

A

sacred duty'

The Holocaust in Dutch Historiography



The 'Final Solution' hit Jews in the Netherlands particularly hard: 100,000 of the 140,000 Jews living in the Netherlands were murdered. Expressed as a percentage, over 70% became victims of the German extermination machine. The percentage was markedly lower in other Western European countries – in Norway and Belgium about 40%, in France 25%, while in Denmark nearly all the 8,000 Jews managed to escape deportation.

In the light of the markedly high Dutch percentage it is interesting to consider how historiography has reacted to the murder of the Jews. This article is confined to the work of three historians, Abel Herzberg (1893-1989), Loe de Jong (1914-) and Jacques Presser (1899-1970), all of them Dutch Jews who survived the Holocaust.

Herzberg initially went into hiding, but was later deported via the Wester-

Departure from Westerbork to Auschwitz (Photo Rijks-instituut voor Oorlogs-documentatie, Amsterdam).

bork transit camp to Bergen-Belsen. He and his wife survived the war there. Returning to the Netherlands they were reunited with their three children, who had stayed in hiding. De Jong and his wife managed to escape to England in 1940. There, cut off from the rest of his family, who remained in occupied Holland, he spent the war years working for *Radio Oranje*, the broadcasting service of the Dutch government in exile. When he returned to the continent he found that nearly all of his family had been murdered. Presser went into hiding just in time, but his wife was picked up when she ventured out of the house. She was murdered in Sobibor.

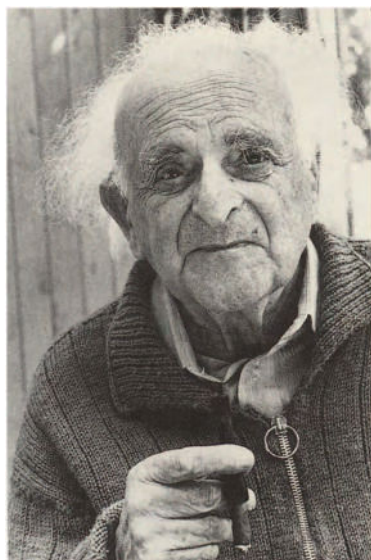
Herzberg, De Jong and Presser have made important contributions to the historiography of the murder of the Dutch Jews during the Second World War. How did they approach this complex and overpowering subject? What follows is a broad brush impression of their historical writing about the Holocaust and also discusses the way in which they dealt with the activities of the Jewish Council. How did these three historians handle their emotional and moral involvement in the subject? And finally, what contribution have they made to helping the Dutch to come to terms with the full horror of what actually happened during the war?

In 1950 the first scholarly study of the murder of the Jews appeared. It was entitled *Chronicle of the Persecution of the Jews 1940-1945* (*Kroniek der Jodenvervolgung 1940-1945*) and its author was Abel Herzberg. In the same year the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation, which had been set up in 1945, commissioned the historian Jacques Presser to write a history of the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands. Then five years later, in 1955, the then Minister for Education and Science asked Loe de Jong to write the history of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Second World War.

Herzberg's *Chronicle* is held by some to be the first historical work of literary merit on this subject in the Netherlands. It was among the earliest historiography on the Holocaust both nationally and internationally. The commissions given to Presser and de Jong are unique. In no other Western European country were such works commissioned. How can we explain this exceptional situation? It seems probable that Dutch society was shocked in a different way or more fundamentally than other Western European countries by the results of the German occupation. The extermination of more than 70% of Dutch Jews was a severe loss for the Netherlands, both in moral and physical terms. The shock to the Netherlands may have been all the greater because the Jewish population was relatively closely integrated into prewar Dutch society. Anti-semitism was not unknown in the Netherlands, but there was certainly no question of the kind of strong antisemitic tendencies to be found for example in France.

In his *Chronicle* Herzberg gives a good overview of the vicissitudes of the Jews in the Netherlands during the war years, using a sober but harrowing style. This *Chronicle* has stood the test of time remarkably well; in 1978 the work was republished virtually in its original format 'because the general picture it gives of the persecution of Jews in this country corresponds to the reality'.

