



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**Signs of the Shoah: The Hollandsche Schouwburg as a site of memory**

Duindam, D.A.

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Duindam, D. A. (2016). *Signs of the Shoah: The Hollandsche Schouwburg as a site of memory.*

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Prologue

The lush, green avenue feels like a retreat from the hectic city center of Amsterdam. There are no hordes of tourists here and both the scale and architecture of this district seem pleasant. The road is divided into three lanes: one for bicycles, one for cars and in the middle a tramway. At first sight, there is nothing special to be observed in this everyday scene. On the left hand is a tram stop and across the



**Figure P. 1.** Photograph David Duindam

street stands a stately building (see figure P.1).

Dutch sounding words *Hollandsche Schouwburg* are written on the façade in large silver letters, partially concealed by a tree. According to the brochure of the Jewish Cultural Quarter, it is the ‘National Holocaust Memorial’. From the outside, this Shoah memorial resembles a functioning theater.<sup>1</sup> Its 19<sup>th</sup> century façade is

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I use the term Shoah to refer to the Nazi persecution of the Jews instead of Holocaust, unless Holocaust is used by the quoted party. Neither term covers the underlying historical processes in their full complexity. Holocaust carries the Christian meaning of burnt offering, implying that the persecution of the Jews was a sacrifice. Shoah means catastrophe and carries the Hebrew tradition of destruction with it, and as such turns away from the methodological and organized Nazi genocide. However, as we address the memory of these events, I believe it can be justified to use the term preferred by a large part of the older generations of the Dutch Jewish community and the staff of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg*. See also chapter 2.2.

adorned with classicist figures. Venus, the embodiment of love and beauty, is the central figurine of the pediment and cherubs adorn the frieze. Without any previous knowledge, or the brochure in hand, one could expect to find a theater inside. Nothing indicates that during World War II, more than forty-six thousand Jewish citizens were detained in this building before their deportation via Dutch transit camps to Eastern European concentration and extermination camps.

Upon entering the memorial, one notices that inside, little of the former theater has remained the same. The central entrance hall provides access to several spaces. On the left, a movie is screened; on the right books and DVD's about the Shoah are displayed on a table next to the reception desk. If you are a first-time visitor, it is not entirely clear what to do next. One can start by watching the movie and walk to the adjacent wall of names, or go straight out into the back where a large open space holds a commemorative pylon. Another option is to go upstairs where an exhibition has been installed. The building that seems intact as a theater from the outside is quite a maze once you enter. There is no clear routing and it does not have a univocal function. Do people go here to commemorate or to find out more about the history of this building? Out of curiosity, or simply as part of a tourist sightseeing excursion?

We usually do not ask ourselves why we go to historically significant sites when we visit a city, since it is such an obvious part of getting to know a place. *In situ* sites of memory such as the Hollandsche Schouwburg seem to automatically embody their own past because of their history. However, when we investigate how this former theater came to be a memorial museum we realize that there is nothing self-evident about its current status. The authenticity of this site is not located in its materiality alone. As I will demonstrate, this authenticity is staged by its presentation and produced by the visitor. The events that took place here are not immediately accessible, but mediated through architectural interventions and museum technologies and imagined by the visitor. Visitors want to be at the very spot where history took place and, although the event itself cannot be perceived or experienced; visitors may look for traces and other signs of the Shoah. My dissertation examines these processes in order to better understand how meaning is constructed at this site of Shoah memory. This prologue provides a concise historical overview of the Hollandsche Schouwburg, discusses the issue of Shoah representation in relation to sites of memory, addresses my own implication in the history and presentation of the Hollandsche Schouwburg and concludes with a chapter outline.

