

*Return to a Vanished World: European  
Societies and the Remnants of their Jewish  
Communities, 1945-1947*

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Between 1938 and 1945, Nazi Germany tried to transform the European continent into the Nazi utopia by means of boundless brutality. Nazi visions of a European 'new order' were often inconsistent. Instead of their proclaimed goal of ruling for one thousand years, the *Reich* achieved a mere twelve years between the Nazi seizure of power and final defeat, and from conquest until retreat a time span of two to seven years of mastery over other European countries. Nazi hubris had to abandon most of its grand designs of colonization, exploitation and nazification, but, with an acute awareness of their shrinking temporal horizon, one obsessive criminal plan was implemented with absolute priority: the destruction of Europe's Jewish population. By the end of 1943, the Nazi elite prided itself on its accomplishment of the historical task of the "final solution of the Jewish problem," in spite of a looming defeat.<sup>1</sup>

After 1945, with Nazism defeated, the question is whether it was possible for the minority of Jews who had survived the slaughter to return to the societies, the towns and villages from where they had been deported or chased. The world they had left had vanished; what good could the post-war era bring them? Europe after 1945 was a grim place – less grim than in the preceding years, but still a continent disrupted by demographic, social and political turmoil, stricken by physical destruction, haunted by recollections of violence and killing. The future was a source of hope and sometimes of euphoric expectations,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Himmler's speech in Posen of 6 October 1943, Bradley Smith and Agnes Peterson (eds.), *Heinrich Himmler. Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen*, Frankfurt, 1974, pp. 167-69.

but it was also a source of profound anxiety and insecurity. If this was the common lot of all Europeans, for the Jews among them there was incommensurably more of the latter, and it was incommensurably more difficult to be capable of the former. Europe, no less after 1945 than before, was also a very heterogeneous and fragmented continent. There was much less that united the experiences of Romania and Denmark, France and Poland or the Netherlands and Italy, than what set them apart. Yet, the Holocaust, realized in very different degrees and striking very divergent local situations, was a catastrophe they had all shared. In this article, I will try to suggest some elements, some reactions, some contours of a common European context. In the other chapters of this volume, diversity will be restored to the continent.

### *The War Hitler Won*

In 1947, at the end of the period considered in this book, the Dutch Jewish author Heinz Wielek published one of the first comprehensive accounts of the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, under the title *The War Hitler Won*.<sup>2</sup> Wielek, the pen name of W. Kwekzylber, had fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and settled in Amsterdam, where he survived the war as a partner in a mixed marriage and a protégé of the Jewish Council. Wielek only implicitly alludes to the meaning of the book's title, when describing his first walk through Amsterdam's former Jewish quarter on 9 May 1945.

Dilapidation and desolation gape from these empty and dying houses. The vacant buildings have been torn down by the mob (...) Sometimes, in your dreams visions emerge of a street, black and empty, with houses whose haunting holes and yawning windows follow you like the caved-in eye-holes of a death-mask. This vision becomes a reality when you walk down these streets. The houses lean on each other and seem to be willing to collapse at any time, in order to bury everything that still lives and walks down there under the pile of their debris. Before there was a popular cinema theater here, innocent amusement for Jews

2 Amsterdam, *Amsterdamse Boek- en Courantmij NV*, 1947. For the identification of Wielek, see Ido de Haan, *Na de Ondergang. De herinnering aan de Jodenvervolging in Nederland, 1945-1995*, The Hague, 1997, p. 19, and Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors. The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940-1945*, London, 1997, p. 3.

without money who could divert themselves like small children for four hours on end.

The Jews have been removed and the billboards *Judenviertel* have also disappeared. The orphanage, the Dutch-Jewish hospital, the home for the elderly: empty, empty, empty. The crippled inhabitants of the Jewish Invalid were, like garbage on a dungeon, thrown on the train on the Borneo Quay. Three years ago? Three and a half years ago? I don't remember. Everything, all this becomes one immense memory that seizes me time and again.

Here the stately synagogue of the Portuguese, there the Ashkenazis: empty. There are still a few pious Jews in Amsterdam and on the major holy days, they met in a forgotten back-street *shul* near the *Stadhouderskade* to speak to God. Some are the mixed marriages; some have wives who converted to Judaism, a fact the *Zentralstelle* fortunately ignored, if not it would have considered these unions as fully Jewish. One came and asked the other: "When is Pesach? When Yom Kippur? If P. doesn't know, then L. probably does..." In Amsterdam...<sup>3</sup>

In the Netherlands, indeed, Hitler had come close to realizing one of his main war aims, the annihilation of the Jewish community.<sup>4</sup> The country had been home to one of the oldest and, relative to the total population, largest Jewish communities in Western Europe. The German occupier killed 100,000 of the 140,000 individuals he considered as *Volljuden*. Emigration to Israel and the United States during the first five years after the end of the war was particularly strong among this decimated community, with one out of every five survivors leaving the country after 1945. Jewish cultural organizations estimated that the post-war Jewish community in the Netherlands consisted of no more than twenty-five thousand individuals, about half of them affiliated to religious organizations.

The Netherlands were no exception.<sup>5</sup> A similar picture could be drawn for Greece, for example, particularly the Jewish quarter of Thessaloniki, once home to fifty thousand Jews. Poland, once the heartland of Jewish Europe, was also transformed into a Jewish cemetery. Bitter memories of local Poles participating in pogroms, looting and massacres both during the war and in 1945 and 1946

3 Wielek, *De Oorlog die Hitler won*, pp. 340-41.

4 See the excellent study of de Haan, *Na de Ondergang*, pp. 61-77. See also Chaya Brasz, "Na de tweede wereldoorlog: van kerkgenootschap naar culturele minderheid," In: *Geschiedenis van de Joden in Nederland*, Amsterdam, 1995, pp. 351-403.

