



Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry

By Ben Barkow
Created 7 Jan 2010 - 11:41am

Book reviews Second World War

By Jacob Presser
Souvenir Press, £15

Ashes in the Wind is Dr Jacob Presser's classic account of the Holocaust in the Netherlands. First published in 1965, it is a product of what one might term the heroic generation of Holocaust writings, predating the tidal wave of scholarship and memoirs that began in the 1970s and which today shows little sign of receding. Its re-publication, in Arnold Pomerans's translation, is to be welcomed.

Presser was a Dutch Jew who survived in hiding in the Netherlands after failing to escape to Britain and a failed suicide attempt. After the war, he spent 15 years researching the book, combing through the vast archive of the Dutch National Institute for War Documentation. It was an immediate best-seller in the Netherlands when it was published. This translation first appeared in 1968.

In Presser's analysis, the destruction of the Dutch Jews fell into three phases: the early measures to isolate the community; their forced removal from the provinces and concentration in Amsterdam; and the deportations to the death camps in Poland.

His unflinching account of the indifference and passivity of most Dutch people challenged the complacent self-image the Dutch had of themselves as resisters of the Nazis. His work prompted much soul-searching, and inspired a younger generation of scholars to drill down deeply into the nation's wartime history.

Yet he was also criticised, particularly for having written from the perspective of the victims and for including such emotive material. Today, such criticism appears strange, when a book such as Saul Friedlander's *The Years of Extermination* is hailed a masterpiece precisely for the inclusion of such material.

Ashes in the Wind must be understood, however, as a document of its time. Not all of its judgments appear sound today. Presser's condemnation of the Jewish Council, for

example, for doing the Nazis' work for them seems now to be harsh.

Recent scholarship is more nuanced and acknowledges that Jewish councils frequently faced what the Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer has termed "choiceless choices".

Though not a Holocaust memoir, the book owes much to Presser's own story. His wife Deborah was deported and murdered in Sobibor. He managed to stay hidden for two years, during which he researched and wrote a history of America, among other works. He was able to do this because non-Jewish colleagues and friends sheltered him and brought him books, letters and research materials.

Presser saw the best and the worst of the Dutch response to Nazi occupation. To an impressive extent he carried this balanced view into his remarkable book.

Source URL: <http://www.thejc.com/arts/book-reviews/25805/ashes-wind-the-destruction-dutch-jewry>