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# Pre- Genocide

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# Pre-Genocide Warnings and Readiness to Protect

Humanity In Action (Denmark)

# The Netherlands: Dissonance between Feelings of Safety and Destruction

Selma Leydesdorff

In his unknown Yiddish novel *Mit Blindè Trit iber der Erd* (*With Blind Steps over the Earth*), the author Leïb Rochman describes an old rabbi crossing the streets of Amsterdam after the Shoah. In the olden days before the disaster, people would open their windows to bless him. He was known for his wisdom; he would bring food to poor mothers, and with his remedies and his help, small children escaped the angel of Death. Suddenly in a window on the top floor of a house he is passing a fist is raised and an old woman shouts: “Scoundrel! At times you saved my son. Thanks to you, he was not decently buried when he died!” And suddenly many children on the roofs shout that he has prevented them from dying in their beds.

The allegories in the book represent our incapacity to predict the future. No one in the years before the Second World War could predict that under the German occupation more than three-quarters of the Dutch Jews would be deported to German camps in Poland and murdered there – more than anywhere else in Western Europe. The Netherlands were too civilized for such inhumanity.

In the collective memory of the Netherlands, almost every non-Jew had hated the occupier, and even those who felt it was safe to continue living as they had before the war – although Jews were people one did not really ‘know’ – imagined that there would also be safety for those considered an accepted minority. This image is a construction of changing memories. I want to argue that in the dominant historical view of the past, Jews have become more accepted than they actually were. It is a challenge to explain this construction.

Is it possible that people in a country can be equal and legal citizens, yet not at all equal in their daily lives? If this is the case, when do these people truly become full citizens? Will social scientists ever be able to measure feelings of safety or acceptance, constructs which are almost never expressed statistically? Do methods exist that can quantify collective feelings accurately? These are some of the pressing questions that require answers in order to understand the expectations of Dutch Jewry before the Holocaust.

It is clear that the Jews had no political authority, and only a very few of them held positions of power. Indeed, only a miniscule percentage of Jews belonged to the elite, and those who did were – and even today are – always pointed to as an example of the successful integration of the Jews. Apparently, a strong dissonance exists between the perception of safety as part of the history of the Dutch Jewry before the war, and what actually happened.

The policy to exterminate the Jews came from the Germans, but the occupation forces were helped by a smoothly running administration and by a majority of the Dutch policemen who were charged with arresting the Jews, and also by the Dutch railway personnel who transported them to the transit camp from where German trains departed to the death camps. All this was facilitated by the smooth Dutch administration.

All over Europe, it has taken time to come to terms even partially with the participation of non-Germans, i.e., the local population, in the deportation of the Jews. Many people have been much too uncomfortable to speak about it. Those who collaborated were people who had mentally shut themselves off from the suspicion that the destinations of the trains to the East were murder factories.

However, modern historiography has forced people to acknowledge this massive participation of the non-Jewish population in the deportations and man-hunts. In most countries of Western Europe, the dominant narrative has been that the Germans were the chief perpetrators, and this is certainly correct; but the paradigm that singles out the Germans for blame has had the effect of hiding and exculpating the non-German perpetrators. Indeed, many of those who facilitated the destruction of Europe's Jewry did not adhere to the Nazis' racist ideology.

The debate about the participation of the local population was first catalyzed by the publication of a book entitled *Vichy France and the Jews*<sup>1</sup> which highlighted the participation of the French population in the deportations. After the book's publication, the issue of collaboration could no longer be ignored. The debate then found its way into countries outside of France, often encountering great emotional resistance, and over the past decades this new paradigm has entered the Netherlands as well. Some people began to wonder in earnest about the extent to which the Germans had actually been helped.

The emotional resistance against such research also appeared in academia, which was generally quite reluctant to explore the issue. It is striking that, while

official collaboration eventually became a bona-fide field of research, more widespread participation has seldom been the focus of serious historical research.

The pre-war history of Dutch Jewry is overshadowed by mythologies that mask the later non-German involvement. Moreover, the degree of integration of the Jews is exaggerated by feelings of guilt about the massive complicity, not only of those who helped to commit the crimes, but also of the many who opted to turn their gaze away from what was happening right in front of them. During the first years of the occupation, many assumed that Germany would eventually win the war, and thus it was better to adapt, and not to talk or think too much about the fate of their neighbors who were rapidly disappearing.

According to the dominant image of the past, Jews began to settle in the Netherlands centuries ago, and thus were no longer considered as immigrants. A presence over centuries and an emancipation in the late eighteenth century had transformed them into 'real Dutch.' The February 1941 strike, when thousands of workers demonstrated their solidarity with the Jews, is supposed to be one of the major indicators that Jews were already integrated into Dutch society prior to the Holocaust.