5 For useful reference, see Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Dimension des Völkermords. Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus*, Munich, 1996.

prompted an exodus of the great majority of Jewish survivors, who would populate the DP camps in the western occupation zones of Germany.<sup>6</sup> In Romania, the country with the third largest Jewish community in Europe prior to 1939, mass deportations, mass killing by Romanian and German troops, and emigration had reduced the Jewish community by 1948 to one-sixth of its pre-war size. The Jewish population of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were virtually wiped out. Other communities, while far smaller, suffered relatively less losses. The tiny Jewish communities of Norway and Denmark lost 750 and 116 people respectively; and Italy, the first fascist nation, lost one-fifth (about 5,600 victims) of its relatively small Jewish community. In Belgium, twenty-five thousand Jews, 40 percent of the local community, were killed. Compared to its Dutch neighbor, the pre-war Belgian Jewish community was less than half the size, for a comparable total population, and it was constituted overwhelmingly by recent immigrants.

Only in Hungary and France did sizable Jewish communities survive. In Hungary the Jews of Budapest, home to one-fifth of the half a million Hungarian Jews, survived, while 400,000 others died in a tragic last chapter of the genocide. In France, in spite of Vichy's home-grown antisemitism, three-quarters of the Jewish population escaped mass murder. After 1945, France was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe (not counting the Russian and Ukraine Republics of the Soviet Union, which numbered about 800,000 Jewish survivors each).<sup>7</sup> A total of 230,000 Jews had survived the persecutions, and by the late 1950s, demographic growth and immigration from Eastern Europe brought this number close to 300,000 (which was the estimated

6 For recent works on Polish participation in the genocide see particularly: Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of a Jewish Community in Poland*, Princeton, 2001, and idem, "A Tangled Web: Confronting Stereotypes Concerning Relations between Poles, Germans, Jews and Communists," in: Jan Gross, Tony Judt and István Deák (eds.) *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*, Princeton, 2000, pp. 74-129.

7 See Anne Grynberg, "Après la tourmente," in: Jean-Jacques Becker and Annette Wieviorka (eds.), *Les Juifs de France de la Révolution française à nos jours*, Paris, 1998, particularly pp. 267-76, and Michel Abitbol, "La cinquième République et l'accueil des Juifs d'Afrique du Nord," *ibid.*, pp. 287-327. For the Soviet figures, see Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union. The History of a National Minority*, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 261-63.

number of Jews living in France in 1939). The exodus between 1956 and 1962 of North African Jews to France would almost double the post-war community. Even though the colonial wars were much more central to their personal experience than the Holocaust, which took place in Europe, it was the legacy of the Nazi genocide and the French participation in it that conditioned the terms of cohabitation of their identities as both Jews and French citizens, a situation not very different from Israel.

The near total destruction of the Jewish population of Europe was the most dramatic and deliberately intended consequence of Nazi warfare, but it was not the only demographic transformation occasioned by the Second World War. After 1918, the Wilsonian utopia of national self-determination had proved incompatible with the reality of the intricate multi-ethnic nature of the population of most European states. After 1945, genocide, massive population transfers, expulsions and border revisions had drastically reduced the diversity. The mass exodus and later expulsion of thirteen million *Volksdeutsche* from Central and Eastern Europe – the backlash of Nazi plans for racial colonization of the region – was quantitatively the major unintended effect of Nazi warfare. Before 1938, one-third of the population of Czechoslovakia was neither Czech nor Slovak, but German (22.1 percent), Hungarian (4.8 percent), Ukrainian (3.8 percent), or Jewish (2.4 percent).<sup>8</sup> A decade later, "national minorities" added up to less than 5 percent of the population. In Poland, Ukrainians (13.8 percent), Jews (8.5 percent), Belorussians (5.3 percent) and Germans (2.3 percent) similarly represented almost one-third of the population before 1938 and less than 3 percent ten years later.

Wielek's title *The War Hitler Won* had an even more general bearing than the author imagined at the time. Through the implementation of massive and ruthless violence on an unprecedented scale, the Nazi rhetoric of "*ein Volk, ein Staat*" had become more of a reality than ever before in European history. Germany itself became more German than it had ever been, due to the departure of over eight million slave laborers that the Nazi regime had imported and their replacement by an even greater number of German refugees. German society after 1945

8 Statistics from Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, New York, 1999, p. 414.

was a very hostile environment for immigrants, to the extent that, by 1946, even old and assimilated immigrant communities, such as the Dutch peasant immigrants who settled in the German borderlands at the end of the nineteenth century, chose to leave the country and “return” to the country of their ancestors.<sup>9</sup>

The years 1945-1960 stand out as an exceptional period of frightening ethnic homogeneity in European history, before the economic boom and decolonization restored pluralism and heterogeneity to at least part of the continent.

Jewish expectations and apprehensions have to be placed in this context. The period between 1945 and 1948 was not only a bright dawn brought by the liberation from Nazi rule. It was also a dark period, when alternative solutions such as immigration to America and Palestine were blocked by the United States and Great Britain respectively, while the prospects for a “return” to a vanished world in Europe were bleak.<sup>10</sup>

### *Homecoming?*

In one episode of his chronicle *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, Giorgio Bassani narrates the unexpected return, in August 1945, of Geo Jozs.<sup>11</sup> In Ferrara, a medium-sized town in the Po valley, north of Bologna, almost half of the local Jewish community of about four hundred, pre-war size, had been killed, among them Geo Jozs’ parents and his brother. The young man finds his parents’ home occupied by the local partisan movement, which had installed their headquarters there after

9 See Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation in Western Europe. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*, Cambridge, Mass., 2000, pp. 177-79.

