

# National Celebrations from an Outsider's Perspective

## May 17<sup>th</sup> in Bergen as an Expression of Social Memory

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### Abstract

The focus of this paper is the social memory dimension of May 17<sup>th</sup>, the Norwegian Constitution Day, as organized and acted out in Bergen in 2005. The celebrations are approached through Pierre Nora's concept of "realms of memory". The author places emphasis on the participants' sensory and bodily experiences. She also discusses the way her outsider's gaze into May 17<sup>th</sup> reflects the way she experienced national holidays in Croatia. The event is perceived from two different perspectives: by following in the footsteps of the main organizers, the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee members, and by experiencing the day in the company of members of a family living in Bergen. In that way the author obtained some insight into the official discourse about May 17<sup>th</sup>, as well as into one private interpretation of the occasion. For these informants, remembrance and the national component played a significant part of their celebrations. The author concludes that not only motifs relating to 1814, the year of the drafting of the new constitution at Eidsvoll, were noticeable at the celebrations. Motifs evoking the Viking era and WW2 were also present. This is why the author concludes that it is the glorious past that societies remember during contemporary May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations.

### Key words:

*May 17<sup>th</sup>,  
national celebrations,  
social memory,  
outsider's perspective*

### In the Realm of Memory

It is two weeks before the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations in 2005, and thirty representatives of various Bergen-based companies, institutions and influential societies gather in the conference room of Rick's Hotel. This

is a meeting of the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee, the body to which, according to an agreement with the town's government, "the centre of Bergen belongs on May 17<sup>th</sup>", as its members have pointed out to me. The richly decorated interior refurbished in old-

fashioned red wallpaper and gilt chandeliers form a perfect setting for the narratives of the Committee's history dating back to 1847 and its importance for the character of the celebrations "as the people of Bergen know it" (Sletten 1985:14; [www.17-mai.no](http://www.17-mai.no)). Many details are yet to be resolved: the number and order of groups in the main parade, the positioning of maypoles and stands where participants can buy their party supplies, the christening of the brand new Viking ship named after Olav Kyrre and positioned at the Festplassen Square as the Committee's gift to the citizens of Bergen. The majority of members arrive a bit early and are chatting and laughing, asking me about my native country and how I cope with the rains of Bergen. It resembles a conversation between old friends. At 19.30 sharp, for when the meeting was scheduled, the chairman bangs his hammer on the table. It seems to me as if the atmosphere in the room, and the people themselves, change instantly. Everybody straightens themselves in their chairs, opens their May 17<sup>th</sup> folders, banishing all petty everyday subjects from their conversations, as well as the laughter from their lips. The singing of "Vær hilset, Bergen" ("Greetings, Bergen") put the participants in the right mood. They are ready, in the words of several Committee members, to take part in something serious, honourable and important. Passing through the solid door with the note "May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee", I felt as if I was stepping into a place reserved for upholding the community and the nation's past, a place where the common denominator of individual experiences is highlighted and contemporary performances and new cultural production are given a sense of continuity; a privileged place to be for a Croatian ethnologist who came to Bergen

with the aim of conducting a study entitled "National Celebrations as Expressions of Social Memory". I have approached national celebrations as *realms of memory*, as the French historian Pierre Nora has defined them (1996). Nora includes not only physical places in this term, but also events that conquer and transform spaces in a specific way, such as commemorations, anniversaries and festivals, all of which can be used by group members to embody images of their past. The memories that celebrations evoke have not frozen; they don't rely on objective accounts of past events. On the contrary, it is a "notion produced, defined, established, constructed, decreed, and maintained by the artifice and desire of a society fundamentally absorbed by its own transformation and renewal" (1996:6). For this reason, national celebrations play a major role in the community's identity politics, sustaining a sense of sameness over time and space. Still, through commemorative practices this representation of sameness is constantly revised and adjusted to the actual social and political context (Gillis 1994). Contemporary celebrations can, thus, be seen as an echo of the group members' current attitudes towards their historical background. They can, of course, encompass many diverse practices and meanings attributed to them by individual participants. The evocation of the past does not necessarily have to be at the heart of such events: the people who engage in them can, for instance, view them as arenas for festivity and fun, innovative, variable and unrepeatable, dealing with present concerns rather than with the birth of a nation. But the past remembered during celebrations is innovative, variable and unrepeatable as well; remembered past can also be fun, as I learnt from the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebration in Bergen. In this context, I will

not be approaching the remembering of the past as a process of trans-generational transmission of facts built into the very foundations of national community. For many participants the references to the past serve to achieve a sense of national continuity, which is highly important when they define their community's sense of identity over time; what being a Norwegian means today. This is why, among many possible approaches to the celebrations, I have chosen the social memory dimension of May 17<sup>th</sup> as the main focus of my study. I have tried to follow this thread while looking at the different ways of preparing for and celebrating the day, the equipment and costumes used and the narratives that explain the participants' involvement. The expressions of social memory that I studied<sup>1</sup> in Bergen have triggered another corpus of memories: my own. My personal views and previous experience of national celebrations in my own country has influenced the prism through which I observed the practices in Bergen. I have therefore found it is important to explain what my outsider's view on the celebrations entail and in which way I tried to study the variety of experiences that people draw from the celebrations.

