Historical Context of the Westerbork Film from an international perspective

Appendix A

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In the essay below, Professor dr. Rob van der Laarse\(^1\) explains the international historical context of the Westerbork film, answering the question:

“How should the Westerbork film be contextualized in order to be presented to an international audience?”\(^2\)

I guess the importance of the Westerbork footage can actually only be really understood from an international context. For the Camp Westerbork memorial center has not only recently received its European heritage label because of its functioning as a memorial site; Westerbork also exists outside this specific location as a collective memory among Jewish survivor communities all over the world, and in the archives in the Netherlands, Germany, Israel, the United States and elsewhere. As a unique, authored heritage of the Jewish persecution, the value and meaning of the so-called Westerbork movie is in my opinion closely related to the unique documentation of this Holocaust site, which for an international audience might be contextualised by the following aspects:

First, it is important from an international perspective - and considering the present refugee crisis - that the Holocaust did not start from scratch. The former Durchgangslager Westerbork demonstrates a unique transformation from a German-Jewish refugee camp into a Nazi-German transit camp in the Netherlands close to the German border. After Hitler’s rise to power many German and Austrian Jews, such as the Frank family, were welcomed in the Netherlands. Yet after the 1938 Reichskristallnacht the Netherland’s government tried to slow-down the German-Jewish immigration by the building of guarded refugee camps, of which the inmates were concentrated one year later in the ‘central’ Jewish refugee camp Westerbork. Yet that in 1941 the Nazis took over command and turned it into a transit camp, might explain why for many people, the radical change from one camp into another, from a camp for foreigners into a camp for people made into foreigners, was hardly recognised. From the outside almost nothing changed, except the construction of a railway and some watchtowers, and the inside story was unknown to anyone, including the Dutch Jews.

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\(^2\) E-mail with request for more information from Athina Gkouma (Communication and Information Sector MOW/CI 7) to Rob van der Laarse, Tuesday 6 December 2016
Secondly, the so-called Westerbork movie is a unique testimony of the Holocaust as depicting
the 1944 daily life of a Nazi German concentration camp from an insider’s perspective. Although
ordered by the camp commander Konrad Gemmeker, it is shot by the German-Jewish
photographer and filmmaker Rudolf Breslauer according to a script of his fellow inmate, the
journalist Heinz Todtmann, and therefore unmistakably of (German-)Jewish authorship. Even
though the (probably) unfinished film was meant for propaganda, the 90 minutes footage offers
today the only contemporary visual testimony of a Holocaust camp scape. Filmed by an
experienced Jewish filmmaker the also still existing (!) script offered enough space to go beyond
the staged appearance of the few other, comparable propaganda movies, such as Kurt Gerron’s
Theresienstadt. Actually the making of this ‘camp-town’ movie had a lot in common with the
Westerbork movie. For not only had Gerron lived as a refugee actor and filmmaker in the late
1930s in the Netherlands, he also had been a Westerbork inmate (and a member of the
cabaret) before being deported in February 1944 with his wife as ‘privileged Jews’ to
Theresienstadt. The SS ordered film of the Czech ‘show camp’ for which he was attracted as
the director, might also have had the same intention as the Westerbork movie: to mislead the
outside world about the condition and destiny of the Jews. And in contrast to the somewhat
naive thought in Dutch literature that the film was Gemmeker’s personal initiative (to let the Nazi
high command in Berlin belief in Westerbork’s potential role as a forced labor camp which would
have saved him from being transferred to the Eastern front), both films show a comparable wish
to depict the façade of a quiet, healthy Jewish camp life. Yet Gerron worked with a script made
by the Nazis, who did not allow him to assemble and edit the footage, like Breslauer was
allowed to by Gemmeker in Westerbork (even though both men would be lost their special
status in Fall 1944, and send by their protectors to Auschwitz). This distinguished the
Westerbork footage, in my view, also from the earlier 1942 unfinished Nazi film about the
Warsaw ghetto, of which the reels are known as “The Ghetto” and stored for decades in an
Eastern German archive. Also of these only some horrifying stills were known, like those of a
starving child on the street (with the Jewish ghetto police forcing people to walk through), before
being recently re-edited into Yael Hersonski’s A film unfinished: The Warsaw Ghetto as Seen
through Nazi eyes. The Westerbork footage is unique, however, right because the camp is seen
through Jewish eyes. For whatever the intention of the camp commander, the reels taken from
March-May 1944 offer us the existing copies of the (lost) raw material which had never been
handed over to the Nazis. Even though it is unknown what happened to the originals, what we
have are copies assembled and re-edited directly after the war by one of Breslauer’s own
surviving team members.

