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Book Reviews

House on Endless Waters. By Emuna Elon. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2020. ISBN 9781760877255

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Until recently the image of The Netherlands has been one of its heroism during World War II. Ironically, the study of Anne Frank's diary has tended to reinforce this mythical image despite the fact that the family was betrayed in 1944 by Dutch citizens, that they were deported on the last train to leave Westerbork in September 1944, and her tragic death in Bergen-Belsen at the end of the war. In his memoir Daniel Johannes Huygens, a simple hairdresser and later house painter, describes how he managed to hide two Jewish families. His home also functioned as a safe house for Jewish children being rescued by the Dutch student underground movement in Utrecht. What he feared most was his fellow citizens, including his own family, finding out that he was hiding Jews. The title of his memoir, *Opposite the Lion's Den*, reflected the fact that his building was opposite the main Utrecht police station, with the Dutch police collaborating fully with the Nazis in the round up and deportation of Jews.[1] Thus, the historical picture of the events of the Holocaust is very different to that presented in the national myth.

There were 140,000 Jews in The Netherlands in 1939, including 30,000 German Jewish refugees and another 20,000 born in mixed marriages. Of these 107,000 were deported from Westerbork to the death camps, with only a couple of thousand returning, so that 73 per cent were murdered. This was the highest percentage in Western Europe. My realisation of the active collaboration of the Dutch in the Nazi process of extermination of the Jews, while working on the Huygen's story, led me to present and later publish a chapter entitled 'A Reassessment of the Dutch record' in the three volume publication, *Remembering for the Future*.[2] This negative record, which also relates to the actions of the Joodse Raad, the Dutch Jewish Council, has led to many difficult questions. The tragic and controversial role played by the Jewish Council. Was it responsible for the deportation of 107,000 Jews? How did it come to that? What role did the various groups play? The civil servants? The royal family? Would I have been a hero?

The contemporary challenge is how to address these questions for a new generation for whom the Holocaust is a fading historical memory. Is it best to do this through traditional historical works or through film and literature? In the film about the Joodse Raad, journalist Hans Knoop meets with writer and columnist, Leon de Winter, who produced a new play based on Anne Frank's diary with his wife Jessica Durlacher in 2016, and who, Knoop hoped, would produce a film a film on the Joodse Raad. He told de Winter: 'Someone needs to give shape to this historical perspective. He owes it to history.' However, de Winter feels he cannot do it. He informs Knoop that the Anne Frank story has a catharsis, despite her horrible death. He argued that her diary is a masterpiece but for him the leaders of the Joodse Raad, Abraham Asscher and Professor David Cohen were 'were honourable Dutch citizens before the war who were reduced to the lowest level [and] became monsters.'[3]

Israeli author Emuna Elon decided to address these difficult questions through a novel which has been described as a thriller. The central theme of the novel is the impact of trauma and memory, the issue of 'the silence,' of Holocaust survivors not speaking about their experiences and parents not telling the story of the events of the Holocaust to their children. It also illustrates how the impact of that trauma can be passed onto the second and even the third generation. At the same time, especially as the novel progresses, the themes the story of hidden children, of the collaboration of the Dutch population, particularly the civil service and the police, the role of the Joodse Raad, of stolen art and the gradual deterioration into brutality and degradation are explored.

The novel is focused on the central character, a successful Israel novelist, Yoel Blum, who survived the Holocaust with his mother, Sonia, and his older sister, Nettie. His mother, to whom he was very attached implores him to never visit Amsterdam, the city of his birth. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that she was frightened that Yoel would learn the truth about the past.

After his mother's death, Yoel is invited to the launch of one of his novels in Amsterdam, and he decides to attend the writer's event with his wife, Bat Ami, despite his mother's demand. While at the Jewish Museum, he sees a clip of a film with his mother and father and Nettie, together with a very young child he did not recognise. After this, he determined to find out the full truth of his story. After returning to Israel with his wife, he meets with his older sister and implores her to tell him as much as the knows. He then returns to Amsterdam to find out as much as he can about the full story.

In the remainder of the novel the story unfolds. Elon has chosen the model of moving between the past and present, gradually building the story to a crescendo, until in the final section, Book Four, she brings all the threads of the story together. By moving from the present to the past and back again, she manages to highlight the impact of trauma and lost memories, as well as drawing word pictures of the challenging issues which the events in Amsterdam raises including a 1887 painting by Jan Toorop, "The Sea near Katwijk," in the Rijksmuseum. She does not always provide the answers, but the emotion of the issues are highlighted.

One theme that is explored through the character, Raphael, is the story of hidden children. In one passage in the book, Elon writes how he did not tell anyone about his past until the organisation of hidden children was formed. This was only in the 1980s, forty years after the Holocaust. He told

Blum: 'They helped me to open up everything that was closed, you see? They helped me to understand that anyone who experienced things like that, especially the ones who were passed from hand to hand, it has a complicated effect on them.' This section ends with Blum reflecting on his own childhood, when his mother had not wanted to mix socially, 'about the three of them, him, his mother, and Nettie, sitting at the table by themselves, always by themselves, on weekdays and Shabbat and festivals' (pp.118-119).