Herzberg defended the Jewish Council, just as he had spoken in defence of Bram Asscher, one of its two Presidents, when he and his co-President, David Cohen, were prosecuted by the Dutch legal authorities in 1947. The



Abel Herzberg (1893-1989)
(Photo by Bert Nienhuis).

Jewish Council had been set up in the Netherlands in 1941 under the German occupation as an organisation whose function was to implement the regulations laid down by the Germans. Herzberg stressed the need to understand the position in which the Jews found themselves in the war years. In his opinion, at the time that the Jewish Council was set up the view that it might 'avoid something even worse' had some validity.

Herzberg, who had been active in the Zionist movement before the war (from 1934 to 1939 he was chairman of the Dutch Zionist League) set what happened during the war explicitly in the perspective of Jewish history. So he considered that the Jewish Council was necessary to set the Jewish population of the Netherlands 'firmly in its place in Jewish history'. He thought it a positive factor that the Jewish Council had addressed itself to spiritual values: '*a historic task, which in earlier times and in other countries had been done over and over again and had contributed to the survival of the Jewish people. (...) Inwardly there was no surrender and that is of the utmost importance when you come to pass judgment on the actual conduct of the Jewish Council.*' During the occupation Herzberg himself had contributed to the spiritual resistance of Jews in the Netherlands. He was one of five editors of the *Joodsche Weekblad* (Jewish Weekly), the successor to *De Joodsche Wachter* (The Jewish Guardian), the paper of the Dutch Zionist League. In Bergen-Belsen, where in an attempt to maintain a minimum of order the inmates set up a court, he filled the role of public prosecutor.

Despite the huge number of Jewish victims, Herzberg thought that Judaism had not been defeated. 'To draw conclusions', he wrote, 'you need to do more than just count the corpses'. Herzberg saw in the foundation of the state of Israel not just the proof of unbroken Jewish vitality and the perpetuation of a principle, but also a condition for the Jewish fighting spirit. He closed his *Chronicle* with a reference to the state of Israel, founded in 1948: 'Here beginneth a new book of chronicles.'

The next milestone in Dutch historiography on the murder of the Jews was the publication in 1965 of *Ashes in the Wind. The Destruction of Dutch Jewry*. (Ondergang. De vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse Jodendom 1940-1945), commissioned by the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation and written by the historian Jacques Presser. *Ashes in the Wind* is the title of the English translation, which was published in 1968. A year later the same translation also appeared in the USA under the title *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews*. Twenty years had passed since the end of the war. In 1961 the trial of Adolf Eichmann had taken place, and had attracted much attention in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere; Abel Herzberg was among those who went to Jerusalem to cover the trial as a journalist. An additional factor was that in the years leading up to the publication of Presser's book television had confronted many Dutch people with the murder of the Jews, for Loe de Jong had produced and presented a 21 part series entitled *The Occupation* (De bezetting, 1960-1965).

After the Eichmann trial and the TV series, *Ashes in the Wind* fell on fertile soil. It is no exaggeration to say that its two parts had the impact of a bomb. In a commemorative address after Presser's death in 1970 De Jong said: 'I don't believe that a historical work has ever appeared in our country whose dramatic impact can be compared to that of Jacques Presser's.' In eight months it sold 150,000 copies. For the first time the Dutch public

appeared fully to realise the extent and the depth of the catastrophe wrought in the Netherlands by the destruction of the Jews.

Because Presser had chosen in his account to let the victims 'speak for themselves', the reader was mercilessly confronted by their suffering. In the foreword Presser spoke of *'a call to speak up for those who, doomed to eternal silence, could make themselves heard only here and now, this time only. The earth should reverberate with their lament, their complaint for one more time. (...) They had no one else but the historiographer to pass on their message. We think that we should not avoid speaking of a sacred duty.'* This was indeed no small task for a man who had himself emerged from the war so badly scathed.