The Hollandsche Schouwburg was established in 1892 in the Plantage district, an area bordering on Amsterdam's old city center. The district was not developed as part of Amsterdam's characteristic concentric system of canals and became a green zone instead.<sup>2</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth-century, the city went through a period of economic prosperity and the Plantage district was transformed into a wealthy green area with several venues of entertainment and offered luxurious homes to the nouveau riche. This included successful Jews who had thrived during the rise of the diamond industry, as the district was near the main synagogues, a park, four theaters, the city's zoo and a panorama-building. To this day, the area still breathes an architectural coherence unique to Amsterdam, combining an eclectic building style with a spaciously designed main avenue, the Plantage Middenlaan.<sup>3</sup> The Hollandsche Schouwburg served as a theater until 1942 in spite of financial struggles, offering mostly light genres – operetta and revue – and at times more serious work by Herman Heijermans, a renowned Dutch-Jewish playwright.<sup>4</sup> The Hollandsche Schouwburg was never an exclusively Jewish theater, even if a great deal of the affiliated actors, playwrights and directors were Jews. Both the district and this particular theater were examples of the integration, or assimilation, of Jews before World War II.

Although the Dutch were often reassured that the Jewish population would not be harmed, measures were taken that explicitly targeted Jews. One of these measures prohibited Jews from visiting and performing in the same theaters and concert halls as non-Jews. Several locations throughout Amsterdam were designated as so-called Jewish locales where an exclusively Jewish audience would be able to see Jewish artists perform, as in the case of the Hollandsche Schouwburg (Dutch Theater) which was renamed Joodsche Schouwburg (Jewish Theater).<sup>5</sup> For several months it was the main venue for Jewish performers who had been forced out of their orchestra's and theater groups, until the building was seized for the registration and incarceration of Jews. When in 1942 the mass deportation of Jews to the so-called work camps in Eastern Europe began, the Amsterdam Jews were first summoned to report in tranches at various train stations. When this proved to

---

<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons the district was not developed for private housing was a decreased interest due to an economic fallback in Amsterdam during the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. See Fred Feddes, *1000 jaar Amsterdam: ruimtelijke geschiedenis van een wonderbaarlijke stad* (Bussum: THOTH, 2012), 66.

<sup>3</sup> Richter Roegholt, *Wonen en wetenschap in de Plantage. De geschiedenis van een Amsterdamse buurt in driehonderd jaar* (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1982), 49.

<sup>4</sup> See Joost Groeneboer, "Onbezorgde jaren. Theater en vermaak in de Hollandsche Schouwburg," in *De Hollandsche Schouwburg. Theater, deportatieplaats, plek van herinnering*, ed. Frank van Vree, Hetty Berg, and David Duindam (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 12–43.

<sup>5</sup> See Esther Göbel, "De Joodsche Schouwburg. Centrum van sociaal en cultureel leven in de eerste jaren van de bezetting," in *De Hollandsche Schouwburg. Theater, deportatieplaats, plek van herinnering*, ed. Frank van Vree, Hetty Berg, and David Duindam (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 74–107.

be ineffective – as many people did not to show up – it was decided soon after that the deportees needed to register at an assembly center where they were to await their deportation to the transit camp in the North of the Netherlands near the village of Westerbork. Initially, the Portuguese Synagogue was selected for this purpose, but because there was no electric lighting and it was difficult to darken this large building, it was decided to use the Hollandsche Schouwburg instead. The building was easy to darken, not far from the train tracks and near the old Jewish district. In June 1942, the theater was turned into *Umschlagplatz Plantage Middenlaan*. The newly created center was managed by a Jewish council under German supervision, copied from the Polish ghetto model. The council appointed Walter Süskind as director of the center, guarded by German troops and Dutch policemen.

For the duration of sixteen months the Hollandsche Schouwburg was used for the registration and deportation of more than forty-six thousand Jews from around the country.<sup>6</sup> After large numbers of Jews from were deported, Jews from surrounding municipalities and cities such as Utrecht were forced to move into vacant homes in designated Jewish areas within Amsterdam before they were required to register at the assembly center. Although one might suppose that deportees would only stay for a few hours or days – a stay in the Schouwburg could last for up to several weeks. The building had previously accommodated 800 visitors as a theater and now held up to 1,300 people at a time, and for which it was of course in no way equipped: there were no beds or sufficient sanitary facilities, in spite of some provisional arrangements such as the installment of two shower cabins. From October 1942 onwards the nursery across the street, called the Crèche, was appropriated to harbor all children less than 12 years of age, separately from their parents. Policies at the deportation center changed over time. For instance, newcomer registration was organized at one point on the stage and at another in the cloakroom. During the summer of 1942, detainees were able to go outside onto the small courtyard behind the stage for some fresh air where some of them had contact with the people living next to theater. A series of illegal photographs demonstrate the thin line between inmates and bystanders during this airing. In this early period when the deportation center had been in operation for only a few months, individuals were able to leave the building for a few hours if others vouched for them. At a later stage, the rules became more restrictive: the

