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Being and Belonging: Benno Premsele, Joop Voet, Sándor Baracs and the Holocaust in Nazi-Occupied Amsterdam

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ABSTRACT

Benno Premsele, Joop Voet and Sándor Baracs were Jewish men, citizens of Amsterdam, who came to age in prewar Amsterdam, survived the Holocaust by going into hiding and became important and well-known spokesmen, for different public causes, in the immediate postwar years. Following their individual trajectories from the late 1930s until the late 1940s, this essay investigates the social habitat and social interactions of these three men in the Dutch capital just before, during and directly after the Holocaust. The focus is on their emotional reactions to the accumulative restrictive orders in the course of the Holocaust and, more specifically, on the impact of the dramatic events on their feelings of belonging and on their perceptions of their community. Exploring the little-studied domain of emotions, this essay sheds light on their tactics to survive, their networks of rescue, their circles of identification and disidentification and their postwar response to the Holocaust. The three microhistories present significant differentiations and complications of our knowledge. They illuminate the strength of the ties with their prewar circles of identification, only to loosen in the phase of the deportations, and only in the case of Joop Voet. They also produce important counternarratives of the dominant narrative in literature of “double victimhood” of Dutch Jews in the afterwar period. Their dissociation from the postwar Jewish community of Amsterdam, a community of victims, should be related to their choice for political activism and public engagement.

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Introduction

In 1954, Malcolm Rivkin, a 22-year-old Fulbright-scholar from Harvard University, wrote a powerful piece of work. Rivkin (1932–2011) had left his home in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, to spend a year in Amsterdam, at the Department of Sociology of the city’s largest university. The purpose of his stay in the Netherlands was to study Dutch Jewry in postwar Amsterdam. To this end, he conducted dozens of interviews and sent a questionnaire to 600 young-adult Jews, according to Rivkin a “fairly

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representative sample” of Jews between the ages of eighteen and thirty living in Amsterdam at that time. Rivkin was particularly interested in what he labelled “patterns of feelings and their consequences.” His long list of questions focused on three key-areas: the degree of identification with Judaism; the strength of social bonds between Jews and between Jews and non-Jews; and expressions of “negative ethnocentrism,” i.e. the feeling that being Jewish was in itself a danger to one’s wellbeing and joy in life.¹

The fruit of his hard work was a manuscript, counting over eighty pages of neatly typed and narrowly spaced lines. Although it would not be published, his study is worth reading. According to the young American scholar, the five years of Nazi-persecution had caused profound changes in all three areas he had been investigating. For most Jews in postwar Amsterdam, Judaism had little meaning: in more than half of the filled-in questionnaires, regular attendance at Shabbat services was considered unimportant. Zionism had replaced Judaism as the sole Jewish ideology. Before Nazi rule was established in the Netherlands, Rivkin continued, there had perhaps been some social distance between Jews and non-Jews; by forcing Jews together and excising them from society, the Nazis had created an “artificial Jewish consciousness.”² In hiding, some Jews had grown closer to their non-Jewish fellows; yet for others the experience of being at the mercy of Gentiles and losing friends and family had created a gap to the non-Jewish world that could not be bridged. This feeling of alienation was redoubled by the different wartime experiences of Jews and non-Jews. Most Jews had already been deported or in hiding when the German occupation turned grim and overtly violent and hunger struck the capital. “There is an Amsterdam Jewish group,” Rivkin concluded about the postwar Jewish community, “bound not by religion or culture or any other precisely definable characteristic, but by a gradually decreasing consciousness of a common violent experience that lasted several years and was not shared by others.”³

This article takes Rivkin’s pioneering study as a starting point. It aims to add to his quantitative research into “patterns of feelings and their consequences” within the Amsterdam community of survivors an in-depth and intra-level qualitative analysis. Following individual trajectories of three Jewish survivors, the essay seeks to break down the Nazi anti-Jewish policy and to focus on subjective experiences and individual responses to various, consecutive steps of the genocidal process. Benno Premsele, Joop Voet and Sándor Baracs survived the Holocaust. In the immediate postwar period, they grew into very distinct public figures of Amsterdam. Their paper trail, including wartime diaries and correspondence, postwar documents and interviews, is rich. How did they make sense of what was happening to them, at that time and in hindsight? How did these experiences and their feelings about and perception of them contribute to choices they made during and after the Holocaust?

The history of the Holocaust in the Netherlands is well researched. As a majority of Dutch Jewry lived in Amsterdam, the city figures largely in most studies on the Holocaust in the country. Already in 1946 Sam de Wolff wrote his study on what he considered “the final chapter” of Dutch Jewry and in 1947 Wilhelm Kweksilber followed suit with the

¹ Malcolm D. Rivkin, “Jews and Judaism in Postwar Amsterdam” (ms, Harvard University, 1954), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives (hereafter: USHMM), Acc. Nr. 1995.A.0338.

² *Ibid.*, 31–2.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

publication of *De oorlog die Hitler won* ("The War that Hitler won").⁴ Two of the three "classics" in Dutch Holocaust historiography, by Abel Herzberg and Jacques Presser, appeared in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ Lou de Jong finished his reconstruction of the Holocaust in the Netherlands, the third "classic," in the late 1980s.⁶ Ever since, Dutch Holocaust research has been dictated by the issue of the country's low percentage of survivors. In the occupied Netherlands, some seventy-eight per cent of the Jews were killed, the greatest number of Jewish victims in Western Europe. How is it possible that this happened in a country that had been a haven for Jews for centuries?

The academic interest in what is dubbed "the Dutch paradox" has produced a great number of comparative studies of the German organization of the persecution of Jews on a local and international level,⁷ and a burgeoning research agenda on antisemitism, popular reactions to the persecution, Jewish-Gentile relations and rescue networks in the Netherlands.⁸ Dienke Hondius was among the first to publish on pre- and postwar attitudes of Gentiles towards Jews in the Netherlands, laying bare a general pattern of rising antisemitism from the late 1930s into the late 1940s.⁹ Her findings are confirmed by other scholars, more recently by Evelien Gans and Remco Ensel in their book on antisemitism in postwar Dutch society.¹⁰ In his highly acclaimed and much disputed study of "ordinary" Dutch and the Holocaust, Bart van der Boom questions the rise of antisemitism in Dutch society and connects the lack of help to their lack of knowledge of what was happening to deported Jews.¹¹ Pinchas Bar-Efrat disagrees and comes to very different conclusions in his study, that covers Gentile reactions to the Holocaust in the Netherlands, ranging from offering help to denunciation. First, a substantial number of Dutch Gentiles were far from passive and actively helped to arrest Jews, merely out of reasons of self-enrichment. Second, the widespread perception of Jews as foreigners to Dutch society thwarted timely rescue-operations.¹²

More specifically, on help and survival, Bob Moore's study of networks of rescue in occupied Western Europe should be mentioned. Moore illuminates that prewar connections

⁴ Sam de Wolff, *Geschiedenis der joden in Nederland: Laatste bedrijf* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1946); Heinz Wielek, *De oorlog die Hitler won* (Amsterdam: Boek en Courantmij, 1947).