### **Where the Abstract becomes Concrete**

How can a scholar who studies national celebrations grasp something as fluid and abstract as memory, an attitude towards one's past? This issue has been dealt with by Paul Connerton, who has found the concretisations of social memory in bodily practices performed during commemorative ceremonies (Connerton 2003:88). My decision was therefore to bring the practical and sensory sides of the celebrations to the forefront (comp. Frykman and Gilje 2003).

When dealing with social memory, we are not venturing into the territory of a mystical communal mind – it is always individuals, the members of the group, who remember. This also applies to historical memory, which does not relate to personally experienced events of the past, but reaches people through written and other types of records, and can be kept alive through commemorations, festive enactments, etc. (Halbwachs 1992:23-24). Once I had acquired an overview of all the different groups, families and individuals who celebrate May 17<sup>th</sup> in their own fashion, my next problem was to decide whose experience to study. Obviously there was no way I could take in all the diverse voices of people attending, or choosing not to attend the celebrations. The most dominant voice which is heard most easily, is the official narrative of what the celebrations should be all about, what ceremonies should be undertaken, which performances should be attended, and which memories of the nation's past are expected to be evoked. There is plenty of material for shedding light on this aspect. It is, for instance, explained in a publication entitled *Atter er dagen opprunden*, published by Bergen's May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee Bergen (Sletten 1985).<sup>2</sup> Although very useful to a cultural scholar, since it explains the emergence of the celebrations and their history, this account introduces no multivocality, no interpretations relating to people who are not involved with organising public events yet taking part and enjoying the festivities and thereby effectively producing their own events. It is a view from behind the stage, presented as an authoritative source. In the words of the chairman of the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee: "This book gives the whole truth - everything you will ever want and need to know about May 17<sup>th</sup>."

One of my objectives was to find out how the stage was set for the national celebrations by the event organisers. However, what I found to be even more significant were the many alternative May 17<sup>th</sup> arenas outside the framework of set commemorative procedures. Such unofficial events would take place anywhere, staged by people who choose to make the day special, not by organising events for the whole city, but by creating their own May 17<sup>th</sup> by giving a personal slant to public presentations, choosing from the official programme, skipping some events seen as irrelevant and inventing new traditions of their own. I tried to look at the events from two different perspectives. On the one hand, I was following in the footsteps of the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee members. On the other hand, I was spending time in the company of members of a family living in Bergen, Aina and Lars Sverkeli<sup>3</sup>, a married couple in their sixties who have two adult sons.<sup>4</sup> These two perspectives showed up some interesting differences in people's ways of celebrating. In this way I obtained insight into the official, public discourse about May 17<sup>th</sup>, as well as into at least one (out of many available) private interpretation of it.

Although I refer to an official discourse, I am well aware that all Committee members interpret the day in a different way within their own families, once they cast aside their role of Committee member. But being a member of the Committee means that your celebrations need to follow a set pattern. All Committee members repeatedly stressed this distinction between acting as a private individual and a public figure who is constantly being asked by the media to give a statement on what May 17<sup>th</sup> is about. During interviews they will often switch from one role to another, clearly stating whether they voice a certain

preference in their capacity as a Committee representative or as a member of their own family, neighbourhood etc. One of them explained his decision to retire from the Committee this year:

I've been on the Committee for 15 years now, and it has been hard but pleasant work. Now I think I would like to try something different, spending the day in the family circle, in an unofficial atmosphere, inviting friends over for lunch, waving to the grandchildren in the parade instead of making sure that the parade is moving at a proper pace. Not seeing people, seeing only the parade. (...) It is something different, you know. When you are in the Committee, your day is full of official obligations and people expect you to be up to it, so that the nation's day gets celebrated properly and in high spirits. When you are with your family, you still have this strong feeling for the day, it's just that your love for the country gets this more familiar face: the face of your nearest and dearest, and the home you live in.

