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**The Holocaust in the Netherlands**

**A Reevaluation**

Conference at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,  
Washington, DC, May 1, 1997.

Cosponsored by the Research Institute of the United States  
Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Rijksinstituut voor  
Oorlogsdocumentatie.

Summary by Patricia Heberer, Historian,  
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

WASHINGTON, D. C.

## **The Holocaust in the Netherlands A Reevaluation**

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The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Fifty years after the end of World War II, the Netherlands is publicly reevaluating its experience under Nazi occupation. Whereas research in the postwar period in the Netherlands focused on the strength and diversity of resistance, recent scholarship has been on the collaboration of local authorities with the Nazis, thus altering previous historiography and public memory about events. Although many Dutch have been honored as among the righteous for saving Jews and a demonstration in Amsterdam against the first deportation of Dutch Jews in 1941 was a rare protest in Europe, nearly eighty percent of Dutch Jews were deported, the highest percentage in Western Europe, and no other occupied country in Western Europe had as many SS volunteers. "Resistance was not general; after all, most people chose to carry on with their lives as normally as possible, simply hoping to survive. And so they sometimes looked the other way when dark deeds were done in broad daylight.... Some people chose the wrong side altogether; fifty years on, later generations still bear the scars." (Queen Beatrix, Christmas speech 1994)

This conference presented new scholarship by Dutch historians, and afforded an opportunity to discuss the contrasts between resistance and collaboration in the German-occupied Netherlands.



On 1 May 1997, the Research Institute of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in conjunction with the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation (Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, or RIOD), hosted an international symposium in Washington, D.C. Entitled “The Holocaust in the Netherlands: A Reevaluation,” the symposium provided scholars—primarily Dutch researchers from the RIOD, Amsterdam—with a forum in which to present their most recent findings concerning the Dutch experience under National Socialist occupation. Conceived by Klaus Müller (USHMM) and coordinated by Peter Romijn (RIOD), the event underscored a process of ongoing cooperation between the two institutions; representatives of the two organizations recently signed an archival exchange agreement that will grant reciprocal access to the institutes' records and garner for the USHMM's archival collection an estimated one million pages of Holocaust-related documentation.

With regard to the symposium's main aim—a reevaluation of Dutch history within the context of the Nazi genocide—the assembled scholars faced an especially complex task. The historical landscape of the Netherlands under German occupation is marked by stark and contradictory realities. In the past, historians have pointed to the Netherlands' centuries-old toleration of minorities, its lack of a virulent antisemitic tradition, and its well-assimilated Jewish community as explanation for an apparently untainted Dutch record of resistance to Nazi racial policy. Hiding Jews from the Nazi occupiers—emblemized in collective consciousness by the story of Anne Frank—was a more significant component of national resistance in the Dutch case than in other occupied countries; and a substantial number of



Dutch nationals are counted among Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations. The Netherlands also registered the first large-scale public protest against Nazi anti-Jewish policies in German-occupied Europe: a two-day general strike in Amsterdam in February 1941, called by local Communists to protest widespread arrests of Jews in the capital. This massive show of solidarity with Jewish victims came at a price; German occupation authorities brutally crushed the demonstrations, and Nazi retaliation for the protest succeeded in dislocating the local resistance movement for the next two years.

With landmarks such as the February 1941 general strike clearly in view, it is not surprising that postwar scholarship in the Netherlands has focused primarily on the strength and diversity of national resistance. Recently, however, more systematic study of the Dutch population under Nazi occupation has served to underscore alarming paradoxes regarding the Dutch national experience. No other nation in Western Europe proffered so many SS volunteers; and, despite the aforementioned national tradition of tolerance toward a well-integrated Jewish community, nearly eighty percent of Dutch Jewry was deported to Nazi extermination camps—again, the highest percentage in Western Europe. Recent scholarship concerning the collaboration of local authorities with the Nazis, particularly with regard to the implementation of racial policy, has done much to change both previous historiography and public consciousness about events in the Netherlands between 1940 and 1945. Those findings presented by historians at the symposium will, it is hoped, help to reconcile the paradoxes inherent in the Dutch experience and to draw a new balance between resistance and collaboration in the history of the German-occupied Netherlands.