⁵ Abel Herzberg, *Kroniek der Jodenvervolgung 1940–1945* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1950); Jacques Presser, *Ondergang* (Den Haag: Staatsuitgeverij/Martinus Nijhoff, 1965).

⁶ Lou de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederland in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Den Haag: Staatsuitgeverij/Martinus Nijhoff, 1969–1991).

⁷ Ron Zeller and Pim Griffioen, *Jodenvervolgung in Nederland, Frankrijk en België, 1940–1945: Overeenkomsten, verschillen, oorzaken* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2011); Hans Blom, "The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands: A Comparative Western European Perspective," *European History Quarterly* 19 (1989): 333–51.

⁸ For a review of the historiography of the Holocaust in the Netherlands, see: Ido de Haan, "The Paradoxes of Dutch History: Historiography of the Holocaust in the Netherlands," in *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008), 355–76; Krijn Thijs, "Ordinary, Ignorant, and Noninvolved? The Figure of the Bystander in Dutch Research and Controversy," in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 247–65.

⁹ Dienke Hondius, *Terugkeer: Antisemitisme in Nederland rond de bevrijding* (Den Haag: SDU Uitgevers, 1990); idem, "Bitter Homecoming: The Return and Reception of Dutch and Stateless Jews in the Netherlands," in *The Jews are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to their Countries of Origin after WW II*, ed. David Bankier (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), 108–35.

¹⁰ Remco Ensel and Evelien Gans, eds., *The Holocaust, Israel and "the Jew": Histories of Antisemitism in Postwar Dutch Society* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017). Also: Ido de Haan, *Na de ondergang: De herinnering aan de jodenvervolgung in Nederland* (Den Haag: SDU Uitgevers, 1997).

¹¹ Bart van der Boom, *"Wij weten niets van hun lot": Gewone Nederlanders en de Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2011). On the debates, see Remco Ensel and Evelien Gans, "The Dutch Bystander as Non-Jew and Implicated Subject," in *Probing the Limits of Categorization*, ed. Morina and Thijs, 107–30.

¹² Pinchas Bar-Efrat, *Denunciation and Rescue: Dutch Society and the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2017).

and social rootedness of individual Jews in mixed Jewish-Gentiles milieus before the war were crucial in order to survive.¹³ Significant sociological contributions to the study of survival chances are made by Marnix Croes and Peter Tammes. They notice higher survival chances among adults, of Dutch and German nationality, and in local communities that are not highly pillarized.¹⁴

Finally, although the Jewish perspective is still largely restricted to the domain of literature (memoires, diaries, fiction), some scholars integrate Jews as agents in the history of the Holocaust in the Netherlands. At various places, for instance, Dan Michman has written about reactions to the Holocaust among several Dutch-Jewish groups.¹⁵ In Katja Happe's survey published in 2017 Jewish responses are mixed in the larger narrative.¹⁶ With the exception of Evelien Gans's study of father and son Meijer, Jewish "patterns of feelings and their consequences" have not been the sole object of any academic research concerning the Holocaust in the Netherlands.¹⁷

For the study of these patterns, a microhistorical approach appears to be beneficial. As is discussed in the introduction of this special issue, a microhistorical approach opens a window to enter a different dimension of analysis: that of emotions and beliefs, feelings and perceptions. At the same time, microhistory as a reduction of scale could help us to understand, to use Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman's words, "the diversity and complexity of the processes by deconstructing an entire monolithic approach without limiting oneself to the borders of a particular locality or group."¹⁸

This essay investigates the lives of three men over a span of approximately ten to fifteen years, with a particular focus on their relations with non-Jews and their appreciation of these relations. In the field of genocide studies, processes of identification and disidentification are widely studied, generally in connection to perpetrators and implicated bystanders. In his analysis of Rwandan society at the brink of genocide, Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan elaborates on the pair, recognizing that social identification is never just a cognitive process, but always includes emotions: "perceived similarities and differences provide a basis for affective involvement or detachment."¹⁹ Disidentification, according to de Swaan a crucial condition for participating in a genocidal project, generally occurs when "a face-to-face relationship between two persons was transformed into the concept of a generalized and decontextualized relation between two timeless, irreconcilably hostile categories."²⁰ This article seeks to explore whether such a process of

¹³ Bob Moore, *Survivors: Jewish Self-help and Rescue in Nazi-occupied Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Marnix Croes and Peter Tammes, *"Gif laten wij niet voortbestaan": Een onderzoek naar de overlevingskansen van joden in de Nederlandse gemeenten, 1940–1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Jozeph Michman, Hartog Beem, and Dan Michman, eds., *Pinkas: Geschiedenis van de Joodse gemeenschap in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Kluwer, 1992), 164–99; Dan Michman, "Understanding the Jewish Dimension of the Holocaust," in *The Fate of the European Jews, 1939–1945: Continuity or Contingency?* ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 225–49; idem, "Jewish Religious Life Under Nazi Domination: Nazi Attitudes and Jewish Problems," *Studies in Religion* XXII (1993): 147–65; idem, "Zionist Youth Movements in Holland and Belgium and their Activities during the Shoah," in *Zionist Youth Movements during the Shoah*, ed. Asher Cohen and Yehoyakim Cochavi (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 145–71.

¹⁶ Katja Happe, *Viele falsche Hoffnungen: Judenverfolgung in den Niederlanden 1940–1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2017).

¹⁷ Evelien Gans, *Jaap en Ischa Meijer: Een joodse geschiedenis 1912–1956* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008).

¹⁸ Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, eds., *Microhistories of the Shoah* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 4.

¹⁹ Abram de Swaan, "Widening Circles of Identification: Emotional Concerns in Sociogenetic Perspective," *Theory, Culture & Society* 12 (1995): 25.

²⁰ Abram de Swaan, "Widening Circles of Disidentification: On the Psycho- and Sociogenesis of the Hatred of Distant Strangers – Reflections on Rwanda," *Theory, Culture & Society* 14, no. 2 (1997): 113.

disidentification also occurred – and in the same pace and way – in the minds and hearts of victims of genocide, vis-à-vis the non-Jewish part of society.

One last note on sources. For this essay a variety of sources has been used, including postwar survivor testimonies. Although the international scholarship has fully embraced survival testimonies as a valuable source, the use of testimonies in academic research on the Holocaust in the Netherlands is not common. According to Roy Schwartzmann, “testimonies chronicle the subjective experience of events, transforming historian Leopold von Ranke’s call to objectively chronicle ‘events as they actually happened’ (...) into ‘events as they happened to me.’”²¹ For the purpose of this essay, i.e. the investigation of how events were experienced, perceived and appreciated by individual survivors, testimonies seem to be an invaluable historical source.

