

Norwegian war children's work for justice – the role of the archives

Summary: People from different weak groups struggling for justice may be dependent on archive material to document and substantiate their claims. In this paper I discuss the question of to what extent we as archivists are aware of our role as rulers of the archives. As an example, I use the Norwegian war children and the importance of information from the archives of the Norwegian National Archives for them both individually and as a group in society. I also discuss how we as Civil Servants and archivists can perform in our work in a professional way when we are aware of the potential significance our role may have for users from weak groups and their work for justice.

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In November 1945 an official Australian immigration committee visited Norway during a tour of Europe in order to promote the immigration of labour to Australia.¹ Norwegian authorities made it clear that Norway had no workers to lose. The country needed all the labour itself to rebuild the country after the war. At a meeting with the committee, however, a leading official in the Norwegian Ministry of Social Affairs suggested a group of 9000 children to be sent to Australia.

These children had been born during World War II as a result of relationships between Norwegian women and German occupation soldiers, the so-called “war children”. The suggestion to send the whole group of war children to Australia was never followed up, but it tells something about the attitudes and ideas within the Norwegian authorities towards this group.

The Lebensborn archive – important for Norwegian War children

Forty years later, in the 1980s, the war children became an important field of work for the National Archives of Norway. Then the war children were adults and some of them presented their life stories in newspaper articles and television programs. Now they were mainly met with sympathy by a post-war generation with a more distanced and nuanced view on controversial topics from the German occupation 1940 to 1945.

During the war and in the first post-war period Norway was strongly influenced by hostile attitudes towards the Germans and everything German. After five years of occupation Norwegian women who had been together with German soldiers, were considered to have let the cause down even though they had not broken any law. Those negative attitudes did also affect the war children and it was in this situation that it was suggested to export all the war

¹ The delegation was led by the chairman of the Commonwealth immigration advisory committee, Leslie Haylen.

children. It was also a widespread view that if the war children were to grow up in Norway, their German origin had to be be erased as completely as possible.

A proposal, which to some extent was also carried out, was that children with typically German names should get new and more “Norwegian” names. Furthermore it was suggested that all documentation showing the children’s German connections, should be destroyed. The intention was that the children should not be able to make contact with their German families. This proposal was not carried out, but would eventually have made it very difficult for war children to find information about their German fathers.

It was especially the archives of the German SS-organisation Lebensborn that some people wanted to destroy. Lebensborn had been founded in Germany in 1935 and functioned as an instrument for the German nazis’ race-based population policy. The organization had been established in Norway in 1941 just to take care of all cases of German occupation soldiers having children with Norwegian women.² The Germans mainly considered the Norwegian people as racially valuable, and every Norwegian woman who became pregnant and claimed that the child’s father was a German soldier, was told to contact Lebensborn, who would follow up the case.

In the period from 1941 until the end of the occupation in 1945, Lebensborn registered about 8000 such cases. In all these cases files were made with detailed information about the children’s parents, evaluation of their health and racial conditions etc. At the end of the war the German destroyed a lot of archive material to prevent the Allied to get access to it. Also Lebensborn in Norway probably destroyed most of their administrative records, but the leader of the organization decided that case files, files and protocols containing information about the individual war children cases, should be preserved. This material was thus preserved thanks to a German SS man who realized that it could later be of value to the children. Also other archives than the Lebensborn archive provide information about war children. This is especially true for Norwegian archives of the postwar period. Nevertheless the Lebensborn files are unique when it comes to documenting the Norwegian war children’s biological origin.

Archival material with several functions

During recent years the archive’s role and contribution to justice for different weak groups in society, has become a subject for discussion.³ The archive’s limitation in being able to function in this way is one relevant question. The archives cannot document all phenomena of the past and, moreover, the perspectives of those in power are usually most prominent in the archives. Searchlight is set upon our role as archivists and the power we exercise by our

² Lebensborn was established in Norway in 1941, about one year after the German invasion in Norway in April 1940 and ran about ten institutions for war children and their mothers until the end of the war in May 1945.

³ In recent years, such issues have been topics in scholarly discussions. See, for example: R.C. Jimerson, *Archives Power. Memory, Accountability and Social Justice*, The Society of American Archivists, 2009; *Archival Science*, Special Issue “Archives and the Ethics of Memory Construction”, vol. 11, no 1-2, March 2011.; *Archives and Manuscripts*, Special Issue “Archives, Identity and Survivors of Out-of-home Care”, vol 40, no 1, March 2012.

control of archives. This power is exercised by deciding which records to preserve, what is to be given priority for publication and what help we should give to people seeking information in the archives.

