nothing. He does hypothesize a little every now and then on the basis of the sources, but in a careful, inconclusive manner, with very little propositional force invested in his words. Most of his sources are official statistics and publicly available data which allow him to give a rather comprehensive account of the wider social and geographical world and in which Kathe Lasnik lived. We learn about the wave of immigration that brought Kathe Lasnik's parents to Norway from Vilnius in 1908, the general living conditions of Jews in Oslo in the first decades of the 20th century, their struggle to make a living, the quite sharp anti-semitism they experienced, the legislative and economic conditions of metal sheet workers (Kathe Lasnik's father was a metal sheet worker rising from apprenticeship to owning his own shop), the trades and the conditions of the trades Kathe Lasnik's sisters were involved in, etc. We get a fairly comprehensive picture of the various social milieus Kathe Lasnik experienced during her childhood, the level of (or lack of) welfare she encountered as she moved into new neighbourhoods and new schools, and sometimes we learn more about the lives of her neighbours than we care to know. Altogether this biography of a young girl succeeds surprisingly well in introducing facets of life in Oslo in the years leading up to the German occupation. But do we get to know Kathe Lasnik any better through such a narrative?

The problem may be expressed thus: we are presented with a story that is rich in its portrayal of the *conditions* of her life but rather meagre in its portrayal of *her* and in its account of her life story. We get a broad and detailed circumstantial backdrop, which in itself isn't irrelevant, but what we seldom get is what could prove the relevance of the backdrop: an account of her various *responses* to various aspects of it. We get to know her social world, but the story of how she acted and reacted in this world, how she interacted with it, is for a large part missing.

### **Knowing little, adding nothing**

The tempting way to tell the story of a person about whom so little is known, about whose life and character the sources are few and so silent or near silent, is to individualize her by fictionalizing her, by giving her thoughts and feelings, ups and downs, blessings and curses we take to belong to any individual human being. Such a strategy clearly facilitates (and gives direction to) the reader's engagement in the story: we are invited to participate in what the author imagines to be the life of the biographee. Søbbye goes in the opposite direction.

Instead of taking the imaginative or literary turn at this point, he insists on writing a source-based biography and remains faithful to his method, i. e. to his sources. This turning away from the modes of expression that we think of as "literary" I take to be a deliberate move in the communicative strategy of *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway*, a move that may come across to the reader as an obstacle to her emotional engagement in the fate of Kathe Lasnik.

The method also shows in the style of the telling, which instead of seeking to let Kathe Lasnik's inner life and reactions surface, exhibits an intense interaction between documentation and narration, the telling of the young girl's story taking place in a perpetual dialogue with the sources. The effect is that the reader senses the research line of action hovering above (or below) the Kathe line more or less constantly.<sup>4</sup> We hear the sources, the statistical material, the documents, the archives, the people who remember her vaguely, speak. We hardly ever hear Kathe Lasnik's own words. And on one of the very few occasions that we know we hear her own words, it is through one of the central documents in the narrative, the questionnaire that spurred Sjøbye to learning more about her, that she speaks: "Always lived in Norway".

These words by Kathe Lasnik also surface in the title on the work. But the title is not a direct quote from the questionnaire (which is reproduced in the book). Nowhere does this particular sequence of words appear in the document; it is put together by the author. All the words, however, belong to the questionnaire; the comma is the only part of the phrase that belongs solely to the author. This authorial sequencing of her words allows us to hear the author's voice on top of the voice of Kathe, in an example of what we with reference to Dorrit Cohn's term psycho-narration – a kind of narration in which we characteristically hear

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<sup>4</sup> "Below" because of the role of the footnotes. They appear as a natural continuation of and therefore as part of the research line of the narrative and so do The Epilogue in which the sources are accounted for and the rest of the documents that are reproduced in the biography. This blurring of the border between text and paratext is supported by the story of how the research line came into being. Sjøbye has in conversation explained that the narrative first was written without the research line. He thought it was a shame that Kathe Lasnik's sisters were relegated to the footnotes as sources, and the research line grew out of this wish to let them play a part in the narrative itself. As the research line developed, it produced a narrative in which the narrative encompasses the footnotes.

both the mind of the character and the narrator's voice – might call docu-narration,<sup>5</sup> through which we hear both the author and the document speak.

