Book Reviews

Henry G. Schogt: *The Curtain: Witness and Memory in Wartime Holland.* Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. [Life Writing Series]. x, 131pp.

The subtitle of this book might suggest a general picture of wartime Holland, but what Henry Schogt has in fact given us is a series of miniatures of the fate of Dutch Jews under the impact of German occupation, persecution and destruction, and of the troubled relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish Dutch citizens.

For this reason, Schogt's book might be qualified as belonging to Holocaust literature, and as such it poses, for the reviewer and reader alike, many of the questions associated with what has become a kind of sub-genre of historical literature. This sub-genre has its own possibilities and liabilities. Holocaust texts tend to fall broadly into two categories: they can be "documents," part of historical writing (including such eye-witness accounts as those gathered for example in the anthology by Remkes Kooistra entitled *Where was God?* and reviewed in the pages of this journal)[1]; or they are some form of imaginative literature using the Holocaust as its theme or setting.[2]

Since Schogt's book consists of personal memories and facts gathered from various sources, it is "history." In its appeal to the reader's understanding and moral reaction, however, it has an "appellative" function, and as such crosses the borderline between objective history – the world of facts – and the subjective world of thought, emotion, viewpoint and morality. Moreover, in so far as he has chosen to cast his memories in the form of incidents which are anecdotal and personal, with an array of "characters," and centered around "significant" incidents, Schogt clearly wants us to see his text as a form of literature, even going so far as giving the individual episodes titles reminiscent of short stories ('The Fortune Teller," "Mr. Rozenberg's Cigars," "In the Dark," "Mussels," "Lily of the Valley and Asparagus"). Both "didactic" and aesthetic criteria, it is suggested, are involved in the writing of these memoirs, and therefore must also be involved in any discussion of this text.

There is in any case no contradiction in aims and method here, since it is clearly the aim of the author both to have his reader's *intellectual* reaction turn into a form of enlightenment and to have the reader become *emotionally* involved in order to formulate a moral viewpoint. As a professor of language and literature, Schogt is well acquainted with the power of certain literary devices to get a message across, and his use of these strategies, though discreet, is effective and appropriate. Schogt paints intimate, personal, sharply focussed pictures, while the larger canvas of the historical process is always present, but, apart from a summary introductory chapter, never central.[3]

The main text is composed of several short prose episodes, each dealing with some aspect of Jewish reality under the German occupation. The book logically separates into episodes seen from the personal perspective of the author (his own and his family's shift-

ing relationships with Jewish schoolmates, friends and acquaintances), and episodes (reconstructed in retrospect) dealing with Jewish families themselves, first and foremost the family of Schogt's wife Corrie, née Frenkel. The division is of course not absolute; on the contrary, it is the interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish groups and individuals that could be said to form the main topic of this book.

In each of these "stories," the paradigm is similar, the action externally driven by the Nazi decrees and activities listed in the "Calendar." The relatively calm and happy existence of Dutch Jews is first disturbed by ominous news from Germany. The Dutch in general, Schogt argues, had a "misplaced sense of security"(1) behind their Water Defence Line. Most Jews, too, refused to believe the worst and clung to illusions. Some clear-headed individuals, however, both Jews and Gentiles, are able to read the signs and consequently take appropriate action. Corrie's parents Flip and Bep Frenkel, for example, were "deeply concerned" (86) and from 1933 onwards provided shelter to a steady stream of refugees from Germany. With the actual occupation by the Germans we witness a gradual disintegration; freedoms are curtailed, the wearing of the yellow star is introduced (21), Jews are forced to renounce Dutch citizenship, and discrimination and persecution begins. Finally there are disappearances, arrests, and transportations.

Crucial in this process of threat and implementation are the reactions of both victims and "bystanders," and Schogt makes it clear that the matter of choice is central to his enterprise. From the Jewish point of view, the (increasingly limited) choices are to escape, to hide, or to resign onself. Schogt's schoolmate Alex, for example, faced with the order to report for "work" in Germany, is offered shelter, but he refuses out of solidarity with his step-brother and sister, and because he does not wish to expose people to potentially harsh punishment. Many other Jews avail themselves of the option, when offered, with a mixture of reluctance and gratitude. From the point of view of Gentiles, the choice is to remain passive, or to take an active role: "Dutch gentiles were free to participate in the Resistance against the policies of the occupying forces; they could also choose to stay on the sidelines, or even become active helpers of the persecutors."(8)

