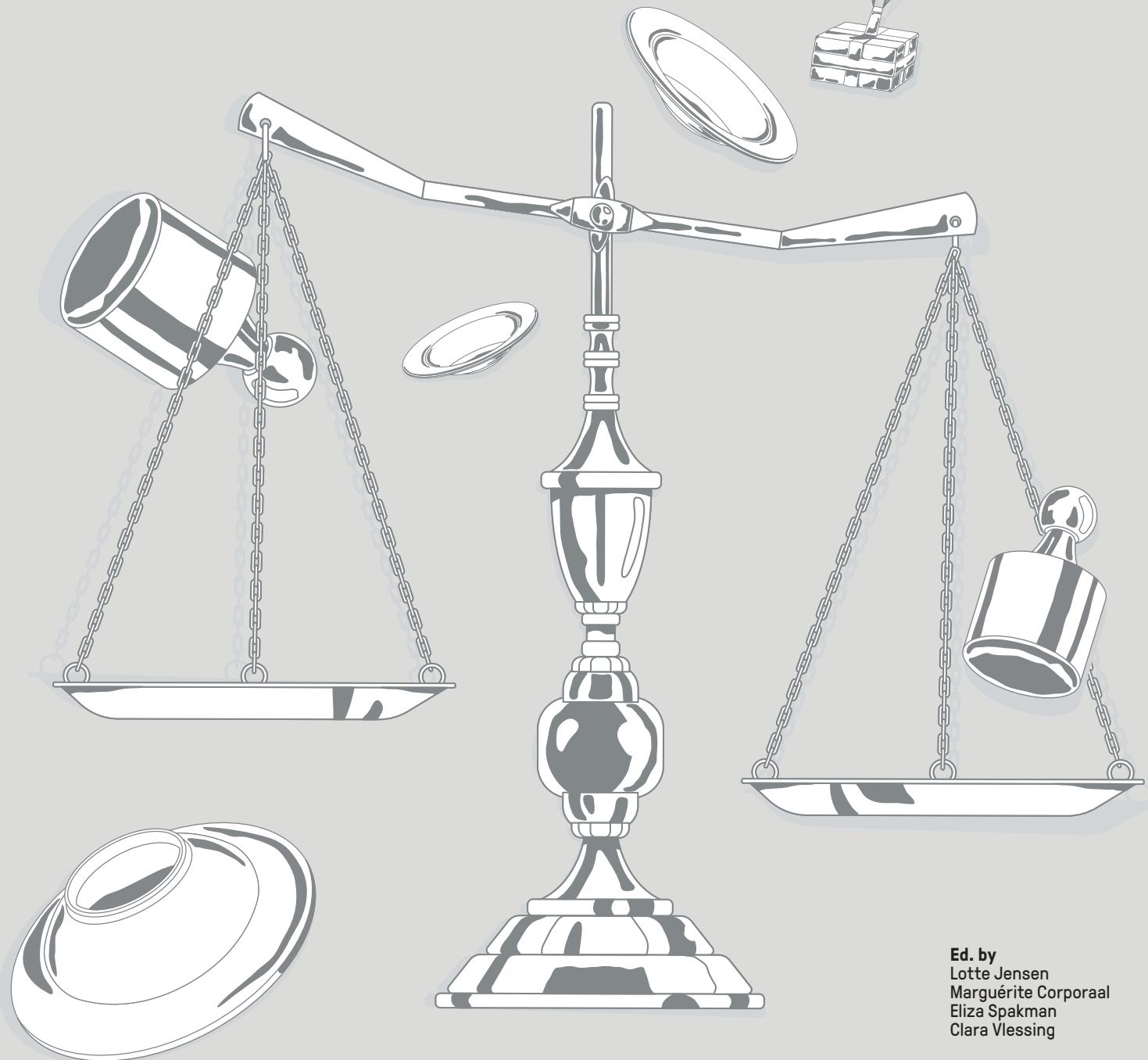


# Famine Legacies as Living Pasts

Experiences and Recommendations



**Ed. by**  
Lotte Jensen  
Marguérite Corporaal  
Eliza Spakman  
Clara Vlessing

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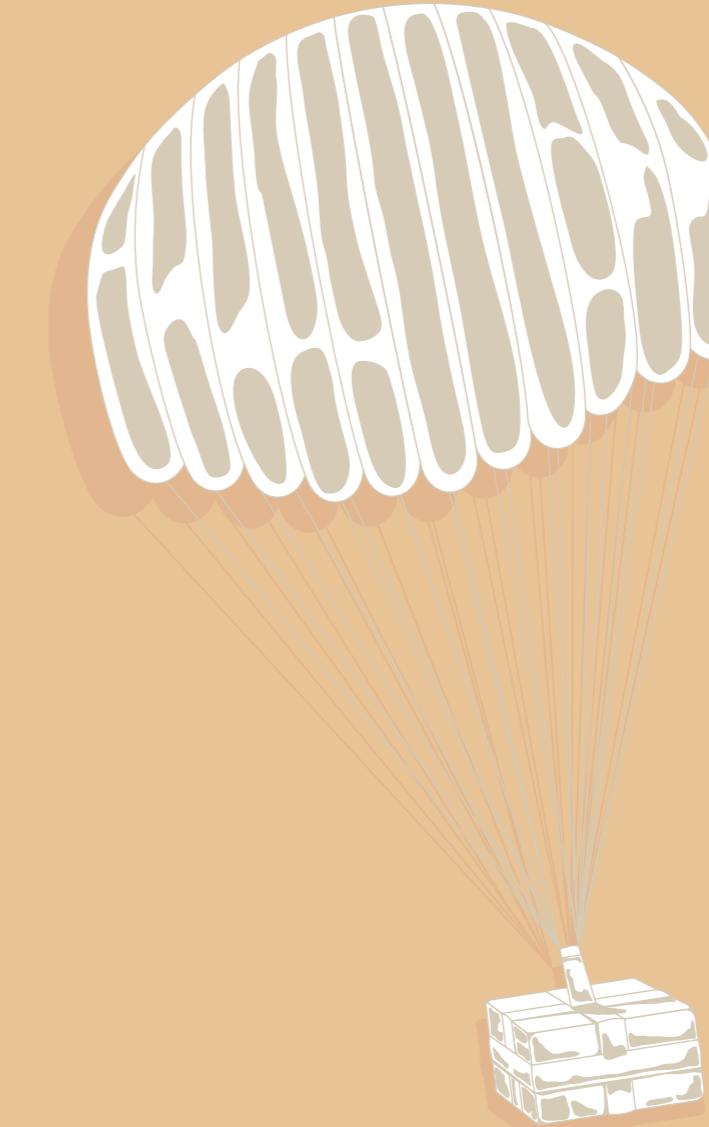
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# Foreword

Famine is a topical issue. Consider, for example, the present situation in Sudan, Gaza, Yemen and the Horn of Africa. Human lives are at stake in these places because of a lack of food and restricted access to clean drinking water.



Such famines also occurred in the past. The team of the *Heritages of Hunger* project have spent the last five years researching the traces that European famines have left in collective memory. We studied famines from the nineteenth and twentieth Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Ukraine, Russia and Spain.

These famines are part of Europe's living past. Their effects may no longer be tangible or visible but they are still at the heart of our societies. As a result of the war between Russia and Ukraine, for example, the commemoration of the Holodomor (the famine in Ukraine caused by Soviet land policies in the years 1932–33) has taken on a different meaning.

Growing poverty in Spain has recently led to a resurgence of memories of the years of famine (1939–1952). The shared past can be both a source of conflict and inspiration. Famines can divide communities but can also bring them more closely together.

Our project was based on two principles. First, our focus was on an international and comparative perspective. Usually famine remembrance takes place in national contexts, but the transnational framework of the project makes clear that famines form a common European past. Second, we wanted to share our scientific knowledge with a wider audience. To this end, we undertook a variety of activities.

Among other things, we organised public events, created a digital exhibition and developed teaching materials for primary and secondary schools.

This brochure shares our experiences of these outreach activities. We go into the findings of the project and bring together recommendations for teaching, commemorating and musealising famines in the public sphere. Hunger is a complex theme that is hard to translate into public activities. This brochure starts with the question: what should employees in the cultural sector, the museum world, teachers and governments take into account?

We would like to thank all those who worked on the Heritages of Hunger project: Martijn Bentum, Anne-Lise Bobeldijk, Charley Boerman, Giulia Bruna, Chris Cusack, Lindsay Jansen, Deborah Madden, Helmi Moret, Anne van Mourik, Gloria Román Ruiz, Eliza Spakman and Clara Vlessing.