This interaction between narration and documentation contribute both to the picture of the life of the young girl *and* to the picture of the struggling author. The struggle to tell the story is integrated in the telling. But it is worth noting that the struggling author never takes the central stage. The narrative does not turn into a mystery story in which the author becomes the detective trying to solve a puzzle, nor does it turn into a self-conscious meditation on the general problem of grasping the elusive "other", so familiar from post-modern biographical literature. Likewise it is out of place to regard this self-reflexivity in the act of telling as a manifestation of the "literariness" of the text. Rather than diverting the reader's attention from the main story about Kathe Lasnik, the perpetual presence of the meta-narrative is geared towards making the reader all the more aware of the nature of Kathe Lasnik's fate and, as an aspect of her fate, the impossibility of getting close to her as a person.

The result is a biography with a strangely vacuous character. The author tells a story with many gaps, and he leaves those gaps open, he does not fill them in; the gaps are part of what we are invited to see and contemplate. So what is the point of this strategy? What is an adequate response on the part of the reader? My suggestion is that we take the respect for Kathe Lasnik as an individual to be expressed *in just that distance* that the narrative maps out between us, the readers and the biography's author, and her. The implicit claim seems to be that to equip her with an inner life that has no basis in the sources, to pretend that we can know her more intimately, is in fact *to fail* to respect and acknowledge her as an individual, as a person with her own set of thoughts, feelings and responses, responses which enter into her being this particular person. Sjøbye develops an aesthetics of remembering in which what we *cannot* know about this person looms almost as large as what we do know. And this gives direction to his ethics of remembering the individual perished victim: His respect for Kathe Lasnik as this particular person with a name and a face is expressed in the acknowledgement that she cannot be brought within our reach. In an important sense she remains unknowable

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<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps the term *docu-presentation* is more apt, as the sequence occurs in a presentational paratext rather than in the narration as such. However, given the tendency in this text to let the research line of the narrative encompass the paratexts, it may not be so far-fetched after all to regard it as part of the narration.

to us. It is by handling his sources in this way, and by letting his narrative discourse be marked by this attitude to his sources, that Sørbye shapes his resistance to the oblivion that the Holocaust prescribed for Kathe Lasnik. And it is this authorial handling of the sources that gives direction to the readerly engagement in the text. Her remaining largely unknown and unknowable to us is part of how this biography teaches us to see her and acknowledge her existence as an individual.

### **This particular victim, the common humanity**

One effect of the author's respect for the limits of the possibility of knowing her is that the narrating of her story throws light on her relation to all those whose fate she shared, all those who in the statistics remain one among the millions of people who perished in the Holocaust. Put differently: her remaining largely unknown to us by the end of the reading in fact seems to *reinforce* the connection between the biography and the statistical material the telling of the story of Kathe Lasnik emerged from. We are brought to reflect on the distinction between two different forms the acknowledgement of the perished victim as an individual may take. It may take the form of writing a narrative which grasps, or seeks to grasp the life story of this particular individual, or it may take the form of an acknowledgement that there is such a story to be told, whether or not we know it or are able to tell it. All of them are human beings with a history that we mostly don't know. In fact, for the vast majority of victims of the Holocaust we have far less to go on than in the case of Kathe Lasnik, and less than we have in the case of the victims named on reliefs and memorials: we cannot even identify an individual whose story we don't know. To acknowledge the reality of these human beings is the only resistance we can muster against the wilful obliteration of them from human memory, and the only way in which we can mark the impossibility of obliterating them as individuals.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The relationship between these two forms of acknowledgements, trying to write the story of the victim and merely recognizing that there is such a story to be told, has got complexities beyond what I capture in my discussion of *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway*. Both forms are expressions of our obligation to remember those whose memory as individuals the perpetrators wilfully and cruelly tried to obliterate. To try to tell the story (to try to find out all we can about the victim) is one possible expression of the recognition of this obligation, and it is hard to take someone who takes no interest in details about any victim's life whatsoever to be manifesting a genuine acknowledgement of this obligation. On the other hand, we can hardly take the obligation to acknowledge the victims as individuals to be an obligation to find out everything we can about each and every one of them. Is that simply