The National Archives of Norway is working within a tradition emphasizing a neutral role in relation to the archive's content and aims to provide equal service to all our users. However, this view is not thoroughly discussed and it may well be said that it is naïve to argue that such neutrality is at all possible. I will return to such questions later, but first I will take a look at what functions the relevant archives have had for Norwegian war children and to what extent we in the National Archives have been aware of our role dealing with requests from war children seeking information in the archives.

During the war, case files in the Lebensborn archive were created to be used in the German's racial demographic policies. The intention was to use the information in the archives to evaluate which of the Norwegian mothers and their children could be considered so racially valuable that they should be adopted by the German people. At the German capitulation in the spring of 1945 the material lost its primary function. After the war, however, it got new functions and until now it has been used in at least five different contexts.

Collection of child maintenance payments. Since the decision that the war children should grow up in Norway, efforts were made in the 1950s, to claim child maintenance payments from the German fathers. During this work, a large part of the total of about 8000 case files in the Lebensborn archive were sent to relevant regional and local authorities responsible for the recovery of child maintenance payments. In the 1950s and -60s work was carried out to collect contribution from German fathers in approximately 1300 cases. Information in the German files was a precondition for carrying out such work and for many mothers and children that was probably of great importance economically throughout the children's upbringing. This work was carried out before central parts of the Lebensborn archive with case files, card indexes and protocols were transferred to the National Archives in the 1970s.

Information of biological origin. After being used in paternity cases in the 1950' and -60', the case files in the Lebensborn archive were largely unused in the next few decades. In 1986, however, the Norwegian parliament passed a new law on adoption. A new point in the law was that adopted children would, at an age of 18 have the right to information about their biological parents. At the same time the Ministry of Justice decided that the same right should apply to those who were not adopted. The intention was that everybody has the right to information about biological parents.

This opened up for the possibility that war children could contact the National Archives and get information about their parents and early childhood. I began working in the National Archives of Norway in January 1987 and until 1994 I worked on over 600 of these cases. While the Lebensborn files in the 1950s had been used as documentation for fatherhood, they now had a new feature. The majority of the war children who contacted the National Archives, wanted answers to questions that often had been left unreplied by their families

throughout their childhood and many hoped to make contact with their German fathers or families in Germany.

Law suits against the Norwegian state. After they presented their stories in the middle of the 1980s, war children became a topic in the public debate and the attitude was largely dominated by sympathy towards the war children. Towards the end of the 1990s the focus in the debate changed from sympathy for the war children to also include criticism directed towards the Norwegian post-war authorities for their handling of the war children. In his New Year's speech in 2000, the Norwegian prime minister responded to the critics by apologizing to the war children for the way they had been treated by the authorities throughout the post-war era. A verbal apology from the prime minister was not enough for many war children and in 2000 a group of more than a hundred sued the Norwegian state for the treatment to which they had been subjected by Norwegian authorities. The claim, however, was dismissed because the case was outdated and the same happened when the case in 2007 was presented for the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

The change of focus also influenced the use of relevant archival material. In addition to seeking information about the individual war children in the Lebensborn archive, it was now more relevant to use the archives from various Norwegian post-war authorities to locate background documentation. Now it was important to present information concerning how the authorities had dealt with the war children, or perhaps just as much, what the authorities had not done during the war children's childhood and adolescence.

Documentation for applications for compensation. In 2002 the Norwegian parliament put forward proposals to establish an arrangement whereby war children could apply for compensation for the problems they had encountered in life as a result of their background. This arrangement was established in 2005, and by 2008 about two thousand of the Norwegian war children had applied for, and got, some compensation.

This compensation scheme required certain demands for documentation and during the years it was possible to apply for compensation, the National archives received several hundred requests from war children who applied for such documentation.