The celebrations last for a short period only, but because the time slot is packed with events, I was unable to follow both the Committee members and the Sverkeli family throughout the day. Some moments were considered crucial by all, like watching the two afternoon processions, the flag parade and the main parade; and attending the choral concert in the Town Hall. However, I did take part in most events that received a high ranking by the two different groups, since they generally did not overlap.<sup>5</sup> The difference in event preferences reflected the difference in interpretations of May 17<sup>th</sup>.

### Approach: Being an Outsider

Norwegian Constitution Day has already been the focus of ethnological attention in the past. Swedish researcher Barbro Blehr in her article "On Ritual Effectiveness: The Case of Constitution Day" discusses how contemporary national holidays can promote nationalist ideology among participants, while showing that the celebrations can give an enjoyable sense of belonging to the local community and the family circle without reflecting on national dimensions (1999). The author bases her analysis on the ways in which the celebrations are incorporated and acted out through bodily movements and ritualized actions. However, it is clear from the text that she herself, through her family relationships, has acquired "some personal habits of celebrating, as well as a sense of what the day was all about" (1999:41).

Although I have also chosen to focus on the bodily aspects of the celebrations, my starting point was quite different from Barbro Blehr's: I had no tacit knowledge of the way the holiday is being celebrated and experienced by participants. Nevertheless, I wanted to be exposed to the participants' lived experiences without reducing them to a system of symbols waiting for scholarly decoding. I wondered how I should deal with this lack of insider's knowledge. A possible solution became clear in discussions with fellow ethnologists in Bergen: I pondered over and found curious practices that were considered rather mundane by my Norwegian colleagues. So, I tried to turn my position of an outsider-scholar into an advantage: by admitting the fact that I am approaching the celebrations from a distance, perhaps I could grasp things that were difficult to observe from the inside.

What first attracted my attention were the practices, narratives and attitudes that

differed most from my tacit understanding of how to celebrate a nation's birthday, which of course was based on my own observations and personal experiences. In Croatia, I had been accustomed to a very different set of definitions with respect to national celebrations: we celebrate birthdays in a festive mood, but not the country's birthday, at least not any longer. There are several possible reasons: one is that grand celebrations of the Republic's or President's birthday to many carry an echo of the Yugoslav period. Huge political gatherings at stadiums, massive parades headed by people carrying wreaths and birthday greetings, children waving national flags and reciting poetry, dancing and singing in the schoolyards for the country and for freedom; all this inevitably brings back images of former socialist national holidays which have been subject to intentional forgetting since the Homeland War in the nineties. Furthermore, in a young democracy, new national celebrations have yet to become established traditions: some national holiday dates are changeable and additional ones have recently been introduced, which causes uncertainty about when to celebrate the nation's birthday, if at all. Also, the people of Croatia are often concerned about the potential negative nationalist connotations of such celebrations. For all these reasons, nation celebrations are considered deadly serious matters, and there is an air of uneasiness about them. The media discourse rarely present the celebration of Croatian national holidays as a matter for ordinary people, and never as a source of relaxed enjoyment of a highlight in people's everyday lives, which enables them to commemorate their attachment to the nation in a whole variety of different modes. Individual interpretations are not generally depicted as an

important part of any such celebrations (comp. Ćanić Divić 2004; Knežević 2004:4).

The Bergen celebrations of May 17<sup>th</sup> in 2005 incorporated commemorative and military features, through the involvement of *buekorps* (children brigades evoking the Citizens' Guards, marching through the city with wooden rifles and drums), through the Committee's traditional Act of Remembrance for the victims of WW2, etc. Some Norwegians may well consider the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations to show signs of nationalism. However, compared to Croatia the most conspicuous difference is that the Bergen celebrations incorporate popular rejoicing and enjoy wide-spread public recognition. This is a long-established celebratory tradition which accommodates a more relaxed attitude and even allows for laughter.

One of the May 17<sup>th</sup> elements with which I first came into contact a year before my fieldwork in Bergen, while still in Zagreb, was the "bunad", the Norwegian national costume. It was brought to my attention by my Norwegian colleague who had been browsing the Internet for pictures from last year's May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations. She was discussing the occasions for which the "bunad" is worn - weddings, confirmations, promotions - and the festive atmosphere that the "bunad" will bring to any such ceremony. All of a sudden, one of the photos made her slip out of her role as a scholar explaining to a Croatian colleague how various cultural practices are attached to an element of traditional heritage in a contemporary context. She turned into the owner of a "bunad", who takes great pride in her costume: "Oh, I have a piece of jewellery like this. It has been in my family for years now. Don't you think it's pretty?" I confirmed it was very pretty, although I was

confused by the question. There was a clash of cultural perspectives.