10 See Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust*, New York, 1982.

11 Giorgio Bassani “Una lapida in via Mazzini,” in *Il romanzo di Ferrara*, Milan, 1991, pp. 87-127. For the post-war context in Italy, see Guri Schwartz, “Gli ebrei italiani e la memoria della persecuzione fascista (1945-1955),” *Passato e Presente*, 47 (1999), pp. 109-30, and Michele Sarfatti (ed.), *Il ritorno alla vita: vicende e diritti degli ebrei in Italia dopo la seconda guerra mondiale*, Florence, 1998. See also the review article by Enzo Collotti, “Antisemitismo e leggi razziali in Italia,” *Passato e Presente*, 50 (2000), pp. 169-90.

having chased the black brigades from the same house four months earlier in April 1945. He would only recoup his house after the defeat of the Communist Party in the 1948 elections. Geo Jozs’ appearance disturbs his neighbors and relatives, both the former fascists, eager to put the excesses of the Mussolini regime and the Salò Republic behind them, and the neo-communists, who were “so honestly convinced that the bright era of democracy and universal brotherhood had finally started.”<sup>12</sup> Jozs embarrasses his fellow citizens by publicly denouncing a local notable as the man who betrayed his family. In protest against his impunity, he then posts himself on the terrace of the Caffé della Borsa in his concentration camp outfit as a living reminder of the past crimes that the town wanted to forget in order “to make a new start.” At the end of 1948, Geo Jozs suddenly disappears from Ferrara, to the general relief. Some report that he had thrown himself in the Po River, while others prefer to believe he migrated to Israel. Bassani writes: “He came from very far away, further even than where he really came from. Returning when no one expected him any longer, what did he want now? To be able to face this kind of questioning, would have required other times, and another town.”<sup>13</sup>

Recent attention has focused on the problems that Jewish survivors encountered in reclaiming their assets – their houses, their possessions, their jobs – or those of deceased relatives, including insurance premiums and bank deposits. The class action suits to seek judicial redress of past injustices have received wide coverage, often presenting the issue as a recent discovery, an unveiling of well-kept secrets. Yet, the indifference and, even, the hostility that met Jewish survivors at their return have been described in great detail long before they hit the courts and the media. Long before Giorgio Bassani (cited above), the Dutch novelist Marga Minco started publishing autobiographical novels in the 1950s. In *Het bittere kruid* (The Bitter Herb), published in 1957, she describes her unsuccessful attempt to recover the belongings of her murdered parents from neighbors who had offered to hide and guard them. This attitude was widespread enough to have occasioned the coining of a Dutch neologism, *bewariërs*, which could be translated as *guardaryans*, a contraction of guardian and “Aryan.” Jan Gross has

12 Bassani, *Il Romanzo di Ferrara*, p. 104.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 92.

underlined the importance of the material rewards that ensued from anti-Jewish persecutions and pogroms for the local population in Poland and how this helps explain both wartime popular participation in the violence and post-war hostility.<sup>14</sup> Without going to the extremes of violence such as the Kielce pogrom of 4 July 1946, in which forty-two Jews were killed, popular hostility to the returning Jews took very public and organized forms elsewhere too. On 19 April 1945 a demonstration gathered 250 to 300 persons in the very central fourth *arrondissement* of Paris, shouting "France to the French," in protest against the "expulsion" of a person from his apartment, reclaimed by its previous, Jewish occupant upon his return from deportation.<sup>15</sup> The protesters later got into a fight with some Jewish inhabitants of the neighborhood. Similar incidents gave rise to the creation of associations for the protection of "tenants of good faith" who opposed legal restitution.

Conflicts over property reveal the human pettiness, even following a tragedy of exceptional magnitude. As such they are only an indication of a wider context of indifference towards the plight of European Jewry during and immediately after World War II. During the last two decades, historiographical attention has been redirected from the singular focus on the perpetrators to the bystanders, occupied societies and wartime regimes, exile governments and even the Allies.<sup>16</sup> More particularly, a host of fairly recent studies have indicted post-war governments, post-war societies and post-war ideologies for mishandling the consequences of the genocide, and even for open hostility towards the survivors themselves. Some of these publications reveal truly appalling events. Dienne Hondius' work on the Netherlands is an outstanding example of this.<sup>17</sup> Hondius documents the internment in

14 Gross, *Neighbors*, and "A Tangled Web."

15 See Lagrou, "Victims of Genocide and National Memory: Belgium, France and the Netherlands 1945-1965," *Past and Present*, 154 (1997), p. 182.

16 For a critical assessment, see Peter Novick's treatment of knowledge by the Allies and allied inaction in his *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston-New York, 1999, pp. 19-59.

17 Dienne Hondius, *Terugkeer. Antisemitisme in Nederland rond de bevrijding*, The Hague, 1990 (second revised edition 1998), and Idem, "A Cold Reception: Holocaust Survivors in The Netherlands and their Return," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 28 (1994), pp. 47-65. Renewed commotion and controversies over assets prompted

June 1945 of Jewish repatriates from Bergen-Belsen in detention camps, together with Nazi criminals, as "former enemy DPs." Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany during the 1930s had lost their German nationality by their departure and had not been able to acquire the nationality of their host country. During the repatriation, they became the repeated object of antisemitic reactions, including by government officials. Popular reactions were also particularly harsh, motivated by collective self-pity over the famine and destruction during the last winter of war in the central region of the country. Jewish survivors heard: "Well, quite a lot of your kind came back. Just be happy you were not here. How we suffered from hunger."<sup>18</sup> Quite another approach is pursued by authors who criticize the wider context in which the genocide and its survivors were received by post-war societies as a concerted attempt at "dejudification." In *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, Tony Kushner denounces the post-war liberal ideology prevalent in Great Britain for its systematic refusal to recognize the Jewish character of the victims. In a perplexing combination, universalism and antisemitism, assimilationism and exclusivism stand accused of this evil.<sup>19</sup> Maxime Steinberg, the foremost scholar of the Holocaust in Belgium, places the blame for the same "fabricated universality" and "mythical amalgamation" on the left-wing ideology

the Dutch government in 1998 to set up a vast research initiative, employing fifty historians for a two year period. The *Stichting Onderzoek Terugkeer en Opvang* (Research Foundation Return and Relief), initially focused on Jewish returnees, broadened its research to include all repatriates, including from the Dutch Indies in the late 1940s. Its explicit aim was to investigate the "immaterial aspects" of the repatriation, since matters regarding restitution are the competence of other governmental commissions. The report of the Foundation was published in November 2001. It includes new details on local and regional conditions and on groups of repatriates who have received little attention so far, such as Sinti, Roma, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Given the eminently political mission of the Foundation, it is an open question whether its research results will add much to the scientific debate as initiated by Hondius.

