

Jewish Children's Literature in the Netherlands*

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The Dutch Jewish Community and Its Demography Today

The Jewish community in the Netherlands has existed since the seventeenth century. There have always been two communities: the larger, Ashkenazi community, and the smaller, Sephardic community. In the absence of any scientific census or survey, the number of Jews in the Netherlands is, at the moment, estimated at about 25,000. Of these, about 11,000 are considered official members of the Ashkenazi community, distributed among 42 local communities throughout the country. The three big cities in the western part of our country—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and the Hague—account for 82% of all Ashkenazi community members. The Sephardic community has fewer than 1,000 members, and just one congregation, in Amsterdam. The membership of the liberal Jewish community (the so-called Progressive Movement)—which is enumerated separately—is about 3,000, in six congregations. Again, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and the Hague account for 80% of its members. At least half of all residents of Jewish origin in Holland are not affiliated with the organized Jewish community.

What do these numbers tell us now? An estimated Jewish population of 25,000 means 0.16% of the total population of the country, which is about 15 million—or just 0.08% if we count only the affiliated Jews. By comparison, the estimated Jewish population in the United States—affiliated and non-affiliated—is 2.5% of the total population. Imagine what this percentage means, for instance, for Jewish books, schools, and higher education in Holland. We have only a few kindergartens and primary schools under Jewish auspices in

Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and only one Jewish high school, also in Amsterdam. There is neither a Jewish university nor the possibility of studying for a rabbinical degree in the country. For the past fourteen years, there has been an ultra-orthodox *heder* in Amsterdam, which comprises all primary and secondary grades. Apart from some small groups in the *medine* (as the Dutch "provinces" are called), which receive their Jewish education in private houses on Sunday mornings, nearly all Jewish educational possibilities are concentrated in the western part of the country. As 80% of Dutch Jews live in the large cities, the provincial Jewish communities will become smaller and smaller, and if the situation does not change, they will in the end disappear. It is clear that, especially for these types of schools and groups, there is a continuous need for Jewish children's literature.

The Position of Dutch Jewish Children's Literature

What does all this mean for Jewish children's books and their position in the market? Again, a few numbers: in Holland, about 1,000 children's books, both fiction and non-fiction (including comic books), are published in Dutch every year. Of these, 800 are reprints; 200 are new titles. In 1989, of these 200, eight had a Jewish theme; in addition, we counted one reprint, so there was a total of nine Jewish children's books altogether. How do we know this? In 1981, an annotated bibliography on adult and children's books with Jewish themes, prepared specifically for public libraries, appeared in Holland. We were members of the editorial committee, and from then on, we continued to collect titles of books on Jewish subjects. Now, twice a year, we publish annotated bibliographies containing about 70 titles each in a Dutch magazine. We hope that this series will be published in due time, as a supplementary volume to the 1981 bibliography.* Reviewing the numbers, we cannot call the Jewish juvenile publishing situation in Holland very satisfactory.

What kind of material for children appears, or has appeared in the past? There exist, of course, a small number of non-fiction books about the Jewish religion, Israel and the kibbutz, Jewish history, and fairy tales—for instance, Leo Pavlat's book (*Jewish Fairy Tales*) has been translated into Dutch. This category constitutes about 10% of the total.

The main subject in Jewish juvenile fiction appearing in Dutch, however, is the Second World War. Holland was one of the countries occupied by the Germans, and as a result of the Shoah, only approximately 20,000 of the 135,000 Jews in Holland survived the war. Eighty-five percent of Dutch Jews perished during the war—a very high percentage. When this became clear after the war, everybody was shocked. Numerous books published currently, therefore, deal with the Second World War and the Shoah. We can divide this material into several categories: (1) persecution of the Jews; (2) hiding stories; (3) concentration camps; (4) resistance against the Nazis; and (5) heroic stories.

All these categories are reflected in books originally written in Dutch, as well as in books translated from other languages. In fact, the number of translations is even greater than the number of original works written in the Dutch language—at least as far as the first three categories are concerned. That is not surprising, considering the fact that not many Dutch Jews survived the war, so only a few could, and still can, describe the experiences. Furthermore, the Holocaust is a European experience; in every European country, books about the Shoah and the concentration camps appear.

In the last two categories—"resistance" and "heroism"—the situation is exactly the

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*Bibliografie over het Jodendom en Israel (*Bibliography on Judaism and Israel*), by Hanna Blok and Devorah [=Franca] Hersch, was published in Leuven, Belgium in 1992. The book lists about 1400 titles.

reverse. This is remarkable, considering the fact that, although many Jews were hidden (which was very dangerous), these writers use the theme to make the story a thrilling adventure. The first three categories—"persecution," "hiding stories," and "concentration camps"—consist mainly of autobiographies and diaries. Of course, there is the famous diary of Anne Frank, which above and beyond all other books occupies (especially in the Jewish community) a separate and a special place. When thirteen-year-olds are given school assignments to talk about subjects of interest to them, they often choose to tell about the life and the diary of Anne Frank, as a symbol for their ideas about the Holocaust.