As the narrative in the story continues, the active role of the Dutch police is described, as they enforced Nazi edits, often with great brutality. Early in the story, Yoel gives the explanation that the Dutch are a very obedient and law-abiding people, but as time progresses it becomes more difficult emotionally to accept this explanation. At one point the police burst into the Jewish hospital where Sonia was working. They forcibly rounded up all its patients, nurses and doctors to take them to the deportation point. This scene is described as follows: 'They were all being marched forward by eight or nine immense, faceless policemen who, with hollers and rifle blows are shoving them, frightened and hunched, with a yellow cloth star on each and every chest along Obrechtstraat and toward Van Baerlestraat.' The narrative then describes how the Dutch people went about their business, returning home from school or work 'all these people, all of them, are just living their lives as usual and going about their business as though this strange little herd of doctors and nurses and patients is not being marched among them, right here on this actual sidewalk, people who in the space of one moment were turned from their freedom and their identity' (p.220). When Sonia realised that she has young children and must return to them, she turns around and manages to escape.

Understanding the role of the Joodse Raad, the Jewish Council, is even more difficult, given the key role that they played in the deportation of Dutch Jewry. This began with the registration of every Jewish person living in The Netherlands already in January 1941. Sonia did not want to register her family's names, but her husband, who was a doctor, feared that they would get into trouble if they did not. His closest friend, Martin, was the son-in-law Jozef de Lange, who was a member of the Raad who was responsible for drawing up the deportation lists.

The question can be raised as how they should be judged? To what extent were they responsible for the murder of 105,000 Dutch Jews? Were they motivated by good intentions, or were they merely trying to save themselves and their families, a basic human instinct? For Sonia, the answer is simple - they were Nazi collaborators for whom she had no time, but the discussion between Yoel and his grandson, Tal, towards the end of the novel about their role illustrates the complexity of the question.

One problem of writing historical novels is how close they need to be to the historical truth. Elon states that the book is based on research, but clearly the characters are fictional. One example in relation to this dilemma is the story of the exchange train that left Bergen-Belsen in mid-1944.[4] This is a true story, which is explained in detail in the book by Oppenheim in terms of the exchange organised with the British of the German Templer women and children who were in Palestine with Jewish women and their children in Europe. Until 1944, Bergen-Belsen was kept as an exchange camp with relatively good conditions and there were trains that went from Westerbork to Bergen-Belsen with selected women and children, so that part of the story is actually correct. However, the group initially listed for the exchange agreement from Bergen-Belsen were called up but then the decision was changed and they were sent back to the camp. A week later, a group was called for a second time, which did actually leave for Palestine. However, there were differences between the names of the first and the second group of women and children. This type of detail would have complicated the drama of the story, but there is the problem as to whether this playing with the historical record is likely to play into the hands of those who wish to deny or distort the Holocaust.

Despite the limitations of using literature to present historical stories, the historical novel still can play an important role advancing historical understandings by bringing the past to life. By focusing on a personal story, where the reader can identify with the main characters, literature can build empathy and produce a better understanding of the dilemmas and complexities in the study of the Holocaust.

Literature can also draw on symbolism and raise questions, without necessarily seeking to provide all the answers. Elon draws effectively on this technique. At the end of the book, she describes how Yoel accompanies his grandson, Tal, to the airport when he returns Israel: 'They were standing next to the El AL counter, which in Schiphol, just like in all other airports in the world, is stuck in some remote ghetto at the end of the passenger hall, as befits the counter of a chosen people, whom because of their striped shirt of many colours, other peoples want to throw into the pit' (pp.300-301). This succinct statement, just one sentence, raises so many different questions and issues. It highlights the ongoing problem of antisemitism, the parallels of the biblical story of Joseph, who suffered from the jealousy of his brother due to his father's favouritism represented by the coat of many colours, and the complex issue of chosenness. This ambivalence is also represented in the book's title. Is it referring to the many canals of Amsterdam lined with houses, which is what I thought when I first read the title; or rather to the House of David and the endless history of the persecution of Jews; or the fact that to survive one had to leave the past behind, as Sonia exclaimed 'those waters have already flowed onwards' (p.303)? Perhaps all these elements are represented in the book.

1 D.J. Huygens. 1996. *Opposite the Lion's Den: A story of hiding of Dutch Jews*, Sydney: Brandl and Schlesinger.

2 S.D. Rutland. 2001. 'A Reassessment of the Dutch Record during the Holocaust,' in Roth, John K. and Maxwell, Elizabeth, eds in chief, *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, Volume 1: History, Hampshire & New York: Palgrave: 527 – 542.
3 Ruud von Gessel. 2015. 'De langste nacht voor de Joodse Raad' [The Longest Night for the Jewish Council], Brooklyn Producties Amsterdam, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J059MIIao4Q, accessed 27 August 2020.
4 A.N. Oppenheim. 1996. *The Chosen People: The Story of the '222 Transport' from Bergen-Belsen to Palestine* London: Valentine Mitchell.