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'Als ik morgen niet op transport ga, ga ik 's avonds naar de revue': kamp Westerbork in brieven, dagboeken en memoires (1942-2010)

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Summary

Established as a refugee camp in 1939 to accommodate the ever larger stream of mostly German Jewish refugees, “Centraal Vluchtelingenkamp Westerbork” (Central Refugee Camp Westerbork) was taken over by the German occupier on July 1st 1942. From that date on the *Polizeiliches Durchgangslager* functioned as a portal of the concentration and extermination camps in the east. One factor that importantly determined the character of the camp was the fact that the German command left the daily administration of the camp to the prisoners themselves. The camp was hierarchically organized in *Dienstbereiche* with *Dienstleiter*. This put especially the first inhabitants of the camp, a group of German Jews, at a comparative advantage. The fact that Jews themselves (in a sense) managed the camp, had as a consequence that Jews were forced to aid the Germans in the deportation of Jews. Despite the barbed wire fence of ca. two meters in height, seven watch towers, and having SS and later Dutch Military Police as guards, the camp retained the character of a small village – an artificial society in miniature. In March 1944 the camp officially became a labour camp, but the deportations, 93 in total, continued until September of that year. On the twelfth of April 1945 the camp and its 918 surviving inhabitants were liberated by the Canadians. Of the ca. 107.000 Jews deported through the camp, only just over 5000 survivors returned.

Already in the transit camp, in letters, diaries and reports, and even more after their period of captivity in the camp, in reports and memoirs, (former) prisoners expressed how they experienced their time in Westerbork. The central question of this book is the question as to the personal experience and memory of transit and internment camp Westerbork, 1942-2010: from the experience during the war, as expressed in letters and diaries, through the fresh memories of shortly after the war, recorded in early postwar reports, to the memories of (more than) fifty years after the war, written down in memoirs. The lesser known voices, too, and especially those, are heard – in particular those of the letter writers of whom only few returned; the famous Etty Hillesum and Philip Mechanicus were not the only ones to write about their experiences in the camp. Men and women, children and adults, Dutch and German Jews, in short, people with very diverse backgrounds felt the need to commit some of their experiences to writing.

The object of this study is not to present a historical reconstruction of life in the camp. I rather focus on the ways in which personal experiences and memories of Westerbork were expressed and recorded in writing. I have limited myself to a small number of viewpoints

from which I studied those experiences and memories. In part these viewpoints suggested themselves to me when I studied the sources themselves: what did their authors write about? In addition I chose viewpoints that allowed me to highlight relatively little researched aspects of the experience and memory of Westerbork. This way I arrived at four different angles or perspectives: first I studied the experience and memory of men and women; I then analyzed how children experienced the camp and how they looked back on it as adults; subsequently I studied the ways in which victims wrote about perpetrators and bystanders over time; finally I investigated the ways in which ‘German’ and ‘Dutch’ Jews wrote about each other and the camp.

Based on the hypothesis that men and women arrived in Westerbork with certain gender expectations, I expected them to have experienced and remembered their stay in the camp in different ways. This hypothesis was only partially confirmed. Although men and women in the camp attempted to cling to their familiar, prewar identities by means of various, often gender-based coping strategies, this turned out to be more difficult for them than they had expected. Letters and diaries show how men and women first and foremost experienced Westerbork *together*. Daily life revolved around the shared care for the family and the shared effort to escape transport (i.e. deportation). In their memoirs after the war, when the immediate danger had subsided, men and women focussed on reinventing their (gender) identity, often in conformity with the normative expectations of the audience for which they wrote. Paradoxically, the result could be that their specifically ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ voice became secondary to the broader Holocaust story they wanted to tell: they had lived through the persecution first and foremost as a human being, not as a man or a woman.

In short, existing gender relations were turned on their heads in Westerbork (and other camps), but after the war they primarily represented an ideal people tried to attain, as they could not before. The erosion of one’s (gender) identity was experienced as a violation of one’s dignity as a human being. By repairing their eroded (gender) identities in postwar recollection, authors could regain some of the dignity they felt they had lost.

An important thing to note is that in egodocuments more was written about ‘femininity’ than about ‘masculinity’, and that the authors of my primary sources wrote with a gender coloured lens. Men wrote about women as members of ‘the weaker sex’ that, like children and elderly people, required protection; the bad treatment they received became one of the main proofs of German transgressions in Westerbork. At the same time men had greater difficulties with female than male promiscuity and openly displayed sexuality. Women were

the most severe critics of their own sex; when another woman did not stick to conventions, abundant criticism ensued.

Just as for adults, for the majority of child survivors arrival in Westerbork constituted a caesura. Not only in a (relatively) literal sense, but also figuratively speaking: in retrospect they felt as if their youth – which had been fine up to then – had been taken away from them. Child survivors emphasized the differences between their memories and those of adult survivors. While as children they might not have been very aware of those differences, as adults they had come to realize more and more how different their experiences had been, and especially how for a long time they had not received any recognition for those experiences. Yet in a very literal sense their youth did not end on arrival in Westerbork. A ten-year-old child remained a ten-year-old child, even in a transit camp, and responded as such to what happened to him or her. Children were quick to adjust, but were also (negatively) influenced by the stressful circumstances. Older children especially acquired freedoms and responsibilities they were often not ready for. That a certain behaviour could be interpreted as precocious, did not mean that the child had become mature in *all* respects.