The archives used as a source for research. From the mid-1990s, the relevant archives were also used as a source for several research projects. In 1995-1998 I carried out a project which resulted in a book that was the first source-based presentation of the history of the Norwegian war children and their mothers.⁴ Later on this was followed up as part of a large project with emphasis on information about war children's upbringing. The preparation for this project

⁴ Kåre Olsen, *Krigens barn. De norske krigsbarna og deres mødre*, Forum Aschehoug, Oslo, 1998.; German edition, hardcover: *Vater: Deutscher. Das Schicksal der norwegischen Lebensbornkinder und ihre Mütter von 1940 bis Heute*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, 2002; German edition, paperback: *Schicksal Lebensborn. Die Kinder der Schande und ihre Mütter*, Knaur Taschenbuch, München 2004.; English summary: K. Olsen: „Under the Care of Lebensborn: Norwegian War Children and their Mothers“, Ericsson/Simonsen (ed.) *Children of World War II. The Hidden Enemy Legacy*, Berg, Oxford/New York, 2005; K. Olsen, „Women and Children in the Front Line: The 'Jerry Girls' of Norway and Their Children“, *Comma* No 1 2004.

was started at the end of the 1990's when many stories surfaced about the government's bad treatment of war children and their mothers. The matter was raised in Parliament which requested the government to investigate the background for the claims. The government then allocated the money for a research project carried out by four researchers in the years 2001-2004.⁵

Even in these research projects, archival material in individual cases were used as source material. In addition archives which document the theme more generally were used. This was natural, given that one aim of the research to a large extent was to achieve a better understanding of the authorities' treatment of various aspects of the theme "war children" in the postwar period.

Contribution to increased justice

This review of how the relevant archival material has been used throughout the postwar period indicates that it has probably been of significant importance for the Norwegian war children in several ways. It can be argued that the archives have contributed to greater justice for war children as a group through their use as source material in the research projects. These projects have highlighted important parts of the Norwegian government's policy and practice in its attitudes towards this group of Norwegian citizens through the postwar period and have increased the knowledge of war children's history among people in a serious way. Moreover, many war children have got knowledge of their biological parents and their early childhood that most of us take for granted. Using information from the archives, some war children also found relatives that had been unknown to them. Furthermore, access to information from the archives has for some war children led to financial compensation from the government.

Equality in our efforts or in the outcome for the users?

What about the archivists who have been working with these archives and who have answered requests from war children seeking information? In the National Archives of Norway it seems as we, more or less consciously, believe that we are working on the basis of a principle that we give the same kind of help regardless of who are searching for information in our archives. This is also in accordance with the Norwegian Public Administration Act saying that we as a government body have "*a general duty to provide guidance*". At the same time this is probably within the ICA Code of Ethics, § 6 which states that "*Archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival material and provide an impartial service to all users.*"

In the recent years, however, criticism has been made against such a form of equality principle. It is claimed, probably rightly, that such a policy actually promotes inequality in access to information from the archives. It can be argued that similar assistance means that a person, who is well used to dealing with official documents and how they are created, will have a much greater benefit from our assistance than a person who is unaccustomed to deal with written documents and are unaware of how public administration is working. Because of

⁵ About the project, see Ericsson/Simonsen (ed), *Children of World War II. The Hidden Enemy Legacy*, Berg, Oxford/New York, 2005.

this, it is reasonable to argue that our focus should be directed less towards equality in our efforts towards our users and more towards working to aim a similarity in the outcomes our users actually have of our assistance.

In their practice many of our archivists probably adjust their assistance towards the users to the principle of equal benefit. However, I am not aware that such a policy is formalized in the National Archives of Norway. I can't remember that such topics have ever been discussed. In general, there seems to be up to each manager and archivist to consider how much assistance is to be given in each case. Thus, it is quite possible that, for example, war children who have asked the National Archives for help, have received various forms of assistance depending on the archivist who acted upon the request. I assume this is not only the situation in Norway and I see a need for more thoughtful and consistently followed up policies and procedures with regard to assistance to different categories of users of archives.

Principles for answering inquiries from war children

I began my work in the National Archives of Norway in January 1987 and was immediately asked to answer inquiries from war children who mostly searched information about their German fathers and their early childhood. Formally, all war children had the right to receive information about their biological parents. Neither the law nor the Ministry of Justice, however, said anything about what specific information about their biological parents the war children should receive. Those of us who would treat these requests in the National Archives discussed these issues informally and in consultation with our leader, we decided to work from what might be regarded as three principles in our work with these issues:

The first principle was that war children, who were then about 50 years old, would get access to all the kind of information about their biological parents, as it is normal for most people to know about one's parents. In addition to regular information such as name, date and place of birth, we therefore tried to give them as much as we could find about their parents. This could include information about the grandparents, the parent's siblings and other family, about childhood and education, employment and other activity. If the files contained photographs, personal letters from the parents and anything else that might be of interest, we sent copies to the child. This did not mean that we necessarily gave the children all the information about their parents that we found in the archives. Again we worked out of a vague criterion that opens for discretion. We did not release personal information of a kind that most people normally do not want others to know.