18 Hondius, *Terugkeer*, p. 94.

19 Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*, Oxford, 1994.

or some form of "Polish anti-fascism," which was blindfolding Western European intellectuals.<sup>20</sup>

Present-day disappointment with either liberalism or anti-fascism is probably not the best standpoint to reconstruct the mental context with which Jewish survivors were confronted on their return. However, it is not impossible to avoid anachronism and to return briefly to three distinct notions that spring up in almost every treatment of this subject and that are central to the issues discussed in this book: antisemitism, anti-fascism and patriotism.

### *Antisemitism*

Antisemitism did not disappear from European societies after 1945, societies that had witnessed the horrible outcome of Nazi antisemitism. To suppose that antisemitism suddenly evaporated in the light of the evidence of Nazi crimes would be to underestimate the inveterate nature of antisemitism in Western European societies. After all, both blatant and latent antisemitism had been necessary preconditions for the massive deportations from the occupied countries, which the occupier would not have been able to carry out without local accomplices and impassive bystanders. From Kielce to Paris and from Amsterdam to the Po valley, antisemitic incidents continued to occur in the years 1945-1947. In France, the *Gendarmerie Nationale* registered antisemitic graffiti appearing in the first six months of 1945, like the one discovered in Courbevoie on 19 February: "Down with the war, down with the denouncers, the firing squad for all Jews."<sup>21</sup> Repatriation officials in Toulouse observed in the same period:

Immediately after the liberation, a certain number of Jews of foreign origin have engaged in an activism excessive both because of their small number and because of the fact that they are foreigners. The regional direction has been assailed by requests for assistance emanating from the different Jewish organizations, which all appeared remarkably well coordinated. As a result, I mandated my

20 "Les Dérives plurielles de la mémoire d'Auschwitz." *Centrale: périodique trimestriel de la communauté juive*, 254 (1993), pp. 6-9; 260 (1993), pp. 11-14 (reprinted in Steinberg, *Un pays occupé et ses juifs. Belgique entre France et Pays-Bas*, Brussels, 1998, pp. 179-90).

21 Lagrou, "Victims of Genocide," pp. 192-93.

information service to run a survey of all Jewish organizations of Toulouse and its region. (...) In order to put an end to the scheming of certain foreigners in this category, who were liable to provoke or foster a new crisis of antisemitism, I have deemed proper, at the occasion of the creation of the departmental association of political and racial deportees to appeal, on the one hand, to the rabbi and, on the other, to two members of very old Toulouse families of a great local standing, to represent the Jews, judging that the interests of a particularly oppressed category would thus be served under the best conditions.<sup>22</sup>

The end of the war, with millions of individuals on the move, liberating armies, workers and prisoners of war returning from Germany, war criminals and former collaborators trying to escape prosecution, was a period of generalized turmoil and acute fear. Repatriation planners were obsessed by a contamination psychosis and drafted reports on the prophylactics of the Plague. Rumors abounded on the evil schemes of a fifth column of revenge-prone Nazis and on a planned communist seizure of power. Xenophobia proved to be a powerful trigger of the popular imagination: east of the Elbe Cossacks were credited with massive plundering, rape and cruelty. The behavior of Soviet troops was a genuine source of alarm, but the images of savage Asian hordes associated with it were much more ancient. West of the Elbe, black American soldiers and French colonial troops bore the popular – and part of the official – blame for similar crimes and misdemeanors. In the midst of this period of confusion, when liberators and enemies, traitors and victims mingled and were each a source of different fears, the Hun, the Negro and the wandering Jew were easily identifiable targets of diffuse feelings of disorientation and *Überfremdung*.

Yet, there was nothing banal about the persistence of antisemitism precisely in this period. It does come as a shock that awareness of the mass killing of Jews by the Nazis did not rule out antisemitism after 1945. On occasions it even seemed to strengthen it, taking up new themes, such as the lack of Jewish resistance or Jewish treason; and a general tendency developed of thinking that if the Jews attracted such unprecedented persecution they must be guilty of something. Traditional Christian antisemitism felt the need to re-appropriate a theme of which it had been dispossessed by the Nazis. In the spring months of 1945, a Dutch author living in liberated Belgium, when the majority of the Netherlands was still occupied, took stock of the years of the

22 *Ibid.*

German occupation in both countries and of the challenges ahead. The book was published in May 1945 by a publisher situated close to the border, and was immediately distributed in the Netherlands. In the chapter on the persecution of Jews by the Nazis, the author felt compelled to warn his readers not to credit Hitler for his accomplishments:

Even if we accept that the power and influence of Jewry in our modern society are not imaginary, yes, if we even willingly admit that the righteous resistance and fair measures against numerous Jewish practices positively benefit Christian society, then it still remains no less true that no Christian of conviction can approve the phenomena that present themselves nowadays under the universal as well as meaningless name of antisemitism. If today we find a certain category of Christians (and this is not unimportant) which sympathizes with this persecution, we should not in the first place forget that if we Christians had in general shown more courage and conviction and faith, Jewish and liberal influences would never have permeated society to the degree they did. The Jews were guilty of the murder of the Son of God, but Pontius Pilate was no less guilty when he nailed an innocent to the cross out of cowardice. [...] Of course, the Jewish problem is a burning question, but those who wish its solution from the perspective of hatred and often of angry envy, have rejected Christian love and with it their Christianity. [...] Christian love requires a different struggle, a different antisemitism. The mass-murder of the Jewish people is the clearest proof that national-socialism is not antisemitic, but anti-Christian. Of course the Christian world will have to fight its war against Jewish hegemony, but in a struggle according to its own principles and not according to the whispering of some evil spirit. [...] The freedom we yearn for must not lead to licentiousness and anarchism, because they are the trump cards through which the liberal-Jewish hegemony can establish itself.<sup>23</sup>