Mokum

Jewish life in Amsterdam dates back to the late sixteenth century, when the city’s council allowed Jewish refugees from the Iberian Peninsula to settle within the city’s walls.²² Early eighteenth century, the Jewish community of Amsterdam counted already over 10,000 people, making it the largest community in Western Europe. Many were Sephardim, but they were soon outnumbered by Jewish newcomers from Eastern Europe who found shelter in a new part of Amsterdam, comprising of three tiny islands of marshland that had recently been drained. This part of the city centre was quickly known as the Jewish quarter.

Jews gained equal rights in 1796, yet their economic chances were still not equal. This changed when industrialization and modernization set in and by the end of the nineteenth century an era of economic prosperity commenced. Thousands of Amsterdam Jews found employment in the city’s booming diamond industry. A new, self-confident social class was born, of Jewish skilled workers, with a strong belief in progress. In socialism they found their beliefs reflected.²³

In more than one way Joop Voet, the first person of this study, was a child of this emancipatory wave. His parents Herman Isidore (Ies) Voet and Maria Boom had still known bitter poverty in their younger years. Better times came with the city’s growing diamond-industry. Father Ies found work in one of the many diamond factories in Amsterdam and made a living as diamond cutter. He joined the socialist Dutch Diamond Workers Union (*Algemene Nederlandse Diamantbewerkerbond*, or ANDB), the first trade-union in the Netherlands. Joop, who was born in 1909, would become a member of the *Arbeiders Jeugd Centrale* (AJC), the national youth organization of the Social Democratic Labor Party. Later, he became a correspondent for *Het Volk*, the main social-democratic newspaper in the Netherlands.²⁴

²¹ Roy Schwartzmann, “Sutured Identities in Jewish Holocaust Survivor Testimonies,” *Journal of Social Issues* 17 (2015): 281. Also: Tony Kushner, “Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation,” *Poetics Today* 27 (2006): 275–95.

²² For a brief overview of the history of Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam, see: Jaap Cohen, *De onontkoombare afkomst van Eli d’Oliveira: Een Portugees-joodse familiegeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Querido, 2015).

²³ For an overview of Jewish life in the Netherlands, see: Michman, Beem, and Michman, *Pinkas*; J.C.H. Blom, R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, and I. Schöffner, eds., *Geschiedenis van de joden in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Balans, 1995). On prominent Jews in the Dutch socialist movement, see Evelien Gans, *De kleine verschillen die het leven uitmaken: Een historische studie naar joodse sociaal-democraten en socialistisch-zionisten in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Vasalucci, 1999).

²⁴ Evelien Gans, *Jaap en Ischa Meijer: Een joodse geschiedenis 1912–1956* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008), 118–9 and 127–8.

For most Jews of Amsterdam emancipation came with integration and secularization. Since 1900, the number of mixed marriages in Amsterdam was steadily growing and in 1934 some seventeen per cent of the marriages were mixed. Even during the High Holidays not more than twenty per cent of the entire Jewish population of Amsterdam came to synagogue. Within one generation, Jews switched languages from Portuguese/Yiddish to Dutch. Jewish children were no longer sent to special Hebrew schools, but to public schools. Jews entered the world of municipal politics and early 1930s, four of the city's six aldermen were Jewish, leading to all kinds of Antisemitic agitation in right-wing press.²⁵

A substantial number of Jews climbed the social ladder, merging into the urban middle and upper-class. Benno Premsele was born in 1920. His father Bernhard, descendant of well-to-do jewellers, studied medicine and specialized in sexology, at that time still a field of expertise in its infancy. By 1920, the year of Benno's birth, Bernhard Premsele had a practice at home and enjoyed fame as radio commentator, using the new media to discuss taboo-matters such as impotency and homosexuality. Bernhard Premsele's ideas about marriage and sex were modern and certainly not conventional in Jewish families. Benno, his sister and brother grew up in an open-minded, intellectual and artistic milieu.²⁶

In the 1920s and early 1930s, for a large part because of the social chances for Jews and the lack of violent Antisemitism in the city, Amsterdam was a popular destination for foreign Jews. Sándor Baracs was born in 1900 in Budapest as the third child of Jewish parents. Although his family had gathered some wealth, career chances as a graduated law student were small in Hungary and early 1927 Baracs moved to Amsterdam. He started to work as a business lawyer at a branch office the Dresdner Bank in Amsterdam, bought a house in the district of the Amsterdam music hall, and applied successfully for Dutch citizenship in 1934.²⁷

Around that time, Amsterdam counted some 70,000 Jewish citizens, roughly between eight to ten per cent of the city's entire population. Approximately sixty per cent of Dutch Jewry were living in the capital, and within the capital often in specific neighbourhoods. Until the turn of the century, most Amsterdam Jews were still in the Jewish quarter. From that time onwards, in a process of upward mobility, many had left. The first group moving out consisted of better-off Jews, who went to the new green neighbourhoods just outside the Jewish quarter (Weesperbuurt and Plantagebuurt). For a substantial part of his youth, Benno Premsele lived here.²⁸

As a result of urban planning initiated by the city council, larger groups left the Jewish quarter in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of them took residence in one of the two newly built neighbourhoods (Transvaalbuurt in the eastern, and Rivierenbuurt in the southern part of town). Transvaalbuurt became the epitome of social-democratic public housing policy and by 1940, a third of its population was Jewish. In that year, some forty per cent of the Rivierenbuurt were Jewish.²⁹ The parents of Joop Voet moved to the Amsteldijk, next to the river Amstel and at the border of this neighbourhood.³⁰

²⁵ Gans, *De kleine verschillen*, 51; Van der Boom, "Wij weten niets van hun lot", 147–52; Michman, Beem, and Michman, *Pinkas*, 125–8.

²⁶ Interview Benno Premsele, 27 August 1995, Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam (hereafter: JHM), collection 2,000 witnesses, interview code 04523.

²⁷ Bert Jan Flim, *Omdat hun hart sprak: Geschiedenis van de georganiseerde hulp aan Joodse kinderen in Nederland, 1942–1945* (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 22–3.

²⁸ Interview Benno Premsele, 27 August 1995, JHM, collection 2,000 witnesses, interview code 04523.

²⁹ Friso Roest and Jos Scheren, *Oorlog in de stad: Amsterdam 1939–1941* (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 1998), 60–1.

³⁰ Gans, *Jaap en Ischa Meijer*, 31.