The question asking me to judge whether a piece of traditional costume was pretty or not reminded me of the contests sometimes held in the rural parts of Croatia, during which a jury of experts will judge which of the girls dressed in their folk costume is going to make the best bride on the basis of the beauty and authenticity of their outfit. Not many Croatian ethnologists and folklorists would like to be identified as a member of these commissions. The folk costumes have a different status in Croatia. From the nineties on, folk costumes can be encountered in various contexts: in museums, on the stage at folklore festivals and through the programmes of folk dance associations. They are part of a tourist attraction – at airports, foreign visitors are sometimes welcomed by girls in folk costumes. They often serve as decoration at occasions during which official protocol applies, and they can be seen in religious processions. However, in most cases they are far from being a cherished item in one's private wardrobe, occasionally taken out to display the personal pride in being connected to a place and a country. Especially among younger urban people one can detect detachment, sometimes even shame, if they happen to own any clothing passed down from their grandparents.

The colourful display of a town centre overcrowded with men and women, boys and girls dressed in national costumes on May 17<sup>th</sup> was a vivid and truly unique sight for a scholar from Croatia. I felt quite at loss when my informants asked about my kit for the celebrations: had I prepared my own national costume from Croatia for the occasion? In other words, would the paradigm of "thinking with one's feet" (Jackson 1983)



also extend to the way I dressed for May 17<sup>th</sup>? Need I say, I had no national costume, and borrowing one from a museum or a folklore association never crossed my mind while I was packing for my stay in Bergen. Still, the question made me consider what impact this would have had on my study. True, my very appearance in a costume from the island of Brač would serve as a methodological tool: it would be beneficial to my research to observe how I, dressed in a national costume, would be welcomed by other participants in the celebrations and to hear their comments on my costume and the way I was using it. However, I felt that my preconceptions would make me too self-conscious, thinking about how *I* felt and how *I* was acting rather than focusing on what others were doing. My strict black costume turned out to be a fine choice for the occasion: it blended in well with the outfits worn by the members of the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee.

#### **“Bunad”, memories and contemporary usages**

The “bunad” turned out to be a splendid looking-glass through which ways of enacting and celebrating one’s past could be observed. Although many such national costumes are products of Romanticist imagination or the national myth-building at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the common narrative of the “bunad” is the one depicting it (i.e., its numerous variants) as a piece of clothing from a misty, timeless past. Even when it is newly made, its cut and ornaments should be “ancient”, “traditional” and “authentic”. What makes it a great subject for the study of social memory is the way it intertwines the past imagined and invented with contemporary needs and performances.

Narratives on the usage of national costumes at the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations in Bergen have been as numerous as the people wearing them. People celebrating in their “bunad” often pointed out its inherent *connection to a place*. Descending from a specific place, having one’s grandparents buried there, even if no living relatives remained, was a frequent narrative used by second-generation Bergensians to explain why they wore a “bunad” from some other Norwegian area. Along with this local and regional identification, *national connotations* have a heavy presence in stories about the usage of the “bunad”. Here, the “bunad” is not restricted to a representative image of one particular national costume.<sup>6</sup> The paradigm of “unity through diversity” was evoked by some of my informants in order to clarify how all the different regional and local variants were built into a symbol of national belonging. During the celebrations, the “bunad” functions as a historical costume, through which the rich national past is also evoked in the today’s context. Being *a member of a family* is also often stressed as one of the major identifications exhibited through the costume. The pieces of clothing and accessories, as well as the knowledge of how to use and combine them, are being handed down from generation to generation. This narrative of the heritage cycle within a family and how the memory of certain deceased family members was triggered by specific parts of the costume, form a significant part of many “bunad” stories.

The meaning of the “bunad” is constantly changing to incorporate all kinds of individual feelings and interpretations. Also, through them the participants express various levels of self-identification. While making its traditionality legitimate through references to historical background, parts

The May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee in  
the morning parade.  
Photographer: The author.



of the costume play a prominent role in contemporary Norwegian society. They are perceived as a means of expressing and reasserting local, regional, national, ethnic, diasporic identities, but also, at the same time, as channels through which family and individual memories are voiced and reproduced.