---

<sup>6</sup> Gringold accounts for a minimum of 46,104 Jews who were held there. For a more elaborate account of the assembly center, see Annemiek Gringold, “‘Het gebouw der tranen’. Zestien maanden verzamel- en deportatieplaats,” in *De Hollandsche Schouwburg. Theater, deportatieplaats, plek van herinnering*, ed. Frank van Vree, Hetty Berg, and David Duindam (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 118–52.

courtyard was no longer accessible, windows were barred after a suicide and it was made impossible to leave the building even for a short amount of time.

During the deportations, more than a thousand people escaped and hundreds of children were rescued with the help of Walter Süskind and several resistance groups who successfully hid them with non-Jewish families in other parts of the country.<sup>7</sup> At the Hollandsche Schouwburg, the names of adults were removed from the registry to cover up their flight. Children, especially babies, were smuggled out of the Crèche, amongst others by the nurses who took care of them, after their parents at the Schouwburg had previously agreed. However, as people were faced with the uncertain prospect of having to go into hiding or having virtual strangers take away their children; the majority of detained Jews were deported to the transit camps Westerbork and Vught, including Süskind who died on one of the death marches that departed from Auschwitz near the end of the war. When Amsterdam was declared *judenrein* in the autumn of 1943, the assembly center was closed and the building was left empty for several years.<sup>8</sup>

In 1944, two businessmen bought the theater and reopened it five months after the end of the occupation in November 1945. They were met with protest: using this former deportation site as a place of entertainment was considered disrespectful by many people. An action committee organized a fundraising campaign, acquired the building and donated it to the city of Amsterdam in 1950 with the stipulation that it would not become a place of entertainment. As the city council did not find an appropriate purpose for the theater, it stood again empty and dilapidated. In 1958 the council decided to establish a commemoration site. Due to its bad state, a large part of the building was demolished and the old stage walls and bricks were used to construct a ruin-like courtyard. In 1962, the first national memorial dedicated to the memory of the Jewish victims of the war was opened. The front part of the building was more or less preserved. On the first floor, a *chapelle ardente* was installed, a small and intimate memorial. The other floors were rented out as office space. The former theater hall was transformed into a courtyard that mimicked the ground plan of the former theater: the center, where once the seats had been, now was a grass lawn. Instead of walking on the grass, visitors were expected to walk through the side galleries towards the former stage. Here, a large commemorative pylon rested on a base in the shape of a Star of David, encircled by the stripped original stage walls. In the courtyard, the national May 4<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Bert-Jan Flim, *Omdat hun hart sprak. Geschiedenis van de georganiseerde hulp aan Joodse kinderen in Nederland, 1942-1945* (Kampen: Kok, 1995); Mark Schellekens, *Walter Süskind. Hoe een zakenman honderden Joodse kinderen uit handen van de nazi's redde* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Gringold accounted for a minimum of 46,104 Jews who were incarcerated in the Schouwburg during the sixteen months it served as an assembly point, see Gringold, "Het gebouw der tranen," 134–136.

tribute and the Yom HaShoah commemoration were organized. The architectural and stylistic design of the memorial was abstract and did not confront the visitor with direct images or narratives of the Shoah out of respect for relatives and survivors.

During the 1990s, the Jewish Historical Museum took over management of this site and began renovations in order to address and educate younger generations. The grass lawn was replaced by a stone pavement, allowing for larger commemorations. Inside, the *chapelle ardente* was replaced by a wall of names and a museum exhibition about the persecution of the Jews was installed on the first floor. The presentation was not abstract, but remained subdued in its tone. In the spring of 2016, the National Holocaust Museum will be established. The intention is to renovate the Hollandsche Schouwburg as a memorial and to establish a new permanent exhibition across the street in an old school building, adjacent to the former Crèche.