However, it may be more accurate to interpret this strike differently, as it was chiefly the result of communist contestation in the harbors. It is now clear that the strike does not actually constitute proof of massive loyalty of the Dutch towards the Jews during the war.

According to the above-mentioned mythological image, the Jews, who were initially present as 'others,' expected to integrate fully with the majority of the population and become 'one of us.' It is indeed the case that they wanted to be part of the Dutch nation, and to adopt its culture. In my work on pre-war Jews, I have stressed that the Jews were ambivalent about the role of their Jewish cultural heritage, which they did not want to reject or abandon altogether.<sup>2</sup>

These Jews were typically optimistic about successful integration since they were more integrated here than in many other countries. Contemporaries from abroad visiting the larger towns where Jews lived always mentioned their amazement at the high level of integration. The many observations of eyewitnesses who stated that Jews were living better in the Netherlands than anywhere else in Europe served as templates for memories of idealized relations between Jews and non-Jews.

Indeed, a reasonable argument exists that the Jews were integrating. In the following, I will examine if this was indeed the case, and if so, to what extent.

Therefore, it is necessary to question the self-image of the Netherlands as a country that lacked a genuine tradition of antisemitism.

Holland has a racist and colonial past, in which overt antisemitism was not part of the day-to-day discourse, but where anti-Semitic prejudices were nonetheless quite common, especially among the upper classes. It must be acknowledged that the Jews were discriminated against and segregated, not physically but in numerous other important ways. For example, there were athletic clubs that excluded Jews. Moreover, sporadic statistics reveal the reluctance of non-Jewish parents to let their children play with Jewish children, and almost all Jews were excluded from many desired professional opportunities.

The culture of the Amsterdam Jewish working classes I have studied for decades was dominated by the elite of the diamond workers, for whom assimilation was a core part of their political goals. Their degree of integration into the Dutch socialist movement is an exception in the European pattern, which has been widely noted by historians of socialism and socialist Jewry. Below them on the social hierarchy were the seamstresses, the cigar-makers, the tailors of the textile industries, and the many unemployed. In the late 1930s, when the economic crisis hit the diamond industry and 92% of the diamond workers became unemployed, the hope for integration remained, although the elite had disappeared and life became increasingly a part of a culture of poverty. It should also be recalled that the Jews were enclosed in a separate economy from which it was virtually impossible to escape. Reports supported by data from 1926 and 1936 confirm this. This 'Jewish economy' was made up of Jews who were unevenly distributed through the various sectors, which deviated significantly from the norm, both locally and nationally. Jews worked in a number of specific sectors, while many others remained closed to them. Jews were more present in small trade, commerce, and retail.

It is important to note that Jews typically worked and lived together. When they entered new neighborhoods, they preferred those streets where other Jews lived and where their lifestyle and food patterns were not considered deviant. They never integrated completely, and access to many professions was blocked. Even when they believed that they were in the process of integrating, they actually lived in their own hermetically sealed world. Louis, a man that I interviewed in the 1980s, stated that he would spend his entire free weekends among fellow Jews, even though he also asserted that he was a worker, just like the non-Jews. Jewish girls would also attend evening classes that were exclusively comprised



of Jews. These classes would frequently teach skills needed in professions in which Jews were allowed, such as how to make fine needlework within the textile industry.

In most positions of societal authority, Jews remained a minority. For example, of the 4,000 municipal aldermen in the Netherlands from 1930-35, there were only 10-15 Jews. Among the 590 members of the provincial states, only seven were Jews. The proportion of Jewish teachers, and Jews in education overall, was also significantly lower than in the rest of the population.

So, it can be argued that while many Jews were integrating to a greater or lesser extent, they still lived in a 'migrant society.' It is also important to note that, although this was the case, they would never consider themselves migrants. For them, migrants were those Jews who came from the East (e.g., refugees from Poland and Russia), and they despised them. In contrast, they themselves were truly 'Dutch.' Still, no one would deny that friendships with 'the others' hardly occurred, and data reveal the persistence of Jewish marginality. The cleavage between Jews and non-Jews tends to be effaced in the collective memory, and pre-war Dutch Jewry is typically taken as an example of a successfully integrated group. The Shoah has made it particularly challenging to recover the pre-war stories of being 'in' Dutch society but not 'of' it. It is apparently much easier to think about the past as the history of a country in which all Jews were regarded as fellow citizens.

In the Netherlands, most people disregarded the threat of Nazism. Even though thousands of refugees were on the move throughout Europe, the Dutch Jews clung to the conviction that they were safe. The Netherlands had not been involved in the First World War. The country had adopted a policy of neutrality and was expected to stay out of any war that might occur in the future. If one had money, there was happiness, such as during a Jewish marriage in the North of the country. Even among the poor and unemployed, life was peaceful and happy.