Nijmegen, 10 November 2024.

Marguérite Corporaal, Lotte Jensen and Ingrid de Zwart

Radboud University & Wageningen University & Research

# Heritages of Hunger

In 2019, we launched the project *Heritages of Hunger: Societal Reflections on Past European Famines in Education, Commemoration and Musealisation*.

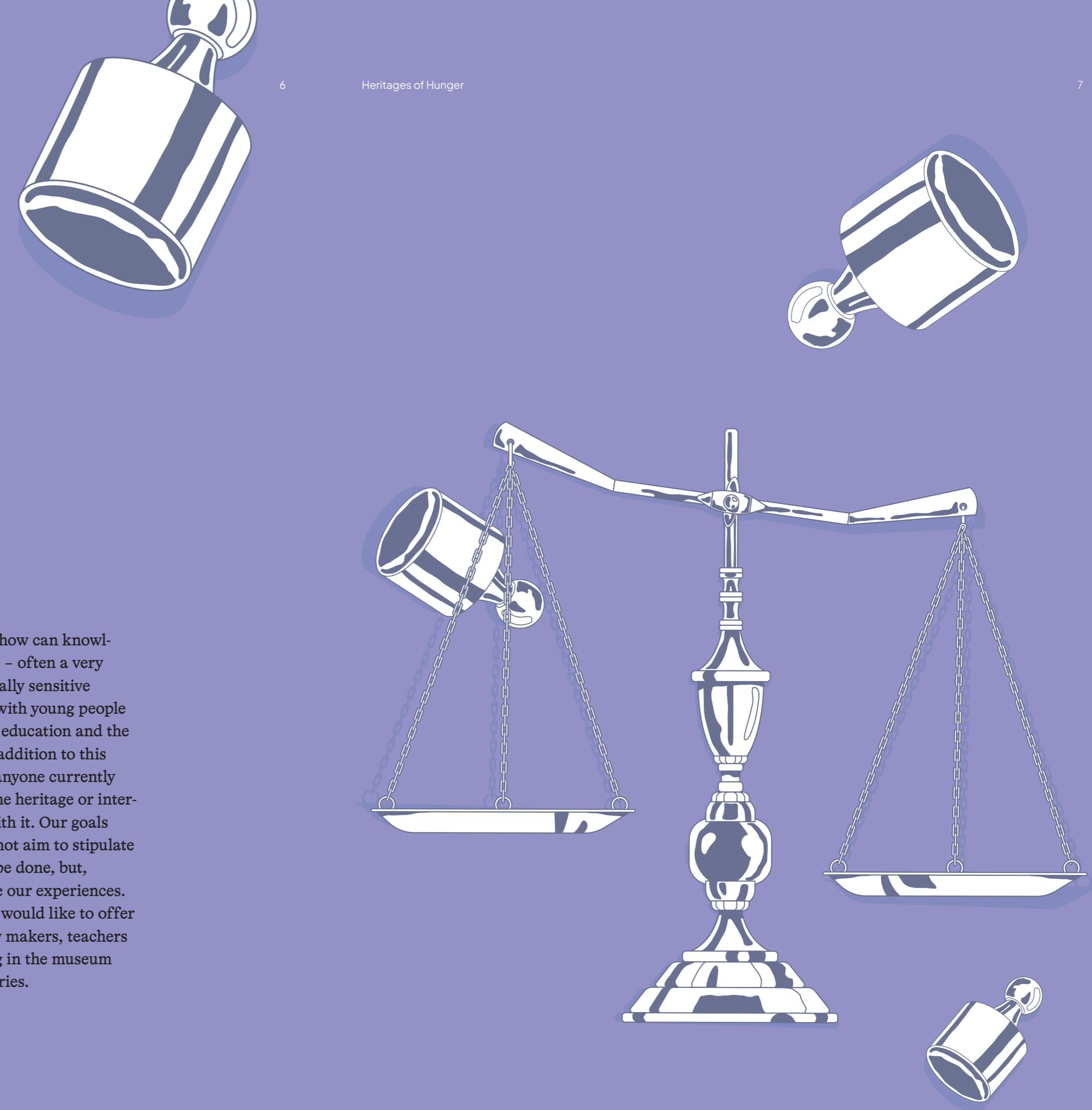
Within this project, we have researched the ways in which the memories of European famines live on to today. We were particularly interested in the role culture and education play in these processes of transgenerational dissemination.

Central questions were therefore: how are famine memories passed on to new generations through education, the museum sector and other cultural expressions? What roles do statues, movies, literature, commemorations and other cultural rituals play in the transfer of knowledge about famine pasts? And what lessons for today can we learn from famine legacies?

Finally, we wanted to share our knowledge with the wider public.

We have not only done research into famine memory cultures, but have also contributed to (re)activating knowledge about famines by creating a public repository and developing educational materials. In this brochure, we will give an impression of our project and our activities. We do this in the form of interviews and

recommendations: how can knowledge about famines – often a very charged and politically sensitive theme – be shared with young people and adults through education and the cultural sector? In addition to this we offer advice to anyone currently working with famine heritage or interested in working with it. Our goals are modest: we do not aim to stipulate how things should be done, but, rather, simply share our experiences. In that manner, we would like to offer some tools to policy makers, teachers and people working in the museum and cultural industries.



**THE PROJECT**

Famines belong to the living past of Europe. They might not be tangible or visible, but they strongly reverberate through our societies. Sometimes, memories are reactivated by current political circumstances. Take the Holodomor in Ukraine, for example. This famine was the result of Stalin's political policies and is once again receiving attention as a result of Ukraine's war with Russia. Or, think of the Spanish famine during Franco's regime. It has recently begun to receive renewed attention when Spain was confronted with growing poverty because, once again, people were queuing for food banks.

The project *Heritages of Hunger* focused on eleven periods of famine in particular (in chronological order):

Ireland	1845–1849
Belgium	1845–1848
Nederland	1845–1848
Finland	1866–1868
Germany	1914–1924
Ukraine	1932–1933
Spain	1939–1952
Russia	1941–1944
Greece	1941–1944
The Netherlands	1944–1945
Germany	1945–1949

In the project we looked at the ways in which memories of these famines live on to this very day. In doing so, we focused primarily on the roles of education and culture. How is the past represented and how is it made accessible to a wider public? What contemporary political, social, ecological and economic interests play a role in this? We considered both educational practices in formal education (classroom practices in primary and secondary schools), as well as informal forms of education and knowledge transfer (such as exhibitions, commemorations, statues, literature, movies).



Famines are not only a part of our living past, but also of our collective past. Even though these eleven famines took place in distinctive socio-economic, political and historical contexts, we want to show that they share important similarities. First of all, they emerged from similar circumstances, such as war, oppression or agricultural crises. Secondly, these episodes are often marginalised in national historical narratives. Historians and cultural producers prefer to emphasise heroic stories, such as episodes of rebellion and liberation. Thirdly, where these famine pasts are remembered, it is mainly within national frameworks.

For that reason, the project team has deliberately chosen to adopt international and comparative perspectives. An example is the Great Irish Famine of 1845–1849. A fungus (*phytophthora infestans*) infected the potatoes, destroying the majority of crops.

Over a million people in Ireland died because of a lack of food. Although this famine is mostly remembered within Irish national frameworks, it was actually a more extensive European disaster. Many other countries were also affected by the potato pestilence and hunger, including the Netherlands and Belgium. By emphasising connective threads in European history, we try to prevent politicisation and polarisation. Famines might be used to divide communities but they are equally capable of connecting people. The memory of a difficult past has the potential to increase collective awareness of vulnerability. These historical connections reveal the pasts that Europeans share and that unite them.



## Interview

# Caroilín Callery

Caroilín Callery has a background in theatre, as she specialised in educational theatre for primary school students. She is currently involved in educational outreach about the Great Irish Famine at the National Famine Museum and in the development of the National Famine Way.



### HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH THE NATIONAL FAMINE MUSEUM?

My father set up the National Famine Museum. In recent years, I've been involved in Strokestown Park, working on its educational outreach, and specifically on the development of the National Famine Way. The Way took the history and the story of people during the famine outside the walls of the museum. With a group of volunteers and museum staff we literally walked 165 kilometres from the west to the east of the country, to Dublin; the same route covered by Strokestown's tenants to their emigrant ship. The track passes through communities along the banks of the Royal Canal, where 1490 of our emigrants from Strokestown walked in 1847.

### WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS THE VALUE OF EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT HISTORICAL FAMINES?

One of the most important things is that there is not much point in telling a story of historical trauma in a way that falls on deaf ears. It's really important to acknowledge that there are still famines. There is still migration. There are still integration issues around migration.

The Irish famine was probably one of the largest migrations ever to happen or be recorded. It has left a diaspora of 70 million who have integrated in almost every country around the world. These people have obtained functions in all professions and are hugely valuable in their new societies. I think it's incumbent on us to shine

a light on what little lessons we can learn, how we can help, and how we can share stories in a way that will show understanding or empathy in relation to the same situation as it recurs in other countries in the modern world today.

### WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS IN THIS?

I think really good educational programmes, like the one *Heritages of Hunger* is developing for schools, with relevant material and a good design, are necessary. In Ireland, when I was in school, there was no education around the famine. There were no museums around the Great Irish Famine in the late 80s and early 90s.

The 150th anniversary really was a watershed. The Famine Museum in Strokestown opened in 1994, which was a seminal heritage project for telling the story of the famine years. It was inspired by initiatives taken by diaspora communities abroad, who had already been instrumental in the creation of commemoration sculptures.

Since then, the education around the famine at every level has grown exponentially and that is still ongoing. The first decade, from the mid-nineties to mid-naughties, was quite delicate, as the peace process was happening in Northern-Ireland. There was one strong school of genocidal theories, which blamed the British government for the disaster, which a lot of people stepped back from. Then from the

mid-noughties to 2016, there was a huge amount of academic rigour that came into play. More complex and less stereotypical angles on the Great Irish Famine showed it to be much more complicated at a number of levels, as historical events always are.

Over the past eight or nine years, there has been a huge explosion of cultural interest, across all genres, in the famine. For example, Declan O'Rourke, a young folk singer, brought out an album *Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine*. There've been a number of really big novels. There was *Black '47*, the movie, as well as *Arracht*. There was the opera that was on in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

The National Famine Way has a full educational document available to schools. It was put onto the primary school curriculum in Ireland for fifth and sixth classes (ages 10–12). It starts with the reading of Marita Conlon McKenna's *Under the Hawthorn Tree*. Most adults in Ireland will know her name and remember the story from that book from their own primary school education.

When we engage with schools, there is a huge interest. There's a huge appetite for material. I think the challenge is for this material to not become set. It should not be the same teaching programme every year. The connection to the current day situation is really important. And that is a part of any of the educational programmes we learn. I think, educationally, Ireland

has come a long way over the last 15 or 20 years in reclaiming the Famine past; and, artistically, it's beginning to feature for a lot of younger artists.

**WOULD YOU SAY THAT THERE IS MORE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE GREAT FAMINE AND OTHER EUROPEAN FAMINES NOW WITHIN IRELAND?**

There is not a great awareness in Ireland of other European famines; there is very little knowledge about this. And that's what I really loved about the *Heritages of Hunger* project. It stood outside of nationality and moved to issues of humanitarianism: how this happens, why it happens, and deeper into what this means for what levels of society, how do people react, who helped and who didn't help, and why did they help? An approach that is not just about being European, but being human.

Nobody leaves everything they know and love, or the language they know, or the profession they had unless there's a really good reason. For that reason, I just find it very difficult to see some of the reactions to events today. The first year we did the Famine Way, we walked to Dublin. On the second day, I got a phone call to say that a ship had overturned in the Mediterranean off the coast of Italy and that 600 people had drowned. And I knew that close to 600 of our 1490 met a similar kind of watery grave. That brings the past very close.

**THAT'S HARROWING. THIS IS ALSO ONE OF THE VALUES OF EDUCATING ABOUT FAMINES MORE WIDELY AND TRANSNATIONALLY. WE USE THE WORD 'EUROPEAN' FAMINES, BUT IT IS SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS ALL OVER THE GLOBE AND IT SHOWS PART OF WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN.**

Oh, I think that issue is at the heart of it.

**AT THE HEART OF FAMINE EDUCATION, YOU MEAN?**

Yes. Educationally, a lot of countries in Europe had the same experience – it was not just an Irish experience. It might help to connect us as Europeans and to build that sense of being on the planet together. That's an important part of this project as well.

**YOU SAID THAT MAKING THINGS COME TO LIFE IS ONE WAY OF MAKING PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHAT IT'S LIKE TO EXPERIENCE THIS.**

The reenactments we do are always quite powerful. When we do the walk, we do it in costume. That makes an enormous difference in letting onlookers connect to the story. When we met the schools, I was speaking in character, as Mary Tye, who had five children with her, saying: "I'm carrying the baby. My children haven't had breakfast. Did you have breakfast this morning? Imagine being here and not having had breakfast." You could just see the looks on the childrens' faces going: "What? Not having breakfast?" It is simple little things to help children understand.

**DO YOU HAVE ONE SPECIFIC OR CONCRETE RECOMMENDATION FOR EDUCATORS ON FAMINE?**

Yes, use the arts. Use role play, use something physical, or put together social media posts around famine. I think it is a very powerful medium, specifically in relation to something that people can perceive as historical. I think it is also very central to connect past famines to the current day.

**IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD ?**

I have been delighted to be part of the *Heritages of Hunger* consortium. I think it's hugely valuable to step outside national boundaries and to contrast events across time. I will definitely make people aware of that when going forward. It has been amazing to be part of this journey!

## Interview

# Anne Lahtinen

Anne Lahtinen has had several functions at the Finnish Labour Museum Werstas in Finland. She has worked as Head of Visitor Services and as Head of Exhibitions. She currently works there as the Museum Educator

### COULD YOU TELL A BIT MORE ABOUT THE MUSEUM?

The Finnish Labour Museum is a national museum specialised in the history of working people and work in Finland, but also in social history. We focus on the history of Finland from the point of view of ordinary people and in particular from the point of view of poor people, marginalised people and different kinds of social movements like the labour movement, the peace movement, environmental movement, and LGBT+ points of view. Our museum is situated in Tampere, Finland. In the scale of Finnish cities, it is quite a large city, in the middle of the country. Tampere is an old industrial city. Our museum is situated in one of the old factories that used to operate here.

### COULD YOU TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT HOW FAMINE FEATURES IN THE MUSEUM?

In Finland, the Great Hunger Years have been quite neglected. In our national story, they are not as important as the Civil War which took place during the First World War in 1918. That is the main tragedy in our national history. People expect to find more about this event when they come to the Labour Museum, because the civil war is strongly associated with the labour movement.

We have not dealt with the Finnish famine much in my museum. There are practical reasons for that. Not many photos or museum artefacts survive which tell the stories of the Great Hunger Years. There are actually just three or four photos in Finland and

maybe a few artefacts that focus on the making of emergency food. So, there is not much to show. But when we participated in this *Heritages of Hunger* project, we soon started creating a new main exhibition for our museum.

### WHAT DOES THE EXHIBITION LOOK LIKE?

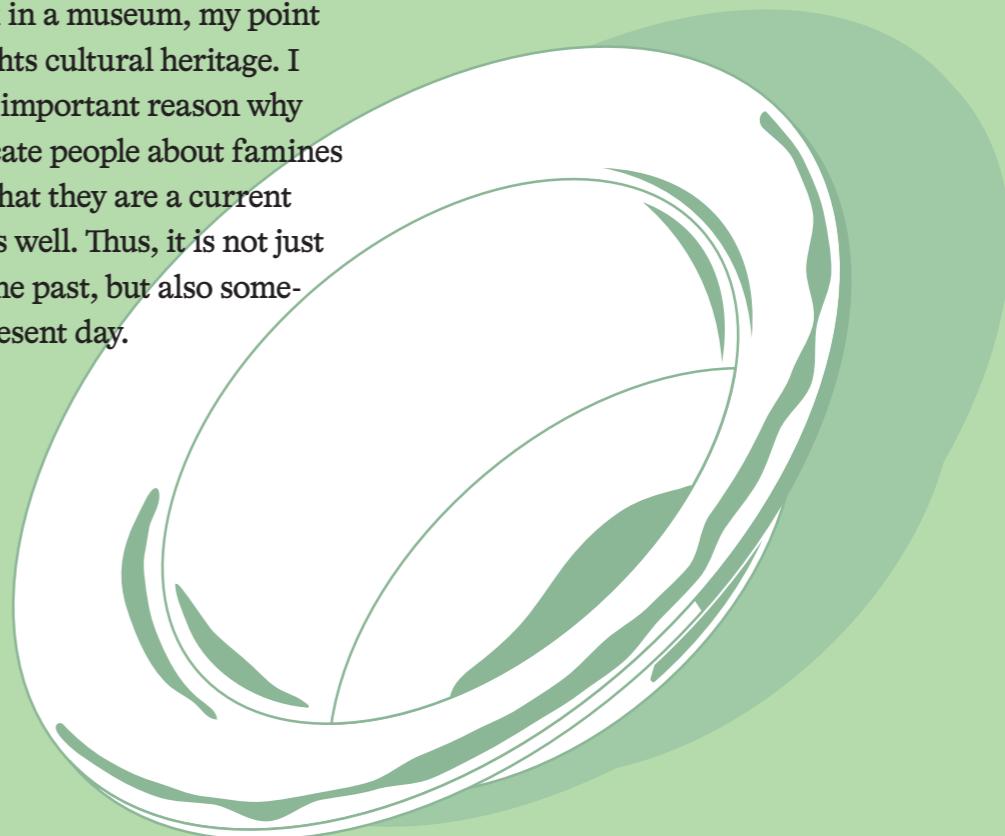
The new exhibition is called ‘The United’ and, because of *Heritages of Hunger*, we decided to start the exhibition with the Great Hunger Years as a kind of entry point to our national history. We have been lucky enough to find a few photos and objects that tell visitors about the lives of ordinary people in the 1860s.

### WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS THE VALUE OF EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT HISTORIC FAMINES?

Because I work in a museum, my point of view highlights cultural heritage. I think the most important reason why we should educate people about famines and hunger is that they are a current phenomenon as well. Thus, it is not just something of the past, but also something of our present day.

### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR YOU AT THE MUSEUM?

From the Finnish perspective, the main problem is that we do not have any photos or artefacts. The hunger years happened so long ago that it is understandable that we do not have those kinds of materials. I think the most difficult constraint is our national curriculum. There are an incredible number of subjects that children have to learn in primary and secondary school. So, the amount of time they have for dealing with hunger is only a few minutes. It depends on a teacher if she or he is interested in teaching about hunger.



Of course, we can make exhibitions. We have the Holodomor exhibition at the moment, for example, and I have made bulletins for the local schools in our area. But to my knowledge, so far none of the schools have visited this exhibition. It's not so easy to get schools to come to museums and to use the exhibitions we have as a learning environment.

**WHAT ARE SOME WAYS IN WHICH THESE CHALLENGES CAN BE OVERCOME?**

One of the most important things is that our museum is free for everyone. Our prices for guided tours are quite reasonable. And we usually have some free guided tours with a museum educator for schools and for vocational schools. We are interested in professional vocational schools and the people who are studying in them. For example, I just heard that this Friday one group is coming to test the learning materials from *Heritages of Hunger* in our Holodomor exhibition and in our 'United' exhibition. So, this is a great collaboration.

Another way is always having some online materials. During the Heritages of Hunger project, we collaborated with the Kuopio Historical Museum, who were also consortium partners in this project. Together, we made a learning package about the hunger experiences in Finland, which is completely free and available online for any educator who wants to use it. One challenge is always to find ways to get people to notice these kinds of materials.

**WOULD YOU BE ABLE TO GIVE ONE SPECIFIC OR CONCRETE RECOMMENDATION TO EDUCATORS TEACHING OR PRESENTING ON FAMINE?**

I would say it's always most beneficial if you can use some real examples. Use real people, use real material, use real experiences. The magic of museums is that we have real objects. They are connected to some kind of story, and people can actually see them. They can even touch or smell them. It is proof of a past that really happened.

We can create a space where you can feel historical empathy and where you can relate to people from the past. And we can think about our own lived experiences. For example, what would I have felt, or what would I do in that kind of situation? Do I have similar situations happening in my life?

**DO YOU WANT TO ADD ANYTHING?**

One of the most valuable things in this project has been the networks and collaborations that have evolved from it. Our new exhibition about the Holodomor could not have happened without the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC, Toronto). They gave us all kinds of materials and photographs to display!

## Interview

# Iryna Mycak

Iryna Mycak has over 20 years of experience in raising awareness about the Holodomor (1932-33). She is currently chair of the National Holodomor Awareness Committee of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, as well as a member of the International Holodomor Awareness and Recognition Committee of the Ukrainian World Congress. She is also connected to the Holodomor Education and Research Consortium.

### **WHAT IS THE VALUE OF EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT HISTORICAL FAMINES?**

The value lies in helping people understand the significance of those histories and their relationship to today. Often there are deliberate intents behind these famines, food is often used as a weapon and awareness of that is critical. We see that happening today. People often do not want to talk about history because it is in the past. But compare it to a medical researcher who cannot focus on a cure if he doesn't know the root of a disease. It is the same with our history.

### **WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH RAISING AWARENESS ON THE HOLODOMOR?**

It's a very slow process. I have been at this work for 20 years now and I see progress. You may not see it from year

to year, but constantly talking about it and finding new ways to approach the subject matter makes a difference. People are much more willing to explore the subject of the Holodomor these days. It is important to make correlations for people between the past and the present. Unfortunately, today we can still see similarities between 1933 and 2024.

### **WHAT IN YOUR EXPERIENCE ARE THE CHALLENGES OF EDUCATING PEOPLE ON FAMINES?**

The challenges are bringing it into the present for people, finding ways to help people understand that by being more knowledgeable, they can be more productive, more effective, wherever they live, even just locally. I look at it this way: everything I do, everything

we all do collectively, is a drop in the bucket that will eventually be filled.

### **HOW WOULD YOU OVERCOME THOSE CHALLENGES?**

Education is key here, because children need to learn at a young age about these famines. It needs to be included in their curricula. Currently, they are not. Famines do not seem to be woven into broader history subjects, which would be a starting point for overcoming this. One of the benefits we have now is that we have tools at our disposal that we never had before to reach people. We can figure out how to reach young people, for example, through video games. So, the more creative we can be, the better off we will be.

### **FINALLY, THEN, DO YOU HAVE ONE SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION FOR EDUCATORS WHO ARE WORKING ON FAMINES?**

Don't give up! And I would say be creative. We have a variety of means available to us, so we have to find many ways to deliver the message. Be bold and be creative and tell the stories that need to be told.



# Activities

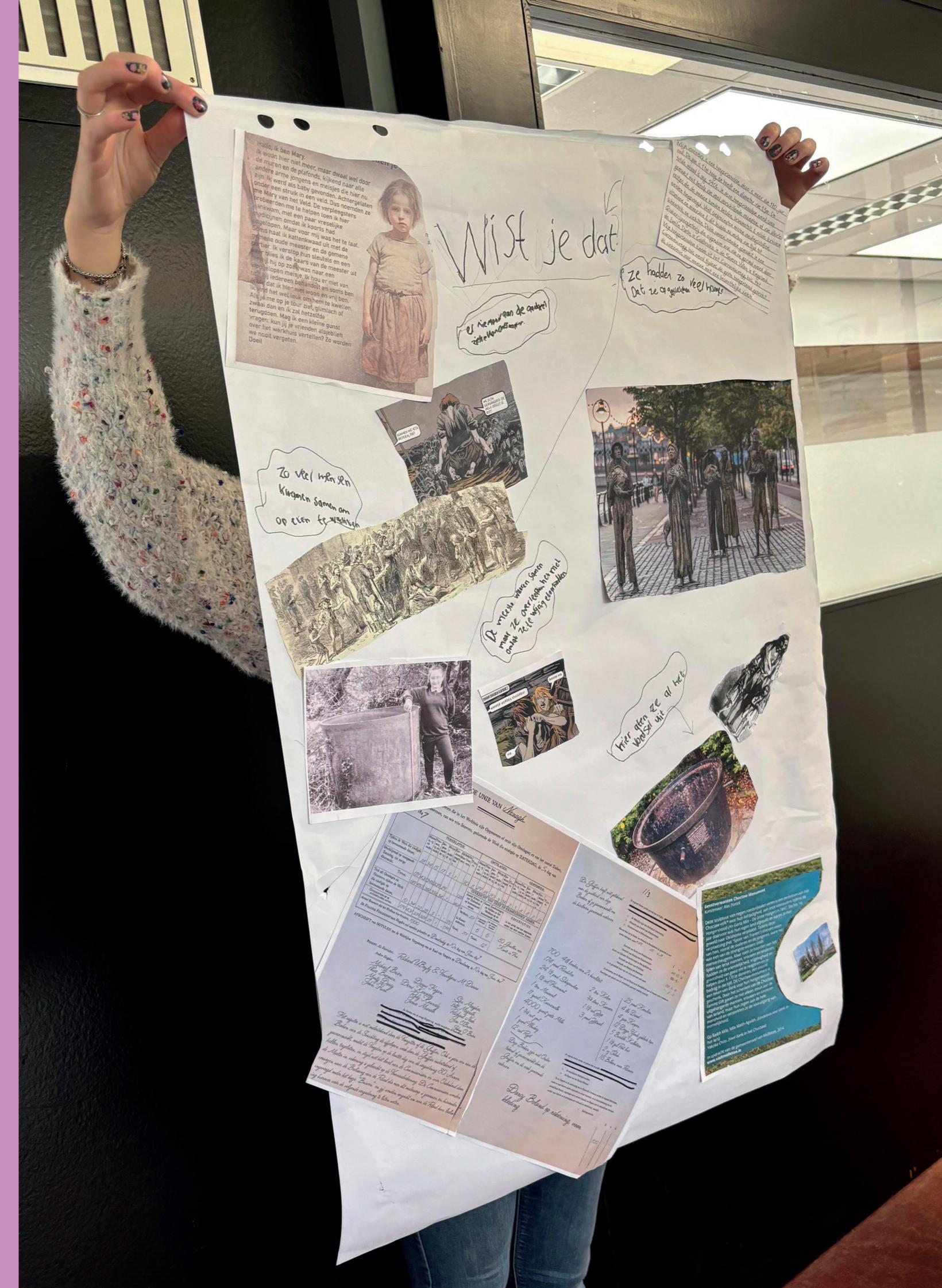
In the *Heritages of Hunger* project, we have not only conducted academic research (see ‘Further Reading’ for some of the publications), but we have also developed activities to make this shared history accessible to a wider public of academics, policy makers, teachers and people working in the cultural sector. Below are descriptions of these activities.