The Hollandsche Schouwburg currently is a memorial museum that mediates the events that took place here. This dissertation deals with the cultural memory of the Shoah and therefore relates to the issue whether we can properly represent the Shoah in an artistic or museum form without harming the historic complexity and the absolute alterity of the victim's position. How do you, or should you even try to, explain events that defy the very notion of human understanding? According to some thinkers, the organized persecution and murder of Jews took away the victims' ability to testify to their own deaths, and speaking in their place can be seen as a moral conundrum. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that eyewitnesses who survived the Shoah may paint an accurate picture of the conditions of the concentration and death camps, but cannot truly testify to what happened to those who were murdered. This leads psychoanalyst Dori Laub to characterize the Shoah as an event without a witness.<sup>9</sup> One could therefore argue that most victims of the Shoah did, or course, not have a chance to testify as they were murdered. Along this line of reasoning, appropriating their speaking position would entail another silencing. Remaining silent altogether, however, is also an impossible solution. Historian Saul Friedländer points out that because the Nazi perpetrators have willfully tried to remove all traces of their crimes, we are obliged to bear witness and try to represent the Shoah.<sup>10</sup> He describes a paradoxical

---

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 34–36; Dori Laub, “An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 75–92.

<sup>10</sup> Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.

situation: on the one hand, we need truth, testimonies and attempts at understanding; on the other hand, the Shoah does not allow for traditional realist representations that claim to fully depict what has actually transpired, as these might offer facile forms of identification understanding and closure.

According to filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, any claim that it is possible to make the Shoah wholly understood is obscene.<sup>11</sup> This paradox – we can never fully understand, but are nevertheless driven to keep trying to make sense of the Shoah – has fueled the debate about Shoah representations for several decades. Friedländer observes a recurrent strategy that circumvents this issue, namely:

the exclusion of straight, documentary realism, [and instead] the use of some sort of allusive or distanced realism. Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid.<sup>12</sup>

Lanzmann's influential film *SHOAH* (1985) is a prime example of such distanced realism. He interviews survivors, bystanders and perpetrators, sometimes *in situ* and at other times in artificial situations that emphasize the fact that these testimonies are displaced in time and space. The realist genre of the testimony is transformed in order to create a critical distance: we need these narratives to try – and ultimately fail – to understand the Shoah. We should however remain aware that these narratives were mediated and reconstructed four decades after the war. *SHOAH* refuses to provide definitive answers and demands an active participation on behalf of the viewer: there are no facetious ways of understanding and processing the Shoah. The audience must truly and critically engage with these representations.

One of the problems of this approach is that it rejects any closure and simultaneously demands continuous engagement. It does not allow for an imaginative interpretation that makes sense of these events, since that would possibly distort the past. According to literary theorist Ernst van Alphen, there is a taboo concerning the use of figuration as opposed to the objective language of

---

<sup>11</sup> Claude Lanzmann, "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 200–220.

<sup>12</sup> Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 17. According to literary researcher Michael Rothberg, there are two general camps in the debate about Shoah representations. On the one hand, realists try to place the Shoah within everyday life and try to understand the events. On the other hand, antirealists such as Wiesel and Lanzmann argue that the Shoah is unique and can ever be understood. Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 4–6. The term antirealist however might be understood as a retreat from the real, whereas the term distanced realism underscores the attempt of Lanzmann to connect to the real, even if this attempt is doomed to fail.



science when it comes to Shoah representations. For certain critics, fictional and imaginative representations are only deemed acceptable when they evoke the past as unrepresentable, such as the non-narrative poetry of Paul Celan. ‘But as soon as Holocaust art or literature introduces narrative elements that relate to historical “reality,” post-Holocaust culture has its guard up. Narrative imaginative images or texts are considered to be in violation of a strict taboo.’<sup>13</sup> According to Van Alphen, this taboo is grounded in a false dichotomy between objective historical and imaginative aesthetic discourse, where the latter is considered undesirable because it replaces the past with something stylized that has no actual basis in reality. However, imaginative discourse does not necessarily need to use metaphoric substitution in order to refer to something that could also be said literally; some events can only be conceived through figuration. ‘This approach to figuration makes imaginative discourse not suspect, but absolutely necessary. Only figurative discourse allows expression of that which is unrepresentable in so-called literal, factual, historical language.’<sup>14</sup>

