JACQUES PRESSER AND THE WRITING OF HOLOCAUST HISTORY

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When I entered the University of Amsterdam and first encountered Presser as professor of modern history in 1966, he had just completed the work on which he had been working for some fifteen years and for which he became most well known, namely *Ondergang. De vervolging en verdelging van het nederlandse jodendom* (1965). A shortened version, translated by Arnold Pomerans appeared in North America under the title *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews* (New York: Dutton, 1969). I would like to begin by reading a passage from this work that raises, directly and indirectly, the issues I want to place before you. The events described concern the Amsterdam raid of August 6, 1942, "Black Thursday", also known as "The Raid of the Two Thousand". (I have added explanations in parentheses where necessary):

> This raid lasted throughout most of the day and part of the evening; the Germans picked up Jews in the street or dragged them out of their houses, often with a great deal of brutality; there were quite a few suicides. The writer and his wife were visiting friends on that day. They watched the German squad approach the house and climb up the steps. Then we heard the people downstairs tell them: "There are no Jews here - but there are some upstairs." Outside a large car was waiting, surrounded by a dozen boys and girls from the neighbourhood, all wearing N.S.B. (*Dutch Nazi*) badges and making appropriate comments. The writer still remembers that the driver, obviously a stranger to Amsterdam, did not know the way to the *Zentralstelle (für Jüdische Auswanderung, i.e., the office responsible for organizing the deportations)* and had to be told by one of the Jews inside. He also remembers how some Jews with "too much" money on them pushed a considerable amount into the author's pockets.
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> Dr. Hemelrijk (*a fellow-teacher at the Jewish Lyceum*) who, that day, was walking up Schelde Street in Amsterdam, not wearing his star, had this to say: "What I saw there was so shocking and humiliating that you needed all your self-control to remain a passive bystander."
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> Professor Cohen (*one of the Presidents of the Jewish Council)* has given us a report of his visit to Aus der Fünten (*the SS-man in charge*) on the morning of August 6: "I found him in his room, in a state of great, and as it struck me and still strikes me, genuine agitation. He explained that the raid had been ordered simply because too few Jews were reporting for transportation and the trains simply had to be filled. But looking at me, he added: 'Believe me, *Herr* Cohen, it is the last thing I wanted.' I then took both his hands and said: 'But, *Herr Haupsturmführer*,

then please don't do it.' He turned to the window, as he always did when trying to hide his tears, and then turned back again to tell me: '*Herr* Cohen, I have no alternative!' I pleaded with him again, but he simply repeated his words."

It so happens that the author is able to fill in the picture: Leo de Wolff, a former pupil who held an important office in the notorious *Expositur (a sub-committee of the Jewish Council involved in organizing the transports)*, told him a few days after the raid how bitterly Aus der Fünten had complained about the distasteful job he had to do: "Why don't those who want it done, do it themselves?"

Because there is little reason to doubt Aus der Fünten's sincerity, it seems doubly strange to see how he set to work on the next day. Here the writer can rely almost completely on his own memory, for as we saw, he was one of the 2,000 picked up on August 6 and who had spent the night with them in the open yard of the *Zentralstelle.* Throughout the next day, they had ample opportunity to watch Aus der Fünten at work - had he been a sadist he could have done no worse. He acted precisely like the German SS officer whom John Hersey has described in his novel *The Wall*, dividing the victims to left and right, to death and respite. Yes, on that August 7, 1942, the writer was able to watch him from early morning until five that evening, with long intervals during which the prisoners were consumed with unbearable anxiety. When Aus der Fünten first appeared on the Steps, he was smoking one cigarette after another, and leant nonchalantly against the wall. He was accompanied by a number of officials of the Jewish Council including Leo de Wolff. Speaking very softly, he said as he looked across the courtyard: "There's too much noise here," and you could have heard a pin drop. Then he set to work. He had people placed in rows, usually no more than fifteen to twenty at a time, had them file before him, looked at them, inspected their papers, asked a few questions of De Wolff and then decided, without a single word, simply by waving his hand to the right or to the left. The writer was able to follow the whole spectacle from a corner near the steps. He saw and heard a conversation between Aus der Fünten and two old people, a man and a woman of about seventy, whose answers he could not quite make out, because they had their backs to him. But judging from Aus der Fünten's reactions, it must have gone something like this:

Aus der Fünten: "Papers?"