The symposium began with introductory remarks by Wesley Fisher, Acting Director of the USHMM's Research Institute. After some initial words of welcome, Dr. Fisher introduced William Lowenberg, Vice Chair Emeritus of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. A survivor of six Nazi camps, including Auschwitz and the Dutch transit camp Westerbork, Mr. Lowenberg stressed the manner in which the symposium sustained the Memorial Council's goal of "educating the present about the past." Lowenberg added a personal note to his opening remarks. Realizing that some findings to be presented at the conference would underscore the collaboration of Dutch authorities with the Nazis, he

expressed the hope that those would not overshadow the heroism of Dutch resisters and rescuers who risked their lives to save thousands of Jews. Council Member Lowenberg was followed by RIOD Director Hans Blom, who defined the goals of the symposium and introduced the first panel of speakers, chaired by Brewster Chamberlin (Director of Archives, USHMM).

The symposium's first presenter, Gerard Aalders (Research Fellow, RIOD), combined the theme of Nazi Aryanization policy in the Netherlands with the timely issue of plundered Nazi assets in his paper, "The Looting of Jewish Property in the Netherlands." Aalders pointed out that approximately 135,000 Dutch Jews were deprived of their property—and most often their lives—in "an extremely systematic fashion." He outlined initial German efforts to "Aryanize" Jewish businesses in March 1941 and delineated the series of pseudolegalistic *Verordnungen*, or decrees, by which the Nazi occupiers were able to expropriate Jewish capital and private property before the deportation of Dutch Jewry began in the summer of 1942. After a brief discussion of Dutch art plundered by the Nazis, Aalders turned his attention to an assessment of looted Dutch-Jewish assets that found their way to neutral countries during the war. He estimated that the value of property stolen from Jewish citizens of the Netherlands amounted to at least ten billion guilders; confiscated gold, silver, precious stones, and *objets d'art* made up approximately sixty million of this total. It is impossible, Aalders concluded, to estimate how much of the looted victim gold remains in the hands of former neutrals. Although the Dutch government has as yet decided not to file a claim against Switzerland for its share of the unpaid balance of monetary gold looted from the Dutch central bank during the war, Aalders explained that the Netherlands would attempt to acquire a significant portion of the fund that the Swiss government is planning to create to benefit the victims of the Holocaust.

Aalders was followed at the podium by Johannes Houwink ten Cate (Research Fellow, RIOD), who explored the controversial subject of the "Jewish Councils" within the framework of the Dutch and French experiences. Houwink ten Cate suggested that the most appropriate method of analyzing the role of the Jewish Councils was not 'from above,' i.e., from the vantage point of the perpetrators, nor 'from below'—from the perspective of the victims, but

rather ‘straight on’—from the viewpoint of the Jewish leadership itself. These men saw themselves not as “tools in the hands of the oppressors, nor as egoistic[al] tyrants,” but as leaders bound by the nature of German rule, hoping to alleviate the plight of their beleaguered Jewish communities by whatever means available to them.

Houwink ten Cate asserted that, whereas Nazi rule in France was quite chaotic in nature, German occupation in the Netherlands under the *Reichskommissariat Niederlande* was more monolithic in its political structure. Such delineation of power had a profound impact upon the ability of German authorities to deport Jews. Pre-war structures did not determine the ‘success’ of anti-Jewish policy, nor did the formal structure of the German occupation. (France was under military rule, while the Netherlands was a *Reichskommissariat*, a form of civil administration.) Rather, the “relative collaboration of local political elites” determined whether the deportations ran punctually or not. In France, where German authorities depended on local willingness to collaborate, native elites were able to block the deportation of Jews, as they did successfully from the autumn of 1942 until the summer of 1943. France was, in this respect, exceptional; more representative was the Dutch case, where no intervention from Berlin was needed to circumvent local authorities and where deportations “ran like clockwork” until the summer of 1943, when the Dutch territories were practically empty of Jews. Under such circumstances, suggested Houwink ten Cate, the *Joodse Raad* (Jewish Council) had very little opportunity to effect a more positive outcome for its embattled community. As ultimate success of the German deportation strategy depended upon the constellation of political authorities and the effective interaction of German agencies with each other and with local political elites, he concluded, postwar criticism of the Jewish Councils has greatly exaggerated the councils' powers and their ability to out-manuever German authorities.