The persistence of prejudice is a powerful reminder that the end of the war did not signal a radical new start and a radical new mentality. Traces of continuity also existed in the administrative sphere. Liberated prisoners from Belsen had their food rationing cards stamped by requisitioned German civilian personnel with the infamous *Jude* stamp of the Nazi era, that is, of a few days earlier.<sup>24</sup> Similar incidents were repeated further on their repatriation journey. For example in Paris, in the hotel Lutetia, requisitioned by the French government for receiving

concentration camp survivors, where a French police officer marked a repatriation card with the mention "Jew"; or in Amsterdam, where the officer of the population register refused to alter the inscription "Jew" under the heading "religion" in spite of the explicit request of a repatriate. Contrary to what critics of the "de-judaization" claim today, repatriates were often horrified at being singled out once again as Jews upon their escape from racial persecution. Refusing to distinguish between Jewish and other victims might have been a fundamental error in the planning of the repatriation and the anticipation of the return, since extermination and "ordinary" persecution were very different realities. In receiving the repatriates, it was also a moral imperative, or, as the Belgian Repatriation Commission stated in its final report: "These principles (of non-discrimination on the basis of race, religion or opinion) are part of the spiritual heritage we have fought to defend and that has been safeguarded through victory."<sup>25</sup> Forced assimilation did occur, but in a very different context, when Christian religious communities refused to hand Jewish orphans over to their relatives, abducted them and hid them under false identities, as happened in notorious cases in France and the Netherlands.<sup>26</sup> However, the strong reactions – provoked both by administrative practices that singularized Jews and by the forced conversions by Christian churches – show that if antisemitism had not disappeared, it had become anathema to all major political creeds prevalent in post-war Europe. Other discourses on the past war and the remedies to build a new post-war society were far more influential in conditioning the reinsertion of Jewish survivors in their countries of origin.

### *Patriotism and Anti-Fascism*

Pretending that after 1945 World War II had discredited nationalism in Europe for good is a pious myth of European federalists. Triumphant

23 Ibidem., p. 194.

24 See Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, *Vom Zwangsarbeiter zum heimatlosen Ausländer. Die Displaced Persons in Westdeutschland, 1945-1951*, Göttingen, 1985, p. 44.

25 Lagrou, "Victims of Genocide," p. 192.

26 For the Netherlands, see Elma Verhey, *Om het joodse kind*, Amsterdam, 1991, p. 279. For France, particularly the Finally affair, see Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy*, Paris, 1987, pp. 66-67, and Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et Génocide. Entre la mémoire et l'oubli*, Paris, 1992, pp. 368-90.

and vindictive nationalism was the central discourse of national reconstruction in the countries liberated from Nazi domination to the east and to the west of Germany. However, European patriotism did have to re-invent itself after 1945. Partly this was for political reasons, because a certain nationalism had often chosen the wrong side – in Croatia and Slovakia, in Romania and France. More fundamentally, though, this had to do with the very experience of the war. With the exception of Germany and Soviet Russia, nation-states had lost much of their relevance in this experience. National armies were mostly eliminated in a very short time, and military deaths accounted for only a modest part in overall war-related mortality. For Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands, the *Blitz* of 1940 had lasted only a few days and liberation in 1945 followed German surrender. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia had been dismembered. Italy, Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria entered the war on Germany's side and finished it in confusion and occupation. Countries like Greece, Poland and France were all too painfully aware that their role in the decisive events of this war had essentially been that of the impotent onlooker and that their national self-determination depended on the good or other grace of their liberators. This did not prevent the resurgence of a combatant patriotism priding itself on the contribution of the national resistance from within or without. To some extent, it even increased the need for such a discourse. Rituals stemming from a military context – banners, parades, monuments to the Unknown Soldier – and celebrating victory through combat were staged in all the liberated countries of Europe.

Obviously, however, war in the traditional sense had lost its centrality: the regular army and with it the figure of the soldier, a consenting participant in the violence of war, sanctioned by the task conferred on him by the State; the notion of front-line and battlefield and with it the geographic location of death at war and the possibility of creating collective burial sites charged with meaning, referring to events, battles lost or won. The sheer weight of civilian victims of persecution, deportation and murder in the war experience challenged traditional ways of making sense of death at war. As a result, civilian victims were included in a holistic tribute to national martyrdom and combat. Mass death and the metaphor of the front, which had impregnated European societies after 1918, became the dominant way of remembering World War II, even in countries that had not

participated in World War I, such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway. The metaphor of collective suffering allowed nations to avoid the disruptive legacy of Nazi occupation. Compared to World War I, the victims had not been conscripts of the national army, equally spread out over the population, but targeted minorities. Rebuilding a national community, so ran the argument, required a nationalization of the memories of the war, both in countries where the idea of collective suffering was a manifest abstraction, such as in the Netherlands, where Jewish victims represented more than half of all war-related deaths, not to mention Denmark, and in countries where it was not, such as, primarily, Poland.

The Nazi concentration camp was a central symbol of this narrative of national martyrdom. Not only did the shock of the carnage and the image of the skeleton-like survivors provoke a shock of comparable impact with the slaughter of the war in the trenches during World War I, it also allowed for a different patriotic commemoration. Among the returning survivors of concentration camps, the arrested resistance fighters and political opponents represented a new generation of veterans of a new war of unprecedented cruelty and heroism. Symbols of their extreme experience – barbed wire, camp barracks, human beings packed in freight cars, prison uniforms, shaved heads, SS prison guards, dogs and watchtowers – constituted a powerful language representing the war experience *tout court*, including the experience of groups of the population whose individual trajectory had never included any of it. Brochures, best-selling survivor accounts, public lectures, monuments, and even traveling exhibitions with spectacular reproductions of camp barracks and deportation cattle wagons, permeated post-war European societies with the imagery of this *univers concentrationnaire*. Commemorations establishing a direct link between the horror of the “deportation” and the horror of the Great War were at least as influential as the ones establishing a link between the victory of 1918 and the “victory” of the resistance in 1945. The memory of resistance and deportation became indistinguishable in their public representation. On the one hand, undisputed resistance heroes were the ones who had proven and paid for their heroism with deportation to Nazi camps. On the other hand, all survivors of the camps were represented as resistance heroes, whose deportation had been the consequence of their patriotic or at least anti-fascist opinions and activities.