The old man handed him some documents which Aus der Fünten read while lighting a fresh cigarette. De Wolff glanced at the papers.

Aus der Fünten: "I see you run a home. Well, well, a home! Just fancy that. For old people? Since when?"

The old man mumbled something and pointed to the paper.

Aus der Fünten: "Since August 1? That's not very long is it? Not quite a week, what?"

The old man mumbled something else.

Aus der Fünten: "Well, well! Very good!" - waving the old man to the left and his wife to the right.

The old man: "My wife..."

Aus der Fünten: "Your wife? What's the matter with your wife?"

The old man: "She's old."

Aus der Fünten: "Old? You tell me she's old? Well, if she can work here she can certainly work for us as well."

The old man mumbled again, probably to the effect that he couldn't let her go by herself. So Aus der Fünten waved him to the right as well - two for Poland instead of only one.

As we have already said, the pauses were the worst part. Aus der Fünten would stop from time to time, while a whole row of quivering people was left standing, wondering when he would resume the inquisition. Rumour had it that he would stop at 5p.m. and that all those left over would be sent to Westerbork and from there on to Poland. The tension became unbearable in the afternoon. The writer will never forget his last glimpses of some of those he knew personally. There was a young girl from his school, a Rose of Sharon whose turn never came and who was never seen again; a friendly old bookseller who, as he knew, would long since have gone into hiding with his wife, had she not insisted on looking after her ailing mother, stood there ashen-faced; a woman teacher all alone; a boy who had escaped during the raid on July 14, but had since been recaptured. There we were, hundreds of us, anxiously watching the clock. At ten to five, at what turned out to be the last muster, the writer and his wife came face to face with Aus der Fünten who looked at their papers, waved him to the left and then, turning to De Wolff, said: "She's still very young."

What De Wolff replied, I cannot say, but my wife was waved to the left as well. A moment later we were in the street with ordinary people and children playing. The solitary woman teacher came out soon afterwards, and then the ring closed

> inexorably on the rest - some 600 were sent off to Westerbork and on... (*Destruction*, pp.152-155).

After this moving and profoundly disturbing passage, let me first of all make some objective comments. Here we see Presser at work not only as an historian, but also as an individual who lived through these events and incorporated his own eyewitness account into his historical account. This unique vantage point, and Presser's considerable gifts as a writer that would justify a study of its own, explain the poignancy of his historical narrative. This draws us, his readers, more closely to the events and their significance, even if we did not live through them ourselves. Moreover, the events he describes are without any doubt the most crucial, in the sense of both difficult and important, of recent Dutch history. They are engraved, or rather, burnt into the national consciousness. They reflect a time when, all of a sudden, the Dutch were forced to watch, utterly powerless, how all the things they had believed in - human decency, the rule of law, civilization - were trodden underfoot with only the thinnest pretense of proper bureaucratic procedure.

Presser suffered this excruciating experience in his own life. His young wife was arrested while bringing some supplies to her parents who were in hiding, without her Jewish star and while carrying a counterfeit ID. She was sent to Westerbork and from there deported to a camp in the East, never to return. In *Orpheus en Ahasverus*, a cycle of poems that constitutes a war diary, he writes: "Men heeft, ergens, mijn vrouw geslacht./Ik weet niet waar; nooit zal 'k het weten./Men heeft, denk ik, ook haar verkracht,/ Vertrapt en in de kalk gesmeten." (They slaughtered my wife somewhere, I don't know where, I'll never know. I think they also raped her, trampled on her and threw her in the lime).

Presser himself went into hiding later on and survived, but the world as he had known it, had collapsed.

What this world had been like can be gauged from the conversations between Presser and Philo Bregstein recorded towards the end of his life as an oral memoir/(auto)biography and published under the title *Gesprekken met Jacques Presser* in 1972.