## **DATABASE**

With the help of data specialists, we developed a public repository of source material (<https://hunger.rich.ru.nl/>). For every famine, it includes sources from the time of the event as well as from its cultural remembrance (including novels, books, films, tv-series, monuments, objects). Users can search these source materials in a variety of ways: by country, by theme, by period, by genre, by age, for example. Consequently, points of connection between the different famines become visible. For example, the theme ‘mother and child’, ‘poverty’, or ‘rebellion’ appear to continuously return in new forms. This repository is useful for several groups: amongst others, academics, teachers, people working in the museum industry who are

looking for relevant sources, artists and NGOs.

In collaboration with the NIOD (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies) Anne van Mourik and Lindsay Janssen developed a podcast about the influence of current events on the memory cultures around famines. Researchers from *Heritages of Hunger* entered into dialogue with experts from the academic and educational spheres. The Holodomor (Ukraine) and the Años del Hambre (Spain) are the famines mainly discussed in this podcast. The podcast is part of a general series produced by the NIOD (NIOD Rewind), which means it is well-embedded and easily findable.



**DIGITAL EXHIBITION**

In collaboration with design agency HOAX, and under the leadership of Charley Boerman (curator), we created a digital exhibition (<https://heritage-sofhunger.org/>). This exhibition has an educational function. Through a question and answer game, the visitor gradually learns more about famine, both generally and about the eleven aforementioned famines researched in the project in particular. The (English) exhibition aims at a public of around 16 years of age and works through a ‘six-course menu’. Every course addresses a different theme:

**Course 1  
WHAT CAUSES FAMINES?**

**Course 2  
WHO SUFFERS MOST?**

**Course 3  
WHAT TO EAT?**

**Course 4  
WHY RESPOND?**

**Course 5  
WHERE TO SURVIVE?**

**Course 6  
WHAT NOW?**

The historical knowledge in every ‘course’ is connected to current political themes. At the end of each course, the visitor is given a concise overview of the knowledge they have acquired.

**LESSON SERIES FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

A kit for teachers of primary school children (ages 11–12) was developed in collaboration with the WKRU (the Science Hub of the Radboud University). This series contains two lessons. The first is concerned with the Great Irish famine and the Dutch Hunger Winter. The second is an extra lesson to deepen understanding and addresses the nineteenth-century famine in the Netherlands and Belgium. Both lessons consist of a short introduction (also available digitally) and teaching kits. The teaching kits are made up of materials that allow students to work independently. At the end of the first lesson, students present a poster about the knowledge they have gained. The second lesson ends with a creative exercise encouraging students to design their own famine monument.

**LESSON SERIES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL WORKERS**

The project team also developed a lesson series that can be used by teachers in secondary education, as well as by people working in the educational industry (museums, knowledge institutes, etc.). There are six modules, most of which contain two or three lessons. Generally, these cover the same themes as the digital exhibition. The lesson series is unique



in that it deliberately uses an international and comparative perspective that is different from traditional teaching methods. Furthermore, there is relatively much attention for the role of cultural media, such as statues, commemorations, literature, and movies.

**COLUMNS AND OPINION PIECES**

Through columns and opinion pieces in national (weekly or daily) newspapers, members of the project team have actively contributed to public discussions about famine. Current events (for example, famines in Gaza, the Horn of Africa, and Sudan, or the commemoration of the second World War in the Netherlands) formed the basis of these media contributions. The aim here was to provide public

debates with some nuance and depth by offering historical perspectives.

**PUBLIC EVENTS IN MUSEUMS**

The project team has organised several freely accessible public events. For example, events were organised in the Verzetsmuseum in Amsterdam, the Valkhof Museum in Nijmegen, the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp, and the Kuopio Museum in Finland. Public screenings of an Irish famine movie and a documentary on Holodomor at local cinemas in Toronto were organised in collaboration with Canada Ireland Foundation and HREC (Holodomor Research and Education Consortium).



## Interview

# Charley Boerman & Ingrid de Zwart

Ingrid de Zwart is an Assistant Professor at Wageningen University and was one of the co-applicants of the *Heritages of Hunger project*. Her research within the project focuses on the Dutch Hunger Winter of 1944-45. Charley Boerman was a PhD candidate in the project. She focused on the cultural memory of three famines, the Finnish famine of the 1860s, the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33, and the Greek famine during World War II, 1941-44

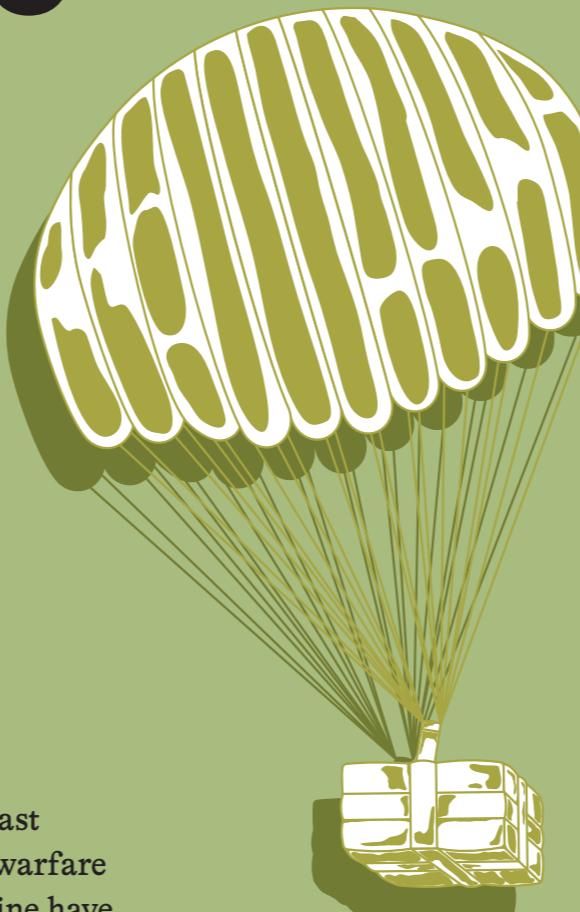
### WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS THE VALUE IN EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT HISTORIC FAMINES?

**CHARLEY:** Focusing on European famines combats this association of famine with certain areas of the world and not with others. In the present day, famines are much more likely to occur in the Global South but this investigation into the heritage of European famines highlights that famine is a quite recent part of the European experience.

**INGRID:** Firstly, famine is an important part of our modern European history.

It is part of our darker past connected to periods of warfare or crises. Periods of famine have significantly shaped the continent itself - not just in terms of its demographic impact but also the longer term political, social, and economic consequences of famine. Secondly, the background to the Heritage of Hunger project is that famine is a shared European past: it is not something that just occurred within one national context. In our project, we have identified a lot of similarities or parallels between experiences of famine. Thirdly, we

considered the longer-term legacies and how they function today. We have uncovered the various ways in which famines still play an important role. Not just in education, but also in political and societal debates, how communities and countries engage with each other.