Post-war patriotism was not only about monuments and official commemorations, but also about healthcare and social recognition, jobs and citizenship. Underneath the apparent consensus around the contours of a patriotic “*univers concentrationnaire*,” a violent confrontation took place regarding the inclusion or exclusion of different categories of victims and most prominently regarding the place of Jewish victims of the genocide. The standard-bearers of traditional patriotism defended an exclusive patriotic interpretation of the veteran, whose merit resided in his defense of the fatherland. National honor had to be reserved for a fighting elite. There was a world of difference between the national martyr, who had died for the cause of the fatherland, and the arbitrary victim. For traditional patriots, victims of the genocide very explicitly did not deserve any form of national recognition. In Western Europe, the patriots set up separate organizations, separate commemorations and campaigned for a separate legal recognition, with separate, superior entitlements to financial compensation and other material and symbolical benefits. Their declared hostility to the “anti-fascist amalgamation” of various victims and dubious heroes was not always devoid of antisemitic accents.

Also in Western Europe, “anti-fascist organizations,” often, though not always controlled by the Communist Party, mounted an explicit defense of the rights of Jewish victims, grounded not in any recognition of the singularity of their experience but in their membership of a broad anti-fascist family. The alternative to anti-fascist assimilation was exclusion from any form of recognition and patriotic contempt as practiced by nationalist, anti-communist and pro-colonial milieus in most Western European countries. The examples of the Netherlands, where narrow patriotic memories gained the upper hand and where government and civil society, with the exception of the ostracized Communist Party, withheld any form of recognition or assistance to survivors of the genocide until the 1970s, or Belgium, where such recognition was limited to the narrow minority of Belgian citizens among the mostly migrant population of victims of the genocide, serve to underscore the importance of an inclusive anti-fascist definition of national martyrdom.<sup>27</sup> In France, for example, laws regulating reparation payments or access to citizenship; social organizations

27 Lagrou, *Legacy*, pp. 210-61.

offering support and solidarity; elementary sociability and common narratives of a traumatic past concerned tens of thousands of individuals.<sup>28</sup> Anti-fascism under communist inspiration did contribute in Western Europe to an innovation of patriotic traditions or at least to rid them of their nastiest and most intolerant overtones. The campaign to honor the memory of the victims of Nazism, conferring on them a special entitlement to national recognition, implied a reversal of patriotic stereotypes. After all, in France for example, they represented what Vichy had defined as *l'anti-France*: Bolsheviks, Jews, foreigners, masons and terrorists, if possible all combined in one individual. For the xenophobic right in most parts of the world, a good patriot first of all needed a familiar-sounding last name. Anti-fascist commemoration, as witnessed in necrologies and monuments, did diversify this creed, even if it encountered inveterate resistance, not least in communist ranks. The posterity of the *FTP-MOI*, the immigrant brigades of the French communist partisans, whose awkward-sounding names were removed from the party's official commemoration at the end of the 1940s, illustrates this eloquently enough.<sup>29</sup>

Present-day anti-communist sensibilities have led distinguished authors such as Maxime Steinberg and Annette Wieviorka to indict the anti-fascist commemoration as an intolerant communist plot.<sup>30</sup> Yet, in the period we are concerned with here, before the outbreak of the Cold War, the anti-fascist commemoration was widely shared by a broad left wing. Communist parties were in government coalitions in France, Italy and Belgium; and even in countries like the Netherlands, where State anti-communism was very strong, the party was not yet the isolated and beleaguered sect it would later become. For Jewish survivors, the Communist Party was a more welcoming family than most other political formations, and one more compatible with their own sympathies on matters such as immigration and foreign policy, not to mention the programs of conservative reconstruction of the confessional parties on the right. As far as support for the creation of a Jewish State was concerned, Zionism was a socialist and anti-colonial

28 Ibidem.

29 See Stéphane Courtois, Denis Pechanski and Adam Rayski, *Le sang de l'étranger. Les immigrés de la MOI dans la Résistance*, Paris, 1989, and Boris Holban, *Testament*, Paris, 1989.

30 Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, and Steinberg, “Les dérives.”

creed, endorsed, before 1948, by the Soviet Union against Great Britain. Even after the rapidly changing alliances and to some extent until the late 1960s, in Western Europe there was no incompatibility between a pro-communist and a Jewish allegiance. The Six Days' War in 1967 and the antisemitic purges in Poland one year later would create an irrevocable rupture.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the national debates on the legacy of war, occupation and genocide used a very similar language in a very different setting. The relationship between the local Jewish communities and the new communist regimes is a long-standing source of controversy and stereotype. Were the new regimes welcomed by the surviving Jews, and did they massively staff their government apparatus and secret police services as the anti-communist and antisemitic version has it? Or were the Jews the first victims of their policy of expropriation and their refusal to undo the effects of Nazi "Aryanization" and later of the State antisemitism of the Stalinist regimes and their newfound ethnic nationalism? Recent studies by Jan Gross and Jeffrey Herf offer a balanced analysis of these two opposing views.

Jan Gross describes convincingly for Poland how the arrival of the Soviet Army and the establishment of the new regime first offered protection to local Jewish communities and was hence welcomed by them. This was first the case in the summer of 1941, when the Red Army brought the promise of a return of public order in the midst of generalized violence in the eastern part of the country and of protection from Nazi brutality. Sovietization and deportations soon reversed this situation completely, and in a matter of weeks volunteers for a suicidal return to the German-occupied western part lined up in front of the German consulate of Lvov.<sup>31</sup> In 1945 and 1946, and particularly after the Kielce pogrom, Jewish survivors again looked to the authorities for protection and some engaged in organizing self-protection units under the umbrella of the Central Special Commission.<sup>32</sup> Physical protection is quite a minimal motivation for support, however. In spite of an official ideology of minority rights, it rapidly became clear that what

31 Gross, "Tangled Web," p. 99. See also his *Revolution from Abroad: Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*, Princeton, 1988.