### **Some Ways of Making May 17<sup>th</sup> Happen**

In the Sverkeli home, the specific preparations and cheerful excitement announce that the great day has arrived. For Aina and Lars there are certain festive details through which the celebratory atmosphere of May 17<sup>th</sup> is marked, placing it in contrast to any other non-working day. There are ceremonial procedures, like attaching ribbons in the national colours to the elegant grey suit and hoisting the national flag in the garden, which Lars cherishes: "The flag should

be up at 8 am, and come down at 9 pm. Just like in the army. But I like it, it creates this special feeling for the day." For the Sverkeli, it is a day of remembrance. But it's not only the nation's birthday of which they are reminded. While preparing her "bunad" for the celebrations, Aina remembers all her relatives who gave her the individual parts of the dress; trying to find an adequate blouse for her granddaughter, she commented how fast they grow and that very soon they would be inviting them over for the May 17<sup>th</sup> lunch. In her eyes, preparing the "bunad" is an activity that brings families together. She herself, together with her daughter-in-law, took a course in making the male "bunad" and made an outfit for her son with her own hands. In the previous years the morning fuss that accompanies the dressing for the day and the hoisting of the flag gained its momentum through preparations for





A jury member is evaluating the different elements of the afternoon parade.  
Photographer: The author

breakfast at home, to which Aina and Lars used to invite close family members. However, this year both their sons and their families will be involved with other May 17<sup>th</sup> activities, or they will be away for the day. Aina and Lars have therefore decided to have their breakfast at Hotel Norge. The meals had to be booked well in advance, since the hotel is a popular spot for kicking off the day, as evidenced by the large number of people present. The breakfast room has been specially decorated for the festivities: the rich banquet, tables attentively set, vases with red, blue and white flowers. Together with a couple of old friends, all dressed up and in good spirits, they indulge in delicacies befitting the day.

Just as the Sverkéis finish their preparations at home, the morning parade winds its way through the city centre. It is headed by the members of the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee, dressed in black suits and with long ribbons in national colours draped from their chest. They walk slowly and with dignity at pace with the music played

by the brass band. Their route, starting at the Mariakirken Church and ending up at the Festplassen Square, is intercepted by frequent stops in front of monuments and plates erected in honour of distinguished people from Bergen and Norway, of WW2 victims, and of the very first May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee members. There the top hats are taken off, the objects are addressed in silence, accompanied by songs like the national anthem, “Ja, vi elsker”, or speeches in which past sacrifice and heroism are evoked as a promise of a bright future, and, governed by a strict protocol, wreaths are placed by individuals chosen in advance.

The stage erected at the Festplassen Square, in the shape of a replica Viking ship, is one of the stops, where the speeches for the day are delivered. On their way the Committee members communicate with the by-standers, waving their top hats to them, cheering, shouting “hooray”, and smiling. Some observers take an active role. A group of five elderly men, wearing the same ribbons as the Committee members,

follows the procession around the town, stopping in several different places and greeting people with rattles. However, the majority just stops on the sidewalk for a short while to look and listen to what is happening. They rarely come outside in order to attend the morning parade – they are mostly caught while running their own errands, or stretching their heads from windows and balconies in order to catch a glimpse of the parade, and then continuing with their own morning routine. The morning procession is defined by the Committee members as one of the crucial moments of paying tribute and expressing affection for the nation. But it is rarely perceived as the highlight of the day by people who are not involved in organising the official programme. So the question is: to whom is the morning parade communicating? Being among the Committee members during the procession, I could tell that it definitely plays an important role within their group. However, unlike the afternoon parades, its messages are not primarily directed at other groups who take part in the celebrations. This parade is directed at their predecessors, at spaces that they re-fill with memory, at the past they are evoking in the present. The Committee's breakfast at Hotel Norge had quite a different character to the one taken by the Sverkelis. For the Committee members this is not a time to spend with families or friends – they have their meal in the company of representatives of Bergen Council and various guests of honour. It is a framework that provides group cohesion and in which thanks is given for the beneficial work done for the community.

The afternoon parades represent the highlight of the day, the moment for which the Committee members have been preparing for months, under the auspices of a spe-

cially selected Board. There are two of them, the main parade and the children's flag parade, moving round the town centre along a circular route, in opposite directions, both ending up at the Festplassen Square. This is the most frequented May 17<sup>th</sup> event, described by many participants, as well as by observers, as the element that makes the day unique. In many narratives that describe the local dimensions of May 17<sup>th</sup>, these two parades are defined as "the Bergen way of celebrating", thus embodying the distinctiveness of the festivities in Bergen, and Bergen itself. My informants tell me that the existence of two separate, carefully prepared afternoon processions is a distinctly different tradition from that observed in most other Norwegian cities, of having one joint parade. The number, refinement and neat arrangement of groups and individuals who take part in the parade is a frequent topic of media reports, but also of informal chats among friends and relatives. The parades provide an opportunity for the public to evaluate the Committee's work. Walking at the head of the main parade, some holding national flags, some waving their top hats at the crowd of people along their whole route round the town centre, they receive credit and gratitude for the efforts they have put in for the benefit of the community.

