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Judith Herzberg's *Tussen Amsterdam en Tel-Aviv*

Judith Herzberg, the 1997 winner of the P.C. Hooft Prize, the highest award for a writer of Dutch literature, is known for her sensitive poetry, her work in the theatre, and her film scripts. One aspect of her writing to which not much attention has been paid is her commentary on the divided life that she lived between Israel and the Netherlands. In her book entitled *Tussen Amsterdam en Tel-Aviv* (Torn between Amsterdam and Tel-Aviv),[1] she gives the reader some insight into her struggle with not feeling completely at home in either country. In view of the struggles that are ongoing in the Middle East, the book is relevant to the present day reader.

Herzberg initially went to Israel to come to terms with one aspect of her roots and to understand Israel. As an outsider from the Netherlands, and at the same time an insider through her constant contact with her relatives, friends and their children and her interests in all aspects of Israeli culture, she is admirably suited to comment on Israeli culture and politics.

When Herzberg was twenty-nine years old, in 1963, she published *Zeepost*, the first of more than half a dozen volumes of poetry. Ten years later she started to write plays; some of them have been translated into various languages and performed across the world. Her own translations into Dutch include works by Euripides, Strindberg and Ernst Jandl. One of her best-known accomplishments is the screen play for the award winning film *Charlotte*, directed by Franz Weiss. The film is based on Herzberg's intensive research into the life and work of the German-Jewish painter Charlotte Salomon, who perished in Auschwitz in 1943.

Although Herzberg is primarily known for her poetry and her theatrical oeuvre, she is admirably suited to describe and comment on the forces shaping the nation of Israel. Above all, it is the human element that fascinates her. She is interested in the lives of the common people and the effects on them of the strife surrounding them. In an interview with the German critic Peter von Becker in 1990 she stated:

> I find the relationship between people who are close to one another much more exciting, more complicated, more contradictory and much richer than the conflicts between political opponents and those in power, where one party can always lock the other one up in jail. (von Becker, 42)

She is interested in self-chosen, mundane confrontations. As she said in the same interview:

> In these relationships between people the emotional situation is not so one-sided (...) When people who love each other — and what is love anyway? — dont get along with each other. ... When people exercise private power in relationships, subject themselves to each other or liberate themselves. That is much more exciting than any political power struggle. ... War, for example, with tanks and cannons, I see as something completely infantile. But, as in the

> theatre, to aim at each other with words... (von Becker, 42)

Judith Herzberg was born in Amsterdam in 1934 to a Jewish lawyer and writer, Abel Herzberg (1893-1989) who, incidentally, also received the P.C. Hooft Prize in 1974, and his wife, Thea Loeb-Herzberg. Her parents were sent to Bergen-Belsen but survived, and Judith and her siblings went into hiding in the Netherlands during the German occupation. Under the influence of her father, who saw Israel as a land of hope and opportunity after World War II — her brother and sister went there as early as 1946 — Herzberg developed an early interest in that country, and in 1949 she went there for the first time with her mother.

Judith Herzberg describes her childhood in the following manner:

> From the age of six to the age of ten I was in hiding, I was interned, I escaped, and then I had to go into hiding again with all sorts of different people, again and again, in totally different environments. My parents did indeed return alive from Bergen-Belsen, but what happened in the meantime could not be put into words, and the stories of my brother and sister who had also gone into hiding remained just that — stories. Thus we became a reunited family that could call itself lucky, but we did not talk about that; my father talked about nothing but the war, and, on the positive side, about Palestine and Zionism. (Herzberg, 19)

Although Herzberg was supposed to join her family in Israel, she married a Dutch gentile, had children and stayed on in the Netherlands. She did not return to Israel until 1966, one year before the war that led to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. In the late seventies and in the early eighties she wrote articles describing her life and that of her acquaintances in Israel for *Vrij Nederland*. These articles, along with an introduction, a conclusion, letters to her friends, poems and personal views, were published in a collection entitled *Tussen Amsterdam en Tel-Aviv* in 1988.

In *Tussen Amsterdam en Tel-Aviv* Herzberg finds her subjects among the domestic atmosphere of her family, friends and the people whom she meets on the street. She describes their attempts to carry on a normal life against the violent, chaotic background of an Israel surrounded by enemies outside its borders and opposing factions of Jews and Arabs within them. Among the Jews themselves there are also different ideologies as far as religion and politics are concerned. The struggle for peace, supported by the majority of Israelis but opposed by the readical elements of the population, that Herzberg portrays in the period from 1978 to 1988, is a problem that has not been solved yet. In that sense Herzbergs remarks are as relevant and topical today as when they first appeared in print.

