

Duality: History and Memory in the Narrative of Norwood

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History

This article examines the role of memory as a source of knowledge through the recollections of the orphans from the Jewish Orphanage at Norwood, an institution for orphaned children established by the Anglo-Jewish community. It functioned for 85 years until its closure in 1961, although the origins of a Jewish child care institution, the Jews' Hospital located in East London, date from 1795.

Norwood history is important for the children, for Anglo-Jewry and for British society. Without such an account there is an important gap in the history of institutional life. It was a complaint that has come from the scholars, as the former children call themselves, that led to the demand for a history of Norwood to be written. At the time of the centenary celebrations in 1895, 'An Old Boy' expressed his regret that 'the Committee have not availed themselves of the opportunity to compile a full and complete history of the Institution, and all its worthies for a hundred years'.¹ The inclusion of the children themselves as worthies was inconceivable at that time.

The absence of a proper account has left the field open to uncritical historical judgements. In a major study of Anglo-Jewish philanthropy, the author asserted that 'by late Victorian standards, Norwood was an exemplary enterprise providing facilities and services far superior to any other of its kind', but there is no indication of what these standards were and what they meant for the orphans.² Expressing not dissimilar comments in 1973, and referring to the post-war period, the secretary of Norwood claimed in a radio interview that the Institution 'has gone down almost into Anglo-Jewish folklore as an institution, in the nicest sense, with a small 'i'.³ Such comments expose the gap in the Norwood narrative but it is also a lacuna in the history of the Anglo-Jewish community and, in a wider context, the social history of the residential child care movement.

The writing of Norwood history stood at a

1. 'Reminiscences of an Old Boy: 1869-75', *Jewish Chronicle*, 26/4/1895, p.14

2. E. Black, *The Social Politics of Anglo-Jewry, 1880-1920* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p.187

3. *Newsletter*, Norwood Old Scholars Association, 30 (Mar 1973)

standstill until 1956 when *The Norwood Story* was written by Edward Conway (later expanded into *The Origins of the Jewish Orphanage*). It was the first serious attempt to publish a history of the institution. Conway was Headmaster of Norwood in the 1950s, and while there examined the impact of institutional life on the welfare of the children. He concluded that the success or failure of any institution like Norwood must depend entirely on the people who administered it.⁴ It never occurred to him that it also depended on the people who were administered - *the children*. But then as the Headmaster his professional interest was supporting the institution.

In 1995, on the occasion of the bicentenary, *What About the Children? 200 Years of Norwood Childcare* was published by Norwood Childcare and the London Jewish Museum. The book is a piece of celebratory literature on Norwood history.⁵ It is an interpretation of two centuries of Jewish child care based on archives generated by governors and staff. The archived sources were written at the time. However, another novel non-traditional source is the personal recollections of scholars – their memories. It is oral history based on the lived experiences of children at the orphanage.

The inclusion of memory as history was initiated in 1981 by Riva Krut who wrote a short unpublished article titled 'History of Norwood Orphanage'. She adopted an innovative approach – interviewing scholars. She found from her interviewing two 'dominant tendencies'.⁶ Firstly, 'there was a terrific amount of guilt attached to anything which might harm the reputation of Norwood', and this protectiveness of an institution to which they were so attached was a factor the historian had to weigh in the balance.⁷ The second tendency was revealed in the phrase, 'Oh, I could tell you some stories' which she never gets to hear or she does but they are carefully balanced.⁸ During the

4. E. Conway, *The Institutional Care of Children: A Case History* (University of London: PhD, 1957), pp.382-3

5. R. Burman (ed), *What About the Children? 200 Years of Norwood Child Care 1795-1995* (London: Museum of Jewish Life & Norwood Child Care: 1995), p.60

6. R. Krut, *History of the Jewish Orphanage* (London Jewish Museum: MS Article, 1980-1), p.11

7. *Ibid*

8. *Ibid*

course of the interview, 'there [were] occasionally moments where an account that had been carefully constructed hit an obstacle and something that had been hidden then breaks the surface'.⁹ It drew attention to the potency of a hidden history that could only be exposed in the recollections of the scholars. Her oral history work was carried on by the Jewish Museum in the 1990s when it conducted a series of interviews of scholars.

