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Motives and impediments in describing war memories: the tragedy of the Jews

Although the number of Dutch people killed in the Second World War is less than a third of the number of people who died in the city of Leningrad alone, where the official death toll of the blockade surpasses 600,000, the scars that the war left are equally deep in both places, and in both places there is constant preoccupation with the war years. But there the resemblance ends. Whereas Leningrad was never occupied by the Germans, the Netherlands went through five years of German rule. During those years there were many deeds of aggression and injustice perpetrated by the occupying forces, but one stood out above all others in its incomprehensible cruelty and brutality: the extermination of the Jews. Of the 200,000 Dutch war victims, half were Jews.

It is not so very difficult for a small nation to come to grips with the defeat suffered at the hands of an overwhelmingly more powerful enemy, especially when ultimately that enemy was defeated himself. But it is next to impossible to understand what happened to the Jews and how it came about, or to accept the fact that the Germans could carry out their plans and win their war against the Dutch Jews. So it is not surprising that this question has become a national trauma and overshadows everything else. It is for this reason that I shall focus my attention here on the Holocaust literature in the Netherlands.

The term Holocaust is convenient — it sums up in one word the whole complex of events: discrimination, persecution, deportation and extermination — but therefore dangerous, because it tends to simplify and devalue and to invite making unjustified comparisons. So when I use the term, it only refers to the uniquely gruesome tragedy of the Jews in the Second World War.

It is not easy to classify the extensive literature that deals with the fate of the Dutch Jews (or Jewish Dutchmen), nor can one always separate literary and non-literary works. Moreover, there are a great number of novels about the war years in which the persecution of the Jews and the *onderduik* (hiding) are mentioned but are not the major theme, such as Simon Vestdijk's *Pastorale 1943*[1]. It would be wrong to incorporate such works into the Holocaust literature. The same holds for *Het wilde feest* (The wild party)[2] by Adrian van der Veen, although there is a constant preoccupation with the fate of the Jews and the reaction of non-Jews. However, the action takes place in New York, and I prefer to limit myself to what happened under German rule in Europe.

Who are the writers, why did they write, and what in particular did they write about? Those are the questions we should ask ourselves. And finally, as a counterpart to those questions, one may wonder whether there are subjects that in spite of the abundant Holocaust literature seem to be neglected, and whether there are special groups of people who remain silent. My answers to all these

questions will be based on my far from comprehensive knowledge of Dutch Holocaust literature and on what could be called personal experience and intuition, so I make no claim to exhaustive coverage nor to scientific proof.

The answer to the question "who are the writers?" is that there are many different groups of writers. First there are the victims who, during the ordeal of hiding and the constant fear of being caught, kept a diary. Others documented in their notes the period before the deportation and the agonizing dilemma between going underground and obeying the German orders, or they described their experiences in the transit camps. In the latter case their writings were smuggled out of the camps, not without risks for the authors, who accepted those risks because they wanted to make their fate known to the outside world. *In depôt, dagboek uit Westerbork* (In storage, diary from Westerbork)[3] is the almost day-by-day account that journalist Philip Mechanicus gives of his life in Westerbork, while David Koker's *Dagboek geschreven in Vught* (Diary written in Vught)[4] combines observations about the camp, its inmates and its guards, with literary, mainly poetic work. Mechanicus declares himself the chronicle writer of Westerbork and states his purpose clearly: to keep a record for later days. Recently his daughter, who lives in Toronto, published a collection of the letters she received from him, under the title *Ik woon, zoals je weet, driehoog, brieven uit Westerbork* (I live, as you know, on the third floor, letters from Westerbork)[5], an allusion to the fact that his bunk was the top one of a combination of three. These letters, obviously written with no idea of publication, form a moving complement to the diary in which Mechanicus suppresses as much as possible his personal moods and anxieties. David Koker's writing is more emotional and has more the character of a correspondence with his former high school friends, one of whom, Karel van het Reve, eventually published the diary and wrote an introduction to it.