There indeed seems to be a certain amount of uneasiness when it comes to too facile and imaginative renderings of the Shoah. Not only because of the threat of substituting the past with a stylized narrative, but also because of a fear of what the audience might construe of it. Will the audience, after seeing *LA VITA È BELLA* (Roberto Benigni, 1997), in which a father fabricates an ingenious story to protect his son from the horrors of everyday persecution, believe that life in the camps would have been manageable if you embraced an imaginative perspective? Here we return to the age old issue of pedagogic reception: does the viewer or reader get the right message? The ‘correct’ reception of Shoah representations is important according to many critics because the obligation to bear witness implies we should honor the memory of the victims. Misinterpreting these representations and coming to the ‘wrong’ conclusions seems to be impious, and perhaps even an amoral act.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of ‘distanced realism’, the taboo of figurative language and the pedagogic effect on the audience all relate to the longstanding Platonic distrust of artistic representations. Can a linguistic or artistic expression truly represent reality? According to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure a word consists of two parts: a signifier, the material element such as the sound of a word, and the signified, the mental concept to which this sound refers. The relationship between the two parts

---

<sup>13</sup> Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> According to literary researcher Berel Lang, literary texts can be judged as moral acts because they affect the reader. See Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 117–161.

is arbitrary and habitual: we know what a word refers to because we have learned this through habituation. This can be extrapolated to all sign systems and complicates any claim of realistic depiction. However, according to the American linguist C.S. Peirce, there are also signs that have an extralinguistic quality. He argues that there are three different kinds of signs: the icon, the symbol and the index. The icon represents an object through similarity, the symbol through an arbitrary and habitual relationship, and the index through an actual relationship of contiguity or continuity. A footprint is an example of an indexical sign of a person no longer there; there is a causal relationship between these two. These indexical signs are always indirect; a knock on a door announces an arrival, but does not signify the arrival itself. The displacement in space and time demands an active interpretation by the observer, since there is a gap between the signifier and what is being signified. So on the one hand, an indexical sign can act as a form of evidence, as there is an assumed causal, actual relationship between the signifier and the signified; on the other hand, there is a gap between these two. The signified always remains absent and the relationship between these two must be actively produced by the interpreter. This also holds for icons and symbols, however for these, the relationships are based on similarity or convention, not on contiguity or continuity.

Within the gap between the indexical signifier and what it signifies two oppositional forces are at work which attract each other because of the promise of causality. Once you see a footprint, it is almost impossible not to expect a human body. On the other hand, it is possible you will never find out if that footprint belongs to an actual physical being. This tension is played out in the famous fragment of Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, in which the shipwrecked protagonist finds a footprint on an island that, to his knowledge, is deserted:

It happened one day about noon, going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand: I stood like one thunder-struck, or as if I had seen an apparition; I listened, I looked round me, I could hear nothing, nor see any thing; I went up to a rising ground to look farther: I went up the shore, and down the shore, but it was all one, I could see no other impression but that one [...] [A]fter innumerable fluttering thoughts, like a man perfectly confused, and out of myself, I came home to my fortification, not feeling, as we say, the ground I went on, but terrified to the last degree, looking behind me at every two or three steps, mistaking every bush and tree, and fancying every stump at a distance to be a man; nor is it possible to describe how many various shapes an affrighted imagination represented things to me in; how many wild ideas were

formed every moment in my fancy, and what strange unaccountable whimsies came into my thoughts by the way.<sup>16</sup>

The gap between the footprint and the absent person is cause for paranoia, a heightened awareness of the environment and an imaginative investment on the part of Robinson Crusoe, who even considers the possibility of a ghost. It is precisely this quality of the indexical sign that allows it to act as evidence of something absent, different from symbolic or iconic signs. That does not mean that indexical signs are more precise: because they do not make present what is absent, the interpreter fills in this gap. Indices are often fragmentary and depend on an active and imaginative process of appropriation. Literary scholar Marianne Hirsch argues that photographs have an indexical quality that allows for an imaginative investment on behalf of the viewer. “They are the leftovers, the fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of postmemory. They affirm the past’s existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance.”<sup>17</sup>

*In situ* sites of memory such as the Hollandsche Schouwburg are characterized by material traces of the past, such as the old brick walls in the courtyard. By interpreting these not as authentic embodiments of the past that offer a kind of immediate experience, but rather as indexical signs that refer to a past that is no longer there, we emphasize the active interpretation of the visitor and the role of both displacement and absence. The gap between the sign and what it refers to is filled up by the visitor’s imagination, a process that encourages the visitor to inscribe his or her own biography and imaginations, allowing for a stronger affective engagement.