Schogt himself, sympathetic to the Jews, is at first not especially aware of their special status, and – without, it appears, a special sense of defiance or heroism – he continues to visit and associate with his school friend Alex and his family after the persecutions have started. At the same time he does begin to see himself as distinct from them as a group.(13) With the invasion, Schogt's parents (who had been in introverted mourning over the death of one of their children), wake up to the world and begin to take on a more active role. Though initially, in the case of Alex, they shirk "from taking in three Jews in their home, two of whom . . . were total strangers," at a later date they do accept to shelter Jews, as "Mr. Rozenberg's Cigars" demonstrates. At least within the narrow circle of Schogt's family and friends, Jews did find shelter and people did defy Nazi policies with acts of courage. At the same time, however, it is suggested that such behaviour was by no means the norm for the Dutch population in general – a point I have heard Marga Minco make with some bitterness. In the

interest, one feels, of documentary authenticity, Schogt in fact presents us with a whole range of reactions by Jews and non-Jews alike to the brutal and relentlessly dehumanizing policies of the occupiers and their sympathizers.

On the positive side there are the obvious "helpers," such as Schogt's own parents, who reluctantly agree to sign the Aryan declarations(13), while at the same time not discouraging Henry from visiting his Jewish friend Alex. They and Henry's sister Elisabeth eventually end up actively supporting and aiding Jewish victims. There are also more remote but equally effective and necessary humane fellow citizens, many of whom provide shelter or papers, or who alert Jews who are in danger of being arrested. A man who was able to provide Corrie with a new identity and thus enabled her to survive the war will forever remain anonymous, but he has found a monument in the episode "Lily of the Valley and Asparagus." There are also those, courageous but less noble, who provide shelter for money ("The Curtain,"101); there are "humane" Germans (26) as well as those who choose the path of non-interference. Such categories of people gradually shade into reluctant or even enthusiastic collaborators ("In Darkness") and those who ultimately betray Jews in hiding (by ignorance, perhaps, as in the case of Mrs. Bloem in "Mr. Rozenberg's Cigars"), or even go so far as to provide the instruments for their arrest (in the form of falsified papers, for example, in "The Fortune Teller").

It is clear that Schogt aims at some kind of "representative" role for his choices of *dramatis personae*, both victims and bystanders. His own aunt Grie, for example, is cast not as a a true villain, but as the model of a typical half-hearted collaborator, slightly in awe of the Germans and all things German, yet not actively involved in the more sordid activities perpetrated by the Nazis and their sympathizers in Holland. Nevertheless, in the final paragraph of "In Darkness", Schogt's ironic tone shifts into sarcasm at the preferential treatment his aunt receives when she seeks compensation for losses "suffered" in the war.

Tone, such as irony and sarcasm, is one way in which Schogt's attitudes are voiced, but at times the moral judgment is expressed more clearly by direct statement. When Henry and Corrie find, in the Rotterdam Archives, a copy of a document registering Corrie's return to her original name and status, and can tell from the comments by a civil servant that nothing has changed in the thinking of some fellow Dutch citizens, the author's anger is clear.

In a world in which people are placed before impossible options, people make good and bad choices, and it is not always easy to cast suspicion on people's motivation. We are put in mind of Brecht's dictum, "Happy the country that does not need heroes." But Schogt does not shy away from questioning behaviour if the facts seem to warrant it. Thus he wonders about the role of the Jewish Council in the facilitating of the registration and organization of the Jewish population, and he clearly indicts the Dutch civil servants for their compliance (inspired by – in this case – a misguided sense of duty). He also de-mythicizes to some extent the scope and effectiveness of the great November strike by the railway workers (the subject of a very much more positive depiction by Theun de Vries in his mammoth novel *November*).

Schogt points to luck as a major player: "Looking back, one notices that one's good fortune depended on trivialities, and that bad luck could be equally fortuitous" (8), as, one could add, in the case of the Rozenbergs, whose house must be the only one never visited by the Nazis. On the darker side, the arbitrariness of the process of selecting targets is chillingly demonstrated in the episode quoted from Jacques Presser's book (5). Much more often, however, it is the choice people make which Schogt places at the center of his stories. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that in the post-war years attitudes towards people whom one knew before and during the war are coloured by the positions they adopted and the choices they made. As relatives are gathered up once again, and reunions, against all expectations, materialize, other ties are forever broken, depending not only on circumstances, but on retrospective judgments concerning these fateful years. Separation, when it occurs, is not always a matter of physical distance (Toronto vs Holland), but of mental and moral distance.