The second morning session, introduced by Chairperson Sybil Milton (Senior Historian, USHMM), focused upon the role of Dutch authorities in the implementation of anti-Jewish policies. In this context, RIOD Research Director Peter Romijn attempted to explain Dutch Jewry's “unexpectedly high degree of vulnerability” during the Holocaust despite its relatively comprehensive integration into Dutch society. In his paper, “Local Authorities and the Organization of the Persecution of the Jews and Gypsies,” Romijn pointed out that

German occupiers relied upon Dutch authorities, especially mayors and police, to aid in implementing a “huge and depressing sequence of German laws and orders,” aimed at the Jewish community. The civil service—instructed by the Dutch government-in-exile to remain at their posts until such a time as their efforts would benefit German authorities more than the Dutch population—faced crises of personal and professional ethics as they increasingly became tools of the occupation. The removal of Jews from the civil administration, Aryanization, and legally enforced marginalization of Jews within Dutch society angered and disgusted many local authorities, but, Romijn argued, those Dutch officials involved in implementing German anti-Jewish policy failed to develop effective strategies to block German efforts and to disentangle themselves from the implementation of German measures. The decision of Interior Undersecretary Frederiks to maintain as many non-Nazis in mayoral posts as possible effectively closed off routes of bureaucratic resistance and paved the way for official Dutch involvement in the persecution of Jews and Gypsies. It must be stated that some Dutch authorities did resist antisemitic measures, especially in the early stages, but it was Romijn's “sad conclusion” that those who did protest only succeeded in proving themselves ‘untrustworthy’ in German eyes and soon found themselves replaced with others more conciliatory to Nazi racial policy. Thus, German occupation officials were able to employ successfully the Dutch bureaucracy in their policies of discrimination and segregation. Concluded Romijn, once Dutch Jews were marginalized legally and physically, effective resistance to arrest and deportation policy (other than rescue) would prove impossible.

Dr. Romijn was followed by Guus Meershoek of the International Police Institute, University of Twente. In his paper, “Ordinary Amsterdam Policemen and the Extraordinary Instruction to Round Up Jews,” Meershoek explored the collaboration of the regular Dutch police force in the arrest and deportation of Dutch Jews. Meershoek began his presentation by showing a segment of contemporary film footage that had been discovered in 1995 and recently incorporated into a documentary for a local Friesland television station. Clandestinely filmed by an amateur photographer in Leeuwarden in October 1942, the footage portrays a local Dutch policeman rounding up a Jewish family for deportation while their neighbors look on. Meershoek believes that the overwhelming number of Dutch Jews, both in

Amsterdam and without, were rounded up in this way. He pointed out that, given their clear shortage of manpower, German authorities relied heavily upon the cooperation of the Dutch police to maintain law and order, and benefited greatly from the efficiency of local police forces. Following the promotion of the pro-Nazi Tulp to be commissioner of the Amsterdam police force in the aftermath of the February 1941 general strike, Amsterdam police were encouraged to enforce rigidly German anti-Jewish decrees and legislation. Even as the force carried out these antisemitic measures, local police officials still seemed to inspire trust, even among members of the Jewish community. In late June 1942, Tulp learned that the German authorities intended to deport Dutch Jews from the Netherlands; although apparently surprised by the orders he received, Tulp seemed to view the leading role assigned to his force in the deportations as a matter of prestige. In September of 1942, ordinary members of the Dutch police force worked with a special police battalion to round up Jews in Amsterdam; thereafter, the regular force was involved in only a few *Razzias* and generally supported the deportation effort by tracking Jews in hiding, guarding Jews at collection points, and overseeing the deportation process. From a German vantage point, Meershoek concluded, these regular police were highly effective because of their familiarity with the surroundings and because they benefited from the “long-standing trust of their victims.” Meershoek closed his argument by connecting the leeway given to and utilized by local Dutch authorities in carrying out Nazi orders and the “fatal consequences of their involvement.”

Chairperson Joan Ringelheim, (Director, Oral History Department, USHMM), opened the symposium's afternoon session by introducing Hans Blom, Director of the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (RIOD). Presenting a paper entitled “The Persecution of Jews: A Comparative Analysis,” Blom discussed the disparity between the relatively high degree of Jewish assimilation in the Netherlands and the alarmingly high mortality rates of Dutch Jews during the Holocaust. Blom suggested that the unique situation of Dutch Jews in the 1930s was the result of two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, a long-term trend of emancipation, assimilation, and secularization had resulted in a significant degree of integration for the Jewish community in the Netherlands. At the same time, however, the international economic and political crises of the interwar years focused attention

