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# Introduction

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Rhodea Shandler's *A Long Labour: A Dutch Mother's Holocaust Memoir* is best understood within the context of the larger Dutch Jewish Holocaust experience and women's Holocaust narrative. The Dutch suffered enormous hardship during five years of occupation by Nazi Germany. Beginning in 1940, Dutch Jews were systematically identified and isolated. From 1942 to 1944 virtually all the nation's Jews who neither fled Holland nor were in hiding were deported to Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt, and the killing camps, primarily to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibor from Westerbork and Vught Dutch transit camps. The fortunate few in hiding who avoided death among the ranks of underground resistance fighters or during the Dutch-wide "hungerwinter" of 1944–1945 experienced constant fear of detection and denunciation, physical deprivation and psychological anxiety throughout the occupation.

Whereas two of every three European Jews were murdered in the *Shoah*, three of every four Dutch Jews perished. Dutch civil servants cooperated in the disenfranchisement of Jewish citizens, stamping J's on their identity documents, confiscating their bicycles and radios, and sending unemployed Jews to labour camps. Dutch police actively participated in the deportations, and collaborators routinely facilitated Nazi objectives.

Following liberation, the surviving Jewish remnant found that their gentile compatriots were, in the main, disinterested in their experience and focused instead on their own hardships under Nazi occupation. In the late 1960s, Holland encountered the generation gap that affected other European nations. The older generation was de-mythologized, students criticized the "establishment," unmasked the resistance myth, exposed the lie of a widespread heroic response to Nazism by their parents, and began to pay more attention to the Dutch Holocaust experience. With publications such as Jack Presser's *Ondergang (Ashes in the Wind)* mapping the abandonment and betrayal of Dutch Jewry despite its integration in Dutch society, the nation began to confront the past more objectively. Historians Dick van Galen Last and Rolf Wolfswinkel (*Anne Frank and After: Dutch Holocaust Literature in Historical Perspective*), who chart the changing tides of interest from focus on the collective history to focus on individual stories, observe that since the 1970s, World War II literature and film have been welcomed in Holland, with resistance and collaboration the most popular subjects in general literature and the Holocaust a major theme for Jewish writers.

Dutch Holocaust literature documents conditions of Jews in hiding and incarcerated in the transit camps awaiting deportation to the killing centers, records the paradoxical role of the Jewish Council, and the survival struggle within the concentration camp universe. Among the victims writing of their ordeals while they were occurring are Anne Frank, who recorded her experience of being in hiding with her family, and Etty Hillesum and Philip Mechanicus, who described the horrendous physical conditions and

camp administration of Westerbork and the psychological terror of inmates awaiting deportation. Other writers offered testimony at war's end. Upon his return from Bergen-Belsen, Abel Herzberg analyzed the behaviour of inmates and their reaction to the harsh camp conditions. Many years following liberation, Gerhard Durlacher recorded his experiences in occupied Holland, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. Marga Minco addressed her wartime experience through the perspective of a fifteen-year-old narrator charting the incremental development of isolation and oppression in a narrative style blending directness and constraint.

Others wrote not only of the occupation and of the camp universe, but focused on the plight of survivors living in silence, shame, and anger as they recognized the magnitude of Dutch Jewish losses and Dutch collaboration. The war and the Holocaust, as well as its aftereffects on his generation, are consistent threads in the fiction of Harry Mulisch, one of the most important writers of the postwar generation. Judith Herzberg, the daughter of Holocaust chronicler Abel Herzberg, who had initially intended to leave the subject to her father, writes about the continuing impact of the Holocaust past on the present, emergence of wartime trauma among characters who have refrained from breaking silence, the tensions within a survivor family and those between Jews and Dutch non-Jews. Her autobiographical writing illuminates the pain of a child hidden apart from her parents, the experience of living under a false identity and being reunited with her parents. From the vantage point of an adult returned to Judaism, Andreas Burnier, who survived the war hidden separately from her parents, writes of a family reunion marred by the hidden child's Holocaust-wrought contempt for Judaism born of her internalization of her protector's anti-Semitism. She recounts recurrent traumatic experiences of displacement and betrayal, of the emotionally wrenching need to remain silent while listening to the anti-Semitic ranting of rescuers, and of the Dutch, who contrary to the myth of rescue, were indifferent to the fate of the Jews or betrayed them when that proved to be opportune.

In the 1980s, a new paradigm of second-generation writing explored issues of memory and Holocaust impact on the lives of children of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. Arnon Grunberg's autobiographical fiction delineates the stress for children growing up with adults suffering from survivor syndrome. Similarly, Carl Friedman renders pressures created by Holocaust-wounded parenting: one parent who constantly talks of *Shoah* pain and is emotionally needy, the other who maintains a code of silence and emotional distance. Rather than receding into the past, the impact of the Holocaust continues to impinge on the present as the post-war generation grapples with parents' histories and the psychological imprint it has encoded their lives.