In her work, Krut incorporated memory as a component in the duality of an historical narrative. That component on its own was important to the scholars who took upon themselves, a few years after Norwood closed, to publish a newsletter in which their own personal perspective on institutional living was told for the first time. The recollections are the children speaking for themselves albeit decades later and are there as one scholar put it, 'to reassure ourselves from time to time that we have a history, a past'.¹⁰ The newsletters, interview tapes and transcripts, and a number of autobiographies are an oral history that adds to the traditional approach of historical research. Entering into an understanding of their personal recollections relies on them and provides a version of events and details not officially recorded.

Memory as an historical source is exemplified by the story of the *Norwood Rebellion*, which is entirely based on personal recollections. The rebellion was a revolt by the older boys against the Norwood management in 1921 because of poor diet and harsh discipline. The source of the rebellion is based on the recollections of six scholars written between 1969 and 2001.¹¹ They provide a version of events absent in any official document or newspaper. The picture portrayed is based on memories recollected five to eight decades after the event. The opportunity for bringing them to light was the publication of the *Newsletter* by the Norwood Old Scholars Association.

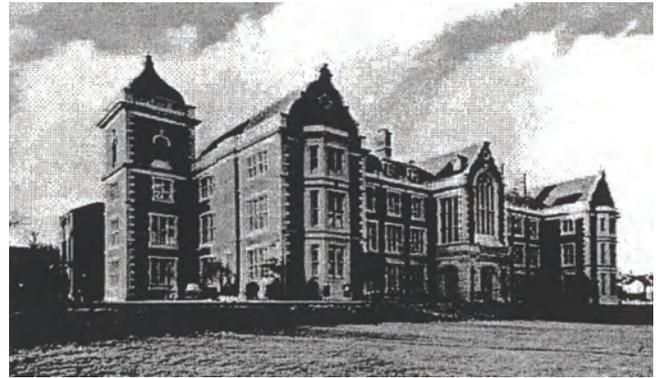
The end of the old institution in 1961 created a discontinuity between the absence of its physical presence and the endurance of its memories. The *Newsletter* provided a continuity - a means to memorise the past. The logo that appears on the front page is the picture of the orphanage. 'Reinstating the environment in which an event has been experienced' for the *Newsletter* reader

9. R. Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation* (London: Macmillan, 2003), p.11

10. *Newsletter*, NOSA, 23 (Jun 1971)

11. *Newsletter*, NOSA, 15 (Dec 1969); 26 (Feb 1972); 82 (May 2001); London Jewish Museum Interview Transcript, Tape 40, 1981

invites an entrance in to the memories it held.¹² The photograph picked by the Association served to reinstate an *institutional* memory but for the individual scholar it was a *personal* invite.



NOSA Newsletter Logo

Traditionally, the historian's research has been document-biased as voiced in the adage that 'the historian works with documents. There is no substitute, no history'.¹³ Much of Norwood's history is based on such contemporary material. What is left out is the evidence of the children and for that reason it does not provide a total history. The corpus of available material is expanded from contemporary documents finite in the extent of their preservation by the inclusion of oral history, the scholars' recollections, open-ended as a living source. The importance of oral evidence is that it is a source of information on deviancy, counter-institutional culture, personal relationships, individual behaviour and revolts not covered by other sources. Without it the Norwood Rebellion would not have been known to have existed. Its authenticity as a real event in the memory of scholars has determined the authenticity of personal recollections as a source in its own right, a source which refutes the adage and the historian's reverence of the document.