The motives for writing a diary are even more complex in the case of Etty Hillesum[6]. What starts out as an outpouring of feelings and a means of arriving at a better understanding of herself and her relationships with others, becomes gradually a document about the plight and the sufferings of the Jews. There is a striking difference in tone between the self-analysis of the pre-Westerbork days and the testimony written in the transit camp before she and her family were sent to Auschwitz. Anne Frank[7], the most famous diary-writer of the Holocaust, was a child when she began her letters to a fictitious friend. Maybe the thought of being published passed through her mind — no diary-writer is completely free from the idea of writing for others — but she seems mainly to have been driven to get a better insight into her situation and to have some private life in a world where privacy was an impossible luxury.

All these diary writers perished, and so the publication of their work was posthumous. Even though there are some omissions and emendations made by the editors to protect the name of the memory of persons that are mentioned unfavourably, the overall tone is different from that encountered in the writings of survivors. Both Etty Hillesum and Anne Frank had a strained relationship with their mothers, and it is very likely that some of their comments would have been deleted if they had survived the camps.

The survivors fall into two categories (if one excludes those who left in time for England, the United States, or some other place): first the larger group of people who went underground and came out of their hiding when the Netherlands were liberated, and secondly the much smaller group of those who

returned from the camps after the war. Two standard works that fall outside the domain of *belles lettres* come immediately to mind when we think of Holocaust documents written by survivors: first the two volumes by Jacques Presser about the destruction of the Dutch Jewry, *Ondergang, de vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse Jodendom 1940-1945* (Downfall, the persecution and extermination of the Dutch Jewry 1940-1945)[8], and Lou de Jong's multi-volume work[9] dealing with the history of the Netherlands during the occupation. Not surprisingly, the persecution and extermination of the Jews are dealt with extensively in de Jong's history. Presser's book is more than a historical documentation of events: it is also an emotional epitaph in which the author shows his bonds with the victims.

Such bonds are even more strongly expressed when we are dealing with memories and feelings, instead of with historiography. The autobiographical element is predominant, as for instance in Sal Santen's volume of short stories *De kortste weg* (The shortest way)[10]. Some of Santen's stories are not really war memories, but give a nostalgic picture of prewar life, although antisemitism spoilt the idyllic picture even then. Marga Minco's *Het bittere kruid* (The bitter herb)[11] is also a personal reminiscence: it follows step by step the growing isolation and oppression, helplessness and alienation, until the brutal end for everybody except herself. The autobiographical element is greatly reduced in her much later work, *De val* (The fall)[12], but one feature is strikingly similar: the protagonist is saved during the arrest, she escapes because she is looking for a coat and not together with the others. It stresses the randomness of fate: I cannot help it that I survived. As Elie Wiesel, the author who introduced the term Holocaust, writes in *Silences et mémoire d'hommes*[13]: "the survivor dies every time he rejoins in his memory the nightly processions, that he has never really left. How could he detach himself from them without betraying them? For a long time he used to talk to them — as I speak to my little sister; I can still see them going away under the blazing sky... I ask them to forgive me for not having followed them."

Whereas the survivor's guilt is fairly subdued in its expression in Minco and Santen, it becomes a desperate cry in Jacques Presser's half fictional, half historical *De nacht der Girondijnen* (The night of the Girondins)[14]. The hero who tells the story is an assimilated Jew called Jacques. He gets a position in the Jewish administration of Westerbork, thus avoiding deportation "bis auf weiteres," as the Nazi phrase went: till further notice. We follow his evolution from Jacques to Jacob, from somebody who distances himself from his Jewishness to a Jew who in a way accepts his fate on the eve of being deported to Sobibor, with a woman acquaintance, De, whom he knew superficially before Westerbork, but with whom he becomes very close in the pressured atmosphere of the camp. So Presser fantasizes in his extremely well documented fiction that Jacob and De undergo their fate together. In reality De — his wife — went to Sobibor alone.