In my presentation the idea of the Holocaust as a partly successful war against memory has figured as an important backdrop for understanding what is attempted and achieved in *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway*. There are, however, aspects of Kathe Lasnik's particular life story that may have hindered rather than helped Sjøbye's project of remembering her as an individual, aspects which are quite independent of the Holocaust, but which nevertheless reinforce what I take to be an important dimension of the ethics of remembering articulated or embodied in this narrative. Certainly we have to bear in mind the fact that she died young. More importantly: from the sources available to the author and made available to us we can make the qualified guess that Kathe Lasnik was a completely ordinary person. She was probably not particularly "memorable" in virtue of her personal qualities. There was nothing outstanding about her; she wasn't particularly talented, beautiful or striking in any respect. Most likely she was just a nice, shy girl, neither particularly popular nor strongly disliked. As a Jew in Norway she was different, but she proved herself unable to turn her difference into an asset. In social contexts in which she detected the danger of exposure, she sought invisibility. Her success at this seems to have joined forces with the dynamics of oblivion inherent in the Holocaust.

Ironically, in view of the legacy of remarkable young Jewish women in the Holocaust literature Kathe Lasnik almost stands out as *the different one*. She is not Anne Frank. Nor is she Ruth Maier, the young Austrian woman who came to Norway as a refugee before the war, and who was deported to Auschwitz on *MS Donau* on the 26th of November 1942 together with Kathe Lasnik. When Maier's diaries finally were published in 2007,<sup>7</sup> they revealed an exceptional talent for writing and thinking, and one cannot help wondering what would have become of her had she been allowed to live.

Kathe Lasnik does not belong to this group of promising Jewish women whose early and brutal death represents a great loss also to the wider culture. On the other hand Sjøbye's biography reminds us of something that may not stand out so clearly in connection with e.g. Anne Frank and Ruth Maier: the importance or significance of her being a person is not in any way connected with her importance or significance *as* a person. There is no horrible loss

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because we recognize the impossibility of doing so? How would we respond to anyone who thought of that as her obligation and spent her life desperately trying to fulfil it? We would probably take her to be mad, but we would not reject her action on moral grounds; on the contrary: would we not take her to be almost an angel?

<sup>7</sup> Jan Erik Vold: *Ruth Maiers dagbok: En jødisk flyktning i Norge*, Gyldendal, Oslo 2007.

connected with Kathe Lasnik's death over and beyond the loss of *her*. In other words, what ultimately gives the injunction to remember her, to remember *her*, this particular person, its force is what she shares with all the other victims of the Holocaust, and indeed with any one of us. *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway* combines a craving for and respect for the particularity of this one human being with a strong conception of the common humanity – the term 'common' here pointing both to the *ordinary* and the *shared* – of which any racism is a denial, and of which the anti-semitism that culminated in the Holocaust is a particularly brutal and evil denial.

As the embodiment of such an ethics of remembering Sjøbye's work does not offer us a resolution of the difficulty of reality that the combination of the unbelievably high number of victims of the Holocaust on the one hand and the individuality of each victim on the other confronts us with. Rather it offers us an access to this difficulty of reality that brings home to us the depth of the difficulty and involves us more deeply in it. This is crucial to what I take to be the moral achievement of *Kathe, Always Lived in Norway*.

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