The articles start out on a personal note. In April 1978, Herzberg went to Israel shortly after her nephew Joshua was killed in action during the Israeli attacks on Palestinian bases in Lebanon. Even then many Israelis doubted the sense of the war that was taking so many lives, and this is a recurrent theme in the subsequent articles. Herzberg constantly contrasts the two attitudes that she sees as shaping Israeli foreign policy:

> (1) that Israel, under the hard-line leadership of Begin was engaged in a territorial war against Lebanon and (2) that Israel saw the use of military force not so much as a question of trying to gain anything at the expense of another nation, but rather as a question of attempting to prevent its own destruction. (Herzberg, 15)

Herzberg points out the many contradictions that she perceives in Israeli public opinion. In her view, the citizens of Israel are divided, confused and above all worried that those leaders responsible for involving the country in wars will continue to fight and cause more bloodshed instead of trying to find solutions by negotiations, moderation and reason. She also points out the contradictory feelings that she notices everywhere: the soldiers who are fighting also demonstrate against the use of force; many soldiers do not believe in the cause for which they are fighting. At the same time many citizens feel that the leader of their country is a nationalist fanatic, but they believe that they should show solidarity and support him. She thinks that Israel is a bold determined nation that faces destruction if it can not find means of resisting its enemies in the Middle East, by maintaining its security zone established in southern Lebanon to protect itself against border attacks. In the meantime, however, innocent people do get killed. Herzberg constantly refers to the relationship between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, where the Arabs clearly constitute a minority within the country and have problems and are faced with grievances that are entirely different from those faced by Arabs in neighbouring countries. She relates many anecdotes describing the juxtaposition of the hatred that the Jews and the Arabs are supposed to feel for each other and yet the many acts of kindness that she witnessed on the part of one side for the other.

One especially poignant description is that of her journey in August 1985 to Hebron, the shrine erected at Abrahams grave for Sarah. As such it is a place of worship for both Jews and Arabs and it is situated in the area occupied by the Israelis since the war of 1967. Herzberg is appalled at the irony of a situation where Arabs, who are not allowed to bear arms, worship in a mosque which is guarded by armed Israeli Jews sitting outside. (Herzberg, 65)

On another occasion she relates a conversation between two citizens of Israel on the eve of the 1988 elections.

> D., a moderate Israeli, asks his Arab colleague, K., "For whom are you going to vote?" The latter answers: "It wont make any difference for us who wins." "What do you mean by that?" "Shamir or Peres, its all the same." "Not to me," D. answers. "If Shamir wins, then a lot of people like myself will leave the country because we dont want our sons to be drafted into the army for those sorts of ideals." K is frightened by this statement. Apparently he has not thought of those consequences. "Thats impossible!" he answers, "You cant do that. If people like you leave, then all of us will be at their mercy." (Herzberg, 183)

Another topic that is discussed again and again by Herzberg is the strained relationship that exists not only between the hawkish Israelis and those who are moderate and would prefer negotiations with hostile elements, but also the tensions between reformed Jews and ultra-conservative ones. She sees the latters acts as religious terrorism and intolerance. One personal experience that she cites is that of lining up to take a taxi from a suburb in Tel-Aviv, where the greater portion of the population is ultra-orthodox, to Jerusalem on a Friday. Herzberg, who by her own description does not look like an orthodox Jewish woman, since she does not wear a wig or a kerchief to cover her hair, and has bare arms and legs, is pushed and elbowed out of the queue, and finally has to walk to another area of the city before she can make her journey to Jerusalem and arrives there much too late for her appointments. For a woman who is used to the tolerance in her native Holland she finds this experience extremely

frustrating and unnecessary. It also takes her a while to realize that orthodox Jewish men, recognizable by their black hats, refuse to share a seat on a bus with a woman, whereas those men wearing yarmulkes are more forthcoming.

In a similar vein, Herzberg reports on the observance of the Sabbath. In some areas of Jerusalem swimming in municipal swimming pools is not allowed on the Sabbath, although for some people who work during the rest of the week this is the only day that they can go swimming. Beaches also seem to be marked off along religious lines. Demonstrations by ultra-orthodox Jews also take place in front of those theatres that are open on Saturday. These demonstrations become violent on occasion and the police force has to be called in to quell the violence. Herzberg sees it is as hypocritical that religious custom could prohibit one from working or carrying objects on the Sabbath, but that it appears to be all right to throw rocks on the Sabbath and expect the police to work to control the violence.

In addition to Herzberg's comments on the political situation in Israel, some of her most vivid and memorable descriptions are those of the daily concerns of ordinary people like herself who simply try to go on with their lives in an atmosphere of fear and tension in a country that seems to be in a constant state of war. The nuisance of periods of inflation, when bank notes suddenly lose their value and are simply tossed like change into pots that everyone keeps in the house for that purpose, is a fact of life. The oppressive heat that affects everyone and the attempts to escape it by going to the beach are mentioned. It is in her conversations such as that with a grocery store owner who escaped the ghettos of Warsaw in the hope of finding a better life in Israel, only to find out that he can not compete with the supermarkets, that Herzberg is at her best. Here she shows why, with her interest in human nature and her love of the beauty of the Israeli landscape, she keeps going back to that country in spite of her frustrations with life there.

NOTE

[1] All translations from the Dutch and German are my own.