

Anne-Lise Bobeldijk

# Forgetting History

## The Memory of Maly Trostenets in Perspective of its History

First of all, I would like to thank the Jewish Museum Vienna and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) for the invitation to this discussion on the newest insights into the study of Maly Trostenets tonight, the audience for being here, and my fellow researchers on the stage for the opportunity to discuss this topic. I was asked to reflect tonight on the historical aspect of Maly Trostenets and, while writing this, it occurred to me that in the current state of research on Maly Trostenets – even in the research on the historical aspect of this site –, the memory of it is never too far away either.

Last April, I found a postcard in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. There were some lines written in German on the front. It said: “Dear mother, I hope you are fine as well, just like Gertrud and I. I’m working at the Jewish Council. Greetings and kisses, Alfred.”<sup>1</sup> On the back side there was the address of this Alfred in Amsterdam, who turned out to be Alfred Cohn. The card was addressed to his mother Louise Cohn. On the part of the card where the address is usually written, Alfred had written his mothers’ date of birth, 26 June 1890 and the date of her transport, 10 November 1941 from Essen. The card was sent on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1943 from Amsterdam to Minsk, where, according to the stamps on the card, it arrived only ten days later, on March 13. Alfred Cohn was born in Müllheim and managed to flee from Germany to the Netherlands in 1939, where he eventually got a job at the Jewish Council in Amsterdam. In September 1943, he was on one of the last transports from the Westerbork transit camp to Auschwitz. Alfred survived Auschwitz and returned to the Netherlands afterwards. His mother was less fortunate. She was never able to emigrate like her son Alfred or her daughter Gertrud, who escaped the Holocaust by emigrating to London.<sup>2</sup> Although Louise Cohn’s date of death is unknown, it is very probable that she never received the card from her son, one and a half years after her arrival in Minsk.

The story of Louise Cohn made me wonder: what can really be said about those people who were sent to Minsk during the deportations in 1941? Were they able to communicate to the outside world about what happened to them? We do know quite a few aspects and stories of the victims who were murdered in Maly Trostenets. Since the 1990s, local historians have started to look into the history of the persecution of Jewish communities in Germany and Austria in connection to Maly Trostenets, which has given us a glimpse into these communities and their stories before the war. But can we actually say something about what happened to those people in Minsk who were not killed directly upon arrival? Daily life in Minsk has been investigated mostly when it comes to the Belarusian part of the Minsk ghetto. It is known that Belarusian Jews were better able to survive because they could communicate with other people around them. For Jews who did not speak Russian or Belarusian, it was more difficult to survive because they could not so easily flee to

1 USHMM Archives, Washington, Harry Goldman collection, book 8, 1988.64.8, Alfred Cohn, Postcard to Minsk (Amsterdam, March 3, 1943).

2 Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld, House of Memories. Uncovering the Past of a Dutch Jewish Family, Hilversum 2016, 186.

join partisans or convince someone outside the Minsk Ghetto or Maly Trostenets to help them.

However, as we know, there were more German-speaking people in Minsk than just the German victims. How much interaction was there between the German-speaking population in Minsk, in all their different capacities as victims, perpetrators, or bystanders? What did the people on ‘the other side of the fence’ communicate to the world about what was going on in Minsk? For example, an Austrian Wehrmacht soldier recounts in his memoirs that his commander struggled with tears when he walked into his local butcher inside the Minsk ghetto. Thousands of kilometres from their shared hometown Berlin was one of them captured in the Minsk ghetto, while the other entered the ghetto to loot for possessions. The soldier recounted that “the corporal had no heart to tell the doubting man the truth. Because [the corporal] knew that his acquaintance would be killed soon”.<sup>3</sup> An actress from Hamburg who performed for Wehrmacht troops and SS personnel and who was active at least for two months in early 1943 sent letters home to her mother almost daily on her encounters with men, new romances and the adventure she saw in the war. In one of these letters, which had quite an outspoken antisemitic tone, she also mentioned that there were quite some German Jews working at the house. Brigitte, the actress, wrote for example of a carpenter, who was a Jew coming from Hamburg as well. She wrote that this might have been the first time she even spoke to a Jew, but assured her mother that she “had nothing to worry about” as she avoided interaction.<sup>4</sup> These are but two examples of such interactions. Further research already indicates that there was more interaction between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders than is usually reflected upon.

