

# AFTERWORD

The Emotional and Critical Historian:  
Jacques Presser's Life and Legacy

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## Who Was Jacques Presser?

Jacques Presser (1899-1970) was born in Amsterdam to a poor Jewish family and named Jacob. His father, Gerrit Presser (1874-1936), worked in the diamond trade, and his mother, Aaltje Stempel (1877-1948), looked after Jacob and his three younger sisters. In 1903 the Pressers moved to Antwerp for Gerrit to find work, returning to Amsterdam in 1907, where Jacques remained for the rest of his life.

The director of the local Twentse Bank, J. Th. Blijdenstein, whose son Presser helped at secondary school, gave him some financial support and that, together with a scholarship, enabled Presser to obtain his PhD in history from the University of Amsterdam in 1926. He then found a position as a history teacher at the Vossius Gymnasium in the city and, in the 1930s, began to write scholarly articles.

Politically, Presser was, as Nicolette Mout put it, "a convinced but thoroughly undogmatic Marxist".

His article, "Mti-Semitism as an Historical Phenomenon" was published just before the Germans invaded the Netherlands. He also finished a monograph about Napoleon and, a year later, in 1941, he completed the manuscript of a book about the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Habsburg Empire and this was published as *The Eighty Year war* under the name of a non-Jewish friend, B. W Schaper.

All Jewish teachers were dismissed at the end of November 1940 and Presser was very proud of the fact that some of the students at Vossier Gymnasium, among them Lucas van der Land and Salvador Bloemgarten, immediately organized a strike.

After the Germans occupied the Netherlands in May 1940, Presser and his wife De (Debora) Appel, one of his former students, had, like many Jews in Amsterdam, tried to flee to England by boat. That failed and, desperately worried about the future, they both attempted suicide but they were found alive just in time.

When, in the summer of 1941, the Nazis ordered that the Dutch school system be segregated, Presser found a job in the Jewish Lyceum in Amsterdam and he combined teaching with writing. He was a very popular teacher who impressed his students with his poetic and emotional presentation.<sup>1</sup>

When the deportation of Jews from Amsterdam began in July 1942, Jacques and De put off going into hiding again and again. They took a family of four into their flat and fostered Isa Baschwitz, the child of a mixed marriage.

By March 1943, Jews were no longer allowed to travel and De was arrested when attempting to visit her mother who was in hiding. She was taken to Westerbok transit camp and from there to Sobibor, where the Dutch Jews were sent straight to the gas

chambers.

Jacques did not discover what happened to her until 1948 and, worried and uncertain, he went into hiding in May 1943. He lived at four different addresses in the province of Gelderland until the liberation in May 1945.

During this time, he wrote a history of America (America: From Colony to World Power, which wasn't published until 1949), a novel in the form of a diary, and many letters. This was only possible because of the help of P.A.L. Oppenheimer, the librarian at the University of Amsterdam, and Isa Baschwitz, who was still able to travel and so could carry books and letters between Amsterdam and Presser's hiding place. Presser's friends, J. de Rek and K. Plomb were also crucial to his survival as he hid in the villages of Lunteren, Wageningen and Barneveld.

In his wartime diary, *Homo submersus* ("Man in Hiding"), Presser describes the tensions between the Jews he met and the non-Jews who helped them but who would sometimes take advantage of their dependence. He writes about sexual affairs, clashes between urban and rural lifestyles, differences in class and cultural backgrounds, kindness, betrayal and the oppressive nature of remaining in hiding for day after day, unable to step outside, not knowing when it would all end.

He returned to Amsterdam after the liberation and set about finding out how many family members and friends had been killed. He chose not to return to his old apartment but moved in with his good friends, the historians Jan and Annie Romein and their children. Later, he rented rooms from Bep Hartog who took good care of him. In 1954, after she had been widowed, he married her.

He went back to Vossius Gymnasium, but in 1947 became a lecturer at the new progressive social faculty at the University of Amsterdam. He was offered a chair there later but the appointment encountered serious opposition from the national government because of his left-wing views. However, he was appointed a full professor in 1952 and remained at the university until his retirement in 1969. He died in 1970.

### ***Ondergang*: The Book and Its Reception**

Most of Presser's time from 1950 to 1965 was devoted to his *magnum opus*, *Ondergang*, which appeared in English in 1968 under the title *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry*. The commission to write the book came from the National Institute for War Documentation and the staff there helped him with the cataloguing of documents, the interviews and the editing. Because of his own experiences and personal involvement, the actual writing of the book was difficult and there were several occasions when it looked as though he might not finish it.

However, the publication in 1965 drew a lot of attention and the book has been recognized as a monument to the Jewish victims and survivors of the Shoah, as well as a detailed and perceptive analysis of the process of segregation, administration, deportation and murder. It is also a critique of the lack of effective help for the Jews and the resistance in the Netherlands.

Presser saw himself as a contemporary historian and used diaries, memoirs, interviews, poems and letters to bring the voices of Jews into his manuscript and so humanize their story. He coined the term "ego documents" and argued for them as a

legitimate source for historians. He used his own experiences and memories and consciously chose to include his own emotions in his writing, which was, and still is, unusual for historians.

Halfway through this long period of research and writing he wrote a very well received short novel about a teacher in Westerbork, *The Night of the Girondists*, 1957.