By emphasizing the specific experiences of a child in the camp, authors tried to show how their childhood lives were disrupted. This resulted in a specific recurring theme (in memoirs), to do with the development towards maturity under extreme circumstances. For child survivors the loss of their youth particularly meant the loss of their youth *as it should have been*, as youth *ought* to be. The experience of Westerbork constituted a decisive moment. What they had been forced to go through in Westerbork was part of the injustice that had been done to them as human beings: their youth had been stolen, a part of their humanity, their human dignity, had been taken from them. Still, in most cases this feeling did not lead to the conclusion that their lives had been unhappy in all respects.

I have analyzed childhood memories not only as a source for the recollection of the war, but also as an instance of the relatively modern genre of childhood memoirs. The memories of child survivors were both ordinary and extraordinary. In Westerbork, too, children grew up, became self-aware and, especially as adolescents, increasingly sought after an identity of their own in the Schülerkreis or simply by being with friends. But the memories of child survivors were also unusual, marked out by war and persecution, premature separation, (the threat of) death, and the sometimes much too early entry into the adult world.

What happened in Westerbork (and after) defied comprehension, it was the height of insanity. That is what those authors tried to convey who wrote about perpetrators and bystanders in the camp. Exactly because camp inmates lived in permanent insecurity about

what was going to happen, because they were misled by (among other things) the seeming normality of (camp) life, and because resistance would be met with serious reprisals, large-scale resistance did not occur. Particularly perplexing for prisoners in Westerbork was that they saw very little of the perpetrators, whereas they were confronted day in day out with what these perpetrators did to them and their loved ones. The Jews were torn between hope and fear; one way or another they had to find a way to deal with the seeming contradictions between the almost invisible Germans and the inhuman barack life, between the ‘decent’ camp commander and the beastly transport, between sympathetic military police and selfish farmers. During the occupation they, being Dutchmen or –women (the stateless Jews excepted), or threatened (fellow) citizens, could not yet think in terms of isolation from the rest of the population, whereas in fact the process of psychic and social separation of the Jewish and the non- Jewish parts of the population had begun from the moment the Germans occupied Dutch territory. Only after the war did reflection on the process of exclusion, on that distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (that was in essence already present before the war), become possible.

That was the tragedy of Westerbork. The reflective distance and the knowledge people acquired after the war, possibly could have made the difference between life and death during the occupation. Continuous deception by the Germans, uncertainty about their fate, and direct dependence on the people – perpetrators *and* bystanders – around them made the choices – to flee, to go into hiding, or to try and stay in Westerbork after all – extremely difficult. A decision to go into hiding brought with it the risk of being captured. For every escaped prisoner ten others were deported. With this knowledge it is not surprising that authors – in their recollections – tried to make Westerbork less elusive and to understand how they could have been so deceived, nor that they wished to explain their motives and their actions to the reader.

German-Jewish ‘camp veterans’ and Dutch-Jewish newcomers experienced Westerbork very differently, each from their specific background. Differences in experience were primarily due to the status one had in the transit camp. Being ‘prominent’ or not (which was partly related to the duration of one’s imprisonment) to a significant extent determined the experience and memory of the camp – more than German or Dutch nationality. Newcomers automatically became veterans, regardless of their nationality. Moreover, ‘Dutch’ and ‘German’ Jews did not constitute unequivocal categories.

Especially the small group of prominents was the target of criticism during and after the war. A small clique of (German-Jewish) prominents assumed all power. Both German-

and Dutch- Jewish authors blamed them especially for the abuse of that power, at the expense of thousands of others. Descriptions of prominent camp inmates were often followed by statements about ‘man’ in the camp. Those statements were intended to show what had become of humanity. The old morality had lost its footing in Westerbork and made way for another morality, one adapted to the character of the transit camp.

The image that authors presented of themselves, however, ran counter to the image of the lethargic, dehumanized victims that boarded the train without protest. This self-image is part of the resistance against the impairment of their moral identity. Everyone saw how others changed in the ‘moral morass’ that was Westerbork, but also how they themselves changed, and they described this in diaries, letters, and memoirs. That change aroused many questions and doubts, especially after the war, when the immediate threat of deportation was gone and survivors came in the position to reflect on their own actions, their own choices, and the consequences of those choices. Despite everything, despite the atrocities, the people in the camp tried to maintain their prewar moral identity, and after the war they attempted to restore this as well as they could. Authors emphasized (also for their audience of readers) their own humanity – that which the nazis had attempted to deny. All kinds of (positive) actions they had undertaken in this regard served as confirmations of their own moral identity. In this matter they showed an increasing openness about both the good and the less good aspects of their own actions, the difficult choices, and the internal struggle.

For the majority of the authors Westerbork was part of ‘the’ Holocaust. The transit and internment camp turned out to be perhaps one of the hardest places to comprehend. It was camp and village at once, a place where one’s identity suffered erosion, but where at the same time it remained possible to be oneself in a way that was impossible in the concentration- and extermination camps; the camp was constructed out of contradictions. This elusiveness that characterized Westerbork, its normal abnormality with its blurring of the distinction between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in attempts to sustain oneself and one’s loved ones, made the ‘correct’ interpretation of the transit camp that so many sought so complicated. The same went for the answer to the question whether they had been able to maintain their identity, and if not, whether they could have done more to maintain their identity, as man or woman, as a child, in the face of perpetrators and bystanders and, finally, over against other camp inmates.