In a sense Presser would have preferred "to be there," but what about those who actually were there and survived? Abel Herzberg, who was about fifty when he was in Bergen-Belsen, started writing about the camp immediately upon his return to Amsterdam in 1945. His articles which appeared in the *Groene Amsterdammer* were published later in book form under the title *Amor fati* [15]. Herzberg tries to analyze the behaviour of the camp inmates and their reaction to the unimaginably harsh conditions, but he also makes an attempt to do the impossible: discover the humanity of the German tormentors. A much more recent book,

Strepen aan de hemel (Stripes in the sky)[16] by Gerhard Durlacher gives an account of his experiences, almost forty years ago in occupied Holland, in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, where he was separated from his family. Not only does he describe his camp life and the less than warm reception he encounters when he returns to the Netherlands, he also launches a scathing attack on the Allies who let it all happen, and who never even tried to stop the murder machine by attacking and destroying camp installations from the air.

Two more personal memories in this category are Nico Frijda's *Post uit Friesland* (Mail from Friesland)[17] and *Kinderjaren* (Childhood years)[18] by Jona Oberski. Frijda's book consists of letters he wrote to a friend while he was in jail (*huis van bewaring*) in Leeuwarden, in the autumn of 1944. The Germans suspected that he was a Jew, but they never confronted him with his father, whom they had arrested before him, and eventually let him go. He led a curiously sheltered life and read an amazing number of literary works and books about art. Although he was only seventeen at the time, some aspects of his letters remind us of David Koker's intense intellectual life. Encouraged by Judith Herzberg, Frijda published the letters in 1984. *Post uit Friesland* is a valuable document, but it lacks the emotional depth of *Kinderjaren*. Oberski gives a hauntingly sober description of the war years and the time immediately after the war — Amsterdam, Westerbork, Bergen-Belsen, Amsterdam — as seen through the eyes of a small child. He saw both his parents die, his father in the camp, his mother shortly after the liberation, somewhere in Germany.

The enormous impact of the Holocaust on survivors, who talk about their experience — often after a long period of repression and inner conflict — is not surprising. What is surprising is the scarcity of accounts of the Jewish tragedy by non-Jews, whether historians, underground workers or witnesses and bystanders. However, the explanation is quite simple. We can roughly divide the non-Jews into three categories: the small active pro-Nazi group, the large middle section of those who did not get involved either way, and finally the small active group of underground workers and people who hid Jews. None of these categories is likely to yield a rich harvest of literary works about the war years, although for different reasons. It is obvious why collaborators keep silent: why dwell on a past that is condemned by the great majority of their compatriots? Even if some accounts exist of Dutchmen fighting alongside the Germans in Russia, the active participation in rounding up civilians, of whatever faith, is not mentioned. For the passive middle segment of the Dutch population, the past war is also better forgotten than remembered, except maybe for food shortages and how they coped with them, and for hardships that were an immediate result of war activities such as air raids and battles. In so far as there is a collective guilt — and for the Dutch this problem surfaced much later than for the Germans — the excuse of the middle group, whether true or false, could be translated into the German *wir haben es nicht gewusst* : we didn't know.

But what about those who knew and did something about it? In their case the silence may stem from a natural reluctance to boast about what can be called altruistic heroic behaviour. It is maybe significant that the story of help to the Jews is told by outsiders who recently interviewed the people involved, in both *Quiet heroes*[19] by the Toronto sociology professor André Stein and *Anne Frank remembered, The story of the woman who helped to hide the Frank family*[20] by Alison Leslie Gold who interviewed Miep Gies. A variant of this account by a third

person is found when the narrator is a child of the person or persons who resisted the Germans and provided shelter. Maria Jacob's volumes of poems *Precautions against death*[21] is a good example. It is easier to tell about your parents than about yourself. Apart from modesty, an important factor may be the sense of overall failure in spite of small individual successes. In *Tijd van leven* (Time to live)[22] Renate Rubinstein says, in one of the numerous columns in which she talks about the war and its aftermath, that it is a strange trick of fate that those who rescued Jews feel guilty about not having been able to save more, while those who actively destroyed them carry on with their lives, leaving the past behind them as if nothing happened (p.74).