So the discovery of this card by Alfred Cohn brought me back to a question that historians of the Holocaust have asked for a long time: How much was known about Maly Trostenets and Minsk during the course of the war and should we, as historians, not look into this more, as it can also tell us something about why and how it was ‘forgotten’? After all, Alfred Cohn, who had no family in Germany anymore, was obviously aware of the fact that his mother had been deported to Minsk.

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Today, the focus on Maly Trostenets very much evolves around the fact that it was until quite recently an ‘unknown’ or ‘forgotten’ site due to the very few who survived there. However, by underlining this ‘unknownness’, the focus seems to shift to how Maly Trostenets has been remembered, instead of what happened at this site. For example, the very interesting travelling exhibition on Maly Trostenets which is now on display in the *Haus der Geschichte Österreich* has a large section on the commemoration of Maly Trostenets in different countries. Although it is indeed interesting to understand how it is remembered, I do wonder whether we already know enough about this place to make a step from the history of Maly Trostenets to the memory of Maly Trostenets.

The other day, I looked at the article on Maly Trostenets on Wikipedia. Although Wikipedia as a source is indeed questionable, it does reflect the general information that many people come across who are looking for some insight on a specific topic. In the German-language article, there was a general description of the history of

3 Luis Raffener, *Wir waren keine Menschen mehr. Erinnerungen eines Wehrmachtsoldaten an die Ostfront*, Bozen 2011, 92.

4 Letter of Brigitte on January 1943 in: Walter Kempowski, in: *Das Echelot II*, 18.1.–31.1.1943, Munich 1993, 339–340

Maly Trostenets. Besides the better-known works on Maly Trostenets by historians Petra Rentrop and Christian Gerlach, an article of Thomas Kues was also used cited a source.<sup>5</sup> Kues is a quite well-known Holocaust ‘revisionist’ and has also written on several aspects of the history of Maly Trostenets and the so-called ‘Aktion Reinhard’ camps. I wonder whether we already know enough to depart from the historical aspect to the issue of memory, seeing that the existing historiography apparently is still being supplemented with the work of people who are involved in ‘revisionist’ history. During the inauguration of the main monument at Maly Trostenets, the Gates of Memory, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that the architects had the difficult task of “preserving the historical truth and giving a complete picture of people’s suffering”,<sup>6</sup> while the architect herself said that it was her task “to safeguard the historical authenticity of the site”.<sup>7</sup> Although this is an important task, the monument does reveal some historical inaccuracies. In itself a monument is not a direct representation of the past, but when it is claimed that it is meant as a testimony to preserve the historical past and to safeguard historical accuracy, even the most minor historical flaws become a problematic aspect. Ensuring that there is a strong historiography of the history of Maly Trostenets should help prevent such errors and flaws going forward.

To end this talk on a perhaps more positive note, I believe it is great that so much attention is being paid to Maly Trostenets, both inside and outside Belarus. It is clear from the existing literature on Maly Trostenets that a lot has already been researched. This multitude of viewpoints will help us better understand what happened at this site and how we have to understand this within the wider context of the Holocaust. However, I think that if we want to be able get even further than this, we might have to step away from the concept of ‘postmemory’ and to start diving into the history again.

This paper was presented at the event *Neueste Forschungsergebnisse zur Vernichtungsstätte Malyj Trostenez. A podium discussion* on October 22, 2019 at the Jewish Museum in Vienna.<sup>8</sup>

5 Vernichtungslager Maly Trostinez, in Wikipedia.de, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vernichtungslager\\_Maly\\_Trostinez](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vernichtungslager_Maly_Trostinez) (25 July 2019).

6 Requiem Meeting The Gates of Memory, June 22, 2015, in: The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/requiem-meeting-the-gates-of-memory-11617/](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/requiem-meeting-the-gates-of-memory-11617/) (22 June 2015).

7 Anna Aksënova, Gedenkstätte Trostenez, in *Der Vernichtungsort Trostenez in Der Europäischen Erinnerung. Materialien Zur Internationalen Konferenz vom 21.–24. März in Minsk, Minsk, 2013*, 46.

8 See more: <https://www.hdgoe.at/malyj-trostenez> (31 March 2020).

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