**CHARLEY:** Through our studies of past famines, we hope that people and organisations recognise famines in the present and maybe intervene before they escalate. Famines are far from being confined to the past. Climate induced famines are only going to happen more often, so it is an important topic to understand.

**INGRID:** It is also important to educate people about famines because there are still so many misconceptions about their causes and consequences. It is like the exhibition that Charley made, which addresses the idea that famines are the result of natural disasters or collateral damage, for example. Those misconceptions are still there in relation to past European famines and are crucial to

understanding the persistence of famines today.

### WHAT DO YOU SEE AS SOME OF THE CHALLENGES AND THE CONSTRAINTS IN EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT FAMINES?

**INGRID:** Those misconceptions about famines are an important challenge. One of the things that we found is that there is still a gap between knowledge and insights from scholarly research and the translation of these insights into educational practices.

### COULD YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF THAT GAP?

**INGRID:** When we looked at history textbooks about the Dutch Hunger Winter, we saw there were some outdated views on how the famine was caused. For instance, suggestions that the famine was a direct consequence of deliberate actions from the German occupation authorities or caused by the Dutch railway strike preventing food supplies from reaching the West in the Netherlands. These factors are not part of academic views on the

causes of the famine, but still persist in educational resources.

**CHARLEY:** I think a big challenge is how to, on the one hand, stimulate cognitive understanding of very complex and multicausal events and, at the same time, allow for an affective or personal entry into these pasts. Particularly if you are teaching famine at a European high school, the audience might not feel like this is a relatable personal experience or possibility. Personal stories can sometimes stimulate certain contested political interpretations of that past. But at the same time, only having a dry, historical narrative that suits academic nuance might not appeal to a younger audience, or museum or heritage institute visitors.

#### HOW DO YOU THINK THESE KINDS OF CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS CAN BE OVERCOME?

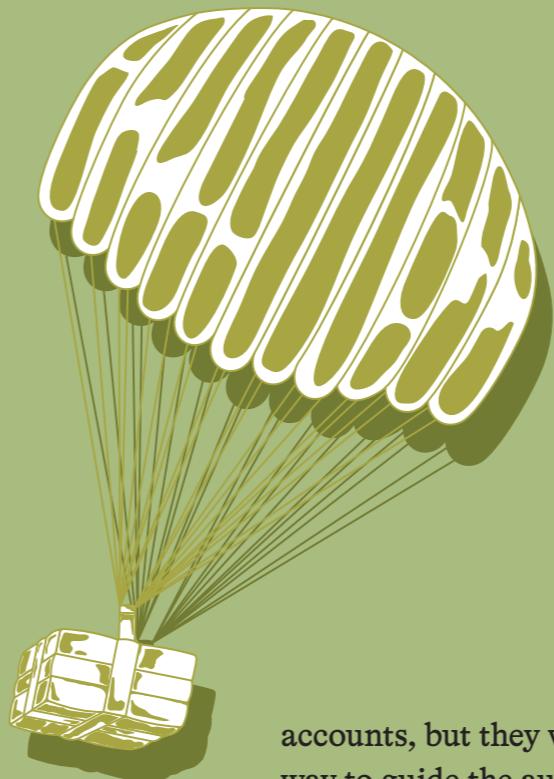
Ingrid: Cross-national cooperation is very important, but also between different stakeholders. I think that is one of the strengths of the project. We are not just a group of academics, but are also actively working with people in education and from the heritage sector. These people know how to engage a younger audience or migrant groups.

**CHARLEY:** Another constraint is that the people affected often do no leave material traces. An effective approach is to play with imagination. One way to deal with the lack of material is to incorporate historically informed

fiction in exhibitions, for example, or to play with certain archival material. You can ask students to come up with a story filling in the gaps in the archive. This can also be an interesting way to deal with the constraints of famine being intangible.

**INGRID:** In the joint chapter that Gloria, Lindsay, Anne and I wrote on textbooks for Famines and the *Making of Heritage* (2024), we discuss examples of assignments where students were asked to imagine what they would do if they were in that situation. For example, one Irish textbook asked students to do creative writing from the perspective of a cottier in the West of Ireland during the Famine. Those are really stimulating ways of engaging the students.

**CHARLEY:** In the exhibition in Finland I went to, they had panels with testimonies which were historically accurate, but imagined. It was also clear that these were fictional



accounts, but they worked as a way to guide the audience.

**INGRID:** These sorts of creative exercises try to provoke critical thoughts on what are usually simplified subject positions like perpetrators or victims. That is also something that we included in that chapter: because there is physically limited time and space to discuss fragments from historical texts, it is very difficult to provide nuance to historical background. So, the guiding role of the teacher in all of this is really vital.

#### COULD YOU GIVE ONE CLEAR OR CONCRETE RECOMMENDATION FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE EDUCATING ON HISTORIC FAMINES?

**CHARLEY:** To emphasise the agency of people living through famine. A lot of the visual culture of famines centres on women and children. They are always represented as destitute sufferers, and seem to have no agency. Of course, with families in these

situations things are incredibly dire, and there is less and less to do.

But as Ingrid's work shows, in the early phase of famine there is a lot of resilience, solidarity and communal outreach. Having an eye for the responses and choices people make during famine is very important to humanise stereotypical victims or to create memorable lives. I think that will also allow for new pathways into famine pasts. It will make it easier to relate to if there are not only texts and images about saints and victims, but people that make choices that sometimes aren't admirable.

**INGRID:** We should see famines today as preventable and as man-made disasters. There is an urgency to look at and learn from the causes and consequences of past famines and the complexities of the actors and institutions involved. We need to look at the longer-term structural causes of famines. But also, sometimes, a handful of actors really play a major role in the cause, development of hunger crises; and in the international responses to famine. If we focus on how famines in the past have been combatted, overcome, and sometimes prevented, we can learn a lot.

## Interview

# Marguérite Corporaal

As a literary scholar, Marguérite Corporaal has specialised in the memory culture of the Great Irish Famine. She is Full Professor of Irish Literature in Transnational Contexts at the Radboud University. As the project leader of *Heritages of Hunger*, she emphasises the importance of an international comparative perspective.



### WHAT IS THE VALUE OF EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT HISTORICAL FAMINES?

We are still dealing with famines today - as we all know with the current situation in Sudan and in Gaza. In Western Europe or North America, we tend to think about them as being really far away from our doorstep or that they took place an extremely long time ago. This is not the case. If you teach people about historical famines, you can engage them much more with the famines that take place today on other continents. You can show how famines emerge and what the aggravating factors are, and you can show the importance of solidarity or how

people help each other survive.

Famines should no longer take place. An awareness of this is so important because it is the only way to make sure we relieve famine distress today and in the future.

### BASICALLY, WHAT WE SEE IN THE WEST, IS PEOPLE JUST LOOKING AWAY, NOT WANTING TO FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE.

Yes, exactly. The cameras are not always turning on those kinds of realities. We see that with Gaza today: it's a lot about the destroyed infrastructures; the images that you see of people that are being displaced, buildings that have been destroyed,

like hospitals and schools, by bombs. Of course, those are really harsh realities but when it comes to intimate images of people really suffering hunger on a daily basis, you do not see them very often. That is probably because we cannot really cope, so that they're not so prominently present in the news.

If you look at the past, at the 1980–85 famine in Ethiopia, there was mobilisation. There were initiatives like Band-Aid. That was started because BBC journalists actually went to the area, and they shot images of people starving and dying of hunger. They were terrible images to see, but I must say they always made a lasting impression on me as a child. I think this coverage created such an awareness that international solidarity was possible.

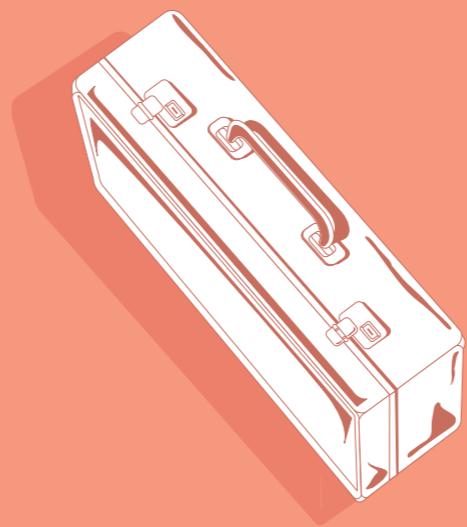
You often hear about imminent famines in the news now. Usually when we get the news on our TVs or radios or on social media, however, it has already reached the point where people are dying of hunger, and we are already at a stage where we can no longer prevent the majority of the suffering, which is a bad thing.