Three members of the Committee do not participate in the parade. They stand by the Blue Stone, a monument in the city centre, paper and pen in hand, taking notes. Their observant gaze follows both the main parade and the children's parade. Groups of buekorps, some of them carrying banners, attempting to hold them as parallel to the ground as possible, wind bands, army cadettes, police troops and fire brigades, groups carrying emblems of insti-

tutions and companies in which they work, sometimes in their official festive outfits, like the university representatives in their gowns, children carrying their school banners, teenagers in disguise, some of them riding in allegorical vehicles, members of sport clubs displaying their skills; they all pass in front of the three Committee members, saluting and trying to look and act their best in front of them, acknowledging their role as adjudicators. Awards are later presented to the participating groups which, according to their standards, make the day most festive. There are three awards: the most elegant group, the funniest one, and - introduced only this year - the award for best display on the theme on the anniversary of Norwegian independence. The evaluation criteria clearly reflect what elements the Committee considers to be the most important features of individual practices attached to the festivities: the commemorative dimension, for instance, is expected to be present, as well as pride in one's country and the nation's way of life. There are also expectations regarding the ways in which these attitudes should be given a bodily expression. After the celebrations, one adjudicator, in his thirties, explained to me:

I was very disappointed this year. The thing is that we are losing the connection with history, so people don't feel anything by walking in the parade. There are exceptions; some really take it seriously in a way. I don't mean to say that they have to walk like in a military parade, but they do need to show some kind of emotion. You dress up in a costume, you sing, you dance, you show at least some affection. And many of them acted like this was their Sunday stroll, 'we're walking here and we can talk to

neighbours watching the parade'. That's simply not good enough. (...) For example, a school was given an award because they were well organized with their banner, class by class, and with flags, and they were singing, they actually knew how to sing the national songs. It doesn't mean you need to be the best singer, but again, you need to show some enthusiasm.

However, not all the events included in the celebrations' official programme have this formal and ritualized air around it. The students in their final year at Hop elementary school prepared a play for May 17<sup>th</sup>. Lars and Aina's grandson was part of the performing group as a member of the band that accompanied the show.<sup>7</sup> It was entitled "1905", thus commemorating the *Centenary*, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Norway's independence from Sweden. The play was performed at Gamlehaugen, the royal residence in Bergen, and was attended by the Mayor of Bergen. The story focused on Bergen-born Christian Michelsen and his achievements as the prime minister who led the country towards the dissolution of the union with Sweden. The play included numerous references to the nation's past, with costumes and scenography adapted to the period that the students attempted to revive on stage. However, there was parody throughout: Michelsen was shown as a womaniser – not a single female character resisted his charms. Also, he was presented as a hypochondriac, suffering from an incurable nostalgic feeling for Bergen while being in Oslo. So, Michelsen was not shown as a glorified, idealized hero, but as a person of flesh and blood with many human faults; his actions, on the other hand, were presented as courageous and advantageous to Norway. This has clearly

shown that comedy, which is a prominent dimension of May 17<sup>th</sup> in Bergen, can also serve as Nora's realm of memory (1996), as yet another context in which a specific attitude towards a common past is expressed. The programme presented from the main stage at Festplassen is also attentively prepared and performed by the Committee members: speeches, concerts, the giving of awards. Still, after the parade is over, around 1 pm., things start to slow down for some Committee members. This is when they get to spend some time with their own families. This is exactly when the celebrations start gaining momentum for the Sverkeli family. Every year, Aina and Lars watch the parades from their customary position by the town theatre. Two rivers of people running in opposite directions form a marvellous view from there and gives them a feeling of being at the centre of events, Aina explains. They didn't expect to see and greet anyone special in the parades, since their grandchildren have been preparing for their local parade in the suburb of Nesttun. But for them, watching the parades is an imperative on May 17<sup>th</sup>: "On no other occasion can you see that many people in the streets of Bergen. All those people moving happily and waving at you, and you wave back at them, although you don't know them... that gives a special tone to the celebrations. That is why we never miss the parades in the town centre, although we like spending the rest of the day locally, in our own part of town."