The epistemological insecurity – does this index really mean that we have any knowledge about what happened here? – can make visitors hypersensitive, just as Robinson Crusoe’s imagination turned bushes into humans. A state of heightened perception and imaginative investment transforms every detail into possible indexical signs. This is what I call the latent and contingent indexicality of *in situ* sites of memory: as visitors expect to find traces of the past they actively look for and may interpret non-authentic fragments as indexical signs. This indexicality is both latent, as it can be traced back to specific events that took place here, and

---

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (London, 1808), 156–157.

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 23. Hirsch also warns us of the potential effects of this active appropriation. “[Photographs] can tell us as much about our own needs and desires (as readers and spectators) as they can about the past world they presumably depict. While authentication and projection can work against each other, the powerful tropes of familiarity can also, and sometimes problematically, obscure their distinction. The fragmentariness and the two-dimensional flatness of the photographic image, moreover, make it especially open to narrative elaboration and embroidery and to symbolization.” Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 117.

contingent, as the imagination of visitors cannot be foreseen and often emerges by chance. A good example is the brick walls in the courtyard of the Hollandsche Schouwburg. These are not completely authentic: they are constructed from original bricks, but the current design stems from 1962. Still, these walls are strongly associated with the war by most visitors, since they expect to see an original deportation center. The latent and contingent indexicality of *in situ* sites of memory is based on the promise and expectation of authenticity, regardless of the fact that this authenticity might be (partially) staged or mediated. The question is then; does this indexicality refer to a stable narrative of the Shoah? Or in terms of the debate about Shoah representations, should we mind an imaginative and therefore possibly historically inaccurate appropriation of the Shoah? Here we come to an important difference between indexical signs and other kinds of texts, as formulated by historian Frank Ankersmit:

The monument does not tell us something about the past, in the way that the (metaphorical) historical text does, but functions rather like a (metonymical) signpost. Put differently, the monument functions like an index: it requires us to look in a certain direction without specifying what we shall ultimately find in that direction. [...] [It] invites us to project our personal feelings and associations on that part of the past indicated by it.<sup>18</sup>

The index may initiate a process of searching for meaning and allow people to affectively connect to the past, but it does not provide context or information. The question is whether visitors need additional context in order to ground their visit in a broader historical understanding. Most *in situ* memorial museums seem to stop the progress of these two notions: emotional investment of the visitor and informing them about the past.

With this dissertation, I will demonstrate the necessity for studying the historical and material development of sites of Shoah memory in relation to the ways in which visitors have appropriated them. I will combine a synchronic critical analysis of the current presentation and a diachronic investigation of architectural and curatorial interventions over time. The Hollandsche Schouwburg does not offer immediate access to the past, but is an indexical sign of the Shoah: it allows visitors to envision past events by pointing out the absence of the victims. Sustaining this imaginative investment is the most distinguishing characteristic of *in situ* memorial museums and may even lead to a proliferation or sprawl of spatial memory.

As any researcher, I am strongly connected to my research object. I was involved by the Jewish Historical Museum in the formulation of the renovation plans for the

---

<sup>18</sup> Frank R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 179.