### IT MIGHT ONLY BE GETTING WORSE WITH THE POLARIZATION THAT WE ARE EXPERIENCING. DOES THAT MAKE PROJECTS LIKE THESE MORE IMPORTANT IN, FOR EXAMPLE, PROMOTING THE IDEA THAT THERE IS NOT ALWAYS A CLEAR PERPETRATOR AND VICTIM?

Yes, that is absolutely true. Famines have to do with already ingrained social structures of inequality that play a role in the distribution of the little food there is. It is not as simple as saying 'these people are to blame for hunger', and 'these are just the victims of that specific ethnic or religious group'. Looking at a bigger picture also includes an awareness of the total spectrum of social inequalities in the world.

### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR AND CONSTRAINTS TO EDUCATION ON HISTORICAL FAMINES?

One is that history no longer has the same place in the curriculum it used to have. History teachers who work in the classroom really do a lot but we also see a tendency to de-historicise, especially on social media where people bring up opinions without considering a *long durée* historical context.



The curriculum is quite set and there is very little room to deviate from that. Therefore, it's important that institutions like museums or commemorative organisations have access to good tools with accurate historical information. If they have, these institutions can also play an additional role in educating people, and not just young people, but also adults and the elderly.

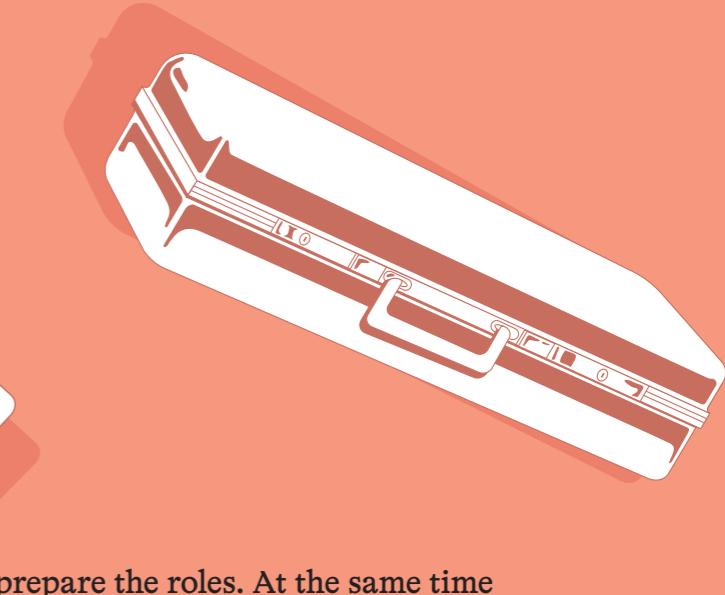
Another challenge is that textbooks are developed in a national context. There's little time to deviate from what the textbooks are offering and also what the curriculum prescribes. You have to teach in order to prepare students for their exams. What we really tried to do with the project when we were developing the learning materials is to work together with teachers, listening to them, seeing what they needed and also discovering, on the basis of the curricula they sometimes shared with us, what subjects we can link our materials to.

#### **WHAT ROLE DOES HERITAGES OF HUNGER PLAY IN THIS?**

What we have done with the project is creating a new awareness. And that is effective, as, for example, with the Werstas Labour Museum. The famine is now a part of their exhibition about what it means to be Finnish and about the Finnish nation. That is a change that the museum has made on the basis of our project.

#### **COULD YOU GIVE A SPECIFIC OR CONCRETE RECOMMENDATION TO EDUCATORS WORKING ON FAMINE?**

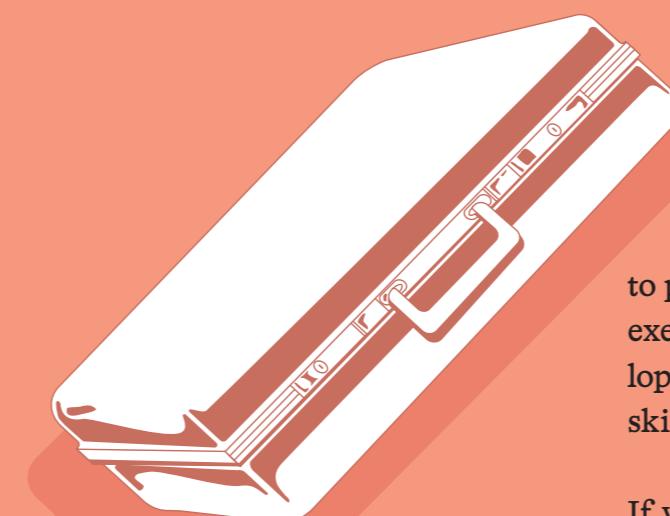
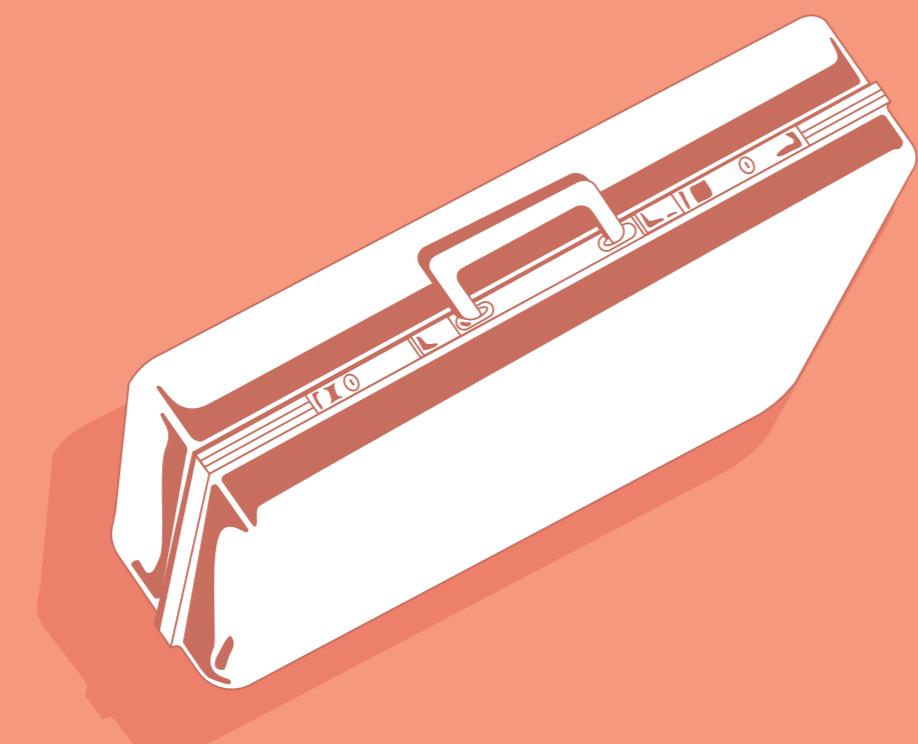
Start with the present day, because that is usually the best way to draw your students in. We also taught classes in primary schools recently. Chris Cusack, Lotte Jensen, and I developed materials for primary schools, together with the WKRU. And we also tried them out in the age groups of 10/11 and 11/12.



to prepare the roles. At the same time exercises like this help students develop argumentation and train debating skills.

If you have a very restricted curriculum, another recommendation is to look for themes where you can make connections to famine pasts. For example, if you are teaching about the Second World War, you could draw in the famines in Greece and in the Netherlands, but also those in post-war Germany and Leningrad. But also, when you teach in general about topics like social inequality, in a society, or about the countryside, and the position of farmers, this is where you can bring in famine materials.

The second thing, is to make an appeal to the creativity of your students. Stimulate a research-based approach. For example, give materials to students as if it is an archive and let them do a lot of work and create something. Let them do things like cutting and pasting because it really helps to make famine histories tangible. Or let them design a famine monument. You can also organise a class debate where everyone plays a certain role. If you do it like that, you make learning a more active process, as students really have



# Recommen- dations from the *Heritages of Hunger* Project

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on five years of research into the transnational collective remembrance of European famines (1845–1946), our recommendations to those teaching, curating and disseminating famine pasts are as follows.