Born in 1899, "in het hartje van de Jodenhoek, op het Waterlooplein" (*Gesprekken*,p.11), he was a child of the 19th century. His father was a diamond worker and a committed socialist, who later fell on hard times. Jacques grew up in a milieu of assimilated Jews, whose spiritual energy had been redirected towards the secular causes of society and culture, especially book culture. His favorite authors were Multatuli and Frederik van Eeden. Along with the fellow members of his youth club of aspiring intellectuals he even went to visit their guru van Eeden in his commune, Walden. But the young Presser was first and foremost interested in the literary expression of ideas and ideals. He wrote poetry himself, discovered Heinrich Heine, and started writing poems in German: a *Schwärmer*, who nevertheless developed a taste for scepticism, witness his later love for Anatole France. In other words, a typical

Romantic, a split personality, with idealism and "nuchterheid" contrasting and complementing each other, finding its expression in irony.

In school the young Presser failed the third grade of the HBS and was sent to the Openbare Handelsschool, where he flourished under a sympathetic teacher. He went to work, briefly, but thanks to a bursary from a fellow classmate's father, he was able to go to University. In order to be admitted, he had to pass the *staatsexamen*, the state entrance examination, which required, among other things, an advanced knowledge of Latin and Greek. He managed to pass this exam after only one year of study. Highly motivated, he totally and enthusiastically submerged himself in a wide-ranging study of European civilization with whose perceived ideals he completely identified. The question of his Jewish identity hardly existed for him at that time: "Uit mijn studententijd kan ik mij niets meer voor de geest halen waarvan ik zou kunnen zeggen dat het mijn instelling ten opzichte van het joodse - voor zover aanwezig- heeft gewijzigd." (I can't think of anything from my student days of which I could say that it changed my attitude towards being Jewish - in so far as I had one) (*Gesprekken*, p. 40). He travelled to Weimar Germany, to Dresden, where Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* made an unforgettable impression on him, and enamored him with the renaissance and all that it stood for. On the same trip he saw, for the first time, in the showcase of a German bookstore, the book by Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* (History as Giving Meaning to the Meaningless). It fascinated him: "Dat boek heeft me jarenlang beziggehouden, hetzij om er mee eens te zijn, hetzij om er tegenin te schreeuwen." (that book kept me busy for years, both when I agreed with it and when I protested against it) (*Gesprekken*, p. 40). This ambivalence reflects the constant dialectic between idealism and scepticism that was integral to his intellectual temper.

Although no activist, he remained an ardent socialist. In fact, his socialist idealism reinforced the humanistic ideology he was acquiring, rather than being alternative to it. A fellow student of Menno ter Braak, he never formed part of the latter's circle which he found too elitist. He was not typical for students at the time: he lived at home and used his bursary and later, his salary, to support his parents.

He graduated in 1926 and obtained a post as a teacher at the Vossius gymnasium in Amsterdam. As a pedagogue he was unable to punish his students, but rather controlled them through his total commitment. This is where he learnt to teach history, which was noticeable many years later when he was a professor of history at the University of Amsterdam. In his lectures he never lost sight of the fact that, in the first encounter, history is story, a narrative involving people, individuals, not a depersonalized account of structures, processes and trends (cf. *Gesprekken*, p. 126). And he was a marvellous, spellbinding storyteller, an exquisite painter whose canvas was time itself. His interest and knowledge ranged far beyond political history into literature, music and art, about which subjects he could become quite rapturous.

In 1929 he was asked to give a course in contemporary history at the Volksuniversiteit in Amsterdam. This was also the year, of course, when the Great Depression hit. A year later, Hitler's party went from 12 to 107 seats in the Reichstag. As a teacher of contemporary history, Presser followed the developments in Germany on a daily basis, including the persecution of the Jews after 1933. As he puts it himself, he did his very best to understand how, of all nations, his beloved Germany could have ended up in the fascist abyss. In effect, he tried to explain it away, to relativise it in his lectures by referring to World War 1 and its aftermath, the reparations, the Depression, etc. Some of his hearers even complained that he was soft on Hitler. Rather, a denial of the essential humanity and culture of the German people was unthinkable, because Presser had too much sympathy invested in them. He had to save the Germans in order to save his own world view. And then, of course, hope springs eternal: "Wij hoopten merkwaardig genoeg veel te lang - dat was natuurlijk een duidelijke fout - dat de zaak op een goede dag nog wel eens kapot zou gaan en dat die onzin, die barbaarsheid zich niet langer in het Duitse volk zou kunnen handhaven." (remarkably, we hoped far too long - it was an obvious mistake, of course - that the whole thing would break down one day and madness and barbarity would not last in the German people) (*Gesprekken*, p. 65).