on the Jews as a group apart within Dutch society. The influx of foreign Jews—especially refugees from Germany—accelerated this trend, which in the long run was to have unfortunate consequences for Dutch Jewry. Finally, Blom argued, Jewish acculturation and synthesis within the Dutch national community meant that Dutch Jews reacted in much the same way as the general population did to the German occupiers and their policies. The absence of a virulent antisemitic tradition in Dutch culture lowered, rather than heightened, Jewish awareness of potential warning signs. Especially in the first year of occupation, the Jewish community's response paralleled that of the local Dutch administration: like native Dutch authorities, Jewish groups too decided to wait out the storm, compromising with the occupier wherever they felt that they could succeed. For the Dutch population at large, such a strategy may have seemed an unfortunate necessity. For Dutch Jews, faced with a resolute German policy of discrimination, marginalization, and extermination, the implications of such a stance would prove fatal.

RIOD Graduate Researcher Conny Kristel followed Hans Blom's presentation with a paper concerning "Historiography in the Netherlands: The Place of Politics in Jewish History." In an analysis of the historiography concerning the destruction of the Dutch Jewish community during the Holocaust, Kristel recounted the works of Dutch-Jewish historians Abel Herzberg, Jacques Presser, and Loe de Jong, focusing on the ways in which the writers' political views on Judaism and Jewish history informed their approach to Jewish reactions to Nazi persecution. In Herzberg's *Chronicle of the Persecution of the Jews*, Kristel contended, it is impossible to separate the author's analysis from his Zionist political perspective, although, the speaker noted, there is no "crudely direct correspondence between one and the other." While Herzberg was a strong advocate of Jewish self-defense and concluded that the tragic events of the Holocaust served to prove that such self-defense was impossible without the existence of a Jewish state, he refused to view Jewish "passivity" in the face of Nazi genocidal policy as cowardice. Herzberg's approach thus stood in stark contrast to the writings of Loe de Jong, whose interpretation of Jewish reaction to the Holocaust clearly corresponded to his Zionist beliefs. De Jong described Jewish life in the Diaspora as "characterized by passivity, insecurity, and fear," and suggested that European Jews—Dutch Jews included— had

developed a long-standing pattern of passive reaction to gentile persecution. Nevertheless, Kristel argued, de Jong was never able to square these contentions with his later works, in which he asserted that Dutch Jewish reactions effectively mirrored the general pattern of the Dutch population as a whole. As such, de Jong seemed incapable of reconciling his general reflections about Jews in the Diaspora with his conception of the Dutch Jewish experience.

Whereas the works of Herzberg and de Jong seem clearly colored by their political viewpoints, there is, according to Kristel, no correspondence whatever between the political orientation of Jacques Presser and his historical narrative. Though an avowed agnostic, Presser's interpretation drew heavily upon religious themes and emphasized the significance of acts of spiritual resistance. And while Presser formally distanced himself from political Zionism, his works clearly stressed the importance of Jewish armed resistance; unlike Herzberg and de Jong, he was inclined to equate Jewish passivity during the Holocaust with cowardice. At the same time, Presser's analysis revealed the author's identification and solidarity with the Holocaust's helpless victims. In conclusion, Kristel suggested that all three historians embraced Zionist analysis in recounting the Dutch Jewish experience, but “not without amendments and contradictions.”

David Barnouw, (Staff Member for Research and Public Relations, RIOD), introduced a new spin on that Holocaust narrative most familiar to American audiences with his paper, “Anne Frank and the Usage of Her Story: A Reevaluation.” The most unique aspect of Frank's legacy, contended Barnouw, is that Anne as icon seems to fit everywhere: perhaps more than any other hero or heroine of the Holocaust, her story has been appropriated by every side and for every possible agenda. Until recently, scholars took little interest in Anne's personal history or the meaning of her message. The general public seized upon the optimistic and reconciliatory nature of Anne's story without much reflection, and Jews and non-Jews alike found they could use parts of her diary for their own goals. Educators have adopted the diary as a way to teach children about the Holocaust. Feminists study Anne as a young woman and seek to establish what and who influenced her writings. Those who work to combat the onslaught of Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazi agitators use the diary as a weapon to convince youngsters and adults alike that genocide really happened, and could happen again.