The aim of these recommendations is to promote representations of historic famines that are accurate, accessible and comparative and that may, in the long run, generate mutual understanding between communities and aid the prevention of future famines. Our hope is to influence the ways in which historic famines are engaged with at schools, but also in the public sector at large.

### 1 NUANCE THE NARRATIVES

Famines have often been used to divide populations and to create hierarchies of suffering. We recommend an approach to representing famines that does not rely on binaries of perpetrator and victim but displays moments of moral complexity.

### 2 EMPHASISE AGENCY

We recommend representations of those experiencing famines that maintain the agency and dignity of historic subjects rather than depending on dehumanising or sentimental stereotypes of suffering women and children.

### 3 USE A TRANSNATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Famine is a common experience taking place across national boundaries, but is often represented as a unique national phenomenon. A comparative approach allows for the sharing of stories and building of solidarity across ethnonational divides. A transnational perspective that displays European experiences of famine also helps decentre the Global South as the perceived locus of famine, while not taking away attention from the crises taking place there today.

### 4 ADDRESS MISCONCEPTIONS

There are still widespread misunderstandings about causes and consequences of famines. These include, for instance, the notion that famines are derived from natural causes or can act as social equalisers. Famine education must highlight the fact that famine is preventable and the consequence of man-made wars, conflicts and political failures; as well as the extent to which famine entrenches social inequalities rather than surpassing them. Charley Boerman's digital exhibition offers a prototype for how to do this.

### 5 MAKE MATERIALS APPEALING AND ATTRACTIVE

Education on famine must be well-structured and clearly laid out, offering the opportunity for imaginative reconstructions of the past alongside representations of historic details (see our 'recommendations for specific target groups' for more on this). To this end, we highly recommend a collaborative approach to famine heritage that brings together academics with experts in the spheres of education and heritage.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPECIFIC TARGET GROUPS

### PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

These are educators involved in teaching children aged roughly 6 to 11 years old within a school. Although our research into this target group was through educational materials designed for and piloted in the Netherlands, these recommendations may be extrapolated to other settings.

- 1 Connect historic famines to events in the present day, including those within students' own lives or that they are familiar with through (social) media catering for this age group.
- 2 Include a mixture of traditional assignments and those that appeal to students' creativity.

### SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

These are educators involved in teaching children aged roughly 11 to 18 years old at school. Our research into this age group has been conducted transnationally, drawing on trial lessons and the piloting of learning materials with teachers in the Netherlands, Spain, Finland, Ireland and Canada.

- 1 Show the relationship between historic famines and contemporary atrocities and debates.
- 2 Connect famine pasts to mandatory subjects within school curriculums, e.g. showing the link between the Dutch Hunger Winter and

World War Two, or between issues of immigration in relation to the Irish and Greek famines.

- 3 Take your class on excursions to places connected to heritages of hunger, such as museums and statues.

### MUSEUM AND HERITAGE INSTITUTE PROFESSIONALS

This target group encompasses those who work in museums with collections that include famine legacies or heritage institutes that are engaged in the commemoration of famine pasts. Our recommendations are derived from the piloting of our learning resources and conversations with *Heritages of Hungers* consortium partners.

- 1 Make famine pasts concrete by including tangible objects; or personal narratives from those who have lived through famine. These strategies help to emotionally engage visitors, especially younger generations.
- 2 Incorporate historically informed fiction or art that reconstructs famine pasts in emotionally appealing or aesthetic ways. This will help convey the historical realities of famines to today's communities.
- 3 Work collaboratively on a regional level, by building bridges between your institute and local educators. This will bring younger generations

to your institute, to learn about famine pasts. Furthermore, local schoolteachers will be encouraged to integrate famine pasts into their classroom practices.

- 4 Work together with international institutions which curate, collect, display and interpret famine pasts from different historical and geographical contexts. This enables joint exhibitions and exchanges which can contribute to broader, comparative perspectives on how famines emerge and are experienced.

### POLICY MAKERS

Drawing from the experiences outlined above, these recommendations are directed at those involved in developing policies for education and heritage across the world.

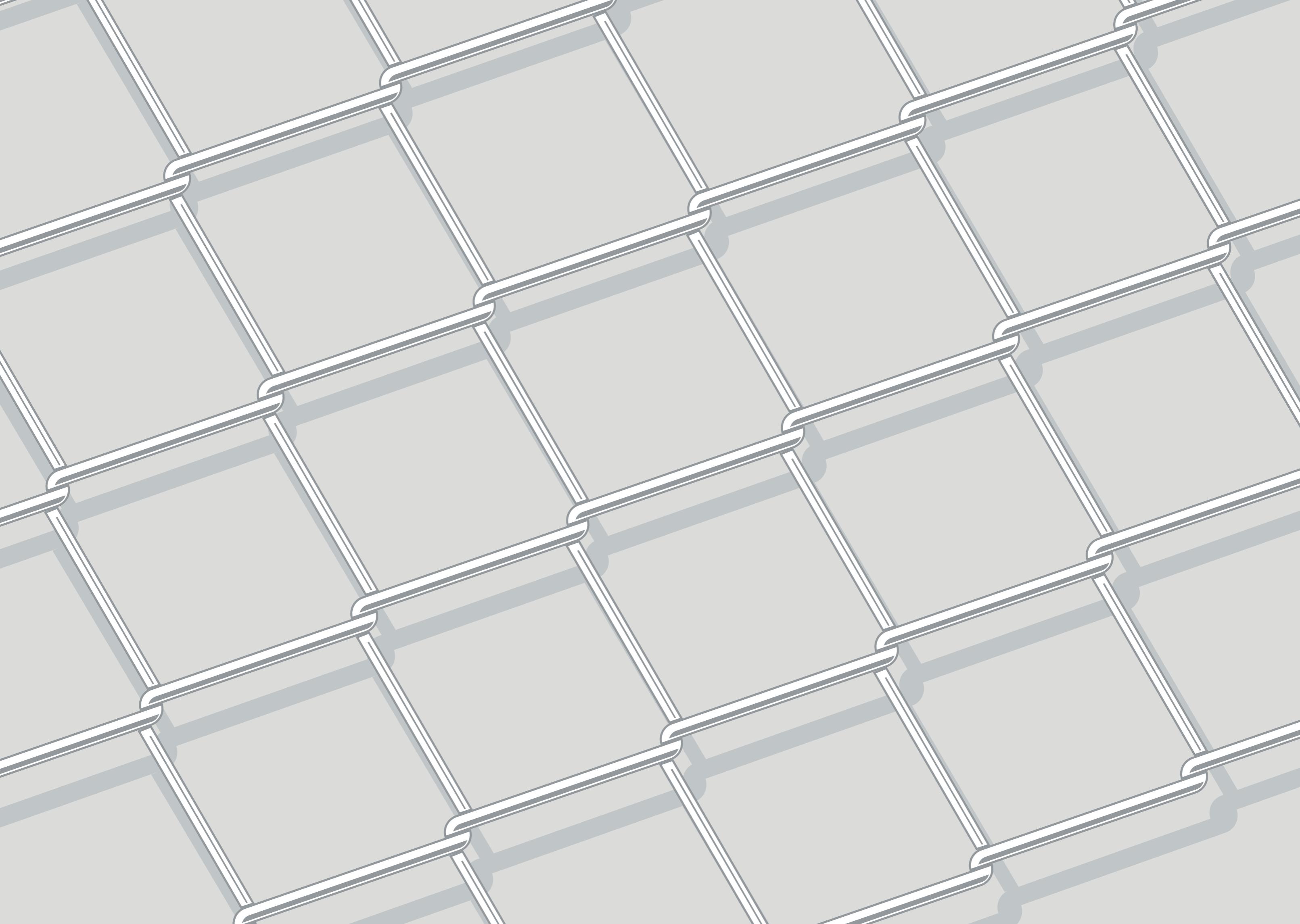
- 1 Preserve cultural heritage on famines. There is a value in famine legacies in museums and monuments that provide physical sites for educators to visit in order to heighten the visibility of famine pasts.
- 2 Stimulate public events on famine pasts, and connect them to annual commemorations or commemorative years to generate more attention.

### ACADEMICS

- 1 Engage with public debates, informed by your scholarly knowledge, by writing opinion pieces, popularising articles or essays.
- 2 Create a network of professionals from the sectors of education, heritage making, the creative arts, and NGOs. Cooperate with them in order to find social venues to articulate your views, and to offer advice to them in developing teaching and heritage practices.

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**ΜΕΡΤΤΑΡΕΣ**

**ΟΥ ΠΝΟΙΑΣ**