

REMEMBERING JEWISH AMSTERDAM

Philo Bregstein and Salvador Bloemgarten. Translated by Wanda Boeke. Holmes & Meier, Teaneck, New Jersey, 2004.

Reviewed by
Simon Bonnettemaker

ANY reader who is interested in the lives of Dutch Jewry will find this book to be an invaluable source of insight into their culture before, during and after the Second World War.

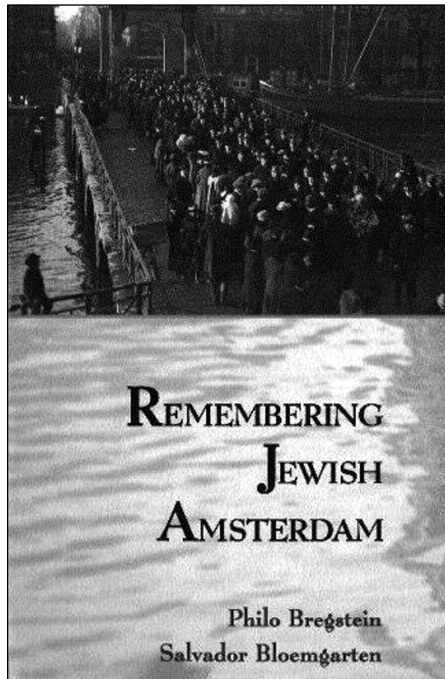
The contents of the book predominantly report Jewish life experiences prior to World War II and to a much lesser extent after 1945, which to this reviewer conveyed a symbolic message regarding of their rate of survival.

Whereas most publications about Dutch Jews document the genocide at the hands of the Nazis, *Remembering Jewish Amsterdam* fills an important gap of information about their occupations, religion and everyday life before the Holocaust. The authors also have a chapter on historical background as a brief introduction on how the Jews became integrated and developed their place in Dutch society.

The greater part of the book is not strictly a narrative on the part of the authors, but rather their compilation of biographical accounts of some 80 interviewees, each identified by name, who must be credited as co-authors, since each one told his or her personal story from the heart.

As such, this format successfully conveys for coming generations, an unfiltered view of Jewish life in Holland in the 20th Century, as seen through the eyes of many different people, without

SIMON BONNETTEMAKER was born in January 1938 in Amsterdam and went into hiding for four years during the war, but was separated from his parents for two years prior to the liberation of the country. He left Holland for Canada in 1953, attended college and married Mia at the age of 24. Simon spent his career as an architectural designer and partner of a Vancouver-based engineering firm which he and two associates founded in 1968.



embellishments.

Based on my own experiences during and after the war, I can vouch not only for the validity of the contributors' stories and diverse experiences in the face of similar events that unexpectedly impacted on their lives, but also the different ways they reacted to safeguard their lives.

The interviewees' accounts of the early war years emphasize Germany's declaration of war in September 1939, when Hitler deceived the world by announcing that Holland would not be invaded, although in 1941 the invading Nazis rounded up most of Holland's Jews, and their fate is well documented.

Without proper national defenses, Holland fell to the German invaders in days. The basic civil rights which Holland had previously enjoyed were now completely abolished, giving way to a growing climate of anxiety, restrictions and fear.

This book makes clear that expectations varied during the early war years. There was a short period of time in which the better-in-

formed Jews were able to leave the country or go into hiding. Mostly they are the ones who are telling us their stories of survival in this book.

We also learn from this short period that the human psyche appears to be programmed in such a way that those living under ominous conditions believe and hope that they will be mitigated with time, rather than anticipating or believing that a disastrous scenario will imminently come upon them.

The lesson here is that today we have a different window of opportunity to mitigate pollution, greed, discrimination and terrorism, not with time and hope, but with much more proactive measures to prevent disastrous scenarios from coming upon us.

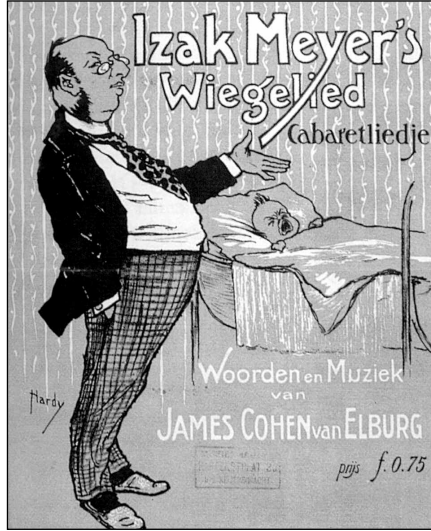
The book also contains many images, including wonderful archival photographs of paintings, street life, people and events during the period from 1910 to 1937.

As non-fiction, this book need not necessarily be read continuously from cover to cover, but is recommended as a book of short stories, to be kept in Jewish and non-Jewish home libraries, as a reference book placed on the shelf alongside educational texts, history books and encyclopedias.

This book has a counterpart in another book titled *Wisch During Time of Occupation 1940-1945*, written in Dutch by Leo E. Traanboer. This book, so far appearing only in Dutch, is recommended for translation and reading in conjunction with *Remembering Jewish Amsterdam*, as it gives an account of the many people who left Amsterdam to go into hiding in the remote countryside of the Dutch farming county of Wisch.

Most of these Jews survived the war, afforded the protection of many farmers readily providing comparatively safe accommodations and sustenance on their agricultural and dairy farms.

The postwar stories told by these farmers recount Germany's imposed edicts of unlimited confiscation of meat and crops, taken to provide food for the occupying



TOP LEFT: Anne Frank (second from left) in 1939 on her tenth birthday, standing with her girlfriends on Merwedeplein (Merwede Square) in South Amsterdam where she lived. Many of the affluent Jews who fled Germany after 1933 settled here.

TOP RIGHT: Cover to the sheet music for "Izak Meyer's Lullaby." This popular song was written by James Cohen Van Elburg, one of the Netherlands' many Jewish composers and lyricists. (c. 1920)

BOTTOM: Jewish pushcarts on Jodenbreestraat, where the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn lived during the seventeenth century. (c. 1910)



troops. Most of these farmers banded together to give an outward impression of submission, while helping one another by clandestinely slaughtering their own cattle at night when the meat was needed for their community and to feed their own families, as well as Jews in hiding.

Several of the interviewees in *Remembering Jewish Amsterdam* recall the relatively small but nevertheless menacing presence of a collaborationist Dutch Nazi party, the NSB (*Nationaal Socialistische*

Beweging, National Socialist Movement), whose members betrayed their own country to serve their own interests. This reminds me of my own story to conclude this review.

In 1940 my parents and I walked quietly out of our fully furnished home with only our portable belongings, to go into hiding in the countryside. During the war, the Germans rewarded many NSB members by allowing them to occupy any homes vacated by Jews. After the war, the Dutch hunted down suspected

NSBers, and since there was a critical housing shortage due to the bombardments, the government effected restitution measures which returned our home to us. With his government's official reinstatement order in hand, my father went to reclaim our home from the NSB family. While making his inspection, he noticed that all our possessions had disappeared, with the exception of our piano, an heirloom and wedding present from my grandparents. My father, surprised to see the piano remaining in the midst of the belongings of the Nazi occupants, exclaimed, "Hey—that is my piano and I want it back."

The NSBer's response was: "If I had known that, I would have chopped it up and used it as fuel, because we suffered so much discomfort during the cold winter months."

This piano, on which my mother and I learned to play, is still in our family. ♦