Rhodea Shandler, who survived the Holocaust hiding in rural Holland, lived in Canada from 1951 until her death in 2006. Having immigrated to Canada because she despaired of the diminishment of Dutch Jewry and Dutch disinterest in Holocaust history, she waited many decades before committing her memories and reflections to print. The long delay might be explained by the demands of raising eight children, the anguish of dredging up painful memories, and the formidable challenge of finding the right words to tell her story. Motivated, in old age, by a desire to leave her story for her children, she remembers and movingly commemorates her murdered family members, reveals her Holocaust history, and meditates on its postwar impact.

In *A Long Labour: A Dutch Mother's Holocaust Memoir*, Shandler delineates her direct experience of many aspects of Dutch Jewry's encounter with Nazi occupation in a manner that echoes the conventions and themes of women's Holocaust writing. Her title invokes pregnancy, common in women's Holocaust experience and writing, thereby testifying to the female particularities of her Shoah memories and the long gestation process from recollection to representation. Holocaust commemoration appears as literary theme and in the narrative form; thematically through the survivor's need to communicate history and foil its misappropriation; and, in narrative structure, as memoir. In contrast to the conjoining of an unmediated direct connection with the recorded events and the

expressive point of view of the diarist, Shandler's distanced retrospective stance combines reportage with mediated recollection, information gleaned from other survivors and postwar documentation. Unlike the diarist's vision limited to the writer's wartime knowledge that may have been clouded by Nazi deception or by insufficient access to information, the survivor's postwar perspective permits the conjunction of the immediacy of the victim's perspective as well as a postwar assessment of traumatic *Shoah* experience, and of the impact of the past on the present.

Shandler synthesizes three characteristically separate roles: the victim who experiences, the eyewitness who reports, and the imaginative narrator who reconstructs or transfigures historic events. When she writes of the trauma of hiding and frequent relocation to avoid capture she does so as an eyewitness, from inside the Nazi universe. When she writes of her brother's work and death at Auschwitz, she does so as indirect witness reporting a family friend's direct witness, carefully delineating and differentiating perception and narrative voice while anchoring and validating the writing in reality. When she writes of Allied movements, or the progress of the war, she does so having been informed by her husband who received information from resistance contacts or access to British radio broadcasts, and when she writes of the different categories of Westerbork prisoners, she writes as a researcher of that Holocaust history.

As in the works of other survivor writers, the reader senses two distinctive voices in Shandler's memoir — the harried voice of the immediate experience and the reflective voice, the youthful Holocaust era point of view and the more comprehensive and meditative post*Shoah* authorial intelligence. We recognize distinctions between the "I" of the narrative present, in accounts rendered from within the perspective of the Nazi designed universe and the "I" of the mature writer perceiving the events of the narrative through a postHolocaust lens.

Shandler presents a detailed account of her family's metamorphosis from Dutch citizens to fugitives and victims of the Third Reich within the larger context of Dutch Holocaust history.

Having come from a family that considered itself “so integrated into the general Dutch community that on many occasions we didn’t think ourselves so very different from the Dutch — that is until the Nazis announced otherwise,” Shandler charts the life her family enjoyed prior to the Nazi occupation: good employment, good relations with the larger community only occasionally marred by antisemitic slurs, and freedom to live openly as observant Jews who kept the Sabbath and dietary laws, celebrated holidays, and attended synagogue regularly. Like many Dutch Jews, her family members suffered loss of income requiring support by the Jewish National Fund.

Contextualizing the family experience within the larger realm of Dutch Jewish experience, Shandler provides political insight noting that since Holland was a democracy, it tolerated the presence of an anti-Jewish political party, the National Socialist Movement that shared German Nazi ideology. With the growth of influence of this party, Jews began to encounter economic hardship and social ostracism. Once Holland succumbed to Nazi rule, the lives of Dutch Jews changed radically under anti-Jewish legislation, including dismissal from civil service positions, curtailment of Jewish professional activities, closure of universities with large Jewish enrollments, banning from residential options in the Hague and other coastal areas, exclusion from coffee shops and restaurants, mandatory registration, the humiliation of wearing a yellow star, and carrying an official identity card branded with a “J.” Anti-Jewish legislation led in 1942 to the deportation of the Jews, including the author’s parents, her brother and his family to Westerbork and from there to Auschwitz, never to return.

Shandler carefully charts her experience from prewar normality to separation from family and fugitive status hiding among gentile families in remote rural areas of northern Holland. As a young adult in 1940, Shandler trained to be a nurse and worked in a private Jewish hospital. During this time, she conceived a child out of wedlock with a German Jewish refugee eleven years her senior who, as a Gestapo fugitive, could not legally marry. Gestapo