Presser's work made a deep and indelible impression on many readers, among them members of a new generation which had in the meantime grown old enough to ask questions about the occupation period. The emotional way in which Presser told the story of the destruction of Dutch Jewry and the accusations in his book were not lost on the public. As De Jong rightly remarked in the commemoration address I have already mentioned, Presser held a mirror up to the reader: 'Behold, this happened in the Netherlands and, tacit reproach: This you have tolerated – you, Jewish leaders, you, Dutch authorities.' The reaction was an almost collective sense of at least passive guilt.

Portrait of Jacques Presser (1899-1970), taken from his identity card (Photo Rijks-instituut voor Oorlogs-documentatie, Amsterdam).



Loe de Jong (1914-), working for *Radio Oranje* in London (Photo Rijks-instituut voor Oorlogs-documentatie, Amsterdam).

While Herzberg had given an important place in his *Chronicle* to Jewish cultural and spiritual life, Presser placed more emphasis on the supposed class politics of the Jewish Council. Whereas Herzberg defended the formation of the Jewish Council and stressed its value as the representative body of the Jewish community itself, Presser saw it largely as the body which implemented German decisions. He spoke of 'collaboration' and compared the two chairmen to the captain of the Titanic: '*But if the Presidents liked to see themselves as captains of sinking ships, they should have remembered the captain of the Titanic who did not take to the boats – but perished in the waves. In May 1943 the Presidents of the Jewish Council agreed to supply the list the Germans had demanded of them – much against their own will and fully aware of the monstrous nature of their task. The writer must put on record that among the 7,000 names, two were conspicuous by their absence – those of Asscher and Cohen. Let that fact speak for itself.*'

Presser's book really touched the heart of the Dutch people. Reviews of it were marked by feelings of bewilderment, guilt and shame. Fellow historians however, were not unanimously enthusiastic about it. According to Presser's colleague I. Schöffer, who discussed the book in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* (Journal for History) in 1966, Presser tried too hard to distance the scientific side of his research from his history writing. Furthermore, he found the book too one-sided and too restricted both in its subject matter and its form. The crucial point of the criticism by Schöffer and others was that in his study Presser had chosen exclusively the perspective of the victims; as a result the systematic way in which the Nazis had conducted their programme of extermination was not clearly brought out. Also many critics thought that from a historiographical point of view Presser's book did not constitute an advance.

Criticism from Jewish circles concentrated on the central line of *Ondergang* (The title can be literally translated as 'downfall'). While Herzberg in conformity with Jewish history and tradition had made a clear connection with future events, everything in Presser's narrative led to the final destruction of the Jews. Herzberg was one of those Jewish critics who took exception to this pessimistic presentation of events.

In the twelve volumes of *The Kingdom of the Netherlands during the Second World War* (Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog), which appeared fairly regularly from 1969 on, Loe de Jong, Director of the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation from its foundation in 1945 until 1979, paid considerable attention to the persecution of the Jews. In the first part, entitled *Prologue* (Voorspel), he began his discussion of the persecution of the Jews with Germany in the 1930s. In later parts, while reviewing the early history of the persecution and the origins of anti-semitism in both Europe and the Netherlands, he went back as far as the Middle Ages. He also looked at the prewar Jewish community in the Netherlands. Herzberg and Presser, on the other hand, both began their accounts with the German invasion. Furthermore, De Jong described at length and in painful detail what happened to the Jews who were deported after they arrived in the concentration camps. Presser had written relatively little about this aspect and De Jong wanted to remedy that. De Jong felt that Presser was just not capable of handling this aspect of the persecution.

As far as the Jewish council was concerned, De Jong left no one in any doubt that he thought this body 'was from the outset a tool in the hands of the Germans'. Contradicting Herzberg, he held that 'there was never any question of the Jews themselves really accepting the authority of the Jewish Council'. At various critical moments, wrote De Jong, large numbers of Jews disregarded the calls of the Jewish Council. So of the five to seven thousand people who were called up in May 1943 (De Jong is referring to the list which Presser used in his condemnation of the chairmen of the Jewish Council), only 500 actually obeyed that call. According to De Jong many Jews thought from the very beginning that the role of the Jewish Council was merely to help the occupying power in its work of persecution and deportation. Neither did De Jong think it just to pick out the two Presidents, Asscher and Cohen, as the only two guilty ones. De Jong's view was that Cohen had always been a more decisive influence than Asscher, and that the question of the collective responsibility of the Jewish Council as a whole also needed to be considered.

