

Bernard Wasserstein, *The Ambiguity of Virtue: Gertrude van Tijn and the Fate of the Dutch Jews* (Harvard University Press, 2014)

One of the most delicate and contentious issues in the harrowing history of the Jewish Shoah or Holocaust, still debated controversially seven decades after the events, was and continues to be the question of the extent of the involvement and culpability (or otherwise) of Jewish Councils in the organisation of the deportation of Jews to the death camps in the east. One of the particularly perfidious elements in the Nazis' design of their death apparatus, these Jewish Councils (or 'Judenräte') were not just made responsible for the running of affairs of their disenfranchised and forcefully ghettoized communities but also implicated local Jewish leaderships in the process of determining who was to be deported on which transport.

Hannah Arendt's casual and heavily debated statement that fewer than six million Jews would have perished if the Jewish Councils in occupied countries had not to various degrees 'collaborated' with the Nazis (1963), may have been overstated and not have taken the horrendous predicament sufficiently into account that the council members found themselves in (none of whom colluded with the Nazis because they shared their ideology, whatever other faults or shortcomings they may have displayed), but this does not detract from the scrutiny and wrath that the 'Jewish collaboration' underwent after the liberation. Certainly so in the Netherlands, which despite its long prevailing self-image of having been a country in resistance, is the country in which the largest percentage of Jewish citizens perished, 105,000 out of 140,000, or almost three quarters of the pre-war community, including refugees from Germany and Austria who had fled to the country. While there were more obvious contributing factors to the horrible efficiency of the genocidal machinery in the country (the nature of the occupation regime; the smoothly working Dutch bureaucracy; the general conformist attitude of the public, etc.), the largely cooperative approach that Abraham Asscher and David Cohen, the two chairmen of the *Joodsche Raad* adopted in an attempt to placate the occupiers, before eventually being deported themselves, was heavily censured after the war, both in legal and historiographical judgement. Ostracised by the Jewish community, Asscher passed away embittered and estranged from the Jewish community in 1950, whereas Cohen lived on to the late sixties, defending his course of action 'to prevent worse', and witnessing at least a degree of changing attitudes and interpretations of their war-time conduct.

But the Jewish Council did not consist of Asscher and Cohen alone. One of the central figures in the organisation, who so far has received much less attention than the two leaders, was Gertrude van Tijn, about whom Bernard Wasserstein is now presenting a meticulously reconstructed biography. A German-born Dutch-Jewish social worker who spent the pre-war years helping refugees to the Netherlands from her native Germany to migrate on to the United States, Palestine and elsewhere (controversially also involving the practice of returning some groups of refugees), during the war she largely ran the day-to-day affairs of the Jewish Council on behalf of Cohen. 'Without doubt one of the most controversial figures' as Jacques Presser called her in his seminal account of the destruction of Dutch Jews *Ondergang* (engl. 'Ashes in the Wind', 1960), referring to her Nazi-sponsored visit to Lisbon in May 1941 to (unsuccessfully) liaise with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee about the financing of Jewish mass emigration from the Netherlands, she

remarkably refused to take this chance for personal escape and returned to the occupied country, putting her responsibility for the Jewish Council's constituents above her personal well-being.

Having been duped by Klaus Barbie to give up the addresses of members of the Jewish work camp in Wieringen, North Holland, nearly all of whom perished in Mauthausen, in the same year [1941], she swore to herself never to hand over addresses to the Germans again. In this she differed markedly from Cohen who continued to comply with the occupiers' requests and, most controversially, delivered thousands of his own Jewish Council employees to the Nazis in 1943. Eventually deported herself like Asscher, Cohen and all previously protected Council workers, Gertrude van Tijn was lucky to be freed from Bergen-Belsen in 1944 in a rare prisoner-exchange involving concentration camp inmates and German prisoners of war, to neutral Istanbul and on to the Holy Land. After the war, she was rejected by the survivors, who associated her with the Jewish Council she had increasingly become ambivalent about herself, and moved to the US where, occasionally interviewed about her wartime experiences, she continued being an activist, i. a. in the Civil Rights movement.

Wasserstein's biography, which to a large extent is based on Gertrude van Tijn's unpublished autobiography and related previously unavailable archival material, is a sympathetic one, without closing the eyes to the ambiguity of some of her actions. As his choice of titles ('The Ambiguity of Virtue') suggests, he does not paint the picture of a 'heroine', as what Gertrude van Tijn never regarded herself, but of a dutiful and conscientious altruist who, like her fellow members of the Jewish Council, including, even if more questionable, Cohen, were forced to make morally hazardous decisions in sheer impossible situations while trying to navigate the 'middle road between outright resistance and abject submission' (p. 2). It is Wasserstein's merit to have done so in a neutral but empathic way, neither heroising nor condemning her choices, but at any rate (further) rectifying Hannah Arendt's verdict to a large extent.

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