This does not mean, of course, that there are no works by gentiles at all. It is more difficult, however, to find a common denominator for them and it may be better to refrain from setting up subcategories. Yet some features recur. The child who observes what is going on but plays no active part in the events, or is powerless to stop the fatal developments, is central to the poetry of Maria Jacobs mentioned above. An equally moving account of a wartime episode is given by Gerard van het Reve in *De ondergang van de familie Boslowits* (The downfall of the Boslowits family)[23]. This story, told as seen by a child, without any retrospective commentary, is extremely subtle and suggestive, thanks to its great restraint. It is a homage to the victims. Many years after the war I myself wrote a tribute to a schoolfriend who died in Auschwitz. "Afscheid van Alex" (Farewell to Alex) describes our friendship in the last year before his deportation. Even though, strictly speaking, Nico Rost's *De vrienden van m'n vader* (My father's friends)[25] falls outside the realm of war literature, the nostalgic memories of Jewish life before the war in Groningen would probably not have been written if the Jewish community there had still been thriving after the war.

A different perspective is offered by Henri Knap in *De ronde van '43* (The round of '43)[26]. A Jewish girl of about thirteen is brought to the house of an underground worker who has already given shelter to two adults. He tries to find an place for her to hide, going in the October rain on his bicycle through the empty streets of a small provincial town. Wherever he asks, people give him reasons for their refusal, and eventually he returns home after a near arrest by a German patrol. All this time, the Jewish girl, wise, discreet and lovely, sits on his carrier, and accompanies him inside the houses. Knap can thus give us an almost complete list of reasons and rationalizations for not getting involved. (In all fairness it should be said that some are involved, but cannot take on the extra risk). The price Knap pays for being so informative is high: his story is totally unrealistic, because nobody in his right mind would take a Jewish girl in this way through the streets of a small town where everybody knows everybody. Yet his novella was the Book Week prize for 1981, as it fitted the image the Dutch like to have of the war. A few brave people, many bystanders most of whom are well-meaning, and a Jewish girl who is almost too good to be true.

This brings me to the delicate question of the selective memory and the incomplete picture we have of these events. First of all, only very few were able to write diaries and to analyze their feelings in the face of persecution and destruction. Very few of the survivors had the strength to look back and give an account of what they had witnessed; such testimonies often came only many decades after the war. In both instances — wartime diaries and retrospective descriptions — we are dealing with exceptional individuals of great courage. Secondly, there is a natural tendency to idealize the dead, and it would be in bad taste

to dwell on the negative qualities of those who were victims of the Nazis. How shocking it is when this rule of elementary decency is not observed becomes clear when one reads Gerard Reve ("van het" has been dropped since *De ondergang van de familie Boslowits*) in *Nader tot U* (Nearer to Thee)[27] about his sense of relief that his hated biology teacher is dead (pp.65-66). She committed suicide with her handicapped sister in Westerbork before the transport she was supposed to be in, left for Poland. On the other hand, one should be aware that the repression of ugly feelings and of reprehensible behaviour creates a distorted picture. People would like to believe in the triumph of the spirit over the dark forces of destruction, and Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum are very frequently quoted when they state their faith in humanity in spite of everything; David Koker is praised for his willingness to see human beings in his German guards. By stressing these positive feelings of the very few, we are able to forget the voiceless masses who went to their death in total bewilderment, to a death without any benefit for humanity. Especially in North America, but also in the Netherlands, the tendency to romanticize the Holocaust should not make us forget that it was a period so full of ugliness, nastiness and senseless destruction that we cannot write about it without trying to find a glimmer of hope. And that for most people there was no hope.

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