The next principle was that we considered it our duty to carry out thorough archival research to find information. Generally, people can come and carry out archival research in our reading room. Because the archival material could contain information that the individual war child had not the right to see, this was out of the question in these cases. At the same time, the war children had the right to get the information from the archives. Therefore we had to do a sufficiently thorough job as to be reasonably sure that the individual war child received the key information about their biological parents. There were, of course, limits to how thorough we could be, but the principle was clear.

A third principle for our work on these issues implied that we should not respond only to what the individual war child specifically asked for, often just the question “who is my father”. Very often we understood that when war children contacted the National Archives, it was the first time ever that they at all spoke about this subject to anyone and that this cost them a lot emotionally. It was quite possible that they would not find themselves able to make new contact to ask for explanation or additional information if they just received a brief formal letter. Therefore it was important for us to give thorough answers with relevant background information. For example, we focused on explaining the function of the SS-Lebensborn organization in Norway during the war. This was necessary because many war children suffered under the myth that Lebensborn was involved in outright breeding and that they themselves were the result of a cynical political race breeding project and not a result of normal relationship between man and woman. We also tried to explain the facts that were mentioned in documents, and quite often we explained information we found about their early childhood. Such information might help to explain for example why a mother saw it necessary to have her child placed in an orphanage or give it away for adoption.

In practice, we worked for several years from these three principles which were not formally approved and written down as guidelines for our work. Now I have not been working with such cases for many years and do not know how the work is done, but I recognize that there may still be a need for clearer guidelines on how these types of cases should be treated.

Archivists changed the practice in public administration

Thus we used a lot of time to find what we saw as important information for the war children who contacted us. After some time, however, the National Archives was contacted by a county governor who had some critical comments to our business. They pointed out the fact that according to the adoption act, only the authority which had granted an adoption could give out information about biological parents to the children when they asked for it. This meant that war children, who had been adopted, had to contact the county governor who then would contact us to get out information about the parents.

After that, we responded to these issues through the relevant county governors. Here, we gave the same information and document copies which we gave when we answered the war children directly. After a time, however, we became aware that the county governors did not convey our response letters and copies on to the war children. They forwarded only the parents’ names, birth dates and addresses at the time of the adoption. Thus, our thorough work in order to help these war children emerged almost useless.

The problem was purely legal. War children, who had been adopted, were only seen as adopted children and in such cases the county governors had their routines of just giving out this scarce information about the biological parents. The Norwegian War Children’s Association, who is working for the war children’s interests, became aware of the situation and in 1994 they sent a letter to the Ministry of Children and Families Affairs where they pinpointed this obviously unreasonable practice. While the Ministry treated the request, I was

contacted by telephone by the Ministry, asking for details of our practice. Shortly after, the Ministry sent its reply to the association with copy to the county governors. Here the ministry wrote that *“The Ministry for Children and Family Affairs has contacted the National Archives c/Kåre Olsen and been informed that the National Archives has a liberal practice of requests for access for children in the files in the Lebensborn archive. We cannot see that there are considerations which indicate that the county governors should have a more restrictive practice than the National Archives”*.⁶

The result of this case was that the county governors were required to change their practice in a more liberal and war children-friendly direction. This also appears as an example of how archivists during their practice can actually influence and direct change important aspects of public administration proceedings.

Our role as archivists

In the 1990's one of Norway's leading newspapers published an article on war children. In the article the presentation of Lebensborn as a stud farm was repeated and it was said that most of the Norwegian war children were the result of a breeding project. Then the National Archivist wrote an article in which he rejected the allegation as a myth. In this case the National Archivist himself published an article for correcting statements about historical facts. Still, it was clear that his main motive was not only a desire to correct erroneous assertions. The main reason was that he wished to correct statements that could contribute to increased personal difficulties for war children. Because we have the archive material with information that could shed light on the subject, he found it appropriate to go out in public in this matter.

I think that the National Archivist acted correctly. We advise the community's memory and this implies a responsibility to clear up false allegations that emerge in public debate. We obviously cannot be required to solve all false claims, but it must be important that we feel this responsibility, especially if we can help to clear up allegations of significance to what may be regarded as weak groups in society.

This was also my starting point when in the middle of the 1990s, I decided to start my research project on the history of the Norwegian war children and their mothers. By my choice of topics and research questions for the projects, I had also indicated that some of my goals were that my work would be in favor of war children as a group. I carried out my project based on professional principles, but did not hide that my goal, among others was to focus on the Norwegian society's handling of this group. I did not use many strong adjectives in my description of the Norwegian government's role. It was not necessary as the documents spoke for themselves. Neither I nor my superiors in the National Archives found it problematic to distinguish between my role as an archivist and civil servant on the one hand, and an historian and researcher, on the other.