Herzberg had asserted in his *Chronicle* that the Jews needed the Jewish Council. De Jong thought that in making this assertion Herzberg had failed to take into account the reason why the Council had been founded in the first place. The fact that the Jews later turned to it in their despair was insufficient justification for its existence. De Jong's view was that the creation of the Jewish Council had made it easier to single out the Jews.

Interestingly, De Jong was prepared to tackle the question of whether or not things could have turned out differently. He thought that while giving a minimum of help to the enemy, the Jewish leaders could have tried to arrange for as many Jews as possible to go underground. Had they done so, his own parents – whom he does not actually mention here – might have accepted invitations to go into hiding. But the Jewish Council never considered a combination of legality and illegality. The Amsterdam leadership, wrote De Jong, lacked the necessary fighting spirit and nerve to take such risks.

According to the Israeli historian Saul Friedlander, who teaches history in both Tel Aviv and Los Angeles, the greatest problem facing the historian of the Holocaust is keeping a reasonable balance between strong emotional involvement and the intellectual objectivity required by this research. This was certainly true of Herzberg, De Jong and Presser; the more so in their case because they were themselves 'survivors'. Of the three authors it is Presser who is by far the most emotional in his writings. His work has been criticised for this but, steeped in emotion though it may be, it affects the reader as none of the others does. Despite the fact that it is never really possible to measure suffering one might nonetheless venture to suggest that of the three historians it was Presser for whom writing a history of the murder of the Jews was most difficult. Herzberg drew hope from his Zionist convictions and the formation of the state of Israel, where two of his children settled shortly after the end of the war. And De Jong, although he has devoted all of his working life to writing the history of the Second World War, was still able to stand back from his subject to some extent, since he was outside the Netherlands during the war years. He said during an interview about this: *'Had I as a Jew been in the Netherlands during the occupation and had to endure all that terror and misery I could never, given my character, have devoted the rest of my life to dealing with it. But I fled to*

England in fear for my life and the detachment that gave me enabled me to work on it.'

In the same article Friedlander warns against a premature closure of this subject, with attention paid to exclusively political decisions and administrative decrees, playing down the actuality of despair and the deaths of the victims. As it happens, you rarely find such a neutralising approach in the writing of Herzberg, De Jong and Presser. Because they regularly quote eyewitness accounts and do not shrink from describing what happened to them and their families, they have avoided writing a 'normal' historical account, in which the voices of the victims themselves are silent.

Of the three historians it is Herzberg who has used his own personal experiences least explicitly in his work. The opening pages of *Chronicle*, in which Herzberg describes his experiences and feelings on 15 May 1940, the day on which the Dutch Army capitulated, are openly autobiographical. Later on, however, references to himself in *Chronicle* are infrequent. But anyone who knows his account of the war, for example from his diary from Bergen-Belsen, *Land of Two Streams* (Tweestromenland), which appeared in the same year as *Chronicle*, will know that Herzberg is speaking from personal experience when he writes about arriving in Bergen-Belsen: '*Externally Bergen-Belsen did not appear any different from other concentration camps and everyone has read descriptions of those. But the dismal atmosphere that hung about the place, even when nothing special was happening cannot be understood by anyone who was not there; nor in truth can it readily be comprehended by those who were there.*'

Presser's *Ondergang* on the other hand is so much a personal testimony that as a reviewer rightly remarked in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 'even the reader who does not know the author (...) will automatically be able through the book to see him, so personal is its style and tone'. Presser's descriptions of his own experiences are dramatic high points of his book. Thus he devotes several pages to a description of the raid on 6 August 1942 in which he and his wife were picked up. The passage about the screening process in which he and his wife escaped being selected makes the reader's blood run cold. Presser also describes how in desperation he called at the Jewish Council in a vain attempt to save his wife, who at that point was still being held at Westerbork.