The favourable response to this helped him continue his work on *Ashes in the Wind*, which became an immediate bestseller. Presser's pointed observations on the passivity of most Dutch as they stood by and watched the segregation and deportation of Jews helped the new generation reflect on and question the choices and inaction of their parents and the authorities during the war.

While the book enjoyed popular success, some reviews were critical, particularly of Presser's emotional style and tone.

Presser continued to write letters, reviews, lectures and articles until his death, one year after his official retirement from the university, on 30 April 1970, a few days before he was due to deliver the annual liberation day "5 May Lecture" in Rotterdam. The text of this lecture, and several others, appeared posthumously.

### **Presser on Race, Anti-Semitism, the Negro and the Jew**

When I read *Ashes in the Wind*, as a history student in the early 1980s, it gave me a critical view of society and a hunger for more knowledge about the history of the Shoah in the Netherlands. Presser's almost casual remarks at the end of the book, about the revival of anti-Semitism around the liberation, were the starting point for my study of post-war anti-Semitism, *Return: Holocaust Survivors and Dutch Anti-Semitism*.

Presser defined anti-Semitism as:

a form of xenophobia, hatred of strangers, hatred and rejection in this case of the Jews, because they are strangers, because they are different. A very particular kind of xenophobia, if only because of its persistence in history, returning everywhere and all the time. This can be explained by the fact that, of all "strangers" in history, the Jews are the only people who have not been able or willing to become extinct.

Another key element in anti-Semitism is the principle of collective responsibility, which Presser calls a strong but persistent injustice. This principle holds every Jew responsible for any mistake made by other Jews, elsewhere and wherever in history.

One can regard anti-Semitism as a collection of more or less strong forms of hatred against Jews: rejection of Jews, prejudice against Jews, irritation with Jews, and aggression against Jews. As well as these, I think there is one more form that anti-Semitism often takes: that of non-Jewish superiority to Jews. This is often a well-intentioned paternalism, a condescension, comparable to 'white supremacy'.

This paternalist anti-Semitism, found particularly in middle and upper-class circles, had far from disappeared after 1945, partly because, during the war, Jews had needed protection and had been dependent on non-Jews. By comparison, hatred of the Jews, although still present, was far less apparent because direct forms of anti-Semitism were taboo in 1945. However, older ears often led non-Jews to advise Jews to know their place

and to show their gratitude to non-Jews. If such gratitude was not shown, then aggression against Jews could result. The French historian Henri Rousso has called this, "antisemitisme d'anticipation"~ an attitude found among non-Jewish authorities in France as well as the Netherlands in the immediate post-war period.

Jacques Presser was fascinated by precisely these issues while he was in hiding during the war. In his book about America, he focuses on the history of slavery, of African Americans and of Native Americans. He characterizes the Negroes as "the only non- assimilable, at least non-assimilated, group in the history of the US". This echoes his definition of anti-Semitism. Presser saw strong comparisons between Blacks and Jews in society. In particular he focuses on attempts to justify the slave trade by spreading the idea of black inferiority and white supremacy:

Theologians went hand in hand with ethnologists, and historians, to imprint on the Negro his inferiority, to teach him docility.

Countering the myth of the docility of the African is a central point in Presser's book. Remarkably, he was able to use the then very recent study by the American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 1941. I assume that Oppenheimer of the Amsterdam University Library had acquired the book and that Isa Baschwitz had taken it to Presser's hiding place.

Presser looked for signs of resistance, for evidence of a fighting spirit, among Blacks as well as Jews. This search is not surprising for someone who had attempted suicide when the Germans entered the country and who was then in hiding. Histories of Black resistance inspired him and he found great joy in the words of spirituals, describing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Go Down Moses", for instance, as "this enchanting music".

His interest continued the issue continued and, after the war, Presser entered into correspondence with the American historian Herbert Apteker, who wrote about slavery a lot. They eventually met in 1962 and remained in touch until Presser's death.

### **The Emotions and the Historian**

Presser's manuscript about American history was heavily edited by his Dutch publisher, Elsevier, who considered it "the product of a man in hiding" and therefore far too emotional and insufficiently nuanced. The post-war years were a difficult period for all Jewish survivors, who felt vulnerable, and Presser accepted the criticisms of the book at the time.

However, by the 1960s Presser found his voice and, in the interviews conducted by Philo Bregstein, he says that he chose to include emotions in his writing, arguing that the voice of the victims had to be included.

When you have worked, as I have, for about fifteen years with these documents, you are continuously confronted with the dead, the voices of the deceased. I read these papers, the lit de scraps of paper, thrown from the train, the rare messages coming from Westerbork ... Before me, hardly anyone has read them and, after me, they are locked into the archives and it's possible that

nobody else will see them. They awoke in me the awareness that one of the tasks of the historian, the man who writes about people in the past, is to give the dead a voice. The dead must be able to speak ... and anyone who lets the dead remain silent allows them to die twice, and I have simply refused to permit that.

Presser wrote from a position of engagement with the victims. Many of his former pupils at the Jewish Lyceum have attested that that engagement was in his teaching and it touched them and they have never forgotten it.

When we see photographs or film footage of Presser he does not appear to be a very emotional man to us. However, Presser's emotions found their way into his texts and it is this emotional engagement that still speaks to his readers.