As with any writing of quality, Schogt's book is an instance of "purposeful" writing, with an eye on reception and aesthetics. It is also self-reflective, in that it shows an awareness of the process of writing itself. Schogt is concerned with being a witness – in the most literal sense of having "been there" — but also with testifying about the "there" in which he found himself, and with the ultimate meaning of his experiences and those of others. He reflects on what "testifying" means in terms of both remembrance (content) and presentation (form).

The role of memory itself, as the subtitle suggests, is central to Schogt's enterprise. But memory itself is a far from reliable tool, as the very first piece, "Remembering Alex", already suggests: "For a long time I believed that events indelibly imprinted on your mind became part of you ... but far from forming a coherent whole, they seem to float in a vacuum, what comes before or after being blurred." (11) One way to "fix" the past, in a double sense of the word, is to write it down, "[i]n order not to lose what is still left and maybe even retrieve some of what seems to have disappeared." From a practical point of view, unfortunately, remembering is an activity fraught with doubt and frustration. On a number of occasions, for example, Schogt asks himself whether he was a witness to the event, or whether he has read about it (e.g. the November strike), or perhaps simply imagined it. Similarly, there are obvious gaps in the narratives generated both by himself and by the surviving members of Corrie's family, and certain problems of chronology will never be cleared up.

Even more difficult, however, is the task of re-creating and re-constructing the emotions felt in those five years, and extracting from the flow of events and accidenta the meaning of this fateful period in his life, though it is precisely in order to face this task, one assumes, that the decision to write has been taken, and its justification morally and existentially grounded. Here the writer must walk a thin line between pathos, sensationalism and sentimentality on the one hand, and an overly documentary style on the other. In its subtle variety of tone, in its irony sometimes shading into anger and sarcasm, in its sober presentation of facts coupled with a very personal timbre, and frankly displayed narrative skills (the stories are – not only because of their very nature - *spannend*)

Schogt's text succeeds admirably.

For the Schogts, the past is still "there," although it is in some ways irretrievably lost. As the epilogue suggests, the present sometimes leaves few physical traces of the past, and the colourless garrison town of Terezín cannot suggest the images conjured up by the word Theresienstadt. But in a more fundamental way it is "there" still, though as "behind a curtain." Indeed, the curtain in the title of the book, the curtain that once protected Corrie's parents from being placed on a list of people to be sent to Auschwitz is, I believe, a multi-faceted symbol. On the one hand, it may suggest an illusory security: the curtain hides, but ultimately it cannot save, and the Frenkels perished in Auschwitz. On the other hand, while the curtain of distance in both space and time seemingly prevents us from "knowing" the past, yet the curtain may become transparent through the act of remembering, and reveal a presence.

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[1] Remkes Kooistra (ed). *Where was God? The Lives and Thoughts of Holocaust and World War II Survivors*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2001.

[2] This latter type has been the subject of intense debate in the last few years (most critically in Norman G. Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry*). It has been suggested by Daniel R. Schwarz that specifically these questions are frequently asked: "Is the concept of a 'fictive construct' disrespectful to the Holocaust? . . . How can those of us who are not survivors write respectfully about the Holocaust since we cannot make amends through our writing for not being victims? . . . Can those who are not Jews have a legitimate vision of the Holocaust?" (Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.) Schwarz was thinking of the writers of Holocaust literature when he asked these questions, but of course, similar questions apply to the potential reviewer and/or reader of such works. Especially in the case of readers who are neither survivors nor witnesses, their critical reception also tends to treat the text either as a (historical and "ego") document or as literature.

[3] For the uninitiated, Schogt provides a helpful appendix consisting of a "Calendar of decrees and activities," a list of concentration camps in the Netherlands, and some chilling statistics.

[4] Jacques Presser, *Ashes in the Wind, The Destruction of the Dutch Jews*, trans. by Arnold Pomerans (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968).

Robert Howell and Jolanda Vanderwal Taylor, eds. *History in Dutch Studies*. Lanham, MD: Univ Press of America, 2003. 246p. (Publications of the American Association for Netherlandic Studies, 14).

This series of selected papers from conferences in Netherlandic Studies is well known to our readers, and they will be happy to see the publication of the selection from the ninth International Conference, held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1998. It is as interesting as all ICNS proceedings are, and not only to historians, despite its title: as the preface says, "art history, history, linguistics and literature" are all represented here.