For many, Anne's story powerfully symbolizes Dutch resistance to Nazi repression and the national readiness to rescue its victims. It is not only Anne and her diary that have achieved such emblematic status, but also the site of Anne's suffering: the "secret annex" where she and seven others evaded deportation until August 1944, when they were discovered and arrested by an Austrian policeman and four members of the Dutch auxiliary police. The house at Prinsengracht 263 "has become a message in itself, a shrine, a modern Lourdes," asserted Barnouw. While debate concerning the usage of her story vacillates between edification and hagiography, Anne herself has clearly emerged as a "symbol of victory over all evils," a girl for all seasons. In recent years, historians have endeavored to achieve a dispassionate conception of Anne and her experiences, but in general those attempting a more balanced portrait have been viewed as "spoilers"; accounts that point out that while Dutch citizens hid and sustained Anne, other Dutchmen denounced and deported her is seen as so much debunking. "What is Anne now?" asked Barnouw: young girl, popular icon, Holocaust victim, moral symbol? Historians and writers continue to study her impact on our thinking regarding the Holocaust and post-Holocaust culture.

The final paper of the symposium was delivered by Klaus Müller (Project Director for Western Europe, USHMM). In his presentation, "Resistance: The Unknown Story of Frieda Belinfante," Müller unravels the tale of a well-known Dutch artist involved in resistance activities and explores why her exploits have been largely forgotten in Dutch collective memory. Born in 1904 to Dutch Jewish pianist Ary Belinfante and his Christian wife Georgina, Frieda Belinfante was raised in a secular home environment and like her parents, "live[d] for music." At age seventeen, Frieda fell in love with a woman seven years her senior and lived with her companion for a number of years. At age nineteen Frieda played in her first public performance, with her father, at Amsterdam's renowned Concertgebouw; by 1936, Frieda's talent as a conductor became apparent, and Frieda formed her own orchestra. As one of the first professional female conductors in history, Belinfante had by 1939 gained a reputation throughout Europe.

On 10 May 1940, the German army invaded the Netherlands. Rather than collaborate with the Germans in their process of *Gleichschaltung* ("coordination"), Belinfante disbanded



her orchestra and began on her own initiative to falsify identification cards for those fleeing Nazi persecution. Later, she joined the underground group, “Artists' Resistance,” which provided identification papers for Jews and others in hiding. Realizing that false papers might always be checked against authentic documents held at the Amsterdam Population Registry, Belinfante helped to plan a successful attack on the Registry in March 1943—one of the boldest and most imaginative strokes of the Dutch resistance. When the group was betrayed four days later, Belinfante escaped ‘underground,’ disguising herself as a man, before making her own treacherous odyssey to safety in Switzerland. Repatriated in July 1945, a disillusioned Belinfante emigrated from the Netherlands to the United States, where she headed the Orange County Philharmonic Orchestra.

But if Frieda Belinfante was a relatively well-known conductor in her native Netherlands before the war, and if the Artists' Resistance's attack on the Population Registry was a celebrated act of Dutch resistance, why, asked Müller, was Belinfante's story lost until now? Müller ruled out the notion that Frieda's emigration played a major factor in her disappearance from the records of Dutch Holocaust studies. Instead, Müller suggested that the skewed genderization of resistance's post-war image—in which men decided and acted while women nurtured and followed—effectively excluded Belinfante's story: Frieda's underground efforts and escape, without reliance on male support, did not fit easily into the predominant image of resistance in the Netherlands or into the rubric of gender roles as they were restored in post-war Dutch society. Moreover, Müller argued, Frieda Belinfante—together with William Arondeus, a central figure in the attack on the Population Registry—were rejected as embodiments of the Dutch resistance because, as homosexuals, they could not function in the homophobic climate of the 1950s and 1960s as shining exemplifications of Dutch heroism and honor; neither were they seen to serve as “suitable” role models for Dutch youth. As with other nations, the Dutch collective memory has been—and continues to be—colored by a “politics of memory,” in which the Dutch resistance during the Second World has become a powerful symbol of national identification. Belinfante's singular actions as woman, half-Jew, and lesbian placed her outside that collective consciousness, so that even Frieda herself chose to forget about her connection with the Netherlands and its resistance—in effect, to forget her

past. It is only at the end of her life that Belinfante decided “to testify to her own experiences,” and leave us with her legacy.

The symposium culminated with an engaging roundtable discussion in which William Lowenberg (Vice Chair Emeritus, United States Holocaust Memorial Council), Hans Blom (Director, RIOD), Jack Boas (Executive Director, Oregon Holocaust Resource Center), and Henry Mason (Tulane University), participated. All agreed that the conference had contributed important insights into the multifaceted history of the Netherlands under German occupation. Scholars and other guests in attendance, as well as many members of the Research Institute, contributed to the intriguing discussions that accompanied each of the sessions.

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