In their postwar reflections on the prewar years in Amsterdam, Sándor Baracs and Joop Voet have no recollection of having experienced Antisemitism. For Sándor Baracs identity was determined by factors like economic wealth and social class, and the neighbourhood he lived in. Friendships and community-life were ordered around these parameters. Baracs moved in the higher circles of Amsterdam society, which were predominantly protestant. Little is known about his political orientation, but he was a member of the (nationalist) Civic Guard of Amsterdam.³¹

"We were Jews, and that was it," Joop Voet told his interviewer in 1973. In the same talk he recalls that, when he was still at elementary school, other children called him "Brillen-jood" (Jew with glasses), a very common term of abuse for Jews. Joop Voet mistakenly thought they called his name, "Brillen-Joop": "Being a Jew had so little meaning to me that I even did not realize that they were being antisemitic towards me."³² More than anything else, the family Voet identified themselves as socialists: father as a prominent member within the ANDB, two of Joop Voet's brothers as activists within the socialist-Zionist movement of *Poale Zion*, and Joop Voet as a leader within the Amsterdam section of the AJC and journalist for a socialist newspaper.³³

According to Benno Premsele, his blond hair and small nose made him look "not Jewish at all."³⁴ At the same time he told his interviewer in 1993, that he had been well aware of his Jewish identity, "but this did not have any special meaning."³⁵ His father was a socialist, but above all a doctor with progressive ideas about relations, sex and youth. His public appearance provoked reactions, from colleagues with more conservative ideas, and from Dutch Nazis. In 1938, Bernhard Premsele was summoned to appear before the Disciplinary Board. In the reporting of the court case in Dutch Nazi newspapers antisemitic stereotypes of a lustful and a radical left-wing Jew blurred.³⁶

Studies on Dutch Jewry in the 1930s make clear, that the process of integration and secularization had been far from total and complete.³⁷ The slander in the Dutch Nazi newspapers regarding his father's lawsuit made Benno Premsele aware of people who did not want him and his family to integrate into a larger, mixed community.

The seemingly complete identification of the three men with the larger secular and mixed community of Amsterdam deserves a note, at least in the case of Joop Voet and Benno Premsele. Both Joop Voet and Benno Premsele asserted after the Holocaust that being Jewish had little meaning to them. At the same time, in their smaller communities, their more intimate circle of social life, Jews were very present. In his postwar interviews Benno Premsele stresses that the social circles his parents belonged to were mixed, but the closest friends of Benno Premsele's parents were Jewish.³⁸ Together, the families Premsele and Teixeira de Mattos bought a summer house at the North Sea coast where they spent their holidays together. The son of his parent's best friends was also Benno Premsele's best

³¹ Marie-Cécile van Hintum, *Lenep, Hester Juliana Octavia van*, in *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland*, <http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/LenepHestervan> (accessed 30 May 2019).

³² *De Telegraaf*, 28 April 1973.

³³ *Ibid.*; Gans, *Jaap en Ischa Meijer*, 31 and 127–8; Gans, *De kleine verschillen*, 496–7.

³⁴ Interview Benno Premsele, 27 August 1995, JHM, collection 2,000 witnesses, interview code 04523; Bert Boelaars, *Benno Premsele 1920–1997: Voorvechter van homo-emancipatie* (Bussum: Toth, 2008), 17.

³⁵ Boelaars, *Benno Premsele*, 17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁷ Michman, *Pinkas*, 125–99.

³⁸ *De Volkskrant*, 15 March 1997; interview Benno Premsele, 27 August 1995, JHM, collection 2,000 witnesses, 04523; radio-interview *Het Roze Rijk*, NPS Radio 5, 6 July 1996.

friend. When the Premselas moved to the prestigious Prinsengracht, they were almost neighbours. Other dear friends of his youth were Wiesje van Santen and Bep Boas, both, like Benno Premsele, from middleclass Jewish families – Bep Boas would marry Benno Premsele's brother.³⁹ Like the brother of Benno Premsele and Joop Voet's siblings, Joop Voet would find and marry a Jewish partner. The nucleus of his life was almost exclusively socialist, but also almost exclusively Jewish.⁴⁰

Emotional Solidarity

On 10 May 1940, just before dawn, German military planes crossed Amsterdam on their way to the airport of Schiphol. The attack on Schiphol was part of the German assault on the Netherlands. The battle would last for five days. On 14 May, after the German bombing of Rotterdam, Dutch forces surrendered. Within weeks after the capitulation, Hitler ordered the establishment of a *Reichskommissariat*. Austrian senior official Arthur Seyss-Inquart was appointed Reichskommissar. In the Netherlands, he stated in his first address to the Dutch people, he had come "to supervise" (*Aufsicht halten*).

Reactions to these first events within the Amsterdam Jewish community varied widely. The general picture painted by scholars like Katja Happe is that of a Jewish community, torn between a firm belief in their unalienable rights and fear. During these five days of fighting, hundreds of Jews tried to get away, to England or to the south, as it was thought that that part of Holland was still not occupied by German troops. Some 201 Jews committed suicide in May 1940, 151 of them in Amsterdam.⁴¹

For Benno Premsele the German attack came "completely unexpected" and "as a total shock."⁴² His parents tried to drive to the port of IJmuiden and find a boat that could bring them to England, but at no avail. Back home, life changed quickly. Already in the summer of 1940, the broadcasting company fired his father and the board of Benno Premsele's school decided to shut down the school. The *Nieuwe Kunstschool* had been a centre for experimental art that was inspired by the Bauhaus school and movement, "degenerated art" according to the Nazi-regime.⁴³

Joop Voet was alarmed by the German attack and the sudden surrender of Dutch forces. He was concerned about the Germans and their plans, but also about the response of Dutch Nazis to the German victory. Apparently, like Premsele, Voet was well aware of a smaller group within Dutch society that wanted to push Jews out of their larger social community, into isolation. Together with his wife and son, his parents and his sister and her husband Joop Voet tried to reach IJmuiden to sail to England. As they arrived at the seaside, they saw their ship approaching. Just before it moored, they heard a loud explosion and witnessed the ship sinking. It was deliberately sunk to prevent German warships from mooring.⁴⁴ Deeply disappointed, the family Voet returned home. Expecting Dutch Nazis to commence a pogrom, Joop Voet barricaded the doorway to his

³⁹ Boelaars, *Benno Premsele*, 62–3.

⁴⁰ Gans, *Jaap en Ischa Meijer*, 31 and 127–8.

⁴¹ Happe, *Viele falsche Hoffnungen*, 28–42. About these suicides, see Lucas Ligtenberg, *Mij krijgen ze niet levend: De zelfmoorden van mei 1940* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2017).

⁴² Boelaars, *Benno Premsele*, 65.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27 and 72–3.