There was another reason why Sverkeli would never miss coming downtown on May 17<sup>th</sup>: the concert in the Town Hall. For 37 years now Lars has been a dedicated member of the Bergen Academic Male Voice Choir, which has some 70 singers from a variety of professions and backgrounds, with two things in common: they

love to sing and they like the social dimension of the choir. Their meetings are not restricted to choir practice every Wednesday night – there are numerous social events they organize together. Each rehearsal is followed by a small refreshment, and the choir organizes trips and parties several times a year; from time to time they combine their holiday with singing as they take their families with them to choral festivals abroad; many of the choir members are house friends who are invited over for private family anniversaries, birthdays, etc. ([www.studentersang.no/index.php?side=English](http://www.studentersang.no/index.php?side=English)). May 17<sup>th</sup> is an occasion at which the choir members present their skills and enthusiasm to their fellow citizens. The Town Hall was packed with people, some of them chorister family members, but many audience members feel that the day should be celebrated through music. Listening to the "good old" songs by Norwegian poets and composers, mostly from the Romantic period, add to the celebratory and earnest mood. The audience stood as enchanted, with heads raised towards the choir. That included me, who didn't understand the words, but could feel that through the softness and sublime quality of the music the attachment to one's country and its way of life was being expressed.

After the concert the Sverkeli didn't linger in the city centre. They didn't listen to the speeches delivered from the stage at Festplassen in the afternoon: they already knew to whom they should be thankful for the freedom and for the day, they said laughing. It was time to move into yet another space in which, through their activities and social interactions, May 17<sup>th</sup> comes to life for them. As Aina put it:

We like spending part of the day in the centre of town ... but what gives us that special feeling takes place locally where we live. The local events give us an opportunity to see and talk to everybody who lives in our neighbourhood, who we don't ordinarily meet that often. Because of Constitution Day everything is crowded and cheerful in the immediate local area. (...) We enjoy spending the day with our families, of course. 17<sup>th</sup> of May is a day for children.

The Sverkelis continued their day by generally following the children's route. They watched another parade, the one scheduled for the Midtun area at 4 p.m. The children and their parents were walking together, waving national flags, crying "hooray" and singing. Since this was a local event, the proportions were much smaller than at the one downtown. However, the Sverkelis, watching from a street corner, were much more involved on this occasion than they had been while watching the main parade: they recognised familiar faces all the time, greeting their acquaintances, discussing what children were in the same class as their three grandchildren. What gave additional meaning to the parade was the fact that it was headed by their son, carrying the banner with the sign "Kringlebotn skole", and their six-year-old granddaughter, holding the banner's tassel. This was the first time that day that Aina and Lars saw their grandchildren all dressed up for the occasion and they enjoyed the sight of them and the results of all the detailed preparations they had been involved in. They followed the parade and joined their son's family at the school playground. The space was turned into a local celebratory centre. At the school's entrance a stage had been erected from which community and school

representatives delivered their greetings and speeches. Tables with coffee and pastry had been erected in the corners of the school ground, and additional benches had been put out for people to sit and relax in the company of their families and friends. Still, this did not diminish primary function of the place: it was used as a proper playground, since for many the time there was spent running around with children from one play activity to another. That was also the case with the Sverkelis. Hopping around in her colourful "bunad", accompanied by Aina's cheering and attention, the granddaughter tried them all: from the lucky dip to ball shooting, bowling, running through tyres and taking part in the sack race. As a reward for taking part in these contests she received small gifts, which she selected with care, a procedure which conveyed to her that there was something very special about this visit to her usual playground.

The time came when the Sverkelis would make their celebration sphere a tighter and more private one. Aina's sister had invited them over for the May 17<sup>th</sup> lunch, a meal organized for a group of 15 extended family members. On her sister's balcony Aina and Lars and their hosts enjoyed a welcome drink of aquavit and the views of the green hills of Midtun, all sprinkled with the red, white and blue colours of the national flag in neighbouring gardens. The red, white and blue were highly prominent all over the dining room: ribbons layed on the tablecloth, candles, fresh flowers in vases, napkins, everything bore the national colours. And the guests' high expectations of the festive table were fulfilled; the food was delicious and the choice of meal just right – traditional specialties befitting the celebration: sour cream porridge, cured ham, pretzels and many other delicacies.



Finally, it was time to go home, to take down the Norwegian flag and take off the “bunad”. The Sverkelis did not attend the official closing ceremony in the city centre, the torch parade from Bergenhus Fortress to the Festplassen Square, and the fireworks at 11 pm. To them, the day felt quite complete and both were very pleased. They had enjoyed all the things they considered important to celebrate May 17<sup>th</sup>: “bunad” costumes, parades, spring greenery, national songs, special meals for the occasion. They celebrated Norway’s birthday, they said, and all of these elements could be defined as the usual May 17<sup>th</sup> décor. But for Aina and Lars the celebrations also had a very private face, and nothing could spoil the joy of being at home and among friends and loved ones on May 17<sup>th</sup>, not even having an outsider, a curious scholar, over for lunch.