In the 1930's Presser's socialist idealism was shaken by the Stalinist show trials, and by Arthur Koestler's analysis of them. The most painful blow came with the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. Yet these events must have increased rather than diminished his ultimate dependence on and attachment to the fundamental values of Western civilization as he knew it.

In the meantime, in 1936, Presser had married his first wife, a former student of his from the Vossius gymnasium. As he tells it, they were ecstatically happy and lived as in a dream during those pre-war years. May 1940 came as a terrible blow, and the couple attempted suicide, but survived. And still Presser did not experience May 1940 as a Jew: "Ik voelde mij ... als de kapotte mens van de westeuropese beschaving, humanist of vrijdenker." (I felt like the broken-down man of Western civilization, a humanist or freethinker) (*Gesprekken*, p. 75). He maintains that they did not attempt this desperate act because they expected to be persecuted as Jews. Even though Presser knew about the camps, and even though there were quite a number of Jewish refugees in Amsterdam, he could not believe it: "Je kon niet geloven dat zoiets daar plaats kon vinden, want je had een waanzinnige verering voor de geest van het land. Dat een zodanige capitulatie van de Duitse geest mogelijk was, dat was onvoorstelbaar." (I couldn't believe that such a thing could happen there, because I had a crazy reverence for the spirit of the country. That such a capitulation of the German spirit could occur, was inconceivable) (*Gesprekken*, p. 77).

It was only after the German invasion that the identification with his Jewish background came about, forcibly. He was fired from his teaching job, but eventually continued teaching at the newly founded

Jewish Lyceum, where the pretense of normalcy was pathetically maintained while one student after another disappeared from the classroom. Presser even contributed to an improvised course for a group of Jewish girls on the subject of Romanticism, in which German culture had played such an important part: "Ik heb die kinderen in de diepste vernedering en ellende kunnen voorhouden dat er toch ook altijd een heel ander Duitsland was geweest." (In the deepest humiliation and misery, I insisted to the children that there had also always been a completely different Germany) (*Gesprekken*, p. 98). At this time (Spring 1943), his wife had already been arrested.

If the immediate, personal experience of the war could not entirely break Presser's pre-war beliefs, the research for the book *Ondergang* which exposed him to the horrendous experiences of thousands of individuals, dead and alive, had a profound influence on him, and decisively tilted the balance towards the sceptical, pessimistic side of his intellectual personality. Moreover, the return to peacetime conditions was like the return to an empty house, to borrow the title of one of Marga Minco's books, to which Presser wrote an introduction. It also meant facing a Dutch society that had problems in dealing with what had happened to its Jewish fellow-citizens. Despite the heroism of individual Dutch men and women and of resistance groups in protecting them, the deportation of the Jews from Holland had been the most "successful" of all the occupied countries. Of a total of 140,000, 110,000 were deported; only 5400 returned (see the Epilogue to *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews*). The writing of *Ondergang* also involved coming to terms with the role of the Jewish Council and the question of collaboration. Troubled above all by a sense of guilt shared by most survivors, Presser was actually unable to put pen to paper and start writing the book he had worked on for fifteen years. Instead, he first wrote a novel about the experience, *De nacht der Girondijnen.*

The novel is cast in the form of a first-person confession by a young Dutch Jew of Portuguese descent, Jacques Suasso Henriquez, who, apart from his Jewish antisemitism, shares many features of his identity with that of his creator (cf. *Gesprekken*, pp. 120-121). Through the father of one of his pupils Suasso gets a job with the *Ordedienst* or Jewish camp police at Westerbork, the holding camp and staging post for weekly transports to Auschwitz. Modeled on the SS, this police runs the camp and rounds up people for transport, mercilessly. Suaso collaborates, until the very horror of the actions he participates in cures him of his antisemitism, and the barbed wire pulls him together with his own people. The catalyst for this turnaround is a religious man, the *rebbe*, with whom he has long discussions and reads the Pentateuch. Eventually, the *rebbe* is deported. While being put onto the train, he loses his Hebrew bible. He tries to pick it up, but Cohn, the brutal head of the *Ordedienst* and arch-collaborator, kicks it away and beats him. Finally Suaso rebels by hitting Cohn in the face, and hands the book back to the *rebbe*. It is in the camp prison that he writes his Dostoievski-like account which is to be smuggled to the outside world.