⁴⁴ Gans, *Jaap en Ischa Meijer*, 138–9.

apartment.⁴⁵ From his wartime diary it becomes clear that fear slowly made place for a sense of solidarity among the Amsterdam public. The day German troops made their entry into the city, Joop Voet witnessed his Gentile fellow-citizens being “dignified:” “Nobody said anything. No applause, yet also no cry of disapproval.”⁴⁶

Sándor Baracs’ first reaction to the defeat of May 1940 was one of defiance. Just a few months after the Dutch capitulation, with friends he had met before the war in the Amsterdam Civic Guard, he began to prepare for armed resistance. Baracs worked together with two sons of a well-known old aristocratic protestant family in Amsterdam, the family Boissevain. He instructed both sons, Janka and Gideon, how to make bombs. A few years later they would form CS6, a remarkably successful and violent, Amsterdam-based resistance group, responsible for various liquidations of Dutch Nazis in 1943. Infiltration and betrayal by Dutch helpers led to the arrest and end of the organization in late 1943.⁴⁷

Despite the seemingly soothing words of Seyss-Inquart’s speech, social life in Amsterdam was quickly changing. Uniformed troops of the Dutch Nazi movement (*Weerbaarheid-safdeling*, or WA) were claiming the streets, using violence and intimidation. Jews among the public were often targeted. Late 1940 and early 1940 there was hardly a day without skirmishes between Dutch Nazis and their opponents. Early February 1941, a WA-man was deadly wounded in the Jewish quarter. Nineteen Jewish suspects were immediately arrested and as a way of reprisal, the old Jewish quarter was shut off for traffic. A few weeks later a patrol of German policemen walked into an ambush near Rivierenbuurt. By way of reprisal, German police entered the neighbourhood, picking Jewish men randomly from the streets and deporting them to a nearby German prisoner’s camp. The round up, in broad daylight and in the middle of town, had many astounded witnesses. A major strike was organized and both Jewish and non-Jewish workers put down their work out of protest against German anti-Jewish aggression.⁴⁸

In his wartime diary, Joop Voet recalls the brooding atmosphere in his city in the days leading up to the strike. In his perception, the strike itself was a unique moment in the history of European Jews: a history of persecution that had known very few moments of Christian solidarity or assistance. The strike, by contrast, was a demonstration of socialist camaraderie: the working class of Amsterdam was caught by “a feeling of proud and impassibility” and stood up to support “Jewish proletarians.”⁴⁹ This representation fits neatly in the (complex) postwar memory in left-wing (Jewish) circles of the event as a unique moment of Jewish-socialist solidarity.⁵⁰ The strike was a feat of the community of people Voet felt he belonged to.

It is remarkable that Sándor Baracs did not even mention the event in his postwar recollections. Perhaps he lived his life at a different stage. Baracs already chose in May 1940 for a life in a clandestine and underground world, with people he had known and felt related to

⁴⁵ Diary Joop Voet [undated], NIOD Netherlands Institute for War-, Holocaust- and Genocidestudies (hereafter: NIOD), collection 244, number 163.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Buck Goudriaan, *Verzetman Gerrit Kastein 1910–1943: “Een communistische intellectueel van een vreeswekkende koelbloedigheid”* (Leiden: De Nieuwe Vaart, 2010), 144–7.

⁴⁸ Roest and Scheren, *Oorlog in de stad*, 205–84.

⁴⁹ Diary Joop Voet, NIOD, collection 244, number 163.

⁵⁰ See, for instance: Selma Leydesdorff, “The Mythology of ‘Solidarity’ as Shown by the Memory of the February Strike of 1941,” in *Dutch Jewish History III: Proceedings of the Fifth Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, ed. Jozeph Michman (Jerusalem: The Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993), 353–69.

before the war. His close friends and companions in his resistance work were from the same circles of Amsterdam high society that he had belonged to before May 1940. Benno Premsele mentions the strike in his postwar interviews, without the emotional charge of Joop Voet, but as a key-moment of radicalization in German anti-Jewish policy. Premsele had not been in Amsterdam during the first day of the strike but returned in the course of the second day. His sister-in-law came to find him at the railway station to warn him. Premsele went into hiding for a few days.⁵¹

During the fourteen months between the strike and the start of the mass deportations from Amsterdam, numerous social restrictions were imposed on Jews. They were forced out of their jobs, schools and social life – and ultimately out of their houses. They were, in other words, gradually forced out of the mixed Amsterdam community that they had felt being part of. For some time, Premsele spent his school-less days and evenings socializing. The social restrictions that limited his possibilities of meeting people outside, in cafes, cinemas or parcs, also brought him and a small circle of (Jewish) friends together. In their parental homes they organized parties and other events. “A bit like carnival, very nice and cozy,” one of Benno Premsele’s friends remembers.⁵²

This period of carefree and joyful partying in a newly established, secluded community of Jewish youth did not last very long. For Benno Premsele the “forcing out” soon got a tangible component. Premsele left his safe home after a second raid on Jewish youth in June 1941. From that moment onwards he lived in another part of town, where the police could not easily find him. Only at noon he went home for lunch.⁵³

To Premsele, despite his physical removal from his family and the dwindling of his social community, his ideas about his community and the people that he belonged to did not change. In a letter dated from November 1941, Premsele expressed his gratitude for “the support and compassion” and “moral outrage” of his non-Jewish friends and fellow-citizens about the anti-Jewish measures.⁵⁴ Joop Voet was of the same opinion. In his diary he noted down that the support he and his wife received from friends and acquaintances “was one of the most heartening things in those dark days.”⁵⁵ In May 1942, most Gentiles reacted with indignation to “the whole thing with those stars.” The first day that he had worn his star himself, an unknown man started shouting at him to keep courage and to be sure that this would pass soon. Others took off their hat for him – a gesture that he would see more often in the following days.⁵⁶

Safety Nets – and Holes

Despite the far-reaching social consequences of the anti-Jewish policy of the Nazi-regime, there is little evidence in the sources to support the view that these restrictions introduced in 1941 and up to July 1942 changed processes of identification and disidentification among the three men. Undoubtedly, their social life outside their homes was shrinking and the circle of people around them became smaller – but in their perception the

⁵¹ Boelaars, *Benno Premsele*, 73.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 72–3.

⁵³ Letter Benno Premsele to Lientje Huisman (November 1941), in *ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁴ Boelaars, *Benno Premsele*, 75.

⁵⁵ Diary Joop Voet, NIOD, collection 244, number 163.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

bonds to this circle were just as strong as they had been before the war. In the case of Joop Voet and Benno Premsele it could even be maintained that their identification with their prewar circles solidified. In their perception of things, the non-Jewish part of the larger Amsterdam mixed community, except for some Nazi diehards, empathized with Jewish citizens. To quote Joop Voet: the ties between Jews and non-Jews withstood the external pressure of the Nazi-regime.