Thirdly, the Westerbork movie, although lying about the intention of the camp, is one of the best
authentic documentaries of the process of the Holocaust. Although the relatively peaceful
images of the 1944 transit camp are not comparable to the brutality of the earlier Nazi ghetto
footage, nor to the 1944-1945 allied films made during the liberation of the Nazi concentration
camps, the Westerbork film is unique for showing us first hand “evidence” of the ‘civilised’
Western European persecution of the Jews. The incredible impact of Breslauer’s film footage is
most strongly related to various shots (in different qualities) of the trains arriving at the
Westerbork Rampe from the SS camp Vught (‘s Hertogenbosch) and departing from this same
platform to the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. As far as we know, these are the only
stills of Jewish transports made from a Nazi concentration camp, and actually the whole
meaning of the Holocaust, of transport and deportation, comes together in these crucial moving
images. Precisely because the so-called Westerbork movie is a 1945 remake of the copies of
Breslauer’s original footage by one of his former assistants, by using all kind of material that
would have never been allowed for the intended movie (as ordered by the SS commander), it
offers us much more information on the daily life in a concentration camp than any other source,
though with the exception of the camp diaries of the Westerbork inmates Philip Mechanicus and
Etty Hillesum. Interestingly Mechanicus’ descriptions of camp life were already combined with
some Westerbork stills in the 1964 Dutch TV documentary In Depot (1964) by the jewish
historian Jacques Presser. One year later his academic publication De ondergang (1965; Engl.
Ed. Ashes in the Wind, 1988) would become a milestone in Dutch Holocaust historiography.
This is important to mention, as despite its impact on Dutch Holocaust historiography,
Breslauer’s movie seems to have been still unknown to later international scholars such as
Hillberg and Friedländer. And yet, the Westerbork footage was used already in the Neurenberg
trials as well as in Gemmeker’s trial (1949) in the Netherlands, whereas stills of the transports
have been used in many postwar Holocaust movies, such as in Alain Resnais’ Nuit et Brouillard
(1956, Night and Fog).

Fourthly, apart from the extermination of the Jews, the international importance of the
Westerbork movie is nowadays also related to its depicting of what might be called Holocaust
dissonances, such as for instance the Roma Holocaust. Kept in Dutch archives, the Westerbork
footage was hardly known up to the 1990s, but, as said, stills were used since the Neurenberg
trials, in movies, and in the Dutch 1960s TV series De Bezetting of the Jewish ‘national’
historian Lou de Jong (also the director of the Netherland’s Institute for War Documentation)
which made a huge impression on Dutch audiences who never had seen anything like this
before. Like in the case of the Warsaw ghetto footage, some of these stills became widely
known, such as the image of the young girl looking through the closing doors of a cattle wagon
departing to Auschwitz on 16 May 1944. In addition to Anne Frank, ‘the girl from Westerbork’ or
‘the girl with the headscarf’ was an important Dutch icon of the Jewish persecution, until
researchers in 1994 discovered her Sinti name Settela Steinbach – an icon appropriated by the
wrong victims, and one Holocaust competed by another.