Many descriptions indicate that a general feeling of trust was ubiquitous. Newspapers, diaries, and other sources from that time indicate complacency, and threats in Europe are mentioned only sporadically. The future was considered safe and secure. For instance, my own mother was forced by her parents to return from Palestine because it was unsafe there. Her parents believed that she would be much better protected at home. However, she ended up in Auschwitz, where she managed to survive.

This pattern of complacency did not disappear completely when the Germans occupied the country. There was still hope for survival within the Jewish commu-

nity. People knew they had to hide, but they also trusted the voices that told them to adapt and to pack their belongings. Once the deportations began, the Jewish leaders reassured them that life in the East would probably turn out to be better than they expected.

The best way for everyone to remain safe seemed to be obedience and non-resistance towards the occupiers. Many saw no reason to flee or go into hiding. Indeed, most people preferred not to doubt and not to fear. After all, there was nothing else to do but to go. Although most assumed that it was better not to be sent to the East, it was thought that, through hard work, survival was possible. The Germans wanted people to believe that no special violence would be directed at them. However, during the razzias, in the streets of towns and villages, the Germans' behavior was violent. Jews then assumed that what awaited them was not good, but no one could imagine the massive killings that would soon occur.

In the history of my own family I found an example of hope in a lovely letter my grandmother wrote to her children on the evening before she was deported. At that moment, she was in the major transit camp at Westerbork. She was worried as she wrote, of course, and she prayed for God's guidance. She believed that she would die, and worded it this way, "I don't know where I'll die. Here in Westerbork or in Poland? The life of Jews is at this very moment unquiet." However, she assumed that "our people will flourish again."

She had lost all of her property, but she left something much more important to her children: her enormous love. She was convinced that my mother would survive with her first husband. They were so strong. (My mother's husband was gassed in Sobibor). My grandmother was not naïve, and before the war she had tried to receive refugees; she knew about the dangers of Nazism. She belonged to a small group of elite Jews who lived a traditional Jewish life and maintained a kosher house. She had been shocked by the violence in the streets of Amsterdam and later in the transit camp of Westerbork, members of my family told me. There were illusions and hope, and at the same time there was no hope.

Lately, there has been a fierce debate about what people knew about what was in store for the Jews. Deliberately, I have kept away from this debate, which mostly concerns the reliability and use of sources. Some read them as a confirmation of the public awareness of danger and others as a denial that people knew. I read most of them as an exculpation of the non-Jewish Dutch who, according to these

sources, could not possibly have known that the Jews would be systematically exterminated.

Some of the participants in this debate argue that even the Jews who would be slaughtered did not and could not have known. This is true in a certain way. I am always shocked to read how the Dutch Jews arriving in Sobibor were forced to write postcards with the message that they were doing well. This happened less than six hours before they were killed. No one could imagine the enormity of the crime that was coming.

Even the 'workers' in Sobibor believed that the people who 'suddenly' disappeared were transported to other camps for labor. Sometimes, it took weeks until they could accept that the stench in the camp came from the dead bodies carried out of the gas chambers. Many survivors I interviewed told me this.

How can we disentangle the dichotomy between integration and non-integration that has been buried for so many powerful reasons? The Shoah has made it so difficult to remember the non-integration of the Jews. It is such a small step to argue that the Jews would eventually have integrated. I prefer, however, to examine a Dutch society in which the Jews were not fully intergrated. Dutch society has had, for centuries, a problematic relation to migrants, and the Jews were no exception to this rule.

In Dutch society, the Jews and non-Jews did not really know each other. It has often been noted how people stood by in the streets when the Jews were being rounded up. This image is true. However, I wonder if the Jews expected their non-Jewish neighbours to act differently. In a sense, the people chased through the streets were their neighbours, but at the same time they were people from a different world who often kept to themselves. The myth of the February 1941 strike suggests that they were also friends, and that there was a massive and unified protest. This narrative, however, has obscured their actual material life in a segregated society. Integration was far away indeed, so much farther than we want to believe.

Unpeeling the many layers that intertwine feelings of guilt with many denials and constructions of memory is a major challenge if we choose a lens which acknowledges that maybe the feelings of belonging and safety have been accentuated. There is considerable evidence to show that the Jews were far less integrated than we are now led to believe. History constantly needs to be rewritten, and this issue awaits future discoveries which may reveal that there was not such a dissonance.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* New York: Basic Books, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Selma Leydesdorff, *We Lived with Dignity, The Jewish Proletariat of Amsterdam 1900-1940* (Wayne State University Press, 1998), *Wir haben als Mensch Gelebt* (Suhrkamp 1998); "The Veil of History: The Integration of Jews Reconsidered," in J. Israel and R. Salverda (eds.), *Dutch Jewry: Its History and Secular Culture* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2002), pp. 225-239; and "The Mythology of Solidarity, as shown in the Memory of the February Strike of 1941," in Joseph Michman (ed.), *Dutch Jewish History* (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1993), vol. III, pp. 353-369.