National Holocaust Museum. Throughout the years I attended various meetings with different stakeholders about the renovation plans. Joël Cahen, director of the Jewish Historical Museum and the Hollandsche Schouwburg from 2002 until 2015, has been and remains an important driving force of this process. Staff member Annemiek Gringold and Esther Göbel developed a concept for a new permanent exhibition based on a chronological dramaturgy. I worked closely with them and Hetty Berg, manager of museum affairs, in particular in preparing a monograph on the Hollandsche Schouwburg.<sup>19</sup> I was involved in several events such as the annual May 4<sup>th</sup> commemorations at this memorial site, the Museum Night of 2013 and an educational program in the context of the exhibition *Selamat Shabbat. The Unknown History of Jews in the Dutch East Indies* (2014-2015). I interviewed several key figures in the making of the museum, some of whom were involved in the renovation of the Hollandsche Schouwburg in the early 1990s: former director of the Jewish Historical Museum Judith Belinfante; former interim director of the Amsterdam Historical Museum Norbert van den Berg; staff members Petra Katzenstein and Peter Buijs; and designer Victor Levie. Others who are involved in the current affairs and renovation of the Hollandsche Schouwburg include: Joël Cahen, Annemiek Gringold, former head of the Hollandsche Schouwburg and currently curator of the Shoah, and Denise Citroen and Machteld Aardse who developed two memorial projects discussed in the last chapter.

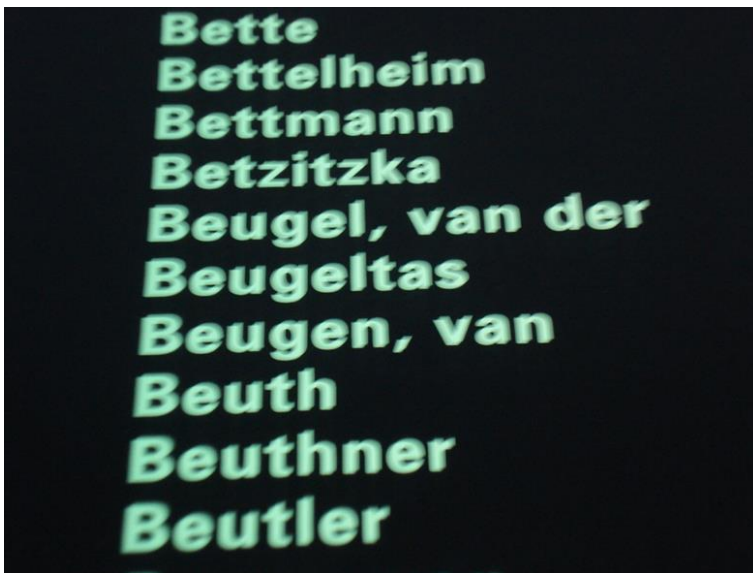
The culture and atmosphere I encountered at the museum was one of intense personal investment and dedication, especially when it comes to the topic of the Shoah. There was a culture of cautious deliberation in order to create consensus and broad support, which also led to a certain amount of indecisiveness. Furthermore, the museum depends on a strong network and grants and private donations, which at times resulted in expedited decisions. Even though the Jewish Historical Museum addresses a broad and inclusive (inter)national public, it always has a special relationship with the Jewish community, both in Amsterdam, the Netherlands and internationally. Former museum directors Belinfante (1976-1998) and Cahen (2002-2015), who played major roles in shaping the Hollandsche Schouwburg as a memorial museum, organized broad support within the Jewish community when executing their plans. Belinfante oversaw the transfer of the memorial to the Jewish Historical Museum and the subsequent renovations in the early 1990s, in which she played a decisive role. Because of her experience at the Jewish Historical Museum, the overall design of the Hollandsche Schouwburg would remain restrained – there was no explicit visual material of

---

<sup>19</sup> Frank van Vree, Hetty Berg, and David Duindam, eds., *De Hollandsche Schouwburg. Theater, deportatieplaats, plek van herinnering* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

Nazi cruelty for instance – out of respect for first and second generation survivors. Soon after Cahen became director, he formulated the ambition to create a national Shoah museum that was more outward looking and socially engaged. One of the first steps was to hire Annemiek Gringold to develop active engaging programming at the Hollandsche Schouwburg that would address a larger public. He combined his network in the Netherlands with his international experience and as such was able to propel the Hollandsche Schouwburg in a new direction. Now that he has been succeeded by Emile Schrijver as director, he remains actively involved as Project-Director for the National Holocaust Museum and will continue to help determine its future course.