There are also other well-known authors who have written about these subjects, such as Ida Vos, whose book *Hide and Seek* was published in English by Houghton in 1991. Her books contain many autobiographical elements. And then there is Johanna Reiss's *The Upstairs Room* (Harper, 1987). Johanna Reiss was Dutch by background, but her books were published in English. She wrote them mainly to tell her own children how she was hidden in Holland during the Second World War. Also, there is *Eva's Story* by Eva Schloss. It appeared in early 1990 and was so extraordinary because Eva's mother married Otto Frank in 1953, so Anne and Eva became "sisters." Finally, there is the book by Uri Orlev, translated from the Hebrew, *Island on Bird Street* (Houghton, 1984), and his other two books on the Shoah—just to mention a few.

In the categories "resistance against the Nazis" and "heroic stories," the situation is a bit different. In the first category, there exist a few very serious stories, including some by the well-known Dutch authors U. G. de Jong and Ben Kok. One book by the latter author is based on biographical material, and tells about a group of young people who try to save Jewish babies and bring them to southern Holland.

In Holland, we had what we called the Joodsche Raad—the Jewish Council. They had to give the Germans names and addresses of all Jews living in Holland; in addition, all Jews in Amsterdam had to live together in a ghetto. It was the first (and I hope it will be the last) ghetto in Holland; nevertheless, it existed. All that the Germans had to do was to go to the ghetto, cordon off the houses, and take all the children away to a place in Amsterdam that we call "De Hollandse Schouwburg" ("Dutch theater" is the literal translation). There the

Jewish children had to wait to be sent to the Westerbork transit camp. Opposite "De Hollandse Schouwburg" was a sort of a kindergarten, where some non-Jewish nurses worked, along with some illegal Jewish nurses. These nurses made contact with the "Hollandse Schouwburg" and tried to take out babies from the Schouwburg to the kindergarten, and then further into the country.

In the "heroic stories" category, there are many books in which young, adventurous boys help to save the lives of Jews and English R.A.F. pilots as easily as one can buy bread at the corner bakery. Were we to count their number, we estimate that there are more saved pilots in those books than were ever attacked, flying above our country! Among all those heroic stories, there are only a few serious ones.

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What Do We Wish For?

First of all, we have to divide the market for Jewish juvenile literature into two groups. In Holland, many non-Jewish children are very interested in Judaism, Jewish history, Israel, and the Second World War. Apart from fictional books on Jewish themes that are also suitable for non-Jewish children, we need more books for non-Jewish children in the fields of Jewish religion and Jewish history, plus books about Israel that are written in an authentic, non-heroic style.

Exactly the same themes are needed for our Jewish children. So here the market follows the same stream. But what else do we need for the Jewish group? Examples include informational books in the form of fiction—picture books for younger children, comparable to *Happy Passover, Rosie* (Henry Holt, 1990), and *Ben's First Chanukah* (Henry Holt, 1988), by Jane Breskin Zalben, which are lacking in Dutch. But we also need fiction for older children that deals with the Jewish experience, because they want and need to identify as Jews, and, as we all know, it is possible to do this through books.

But now we come to another difficulty. If there are few young Jewish Dutch authors, there are almost none in the field of Jewish children's literature. When we discovered

this problem a few years ago, a Dutch Jewish newspaper established an award for a good Dutch Jewish children's book, but nobody responded. The only remaining solution is to translate books dealing with Jewish themes. We have to be aware, however, that we need books in which children can recognize their own situation. For example, the backgrounds of a Jewish child in Europe and of a Jewish child in Israel are different, and although it is very nice and interesting to read about Israel, only in a very few instances might there be real identification on the part of a Dutch child. The same generally applies, with a few exceptions, to Jewish books from the U.S. and elsewhere in Europe.

Conclusions

(1) People from other countries who were victims of the Nazi occupation and still suffer from the results can recognize themselves in our descriptions and our problems. This might constitute a starting point for international cooperation in the field of Jewish juvenile literature.

(2) We need to talk about the possibilities for cooperation in international publication, between the U.S. and European countries; for instance, we can pursue the idea of publishing picture books in this way.

(3) We need to convince our publishers that the Israeli and Jewish market in children's books is an interesting one. They should no longer think that books with a Jewish theme are interesting only for adults. We hope that we can deal with this point in the roundtable discussion this afternoon.

[Unfortunately, there was no time for the roundtable discussion, and the procedures needed for organizing and planning the publishing of more indigenous and translated Jewish children's books in Europe and Latin America, as well as cooperative publishing ventures, were not addressed. Although the current economic climate is unfavorable to experimental publishing concepts, this goal has not been dropped and will be explored further—perhaps at the next Jerusalem Book Fair.—Marcia Posner, Symposium chair]

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