De Jong too, perhaps imitating his colleague Presser, finds room in various places in his work for what are mostly short and matter of fact descriptions of his personal experiences during the war years. For instance, he described his flight to England and recounted how in London he 'knew' what the 'Final Solution' meant ('When I subsequently heard in July that my parents and younger sister had been taken away after the raid on 26 May I knew what that meant'). At the end of a chapter about what was done to help the Jews De Jong engaged in some self-criticism. He described how, at a time when the Jews were being deported from the Netherlands, he thought that the most useful thing he could do was to make 'a modest contribution to the final victory' through his work at *Radio Oranje*. 'I now think', he concluded, 'that I concentrated too much on the final victory and too little on my fellow Jews. I now think that I neither felt nor showed a sufficient sense of solidarity with them.'

Strikingly enough, the inclusion of one's own wartime experiences in the

historiography of the Holocaust is, as far as I can see, an exclusively Dutch phenomenon. While Herzberg, De Jong and Presser did it almost as a matter of course, foreign colleagues and approximate contemporaries of this Dutch threesome, such as Raul Hilberg (*The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1961) and Léon Poliakov (*Harvest of Hate*, 1951) did not make use of their own wartime experiences in their historical writing.

Finally, have Herzberg, De Jong and Presser contributed to the process of coming to terms with the trauma of the Holocaust? That Dutch writers and historians had at least not failed when it came to transmitting knowledge of the Holocaust became clear in 1978, when the American television drama *Holocaust* was shown on Dutch television. As the historian Jan Bank observed in his inaugural lecture in Rotterdam in 1983, the Dutch television viewer was markedly less shocked and surprised by what was presented to him than were American and German viewers. For many Dutch people, the persecution of the Jews was 'living history', not some unknown phenomenon. That this was the case was in part at least attributable to the historical – and other – work of Herzberg, De Jong and Presser.

In the process of coming to terms, however, knowledge is only a first step. Only when what happened is integrated into a people's consciousness and leads to changes in behaviour is the end in sight. I would be claiming too much here if I asserted that where the Netherlands is concerned that process is complete. Any such claim would require further research. But a few observations from foreign researchers are relevant. In 1992 *Pinkas*, a series published by Yad Vashem about Jewish communities in countries under German occupation during the Second World War, produced its volume on the Netherlands. The authors were Joseph Michman (who after the war left the Netherlands for Israel), Hartog Beem and Dan Michman. In the chapter entitled 'Traumatic Recovery' ('Traumatisch herstel') they wrote *inter alia* that the behaviour of Dutch people during the persecution of Jews in their country contained much that was reprehensible. But they thought that the

The fence around the Jewish district in Amsterdam, 1941 (Photo Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, Amsterdam).



Netherlands differed from other countries occupied by the Germans in that there they were conscious of the fact that they had let the Jews down. Furthermore, Debórah Dwork, an American researcher, and Robert-Jan van Pelt, a Dutch historian working in Canada, recently drew attention to the fact that the Dutch reaction to the Holocaust was exceptional in that the Dutch had 'come to recognise and accept responsibility for their accommodation, complicity and collusion' in the murder of the Jews. In so far as this is indeed the case, the three historians whose work has been central to this article have undoubtedly made a substantial contribution to the formation of this consciousness.

The work of Herzberg, De Jong and Presser brought to an end the writing of history about the Holocaust by people directly involved in the subject. The murder of the Jews however, even nearly fifty years after the end of the Second World War, still attracts the attention of many scholars. Since the late 1980s in particular, a number of studies dealing with the Holocaust have appeared in the Netherlands. Most researchers in this field have no personal experience of the German occupation, very few of them are Jewish, they concentrate on particular aspects and their studies are in general characterised by a more factual approach.

It is Herzberg, De Jong and Presser who through their outstanding historical writing have forcefully drawn the attention of many Dutch people, and not only scholars, to the murder of Dutch Jews. In doing so they have rendered the Netherlands a great service.

CONNIE KRISTEL

Translated by Michael Shaw.

FURTHER READING

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