By presenting this extreme case of an antisemitic Jew redeeming himself, Presser states his case for the ultimate humanity of man. Aptly, the motto of the book is: *Homo homini homo.* The pendant Latin quotation against which this motto makes a definitive statement, reads: *Lupus est homo homini, non homo*: Man is a wolf to his fellow man (Plautus, *Asinaria* 2.4.88). The symbol of his redemption is the book that is both saved and salvific, namely the *rebbe*'s Book and Jacques' own written confession, that is Presser's own act of writing.

In the end, Jacques, who has exchanged his assimilated name for that of Jacob, is scheduled for transport to Auschwitz, together with an old friend called Dé (the name of Presser's first wife). In this way Presser effected a symbolic union in death with his beloved, whom he had traced to Westerbork. About this camp he knew everything there was to know as an historian. The novel thus becomes a very complex, multi-layered entity, combining historical research, fiction and elements of personal experience, achieving a temporary suspension or transcendence of the difference between fact, fiction and experience, and bringing about a meeting between history and humanity.

Through the writing of this novel, Presser was finally able to exorcize his feeling of guilt, to affirm his identity, and to give meaning to what seemed meaningless. It also brought about the *déblocage* that allowed him to start the writing of *Ondergang*. Despite the apparent differences in genre, the two works resemble each other in more than one way (see also Philo Bregstein's Nawoord in the Meulenhoff edition of *De nacht der Girondijnen*, Amsterdam 1975, esp. pp. 88-89). Above all, *Ondergang*'s extraordinary immediacy, conveyed by numerous eyewitness accounts - all confessions of sorts - and the author's own tormented voice, woven together with facts and events through the technique of *reportage*, makes for an impact that is effected in *De nacht der Girondijnen* through concentration in a single point of view. The cathartic effect of these testimonies is attested by Presser when he relates how, profoundly moved himself, he would listen as eyewitnesses unburdened themselves in front of him in terribly emotional sessions, sometimes sending them on their way, speechless, with an embrace or kiss, an act of sharing in the intimacy of suffering. Here the distinction between historian and fellow human being, between the objective and the subjective, is transcended in an act of humanity and in total commitment. In fact, it is difficult to see how this account could have been written otherwise. Ironically disclaiming "Olympian objectivity" (*Destruction*, p. xiv), Presser instead achieves a passionate veracity that embraces the lived experience of his people. At the same time, he is painfully scrupulous in the sifting and weighing of the evidence, giving credit wherever it is due to individual acts of decency, heroism, and sacrifice.

His work on the book *Ondergang* inevitably led to a reevaluation by Presser of the world of European civilization, an idealistic mental construct in the first place, as a "verloren toverland" (a lost fairyland) and to the realization: "De humaniora humaniseren niet." (The humanities don't make one human) (*Gesprekken*, pp. 133, 140). Yet Presser's own

work stands, for ever, one would hope, as a testimony of one man's humanity to man, as an example of writing as a redemptive act, and as a living demonstration of the need to testify against inhumanity, lest, in Presser's own words, the dead die a second death (*Gesprekken*, p. 125).

Note:

This paper was first presented at the CAANS meeting of the Learned Societies' Conference in Windsor (May, 1988). Recently, the first biography of Presser has appeared: Nanda van der Zee, *Het gelijk van de twijtel*(Uitgeverij Balans, 1988), reviewed by Chris van der Heyden in the Boekenbijlage of *Vrij Nederland* (24 December 1988).

Former SS-captain Aus der Fünten was released from Breda prison in January of 1989, along with another war criminal, after a hotly contested vote in the Dutch Parliament.