It is noteworthy that this only partially altered, and merely for Joop Voet, once the German policy entered a new phase and deportation (and murder) of Jews from the Netherlands was prioritized. Spring 1942 had already witnessed the forced move of thousands of Jews from places near Amsterdam to the capital and the departure of unemployed young Jewish men from Amsterdam to labour camps in the eastern and northern parts of the Netherlands. Many German and Austrian refugees had been summoned to leave the city, too: their destination was the refugee centre in Westerbork, near the German border. Early July 1942, some 4,000 young Jewish residents of Amsterdam, predominantly refugees, were requested to report in person to the head office of the German police in Rivierenbuurt. They were selected "for work under police-supervision," allegedly in Germany proper. As many did not respond, a raid was organized in the neighbourhood, taking some five hundred Jewish "hostages." They would be sent to Mauthausen if the addressees did not turn up. Ten days after the summons had been sent, a first full train left Amsterdam for the transit camp Westerbork. A day later, on 15 July, 1,137 detainees of Westerbork were sent to the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the last two weeks of that month, another five trains would take off, transporting 4,605 Jewish citizens to this place.⁵⁷

From that time onwards, street after street was emptied of its Jewish residents. Trucks drove into neighbourhoods after eight p.m. to take Jews from their homes. Incidentally, specific parts of the city were surrounded and combed out during daytime. Larger German "actions" took place on 6 and 9 August 1942, and on 26 May and 20 June 1943. The last one dated from 21 September 1943. Some 3,000 Jews were arrested, including the leaders of the Jewish Council. From that day, Amsterdam was officially declared "free of Jews" (*Judenrein*), even though thousands of Jews were still living illegally in the city. Some 7,000 of them were caught before the collapse of Nazi rule in the Netherlands on 5 May 1945.⁵⁸

The three survivors of this study all managed to evade deportation, but with dissimilar strategies. Remarkably early – in January 1942 – Benno Premsele made the decision to go into hiding. A month before, Premsele had tried to flee to Switzerland, together with a daughter of his parent's best friends Teixeira de Mattos, her husband and brother in law. They had to turn around at the French border.⁵⁹ In finding hiding places, his father's contacts proved essential. Apart from a short intermezzo, Benno Premsele would find shelter with people he knew. During the first year of his time in hiding, he stayed together with his brother and his sister-in-law, at two different addresses. In one of these places, they were with eight others, eleven in total in a small attic. Early 1943, with the help of an assistant of his father, Benno Premsele

⁵⁷ Zeller and Griffioen, *Jodenvervolging*, 424.

⁵⁸ Croes and Tammes, "Gif laten wij niet voortbestaan", 182–3.

⁵⁹ Boelaars, *Benno Premsele*, 78.

found a better hiding place in the house of a longtime friend of the family, actress Aty Krok, in Amsterdam.⁶⁰

In one of his postwar interviews, Benno Premsele praised his caretaker for her unselfishness and hospitality, providing him a place to stay, sacrificing her privacy as they shared only one single room. He remembered the time spent in hiding at Aty Krok's as "a fantastic time. First, I knew the people very well, especially Aty. We had a very special relation."⁶¹ Most Jews in hiding changed addresses frequently, were brought to people they did not know and were often housed in the countryside: Benno Premsele stayed at one address for over two years, in his hometown Amsterdam and with someone he knew very well.⁶²

Joop Voet, who had been praising the solidarity of the Amsterdam public and the support of his friends in earlier phases of the Holocaust, had some major disappointments to overcome. Through "friends and acquaintances" he had found a safe home for his children but finding a hiding place for himself and his wife turned out to be an ordeal. Early 1942, an old friend from his youth came to him to offer help. They could come over to her house whenever they needed to go into hiding. When deportations commenced and Voet indeed turned to her, she hesitated. The neighbour was not to be trusted, she explained. It was a bitter pill to swallow. Other friends also turned him down. Eventually, an old friend from the socialist youth movement came to the rescue. Without their yellow star on their jackets, Voet and his wife walked to the station, taking a different route through neighbourhoods where the chance of meeting people they knew was small. Their journey went to the countryside, miles away from their hometown.⁶³

Sándor Baracs survived with the help of a network of prominent members of the Dutch Reformed Church in Amsterdam and through the disguise of his Jewish descendance. Like Joop Voet and Benno Premsele, he obeyed the order to register as Jewish early 1941. Consequently, the entire corpus of anti-Jewish regulations also hit him. Although Baracs had been frequently away from home before July 1942, his hiding became structural from the moment the deportations commenced. Like Premsele, Baracs stayed in one place most of the time: the house of Hester van Lennep, the aunt of his co-resistance fighters Janka and Gideon Boissevain. They were lovers, but also "partners in crime." Jewish clients visiting her beauty parlour often turned to her for help for their children. Slowly Hester van Lennep managed to create a network of accompanists and hiding places for children. Baracs joined her network. As opposed to Premsele, who rarely left his hiding place, Baracs moved around freely, with falsified identity papers, as a non-Jew. Only after August 1943, when police were closing in on Hester van Lennep, he went into complete hiding, together with Van Lennep.⁶⁴

A few months before, they had been introduced to Gezina van der Molen, architect of what was called "spiritual resistance." She enjoyed some fame as a female journalist and, during the war, as one of the founders of the Dutch Reformed resistance group "Faith" (*Trouw*). Van der Molen, who worked next to a Jewish nursery and daycare centre in Plan-tagebuurt, just opposite the building that was used by the German police as an assembly-

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 23, 93 and 98–101.

⁶¹ Interview Benno Premsele, 27 August 1995, JHM, collection 2,000 witnesses, 04523.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Diary Joop Voet, NIOD, collection 244, number 163.

⁶⁴ Flim, *Omdat hun hart sprak*, 22–3.

point for Jews prior to their deportation from Amsterdam, considered it her Christian duty to help these children. Together with Baracs and Van Lennep and with the help of many others, she brought some eighty Jewish children in safety. They were handed over to foster parents, selected by Van der Molen. As a rule, they were good Christians. The rescue-operation came to an end with the last raid in Amsterdam in September 1943. Baracs and Van Lennep married a few months later.⁶⁵

Trusted friends. Most scholarly work on networks of rescue assert that they were essential in order to find hiding places, and thus to survive. In the stories of Benno Premsele and Sándor Baracs they were available, less so in the story of Joop Voet. The help that Premsele and Baracs received from these trusted friends even strengthened their ties to the community that they believed were part of: in a broader sense, the Amsterdam secular and mixed community of Jews and non-Jews; more narrowed down, for Benno Premsele the circle of the liberal and artistic urban elite and for Sándor Baracs the circle of mainly protestant Amsterdam high society. Their strategies to evade deportation had been very different, though. Whereas Premsele chose to hide, as a person persecuted because “he was born that way,” Baracs chose to disguise his Jewish identity.

Change and Consolidation

Like for most Jews, the misery of the three men did not end with the end of Nazi rule in the Netherlands. In each life there were people gone, for good: the Shoah left all survivors of this story bereaved. Benno Premsele lost his parents and his sister, Joop Voet his parents and many other members of his extended family, Sándor Baracs his friends and co-fighters Janka and Gideon Boissevain. The story of the Jewish community of Amsterdam during the immediate postwar years is a story of grief and loss, and also of rising Antisemitism and failing care for Jews returning from hiding or imprisonment.⁶⁶ The life histories of this study offer complementary, yet surprisingly diverging narratives.