32 "Tangled Web," pp. 107-14.

the new authorities had to offer was not emancipation for the Jews, but emancipation of Jewishness. Even if a minority of *shtetl* youth did welcome the latter option, the disaffection of the overwhelming majority was radical. By 1948, a quarter of a million Jews had chosen to leave the country – an exceptional mass migration by peacetime standards and, contrary to the exodus of the German minority, induced in the absence of any government policy of expulsion.

Jeffrey Herf's *Divided Memory*, a comparative study of the political debates in East and West Germany on the Nazi past and particularly on the place of the mass murder of the Jews in these debates, is particularly revealing for the period that concerns us here, the years 1945-1948.<sup>33</sup> In the milieu of the anti-Nazi emigration in the late 1930s and early 1940s, there was both a concrete solidarity and, to a certain extent, a community of views on the post-war reconstruction of Germany between communists, social democrats and Jews. The exiles came to play a much more prominent role in the eastern occupation zone, where the Soviet occupier mistrusted the local population and tried to implant a new regime on "anti-fascist premises," than in the western zones. Denazification was at least quantitatively much more thorough than in the western zones, and, in the commemoration of anti-fascist martyrdom, the fate of the Jewish population of Europe initially played a more prominent role than in the politics of conservative reconstruction of someone like the future chancellor Konrad Adenauer. On 9 September 1945, a "national day of memory for the victims of fascism" was created in the Soviet zone. The victims of the antisemitic persecutions were explicitly included in the tribute, and the presidency of the Central Committee for the Victims of Fascism (*OdF or Hauptausschuß für die Opfer des Faschismus*) was entrusted to Julius Meyer, a member of the East-German communist party (*KPD*) and leader of the Berlin Jewish community. Social policies for Nazi victims were strikingly similar to the ones implemented in France in the same period. Jews were recognized as "racially persecuted" and received pension benefits, additional vacation days and free public transport, but at the same time a "hierarchy of victims" was created, giving special honors and entitlements to the "fighters." By June 1946, the administration had

33 Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.

registered more than 42,000 victims (*Opfer*) and about 15,500 fighters (*Kämpfer*).<sup>34</sup> February 1947 saw the creation of the government-supported Union of Victims of Nazi Persecution (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes, VVN*), an organization that prided itself on the prominent role of former Nazi victims in the government and administration of the Soviet zone.

If all of this compared favorably with the Western occupation zone, there was one important exception: restitution. In 1946 and 1947, restitution laws for Jewish survivors were passed in the Western zone. High-ranking party officials (the new *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland, SED*, had absorbed the Socialist and Communist Parties) most prominently Paul Merker and Leo Zuckermann, petitioned the government to create similar laws in the Eastern zone, arguing that an anti-fascist regime could not allow itself to be outdone by its capitalist contender in its policy towards the victims of fascism. Their pleas remained unanswered. Restitution was not only incompatible with the aim of the sovietization of the national economy, it was rejected with the overtly antisemitic argument that it was unacceptable for the party of the German working class to return property to Jewish capitalists. The same group of people also demonstrated explicit support for the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine, both as a consequence of the solidarity between former victims of fascism and as part of the anti-colonial struggle against Great Britain and the "Anglo-American oil companies."<sup>35</sup> The re-stalinization of all Central European communist parties between 1948-1949 and 1953 and the "anti-cosmopolitan campaign" started in Moscow in 1949 would target this group and durably change the policy regarding the memory of Nazi persecution of the Jews. Anti-western paranoia and spy-scare turned quickly into a purge of party members who had been exiled in the west before 1945 and particularly, Jews. Between the László Rajk trial in Budapest in September 1949 and the Rudolph Slansky trial in Prague in November 1952, successive waves of purges and denunciations would hit high-ranking party members in most Soviet bloc countries, accused of acting as capitalist or Zionist spies. (Interestingly, the spy-scare of McCarthyism on the opposite side of the Cold War barrier was not devoid of an

34 Ibid., p. 83.

35 Ibid., p. 98.

antisemitic stereotype either and similarly dissuaded any tendency towards Jewish distinctiveness in the United States).<sup>36</sup> In East Germany, the initial mistrust of the local – nazified – population and Soviet reliance on exile milieus was wholly replaced by a new nationalist and anti-western ideology of building socialism for the German working class in which there was no room for an explicit acknowledgment of the plight of European Jewry under Nazi rule. In 1953, the inclusive Union of Victims of Nazi Persecution (*Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes*) was transformed into an obedient Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters (*Komitee der Antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer*), which would take the fore in the organization of commemorations and the construction of monuments, memorials and museums in the German Democratic Republic, including the concentration camp sites of Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück and Buchenwald. A short but crucial intermezzo was thus irrevocably brought to an end.

### Conclusion

To what kind of a world did Jewish survivors return – the very few who survived deportation and were repatriated, those who survived in hiding and re-emerged, those who came back from exile in allied or neutral countries? Most trajectories were much too complicated to represent the events of the war years and the first post-war years as a return journey. The "comeback" was often only a transitory stop on a migration to further destinations. Most importantly, the place where war and persecution had struck them in most cases no longer existed – their home and their belongings, their relatives, their community, their neighborhood. Even the social, political and demographic make-up of the country they had known was most often radically transformed by war. This paper has dwelled very little on the harrowing experiences of the returning survivors themselves and limits itself to a description of some general features of the societies they returned to.