The various descriptions of the rebellion by the scholars - *Kam's Rebellion*, the *Great Rebellion*, *Kahn's Rebellion* and the *Norwood Rebellion* - contain different accounts in which details of the event, the motives for rebelling, the boys who were involved and even when it took place are inconsistent, and for that reason a precise account will never be known. Devoid of reference in official minutes and reports, the existence of the rebellion was denied by the authorities. It immediately disappeared into obscurity to remain a hidden yet significant piece of Norwood

12. A. Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory* (East Sussex: Psychology Press, 2007), p.183

13. P. Thompson, *The Voices of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.183

children's history until the scholars narrated their own recollections of the event in the hazy light of distant memories. The childhood repository of the boys' deviant behaviour has become accessible to the historian and only now can the rebellion be pieced together.¹⁴

What the historian has to judge is the degree of distortion in oral accounts and one way of dealing with it 'consists in studying the largest number of cases [available]'.¹⁵ Providing as much detail as possible in recollections may introduce 'the kind of sensory and perceptual associates' that can be taken as evidence that an event has been remembered rather than invented.¹⁶ The seven accounts of the rebellion have been sufficient to construct an historical narrative.

The documentary value of an event is an exercise in which the historian

must provide us with the key which transforms the crude document into an historical source and must give us the reasons why plausibility is attributed to one part of the history and doubt to another.¹⁷

The key is the themes - the rebellion, counter-culture, corporal punishment, deviance - and the placing of individual actions in an historical narrative. This paper places the one known strike within the wider realm of oral history. Its plausibility derives from the comparative evaluation of the recollected accounts and the wider context of counter-institutionalism.

Oral evidence, unlike archived documents, is the product of scholars' living memories. Psychological research shows 'all memory, whatever age it's laid down or recalled, is unreliable' and over time gets less accurate.¹⁸ One way memory is unreliable is that it is not chronologically organised and this explains the different dates given for the revolt. 'Personal time is notoriously at odds with public history' and this has meant memory has been dismissed.¹⁹ The historian J.H. Plumb in 1969 wrote the 'past' that is constructed through memory is a 'created ideology' and not 'true history'

- memory and history were seen as incompatible.²⁰ But almost thirty years later the duality of history and memory was seen quite differently. The historian David Lowenthal recognised '[memory] no less than history is essential to knowing' - memory makes history itself possible.²¹

Recognising the subjective in individual testimonies is a challenge to 'the accepted categories of history'.²² The subjectivity in oral histories 'is certainly not to say that we are working with memories of a false past'²³. A high proportion of the rich detail in recollections remains objectively valid and verified by other sources and provides 'the only good evidence we have from an undocumented, hidden world'.²⁴ A lot of the details are consistent in scholars' accounts such as the canings mentioned in many of them - caning was part of the disciplinary regime. The main evidence for the rebellion is the scholars' accounts, but a critical analysis of them has been utilised to demonstrate its authenticity.

The invitation by the Association for scholars' recollections allowed the scholar as an adult to reflect where Norwood stood in his or her personal history. The Headmaster, Marcus Kaye, asked leavers to write a letter of thanks. Such letters were constrained in their criticism of the institution. The scholars were expected to carry the banner of Norwood and uphold the name of the institution when they left. Some have been selectively preserved in the Headmaster's scrapbook for the years 1913-15. The act of writing a letter implied an avowal of the life at Norwood. One scholar, Maurice Levinson in his autobiography *A Woman from Bessarabia* wrote that he resisted writing a letter because in his personal history it denied him being a person.²⁵ The refusal to write a letter excluded the possibility of Kaye pasting it in his scrapbook as evidence of how good Norwood was for the children.²⁶ Levinson's account forms part of the life story of Norwood without which his side of the story would be untold.

