Summary

Camps as contested sites. The former WWII camps Westerbork, Vught and Amersfoort in the Netherlands as remembrance site, place of memory and heritage site.

The main focus of this research project is the contemporary functions and meanings of former World War II camps in the Netherlands. For younger generations ‘places of memory’ have become increasingly important in relation to the past. This is especially true for the three former camps Vught, Amersfoort and Westerbork. Although these former camps have been designated as location for a National Monument as early as 1947, it was only during the last decades that they transformed into places of memory.

Former camps contain different meanings for various (mnemonic) communities and groups. These are not only the divergent categories of victims and their next of kin, but also interned Germans and collaborators as well as former Moluccan soldiers and their families. Moreover, this research addresses the former camps in relation to the international Holocaust Memory Boom and the increasing number of visitors without ‘living memories’ of the war, which bring these sites in a field of tension of public commemorations, personal memories, and the ‘tourist experience’. These new ways of dealing with the past offer new challenges for the presentation of former camps, which are often accompanied by intense emotions and debates. Hence, the main question of my research project is: What tendencies and tensions can be observed as a result of the different functions and meanings of the former camps Westerbork, Vught and Amersfoort? To answer this main question four sub-questions are formulated that are subsequently addressed in four chapters.

Chapter 1 concentrates on the question how the authentic camp (and the image of the authentic camp) relates to the experience and staging of these sites. Different ways of dealing with authenticity and the need of younger generations for visualization and experiences are discussed on the basis of a number of former camps in Europe. Many former camp buildings have been demolished, reused or perished in the course of time. How can visitors imagine what is no longer there? And what comes first in the presentation of these sites: the authenticity of the testimonies and relics or the possibility of a historical-tourist experience? Also discussed in this chapter are some Holocaust museums, which are not located on the historical site of a camp, but whose museum presentations are part of the same (international) debate about authenticity, reconstructions and symbolic representations.

The camps Westerbork, Vught and Amersfoort were reused for the internment of members of the Dutch National Socialist Movement and others suspected of collaboration, shortly after the liberation. Contemporary approaches to this internment period is the subject of chapter 2, which is placed in the context of Raul Hilberg’s famous trichotomy victim,
perpetrator and bystander. A precise interpretation of this threefold division – just like a strict differentiation between who was so-called ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ during the war – is no longer commonplace in Dutch historiography. However, this does not apply to the public memory of the war in the Netherlands, as can be concluded from this chapter. War heritage that refers to perpetrators or collaboration is still a very emotive subject. The case study presented in this chapter is an analysis of the exhibition *Internment Camp Westerbork 1945-1948* opened in December 2008 at the Remembrance Centre of Camp Westerbork and the flood of highly emotional reactions that followed.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between the collective war memories of the camps and the postcolonial Moluccan memories of these sites. What happens when both memories encounter each other in the public space of a former camp site? At the beginning of the 1950s the former camps Westerbork and Vught were transformed in dwellings for Moluccan men of the KNIL (Royal Dutch Indies Army) and their families. In the course of time the Moluccans appropriated the camps as a part of their cultural heritage. In viewing the war memories and the postcolonial memories of the Moluccan dwellings as part of the same memorial landscape, it is stated that these memories have a competitive relation as well as a strengthening impact on each other. The case study of this chapter focuses on process of musealisation of barrack 1B, the last remaining authentic barrack of camp Vught as well as the Moluccan dwelling Lunetten, which has been open for the public since 2013.

Chapter 4 focuses on the rise of a new discipline: camp archaeology. Following Poland, Germany and Austria, the archaeology of camp sites is getting a foothold in the Netherlands. This chapter deals with the question why archaeological research on these sites is conducted and the added value thereof for the historical knowledge, the museological presentation of the past and the design of former camp sites. The case study in this chapter is the ‘Westerbork Archaeological Research project’, which started in December 2011. During the execution of this research a new ‘owner’ presented itself in the context of this archaeological framework: the municipality. This chapter shows that as a result of the discovery of the camp as an archaeological site, the dynamic development of the former camp as place of memory and heritage site is being put at risk.

This study concludes with an exploration of a number of contemporary and future developments at former camp sites. A next step, which has now been cautiously made, is virtual reality. An example is the application that enables visitors of the former camp site of Bergen-Belsen – the camp was burned to the ground after the war because of to great risk of diseases – to see a virtual construction of the camp. Some critics argue this goes too far. Those who are in favour – just like proponents of staging of the former landscape by replacing barracks and cattle wagons – stress the educational aspect of virtual reality. Finally, in all these debates no mnemonic community or any other stakeholder has the last
word. The process of giving meaning to and shaping the presentation of the camps is a continuous dynamic process and the competition to shape the memory of the former camp sites has not yet ended – and probably will never end.