A comparable dissonant expect of the Westerbork movie is the role of the ‘Green’ Jewish camp
police. Like the Warsaw ghetto police also in Westerbork Jewish inmates, mostly from the
German speaking ‘old inmates’, were appointed as internal camp guards, and these Jewish OD
(Ordnungsdienst) was sometimes also involved in the persecution of Jews (such as the
transports of inmates from the Jewish orphan houses). From an international perspective this
questions the common dichotomy of victims and perpetrators. The film footage shows
‘collaborating’ Jewish policemen in their green overalls marching as Fliegende Kolonnen, and
loading even sick people into the train to Auschwitz, after which they lock the doors. The active
role of Jewish policemen was however long silenced, and has only recently been given more
attention in new research on camp letters and diaries. For not only did the Dutch police and
fascist Waffen SS- members play an important role in pogroms, Jew hunting and the outer
guarding of Westerbork, the internal guarding of the camp was completely Jewish. It clearly
demonstrates the privileged role of what Abel Herzberg already in his Kroniek der
Jodenvervolging (1950) named ‘the Jewish nobility’, with Arthur Pisk, head of the OD or ‘Jewish
SS’, and Oberdienstleiter Kurt Schlesinger as Jews worse than the Nazis.

A last, and most important, dissonance of the Westerbork movie is the Nazi façade of
Westerbork as a ‘normal’ labour camp in the old Dutch reclamation area (where work camps like
Veenhuizen were introduced to civilise the urban poor already in the early 19th century).
Together with the very effective organisation of the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands
as copied from the Polish model (of a Jewish Council together with the ghetto and camp
system), this too may explain for a large part the lack of resistance among the urban Jewish
camp inhabitants. Actually the Westerbork movie creates a false image of the Holocaust in the
Netherlands if only because of the time of its creation. For it was during the first 1942-43 phase
of the Holocaust when most of the labouring poor were send from Jewish work camps to the
Nazi extermination camps in Poland, organised via Westerbork by the first brutal camp
commanders Deppner and Dischner. Gemmeker, the third SS commander, represented in
contrast, the second phase of the Holocaust when the Jewish upper class was ‘smiled’ into the
trains for having a good time in the East. This was the camp as depicted in the Westerbork
movie, beautified like a show camp at the same time as Theresienstadt, in which daily life, just
like the trains, seemed orderly organised around collective work on industrial orders and
‘healthy’ farm labour, while the inmates enjoyed sports, cabaret and revues, and went to
synagogue and protestant services (for Christianised Jews in mixed marriages). Even sick
people were cured in the largest hospital of the Netherlands under the personal eye of the
commander, before putting them on the list for the weekly transports to the extermination
camps. Yet what the Westerbork movie shows is actually not like Gerron’s Theresienstadt a
reality staged for propaganda to the outside world, but a camouflaged camp on behalf of the
Jews themselves! It is this aspect of the film footage which makes it such an important visual
document of the Holocaust. For it was exactly this Nazi façade which relates Westerbork’s revue
directly to Sobibor’s ‘Himmelfarbrasse’, actually the last walk for more than 33.000 Dutch Jews
to the gas chambers in a building disguised as a Jewish bath house. Watching the Westerbork
movie might give an international audience an unexpected, unwanted answer to the probably
the most posed question: why did the Jews followed the German orders and not revolt or
escape? Actually the orders were given in German by fellow Jews, and nothing, absolutely
nothing, pointed into the direction of a brutal killing machine working on full speed only 72 hours
away from Westerbork in Sobibor or Auschwitz-Birkenau.

And finally, this brings me to an element in the Westerbork movie which goes beyond the victim-
perpetrator dichotomy and addresser ourselves, watching what happened in an unwanted role
as bystanders. For watching the movie with our knowledge now of what happened then, with all
those people in the barracks, work sheds and in the trains waiting to be removed to the
extermination camps in the East, is a disturbing experience. It poses logistic questions on our
still existing ‘concentrationary’ mindset like in Harun Farocki’s artistic remaking of the
Westerbork footage in Aufschub (2007, Respite). The movie shows us normal people, both
Dutch and German, Jews and Nazis, guards and inmates, men and women, old people and
young children, and that unexpected Roma girl, one of 244 Dutch Sinti people deported to Auschwitz, with her last anxious eyes on, as we now know, her favourite dog, Gemmeke’s German shepherd. As for me, I found this the most disturbing thing learnt from this almost ‘industrial movie’, that the worst of all evil might be hidden in normalcy.  

3 E-mail: response from Rob van der Laarse to Athina Gkouma (Communication and Information Sector MOW/CI 7), Wednesday 14 December 2016.