European societies in the years 1945-1947 were absorbed by the turmoil war had created and by the challenge of reconstruction. Public

36 See Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, particularly pp. 92-102.

attention was often not available for compassion and solidarity with the survivors of the genocide. Material goods were scarce and there was a housing shortage, all of which made restitution an unpopular issue. Antisemitism had been driven underground, but it resurfaced in some popular reactions, ranging from insidious remarks and clandestine graffiti to spontaneous demonstrations and even small-scale pogroms. Recognition of Jewish distinctiveness was therefore frequently still linked in the minds of Jewish survivors with reactions of fear. Moreover, post-war European societies set out to "nationalize" memories of the war in narratives of collective martyrdom and resistance as a means of consolidating re-emerging national identities. In this context there was little room for the acknowledgment that Europe's Jews had been subject to a Nazi project of annihilation that set their experience apart from the collective ordeal of war and occupation. However, this failed acknowledgment and the insensitivity it implied was neither the product of widespread antisemitism nor of a generalized attempt to de-justify the victims. Even if there was an awareness and the occasional public recognition of the fact that "the Jews suffered more," the historical understanding of the continental project to destroy European Jewry as transpires in the present-day terminology of "genocide," "Holocaust" and "Shoah," only emerged in later years. Post-war societies were not in the first instance concerned with historical truth, but with social justice, or at least they should have been.

The modalities and the language by which victims of the Holocaust were recognized as national victims in post-war European countries did not carry any recognition of the specific nature of their experience; on the contrary in fact. Their persecution was assimilated with a service to the nation – in the terms of the time they had "contributed to the salvation of the Nation."<sup>37</sup> As victims of the national enemy they had become honorary citizens, and as victims of fascism part of the anti-fascist struggle. The national remembrance honored the dead and provided aid for the survivors as victims of deportation, as patriots and anti-fascists, not because of extermination as Jews. That being said, no other forms of social recognition were available at the time. The anti-fascist commemoration offered a formal legal recognition to survivors

37 In the wording of the preamble of the French law for "political deportees." See *Loi no. 48-1404* (9 September 1948), *Journal Officiel* (10 September 1948).

of the Holocaust, with both symbolic and material benefits; it offered social support and sociability through organizations capable of delivering a powerful sense of mission. The "anti-fascist amalgamation" was partly imposed upon many survivors, partly welcomed and interiorized, as a strategy for re-integration and as an identity. Anti-fascism was a powerful narrative, a heroic and dynamic posture, a means of overcoming the appallingly arbitrary affliction that had hit them, and thus a way to take possession of their own destiny. Forced assimilationism and ideological hegemony were not incompatible with receptivity among Jewish survivors for this interpretation.

Accordingly, after 1945, a measure of social justice for victims of the Holocaust in post-war Europe did not depend on the establishment of the historical truth about the distinct experience of their persecution; quite the opposite. Only insofar as they presented themselves as anti-fascists and patriots could they legitimately claim public attention and official recognition. In the terms of the immediate post-war and from the perspective of the survivors, the conflict between an identification as Jew or anti-fascist was also a conflict between a categorization by the persecutor and a free-floating categorization whereby the victim could choose her or his identification. To the extent that antisemitic hyper-patriots pleaded for the exclusion of Jewish victims from post-war legal recognition on precisely this basis, historical untruth collided with social injustice. European Holocaust survivors who had internalized a militant anti-fascist and patriotic identity spoke a language that was understood by their contemporaries and provided social legitimacy, self-esteem and a sense of purpose. In their aspiration for justice, they inscribed their personal experience in collective narratives and escaped moral solitude. This implied conforming to the codes and paradigms capable of providing social legitimacy, first of all that of the fighter and the militant, the hero. Recognition for their historically specific suffering was dependent on their identification with universal values of patriotism, anti-fascism and humanism.

Post-war Europe was not a promising setting for the emergence of a multi-cultural, tolerant and cosmopolitan society. Indeed, quite the reverse. The emigration of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Europe during these years, including the miserable conditions of a protracted period of transit in DP camps where emigrants were hostage to the political arm-twisting between Britain and the United States about the

emigration quota to Palestine and America respectively, is a powerful illustration of this. The advent of the Cold War after 1948 would only darken this picture, increase suspicion and xenophobia, and leave even more Jews politically homeless in a hostile environment. In this light, the debates over the inclusion or exclusion of Jewish victims in national memories, social policies and restitution processes are important, in part for what they can contribute to a better understanding of the experience of Jewish survivors, but, more centrally even, for what they can reveal about the way European countries reconstructed themselves after the catastrophe of Nazism and the degree to which they succeeded or failed to re-invent themselves and evolve towards more open and tolerant societies.

## *French Apprehensions, Jewish Expectations: From a Social Imaginary to a Political Practice*

RENÉE POZNANSKI

The term "return" was not neutral in France after the Liberation. Throughout the German Occupation the French people had been waiting for the return of more than two million absentees – prisoners of war, labor conscripts, resistance fighters, political deportees. Jews – so-called racial deportees – accounted for only a small minority of all the absentees. At the time it was believed that about one hundred and twenty thousand Jews had been deported.

Following the Liberation, the absentees were in fact very much present in people's minds; and an "Absentees' Week," 14 to 21 December 1944, was organized by the Ministry of Prisoners, Deportees and Refugees.<sup>1</sup> The actual return began in the spring of 1945. But whereas the vast majority of prisoners of war and labor conscripts returned and 60 percent of political deportees took the road back to France,<sup>2</sup> only 2,500 Jews had survived the death camps – a mere 3 percent of the 76,000 Jews deported from France.<sup>3</sup> On 1 June 1945, the arrival was celebrated of the one-millionth returnee – a prisoner of war. At the end of June 1945, *Libération* referred to the fate of the Jews of France: "More than a hundred thousand Jews living in France were deported beyond the Rhine. To date, only two thousand have been found. One must, alas, expect a 95 percent casualty rate."<sup>4</sup>

1 Edouard Lynch, "Les filtres successifs de l'information," in: Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci and Edouard Lynch (eds.), *La Libération des camps et le retour des déportés*, Brussels, 1995, pp. 163-75.

2 Sixty percent of the 63,000 resistance and political deportees; see Jean-Pierre Azéma, *De Munich à la Libération, 1938-1944*, Paris, 1979, p. 189.

3 Pieter Lagrou, "Victims of Genocide and National Memory: Belgium, France and the Netherlands, 1945-1965," *Past and Present*, 154 (1997), pp. 187-90.

4 Lynch, "Les filtres successifs de l'information," p. 179.