#### **Which past is remembered on Constitution Day?**

Nowadays there is an opinion, especially among the younger generations, that May 17<sup>th</sup> is not about pointing to the nation’s greatness and its past. They see the celebrations as an innovative and unrepeatable phenomenon open to a variety of meanings and including practices so diverse that they cannot be squeezed into a single framework. Also, local and regional identities expressed through the celebrations are frequently described as dominant in comparison to the sense of national belonging. Since each participant creates his or her individual May 17<sup>th</sup>, this view clearly agrees with their ways of making the day happen. However, for many of the people I talked to, representing a number of different generations, remembrance and a national dimension also play a significant role in

the celebrations, even if it was hard to notice at first. One of my female informants in her forties explained to me when telling me about her private experience of the celebrations in 2005, that this incorporation of the national dimension is something the participants don’t pay much attention to: “When it comes to the celebrations, the national aspect can somehow be read between the lines everywhere, even if it is never expressed.” Barbro Blehr reasons along the same lines when analysing the ways in which the participants of the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations grasp the national dimension:

To sum up, national dimensions are, if not always articulated, then at least close at hand when people are encouraged to reflect upon the meanings of the celebrations. Thus, we might well conclude that a successful mediation of the national is taking place on Constitution Day. When people engage, once a year, in the activities in the previous section, they confirm in a most agreeable way that the Norwegian community exists, and that they are themselves part of it (Blehr 1999:37).

Reminiscences of the past were very numerous and multilayered at the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations: some were very personal, as memories of specific family history or of individual experiences of previous celebrations; some were in relation to official narratives of national history, through which the cohesion of the Norwegian community is accomplished. Within this set of social memories not only motifs related to 1814, the year of the drafting of the new constitution at Eidsvoll, were noticeable at the celebrations. Numerous narratives and motifs, such as the stage shaped like the

Viking ship “Olav Kyrre” evoking the Viking era, were present. Victims and heroes of the Second World War were also evoked. Prominent scientists, artists, politicians and activists from different historical periods who contributed significantly to the Norwegian community were constantly drawn to people’s attention. This year’s special *Centenary* award was won by a group impersonating cyclists from the turn of the century. On the other hand, there were hardly any themes evoking the period during which Norway was subject to Danish and Swedish rule. So, what kind of common Norwegian past is evoked through the festivities? Judging from the historical episodes highlighted and considered to be notorious, we may conclude that the past remembered at the contemporary Constitution Day celebrations have neither fixed temporal determinants nor a chronological line. It is the glorious past that societies remember in their realms of memory.

## Notes

1. I conducted my fieldwork in May, June and September of 2005. My previous knowledge of Norwegian society and their Constitution Day celebrations was limited: I had learnt about them through the general historical and ethnological literature available to me in Croatian libraries, through the media and the Internet, particularly through the web page of the May 17<sup>th</sup> Committee and through my contact with fellow ethnologists from Bergen and Kristiansand.
2. Since I have no command of the Norwegian language, parts of this book were translated to me by Kirsti Mathiesen Hjemdahl.
3. Aina and Lars Sverkeli have given their consent to the use of their real names in the article.
4. My fieldwork focused on Committee members and the Sverkeli family. Using phenomenologically inspired methodology, I studied their movements on the eve of, during and after the celebration. I also conducted interviews with them on several occasions (the first carried out with two Committee members and the Sverkeli during my short stay in Bergen in 2004, seven months before the celebrations). I also conducted short interviews with nine other informants

after May 17<sup>th</sup>, asking them to give an account of their experiences, impressions and attitudes towards the celebration. All live in Bergen; six of them are female; they belong to different generations, ranging from secondary school pupils and students via people in their thirties and forties employed in the private and public sectors, to senior citizens. I had no opportunity to talk to someone who refrain from celebrating, although I am sure that this attitude would shed additional light on the May 17<sup>th</sup> celebrations.

5. I took part at the following events: I walked with the Committee members for the morning parade across the city centre; I had breakfast at Hotel Norge with the Sverkeli; I watched the main and the flag parades from the Blue Stone together with the jury members; I attended the choir concert at the Town Hall in the company of Aina Sverkeli; I spent the afternoon at Kringelbotn school playground in Midtun with the Sverkeli; I joined the May 17<sup>th</sup> lunch prepared at the house of Aina’s sister; I participated in the torch parade and in the closing ceremony at Festplassen, studying the activities of the Committee members.
6. Still, some variants of traditional costumes are defined as more “national”, or more widely recognized. Such is the case, for instance, with the bunad from the Hardanger region, which is considered one of the most representative Norwegian symbols within the diasporic community of central Texas, USA (Pierson 2006:247).
7. I watched the play at Hop school before May 17<sup>th</sup> celebration, in the company of Aina and Lars. I interviewed the stage director and some of the actors about the production and its objectives.

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