Additionally, I have investments on a more personal level. When beginning this project, I had no personal ties to the memory and/or history of the Shoah. Two years into my research, there was an unexpected turn of events while I was preparing for a trip to see my family in Indonesia; precipitated by doing some research into the background of my late Indonesian grandmother. One day, I was



**Figure P. 2.** Photograph David Duindam

standing in front of the wall of names. Instead of observing other visitors – as a proper distanced researcher would do – I took out my own camera to take a photograph of the name Van Beugen (see figure P.2). There it was, lodged between Beugeltas and Beuth, a toponym referring to a small Dutch town near the German border. Van Beugen is the family name of my maternal grandmother and I knew

very little about this side of the family. After some investigation I found out that Elias van Beugen was my great-grandfather. He was born in 1878 in The Hague as part of an orthodox Jewish family of twelve children. Elias moved to the Dutch East Indies in 1897 where he was successively a soldier, journalist and administrator for the Dutch government until his death in 1935. He was married to an Indonesian woman and had 5 children, one of them my grandmother. At least four of his brothers and sisters back in the Netherlands would be murdered in Sobibor and Auschwitz during World War II. When I asked my mother to show me the family archive – an old suitcase full of unorganized photographs and papers – I found a JOKOS-file Eliazer van Beugen; a claim presented to the Federal Republic of Germany after the war regarding looted household contents. The claim was granted and the list of recipients provided insight into the globally dispersed family, who lived in Enschede, New Jersey and Jakarta, amongst other places.

A short while after this discovery I visited Indonesia, where I met the thirty-year old Toar Palilingan, great-great-grandson of Elias van Beugen. When he found out about his ancestor at the age of 15, he decided to convert to Judaism, took the name Yaakov Baruch and now runs one of the few synagogues in Indonesia.<sup>20</sup> He brought me to the grave of Elias onto which he had placed a tombstone engraved with a Hebrew text and an incorrect year of death. When I pointed this out, he shrugged his shoulders and said he would correct it. The apparent ease with which he shaped the memory of our common ancestor was fascinating. Does the actual relationship to his heritage allow such a large investment in Judaism? Or does his imagination run amok? It was not much different from the way I had appropriated the family name at the Hollandsche Schouwburg. It is precisely the lack of knowledge that spurs our curiosity and allows for a personal and emotional engagement. It also demonstrates how the Hollandsche Schouwburg is part of an ever-expanding network of memory which constantly produces new connections.

The Hollandsche Schouwburg may at first appear to be a straightforward object of analysis. It is clearly demarcated, is heavily implicated with the memory of the Shoah and presents its visitors with distinct commemorative rituals. However, when investigating how these elements came about and how they currently function, we will find that the memory of this site is not stable, that rituals are not given but coproduced by visitors, and that its borders are not fixed demarcations but rather permeable contact zones.

---

<sup>20</sup> Coincidentally, Yaakov Baruch was part of the aforementioned Jewish Historical Museum exhibition *Selamat Shabbat* as one of the few remaining Jews in Indonesia.

In order to come to a better understanding of how the past is made present at this site of memory, this dissertation combines a synchronic and diachronic approach. Chapter 1 frames the topic within several important academic fields, namely memory, heritage and museum studies. How do physical remnants of the past mediate that past? The issues of authenticity and historicity of the museum as a collection of media and other technologies are addressed, as well as that of spatial memory. Chapter 2 focuses on the postwar debate about the purpose and physical appearance and reconstructions of the Schouwburg. Was the former theater during the seventeen years prior to the establishment of the memorial in 1962 a site of silence or rather an important facilitator in the creation of a public memory of the Shoah? Chapter 3 investigates the commemorations that were held in and around the Schouwburg. Did these entail a complete appropriation of this site, radically changing its meaning? Or did the site enable and coproduce the performance of divergent memories? This chapter will also investigate visiting practices that developed along with, but also in contrast to the official purpose of this site, and how the memorial was renovated under the supervision of the Jewish Historical Museum in the early 1990s. Chapter 4 analyzes the current presentation of the site, with a focus on its historical and material development, and the active role of the visitor in the production of memory and meaning. The current memorial museum is not a discrete medium that transmits a coherent narrative, but rather a spatial configuration of multiple media and technologies that at times compete with each other. The result is a fragmented narrative that forces visitors to make sense and appropriate it on their own terms. The final chapter delineates the spatial borders and addresses the persistent expansion of sites of memory and the way they interact with their environments and local inhabitants.