

The Netherlands' Unrighteous Gentiles

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

By Tunku Varadarajan

Amsterdam Annemiek Gringold burns with a passion, improbably fierce in a bookish historian. She is a Dutch Jew and the principal curator of the National Holocaust Museum, which opened here in March after decades of foot-dragging. The project is stirring long-buried memories. Three-fourths of the Jewish population in the Netherlands was wiped out in World War II. Some 140,000 Jews lived in the country; 102,000 perished.

After the war, Ms. Gringold says, Jewish survivors were ostracized out of fear that they would reclaim property—houses, paintings, furniture, silverware, bicycles, clothes—that many Dutch Christians had appropriated. The Jews were a searing reminder that the postwar national self-image—of a plucky, upright folk that had resisted the Nazis to the best of their abilities—was in many cases bogus.

Ms. Gringold is intent on righting a wrong that's been largely neglected for 80 years. The renowned tolerance of present-day Amsterdam veils a wartime past that stains its civic conscience—a conscience stained afresh when a local statue of Anne Frank was vandalized this month with the word “Gaza” in red paint. Young Dutch people aren't sufficiently taught in schools of the extent to which the country's people collaborated with Nazi occupiers. Too many older citizens still subscribe to the convenient myth that the segregation of Jewish compatriots, the implementation of laws and regulations that stripped Jews of every right, and their all-too-visible deportation to Auschwitz and other death camps were crimes in which the Dutch didn't participate.

A December 2022 survey revealed that nearly a quarter of Dutch millennials and Generation Z members believe that the Holocaust is a myth or that the number of Jews killed has been greatly exaggerated. When the museum opened on March 10, anti-Israel protesters outside—many of them white and Dutch—called for the chief guest, Israel's President Isaac Herzog, to be tried for genocide. Ms. Gringold called the demonstrations “undignified.”

In an email exchange, the historian Simon Schama describes the museum as “absolutely

unsentimental, in fact the anti-Anne Frank.” In “The Diary of a Young Girl,” written while in hiding in an Amsterdam attic, Frank (1929- 45) wrote that “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.” Ms. Gringold seems to disagree. She points to a section in the museum where clusters of Dutch visitors are gathered, their faces stricken with pain and confusion.

This is the “corridor of collaborators,” where a third of all portraits depict Dutch people. They were “Jew hunters, who got a bounty for turning people in, and volunteer guards.” The museum, she says, “looked for photos in which you can recognize the humanity of the perpetrators. They were ordinary Dutch people, someone’s father, mother, brother.” The aim is to generate “moral anxiety in the viewer,” who will, inevitably, see himself or someone he knows reflected in the images before him.

A Dutch museum unearths long-buried stories of complicity with the Holocaust.

The persecution of Jews in the Netherlands took place in plain view, making it all the more important to highlight the readiness of Dutch collaboration. “We didn’t have brick walls and barbed wire and ghettos in the Netherlands,” Ms. Gringold says. Those were “a Central and Eastern European thing.” Here, the isolation of Jews was done by laws and regulations, enforced by Dutch civil servants. “It wasn’t just Hitler that murdered the Jews. There were tens of thousands of people who were involved at various levels—including Dutch people.”

Artifacts include Nazi craniometers used to measure skulls, the blue checked shirt worn by a 9-year-old Jewish boy when Dutch bounty hunters found him hiding under floorboards, and a bolt of cloth printed with yellow stars, which Jews were required to wear. Among the most chilling is a stamp attached to a wellworn wooden grip. It was used by A.A. Rambonnet, a Dutchman who specialized in notarizing seized Jewish property. To him goes the dubious honor of having sold the most Jewish homes in a single day, 146. Collaboration like this was quotidian, almost banal. Stockbrokers traded in seized Jewish stocks; tram companies billed Nazis for transporting Jews to transit camps.

The museum sits alongside the site of a former school and creche where Jewish children were housed after being separated from their parents. The adults were confined at a theater across the road before being transported to a holding camp at Westerbork, in the northern part of the country. From there, Jews were sent to Auschwitz, Sobibor, Theresienstadt and Bergen-Belsen. “We are located on an authentic site where part of the history took place,” Ms. Gringold says. “We have museums in the U.S. and Israel, but the Shoah did not take

place there.”

“Parents, children, brothers, sisters—they were taken from here,” she adds. “Human beings passed through these buildings on the way to their death.” Ms. Gringold points me to words etched at the museum’s entrance, written by Primo Levi, an Italian writer who survived Auschwitz: “It happened, therefore it can happen again.”

Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at New York University Law School’s Classical Liberal Institute.

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