Soon after the liberation, Benno Premsele went to his parental home, only to find out that other people had moved in and were not of the intention to leave. For weeks he and his brother were unsure about the fate of their parents and sister. A stranger who had been in the same camps with their parents came to tell them about their death. “Taking inventory, all the people that did not come back, it was terrible,” he stated in an interview held in 1995.⁶⁷ Since that moment he never celebrated his birthday anymore.

For some two years, Benno Premsele stayed in the apartment of his brother and his family. Subsequently, he moved to a place of his own, close to where he was being brought up, in a neighbourhood “where everyone knew each other,” close to Dick Teixeira de Mattos, his dear friend of his youth.⁶⁸ It was during these years that Benno Premsele established his name as an interior designer, and as a public spokesman for homosexuals in the Netherlands.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See, for instance: Hondius, *Terugkeer*; Evelien Gans, “Vandaag hebben ze niets, maar morgen bezitten ze weer een tientje: Antisemitische stereotypen in bevrijd Nederland,” in *Polderschouw: Terugkeer en opvang na de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, ed. Conny Kristel (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2002), 313–53; Pieter Lagrou, “Return to a Vanished World: European Societies and the Remnants of their Jewish Communities, 1945–1947,” in Bankier, *The Jews are Coming Back*, 1–24.

⁶⁷ Interview Benno Premsele, 27 August 1995, JHM, collection 2,000 witnesses, 04523.

⁶⁸ Boelaars, *Benno Premsele*, 111.

In his fight for gay rights, Benno Premsele was obviously treading in the footsteps of his father, who had been one of the first doctors in the Netherlands to talk about this taboo. At the same time, speaking up was Benno Premsele's reaction to the imposed silencing during the Holocaust. "My instinct for self-preservation had pulled me through," Benno Premsele reflected in 1987,

And I thought to myself: you have survived that war, so now it is time to search for your own identity. The first step was to deal with my homosexuality. I became aware of my homosexuality during the war and I decided that I wanted to come out and be open about it, not to be pushed back in a subculture.⁶⁹

The choice of words of Benno Premsele is interesting. There is no reference to the Holocaust, the persecution of *Jews*. Instead, he uses the much more generic term of war. Benno Premsele refers to being pushed back in a subculture – suggesting equivalence of an existence in hiding and a subculture. Apparently, Benno Premsele felt that there were similarities. Coming out and speaking up as a homosexual was his answer to his persecution as a Jew.

To a greater extent, Baracs' postwar activities were a continuation of the resistance work he had been developing together with Van der Molen. Immediately after the last round up in Amsterdam in September 1943, they exerted themselves to make postwar provisions for the care of Jewish children in hiding. Van der Molen and Baracs agreed that their biological parents – should they come back – should be divested of parental authority. According to them, it would be "in the psychological interest" of the children if they stayed with their (non-Jewish) guardians. In May 1945, the "National commission for wartime foster children" (*Rijkscommissie Oorlogspleegkinderen*, or OPK) was established, with Baracs as its director and Van der Molen as its president. The plans that had been designed in the last phase of the war were now brought into practice.⁷⁰

In his position of the OPK's director Sándor Baracs often clashed with representatives of the Amsterdam Jewish community, who considered his work as a modern version of the Christian mission to win over Jewish souls. By some whim of fate Joop Voet became one of his main adversaries. Shortly after his return from hiding, Voet was appointed the American Joint's director in the Netherlands, which put him in charge of larger funds.⁷¹ In his address to other country directors of the Joint in April 1948, Voet mentions the "terrific fight" over the custody over Jewish children in the postwar Netherlands, "a fight that lasted about three years and still the fight is going on."⁷² "The bringing back to Jewish life of the Jewish war orphans," Voet explained the Joint head office six months later, continued to be a problem as Baracs' OPK generally advised to let the children stay where they were.⁷³ In these years immediately after the war, Voet reserved most Joint funds for children's homes,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁷⁰ Elma Verhey, *Om het Joodse kind* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1991); Gert van Klinken, *Gezina van der Molen: Strijdbaar en omstreden* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2006).

⁷¹ The Joint, or the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, was the largest, US-based relief organization for European Jews after the war. See Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939–1945* (Jerusalem: The Institute of Contemporary Jewry, 1981).

⁷² Draft talk Joseph Voet, 6 April 1948, JDC Archives, 1945–1954 Geneva collection, item ID 2545064.

⁷³ Report Joop Voet, on the General Situation of Dutch Jewry and the Activity of the American Joint Distribution Committee in the Netherlands during the first 8 Months of 1948, 1 October 1948, USHMM, RG 68.066M Reel 33, GII/279B/ Med. 188.

programmes of the Zionist youth movement (*Hachscharah*) and lawsuits to acquire custody over Jewish children.⁷⁴

Although it was the Joint's task to offer relief to the Dutch Jewish community, Voet was pessimistic about the future of Dutch Jewry. "Dutch Jewry was a proud and rich population, but not much is left," he stated in April 1948, just a month before the establishment of the state of Israel. He expected that many would choose to leave, to Palestine or to the United States. "At present," Voet concluded, "there is a good cultural life, but it will last only a few years and the proud history of Dutch Jewry will probably come to an end in some way or another."⁷⁵ Joop Voet was not only signifying a general trend, but also revealing his own state of mind and future plans. In the late 1940s, when the relief work of the Joint in the Netherlands was approaching its completion and the Dutch Jewish community was financially self-reliant, Joop Voet emigrated to Israel.⁷⁶

As opposed to Sándor Baracs and Benno Premsele, Voet's circle of identification was deeply affected by the Holocaust. Whereas Baracs returned to what he perceived as his social community before the war – protestant high society – and Premsele moved in the same liberal and artistic circles that his parents had belonged to, Voet left the family of Amsterdam socialists. Even more so: he left the Netherlands. Before the Holocaust, he had been part of the huge socialist wave that had contributed considerably to the development of the city of Amsterdam. He was joined by his family: his father and brothers were frontrunners within various branches of the socialist community. His brothers already supported the Zionist project long before the Holocaust. Joop Voet had been hesitant. In his opinion, a Jewish-nationalist agenda would conflict with the international agenda of socialism. As Evelien Gans already persuasively demonstrated in 1999, this line of thought was common among Jewish leaders within the socialist movement of Amsterdam.⁷⁷

"Before the war," Joop Voet told his interviewer in 1973,

it had been irrelevant if someone was Jewish or not, but after the war (...) Jews were perceived differently. People were making a distinction between Jews and non-Jews (...) Suddenly I was someone else. I was no longer Jopie Voet of prewar times, no, I was a Jew.⁷⁸

Voet's observations resemble remarkably well De Swaan's analysis of the societal process of disidentification. Obviously, Joop Voet was talking about his own changed perception of himself and his relation to non-Jews. The Holocaust had made Dutch people "Jew-conscious," he concluded in this interview, and this certainly was true for Joop Voet. His perception of his community, the people that he belonged to, had shifted.