An article appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1974 entitled 'They Asked for More and Got it' in which a number of scholars expressed criticism of Norwood. It was contradicted by a former teacher

14. Thompson, pp.154-5; R. Basso, 'Myths in Contemporary Oral Transmission: A Children's Strike' in R. Samuel & P. Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.61

15. J. Peneff, 'Myths in Life Stories' in Samuel & Thompson, p.41

16. Baddeley, p.320

17. Peneff, p.45

18. K. Sabbagh, *Remembering Our Childhood: How Memory Betrays Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.194

19. Samuel & Thompson, p.7

20. G.S. Wood, 'No Thanks for the Memories' *The New York Review*, Jan (2011), p.2

21. Ibid

22. Samuel & Thompson, p.2

23. Samuel & Thompson, pp.5-6

24. Ibid

25. M. Levinson, *A Woman from Bessarabia* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964), p.62

26. Two scrapbooks are in the archive at Southampton University.

Sol Taylor and the Association, claiming 'the article gave a very unfair picture of life at Norwood'.²⁷ For them 'it was a good Institution and made so by the people who administered it'.²⁸ The article's author replied, 'I gave a fair and undistorted account of what it was to be brought up in Norwood *from the child's point of view*'.²⁹ Taylor was criticised as showing only 'the teacher's side [which] left out the humanitarian part of school life which is just as vital as the educational side'.³⁰ The article opened up a dispute over what was the 'authentic version' of Norwood experience. There were two memories being fought over - one institutional and another by the individual scholars. At the level of an institution in historical imagery, a picture has been formed in which memory becomes part of the real life account and Norwood becomes a good institution.³¹ But the historical narratives related by many scholars remember it was not 'good enough' for them.

The recollections rely on a remembered experience but for some scholars there was an absence of memory. Sidney Kaye, who went to Norwood in 1933, wrote that 'for a long time I preferred to block out the past'. It was meeting another Norwood boy that helped him to remember the forgotten years.³² The Newsons, in their research on young children, examined the importance of memory in the development of the young child. They found

the child relies on his parents' role as a memory bank to which he can refer for evidence of himself as an individual with a history...[It is] through his store of memories...recollecting past experiences ...[that] establishes him as a person with a

past...In contrast, the child who is deprived of parents may in fact have...no one to confirm whether these memories are in fact correct or figments of the imagination.³³

Their research shows that the institutional environment can impede the social function of memory in the child. The deprivation for some scholars resulted in permanent memory loss.

For scholars who recorded their memories there was the need to find a balance between correct fact and imaginary figment. A picture taken in 1912 of smiling girls balanced on two sides of a see-saw captioned 'Norwood girls at play' in the bicentennial book projects an institutional memory.³⁴ For the scholar the act of writing a recollection is 'a work of conviction, memorization and clarification', an avowal of what Norwood personally meant. Indeed, as one resident wrote of his experience in another institution, it 'enabled me to close a chapter in my life'.³⁵

This paper has examined the institution as it affected the children. It has looked at oral sources and the words of the children themselves. Their memories raise issues of authenticity - of oral evidence as a source, the content of oral evidence, 'inauthentic memory' and conflict over the 'true' memory. Despite limitations they reveal a counter-culture of deviance and expose a piece of lost history - the Norwood Rebellion. For scholars, its importance is that 'its memory will live on in history'.³⁶ This article opens a door for historians to enter into the inner workings of the institution. Through scholars' recollections they can reveal a history that creates a new reality of Norwood.

27. *Jewish Chronicle*, 22/11/1974, Colour Supplement, pp.68-75; *Newsletter*, NOSA, 26 (Jan 1975)

28. *Ibid*

29. *Ibid*

30. *Newsletter*, NOSA, 37 (Apr 1975)

31. Peneff, p.45

32. *Newsletter*, NOSA, 97 (Sept 2008)

33. J. & E. Newson, *Seven Years Old in the Home Environment* (Middlesex: Pelican, 1978), p.444

34. Burman, p.32

35. Peneff, p.45; J. Adams & G. Coll, *The History of Shirley Oaks Children's Home* (London: Deptford Forum, 1999), p.100

36. *Newsletter*, NOSA, 36 (Jan 1975)

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