⁶ Quoted after reproduction of the Ministry's letter in the The Norwegian war children association's magazine *Røtter*, no 3, 1994.

It can be said that the National Archivist through his newspaper article and I through my research chose to contribute in bringing the facts out in public in ways that aimed to contribute to greater justice for the Norwegian war children. I think the same goal of promoting greater justice should apply when we process requests for information from persons who can be said to belong to weak groups in society.

Such topics have not been discussed thoroughly in the National Archives of Norway. This is probably also the situation in many other countries. In practice, it appears that it is up to each manager and each archivist to determine how far one should go in helping people to find information in the archives. In general I think people who seek information which is important, for example, for their claims on the authorities, get more help than, say genealogists. However, the assistance provided will probably vary over time and also depend on the attitude of the archivist or official in question. I think there is a need to establish more regular procedures for the assistance to be provided in different types of requests, but that we should give priority to disadvantaged groups.

However, we should act within clear limits. As civil servants and archivists in a national archive, we are responsible for managing the state archives in a responsible manner and to make them available to people. The boundaries of the national archive's responsibilities vary from one country to another. In Norway it is, for instance, beyond our job to contribute to the creation of new archives. If we were to experience that persons belonging to what might be called a weak group, were having difficulties finding archival material with information that could document, for example, their claim for compensation for poor treatment by the authorities in their childhood, there would be little that we could do. But, perhaps we should be more aware of the importance of ensuring that archival material of that kind created within the public administration are properly kept and later handed over to us.

As archivists we should make as much effort as possible, but we cannot go beyond our tasks as civil servants. In our work we are influenced by our personal beliefs and values. Empathy for people who seek our help is obviously a good thing and we should have an emotional involvement in the work. But personal emotions can also cause problems.

This became relevant in the 1980's when a colleague was to process some requests from Germany. The requests came from German persons approaching retirement age who contacted the National Archives of Norway to receive information from records showing that they had served the German occupation forces in Norway during the World War II. They needed this documentation for their applications for pension. One of these persons had been working for the German Security Police in Norway during the war. When my colleague recognized the name of this German, he refused to process this request. Close members of his family had been tortured and killed by the German Security Police during the war and now he would not contribute to a better pension for the former policeman. His reaction was respected by the management of the National Archives, but the request was of course handled by another colleague and the former German policeman got his request properly treated.

Personal attitudes and engagement can thus be important in our work, but it can also cause problems. It is important to be aware that at work we are civil servants and archivists, not social workers or political activists.

An important discussion

Here I have mostly discussed our dealing with requests from war children who seek information from the archives. The underlying theme is our role as archivists, and the extent to which we may contribute to greater justice for disadvantaged groups. I have not touched on the question of our power when it comes to other aspects of our dealing with archival material. Therefore, I will briefly end with a small episode that made me think about our role as rulers of the archives.

Some time ago I was contacted by a man who introduced himself as the son of a Norwegian who after the World War II was convicted for treason as a member of the Norwegian fascist party. Now the son wanted access to the archives from the prison for persons convicted of treason, where his father had spent some years after the war. I had to inform him that the records were not organized and therefore not available. My answer apparently provoked the man. 20 years ago he had made contact and got the same answer. In his view the National Archives, and therefore the Norwegian government, deliberately allowed these records to be disordered, with the objective that the condemned and their descendants would not have access to information that would reflect negatively on the authorities. I could only apologize and claim that it was for purely economic and practical reasons that these records are still disordered.

After this conversation I thought, however, that perhaps the man could have a point. From what I know about the attitudes towards the traitors in the decades after the war, it cannot be completely ruled out that my predecessors more or less consciously neglected to give priority to making these records available for use. I have not tried to investigate the matter further, but from my uncertainty arose the question whether we actually here have an example of how archivists have exploited their power over the archives to deny a group of people access to information from some archives. In this case it is about a group that during the five years 1940-1945 undoubtedly was a strong group in society as collaborators with the German occupants. At the end of the war they had their status changed drastically, and later their descendants may have been said to constitute a weak group in society which we today should give high priority in our work. At the same time one can ask what right we have to define who belongs to a weak group in society. Perhaps that, too, constitutes a form of exercise of power? The questions are many and the discussion is barely started!

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