Sándor Baracs, Benno Premsele and Joop Voet reacted to the years of persecution and personal loss with grief and sadness, like most Jewish survivors, yet at the same time with energy and public engagement. For Baracs, his Jewish identity had never been a major identifier. His circle of identification before the Holocaust had not been the Jewish community. His work in the matter of custody over Jewish children after the Holocaust and his collaboration with prominent representatives of Dutch Protestantism in these first

⁷⁴ Letter Joop Voet to M.W. Beckelman, 22 March 1948, JDC Archives, 1945–1954 Geneva collection, item ID 1040667.

⁷⁵ Draft talk Joseph Voet, 6 April 1948, JDC Archives, 1945–1954 Geneva collection, item ID 2545064.

⁷⁶ *De Telegraaf*, 28 April 1973 and 4 December 1995.

⁷⁷ Gans, *De kleine verschillen*, 47–52.

⁷⁸ *De Telegraaf*, 28 April 1973.

postwar years are clear indicators for his main circle of identification. People belonging to this circle – foremost: his wife – had provided him a safety net during the Holocaust. To a large extent, continuity can also be found in Premsele’s story. In the three case studies of this essay, only in that of Joop Voet the circle of identification drastically changed. Voet was also the only one with the negative experience of “trusted friends” who were hesitant to come to his aid.

Some Concluding Observations

This essay discussed individual trajectories of survivors of the Holocaust, small traces in the history of the Jewish community of Amsterdam that lost over 60,000 of its members during the five years of Nazi-persecution. By closely following the steps of three men, from the late 1930s to the immediate postwar years, the primary aim was to find out more about “patterns of feelings and their consequences.” Within the historiography of the Holocaust in the Netherlands, the study of emotions is still in its infancy. This essay should be understood as an exploration into this important field of research.

Focusing on feelings and particularly on feelings of belonging, Abram de Swaan’s concept of (the widening of) circles of identification and disidentification served as a main analytical tool. De Swaan convincingly argued that a societal process of “widening the circle of disidentification” vis-à-vis a victim-group is a necessary condition for genocide. A key question of this essay has been whether processes of identification and disidentification could also be observed among members of the victim-group, vis-à-vis society at large and, more in particular, the community that they felt they (had) belonged to.

By juxtaposing three life stories, differences and similarities were brought to light. Benno Premsele, Joop Voet and Sándor Baracs were Jews, but their recollections of their prewar years suggest that before the Holocaust a Jewish identity was at most of secondary importance to all three men. They felt that they belonged to distinct social communities, defined by identifiers other than a Jewish identity: political beliefs, class, lifestyle, worldviews. Within these communities, they did not experience antisemitism. Only Benno Premsele recalled the antisemitic smears his father had to endure as a Jewish doctor with modern ideas about relations and sex. The insults came from outside his circle of identification.

In their retrospective perceptions of their lives in prewar years the three stories are congruent with findings in earlier studies, although none of the three men signalled an increase in antisemitism during these years before the Holocaust. It is plausible that their recollections of prewar years have been affected by what was to come, after May 1940. From that moment onwards, their “patterns of feelings” started to depart from each other – although later than is suggested in most literature on the matter. It is remarkable that until the onset of the deportations, ties with the prewar community apparently even solidified. Benno Premsele was heartened by the empathy displayed by his friends and in wider circles of Amsterdam society with the fate of Jews. For Joop Voet the strike in February was of immense importance. In his interpretation of the events the strike underscored the cohesion in and strength of his community and the solidarity between Jews and socialists.

Only after the first summons for deportation in early July 1942 did the experiences of the three men begin to diverge. Studies on rescue and hiding point at the importance of

knowing non-Jewish people or, even better, of having trusted Gentile friends. Benno Premsele and Sándor Baracs both had such trusted friends who not only helped them find hiding places, but who also offered them shelter in their own homes. Thus, both men spent most of their time in hiding with very good friends from circles they felt that they belonged to before the war – with people of the community that they identified with. Their circles of identification did not alter during the years of persecution. As opposed to many others, Benno Premsele and Sándor Baracs were not at the mercy of numerous strangers, but in the safe, trusted and known pair of hands of one friend. Despite these similarities, the strategies the two men developed to evade deportation were very different. Whereas Premsele hid, because of his Jewish identity, Baracs denied his Jewish identity and walked the streets as a non-Jew, with falsified papers.

In dire need of a hiding place, Joop Voet came to the bitter conclusion that his trusted friends were much less inclined to help. It is tempting to think that this experience made him doubt whether he (still) belonged to his prewar community. This doubt presumably grew stronger after the Holocaust, when, according to Voet, non-Jewish citizens of Amsterdam had grown “Jew-conscious” and the line between Jews and non-Jews appeared to have become a rift. Voet’s circle of identification changed, from a circle of Amsterdam socialists into a circle of Zionists.

The immediate postwar period looms large in recent research of the Holocaust in the Netherlands. In the common narrative Jews returning from the camps and hiding places are “double victims”: victims of German persecution and victims of official Dutch policy towards homecoming Jews. The three life stories of this essay offer important counternarratives, of political activism and public engagement. Baracs, Premsele and Voet became public spokesmen, for remarkably distinctive causes. Baracs’ work in a Protestant organization that was dedicated to bring or keep Jewish children into the care of Protestant parents was a continuation of his resistance work. As a gay-activist and highly praised designer Premsele felt at home in the milieu of the artistic and liberal avantgarde of Amsterdam – the social circle to which his parents had also belonged. Only for Voet had the circle of identification drastically changed. None of the three men identified with the shattered postwar Jewish community of Amsterdam. Processes of disidentification could be localized here, *vis-à-vis* this community. If there was one circle they did not identify with, it was the circle of victims.

Returning to Rivkin and his “patterns of feelings,” an in-depth analysis of the stories of Baracs, Premsele and Voet did not confirm all the findings of his qualitative study. Firstly, there is little to support that the three men felt connected to each other or the postwar Amsterdam Jewish community “by a common violent experience.” Secondly, only in the case of Voet could it be maintained that the Holocaust and the immediate postwar years produced a feeling of alienation and distancing from the non-Jewish part of his prewar social community. Thirdly, although the Jewish Amsterdam community was not an identifier for any of the three men, only in the case of Baracs are traces of “negative ethnocentrism” evident.

In the burgeoning research of the Holocaust in the Netherlands the issue of the low survival rate in the country has produced a stream of studies on relations between Jews and non-Jews. Much of the work focuses on the latter: the attitudes of non-Jews; their beliefs and moral systems; the help they offered to Jews or, on the contrary, to the German persecutors. This essay shed light on “the other side,” *in concreto* three individual Jewish

survivors. It is easy to see in which direction future research could develop. As this essay illuminated, the benefits of a microhistorical approach, in particular for the study in the field of emotions, seem almost endless.

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