THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS CONTEXTS

The Rescue of Belsen's Diamond Children

Bettine Siertsema

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The Holocaust and its Contexts

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CHAPTER 1

A Brief Overview of the History

From the sixteenth century onwards Amsterdam was home to a diamond industry.[1] The Spanish and Portuguese Jews who settled there at the end of the fifteenth century played an important role in this industry. The joint Catholic sovereigns Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabel of Castile had given them the choice of either converting to Catholicism or leaving the Iberian Peninsula. A new influx into Amsterdam followed after 1585, when Antwerp fell into Spanish, that is Catholic, hands. The Portuguese Jews who had settled there previously now moved on to the Northern Netherlands and especially to Amsterdam, where there was freedom of religion. In addition to their expertise, they also brought their network of international trade contacts with them. Sources of rough diamonds were India (from before the beginning of our era), Brazil (bounteous diamond fields discovered in 1727), Russia (nineteenth century), and South Africa and other African countries (from around 1870).

The diamond industry has always employed a great many Jews, partly because it was not organised into a guild. In the Middle Ages Jews were barred from joining guilds, so most trades were not open to them. But in the absence of a guild, the diamond trade was. The processing of the

[1] Simone Lipschitz, *The Amsterdam Diamond Exchange* (Amsterdam: Stadsuitgeverij Amsterdam, 1990, bilingual edition), 27.

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B. Siertsema, *The Rescue of Belsen's Diamond Children*, The Holocaust and its Contexts,
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hardest material found in nature required great skill and expertise, often passed on from father to son, and sometimes from mother to daughter. It was a generally respected and relatively well-paid craft.[2]

There was a clear hierarchy in the business. At the top were the cleavers, who after careful examination—which could take hours, sometimes even days—split the rough diamond. Then the sawyers went to work, giving the stone its basic shape. The cutting edges were chosen in such a way that the largest and purest stone was left by cutting away any irregularities with as little loss of material as possible. At first this work was often done at home, including by women. And finally, the polishers did their work by sharpening the facets that give the stone its radiant appearance. Each job required great expertise and concentration. Remarkably many women worked as sawyers and polishers, because they were considered eminently suitable for this sort of precision work, which required little physical strength, but of course also because they were generally cheaper labourers than men.[3] Apart from large machines for sawing and the so-called mills with grinding wheels, all sorts of small equipment were used, such as caps and adjusting instruments, which served to keep the diamond at the correct angle for sawing and polishing, and a whole range of sieves, pliers, and magnifiers. At the top of the diamond industry were the factory owners and traders, who with their international contacts took care of supplying the raw material and selling the final product. However, they had almost always learned the trade in practice and had therefore also gained their own craft experience.

Particularly due to the discovery of rich sites in South Africa, the diamond industry in Amsterdam flourished in the late nineteenth century. Not only the availability of rough stone was key, an equally important factor was the emerging industrialisation. At first the mills in the domestic workshops were mainly operated by women, but now in large factory spaces, first horsepower and later steam power were employed. In the twentieth century the large machines were driven by electric motors, but there was always a great deal of manual work involved. The rising prosperity led to a great demand not only for industrial diamonds but also for jewels. Good craftsmen had their work cut out for them and were well

[2] Philo Bregstein & Salvador Bloemgarten (samenstellers), *Herinnering aan Joods Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1994), 48–53.

[3] Lipschitz, *Amsterdam Diamond Exchange*, 33.

paid. This flourishing period, from 1870 onwards, is called the Cape Era.[4] By 1890 around half of Amsterdam was economically dependent on the diamond trade, which counted some 6500 merchants and workers on all levels.[5] The extent to which the rich diamond workers profited from the rather sudden increase in prosperity during the Cape Era becomes clear from a popular story that circulated, about how the diamond men used to light their cigars with banknotes, to flaunt their wealth.[6] The overall prosperity in the trade was due to the profitable deals the Dutch merchants had struck with the De Beers company, founded by Cecil Rhodes, which held a monopoly of the diamond sites in the British Cape Colony (and remained the global monopolist until the start of the twenty-first century). Obviously, that prosperity was acquired at the expense of the South African miners, whose working conditions were far worse than the already unfavourable ones of the diamond labourers at the Amsterdam side of the trade.[7]

In 1891 the Amsterdam Diamond Exchange was established, and in 1894 the General Dutch Diamond Workers Association, the ANDB (in Dutch: Algemene Nederlandse Diamantbewerkers Bond), was founded. It was a very influential trade union, which not only strove to serve the socio-economic interests of its members but also aimed at their cultural elevation. This can still be seen in the impressive trade union building, 'de Burcht van Berlage' in today's Henri Polaklaan in Amsterdam. The edifice contained murals by Richard Roland Holst with lines of poetry by his wife Henriette, as well as a library, and all sorts of courses were organised there. The ANDB was highly successful in its negotiations with employers, with results including the first 44-hour working week, later a 40-hour week, and two weeks of paid holiday. But this strong position of the trade union also led to a gradual shift of the main centre of the industry to Antwerp, where working conditions were less favourable and thus cheaper for employers. The First World War brought some recovery to Amsterdam's position, but the inevitable economic fluctuations struck hard, and even

[4] S. Asscher, *Diamant, wonderlijk kristal* (Bussum: Unieboek, 1975), 33–36.

[5] Saskia Coenen Snyder, 'As Long as It Sparkles!': The Diamond Industry in Nineteenth-Century Amsterdam. *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 22(2) (Winter 2017), 40–41.

[6] Lipschitz, *Amsterdam Diamond Exchange*, 33.

[7] See for the history of the ties between colonialism and the diamond industry and the exploitation of miners: Tijl Vanneste, *Blood, Sweat and Earth: The Struggle for Control over the World's Diamonds Throughout History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2021).

before the stock market crash of 1929, 7000 of Amsterdam's 9000 diamond workers had become unemployed. The years before the Second World War showed some improvement.[8]

Illustrative of Amsterdam's position as a diamond city is the fact that the largest diamond ever found was entrusted to the Asscher Company to be processed. It was the Cullinan diamond, a gift of the government of Transvaal to the English king in 1907 as thanks for the self-government that this former colony was granted. The story goes that Abraham Asscher, the later co-president of the Jewish Council, simply took the boat from England with the rough diamond in his pocket, because that seemed safer to him than transporting it with the torpedo boat destroyer that was the officially announced means of transportation.[9] The cleaving was done by Abraham's elder brother, Joseph Asscher. To this day the stones adorn the British crown jewels. Earlier, in the mid-nineteenth century, another legendary diamond, the Koh-i-Noor, was cut and polished in facets by the firm Coster in Amsterdam for Queen Victoria.

The Diamond Exemption

During the Second World War the Amsterdam diamond Jews, at least part of them, were exempt from deportation for a long time. The Germans wanted to set up their own diamond industry in order to provide jobs for wounded and disabled soldiers, following the example of France, which had done something similar after the First World War. But just as important was the intention to acquire foreign exchange, while the hard industrial diamond was a necessary component for the production of weapons, planes, and the like. How eager the Germans were to get hold of diamonds became clear during the infamous robbery at the Diamond Exchange at the Weesperplein on 16 April 1942. All traders had to come to the Exchange with their entire stock of diamonds, which was then confiscated, supposedly to store them in a safer place than in Amsterdam. In total some 70,000 carats were seized. But apart from the robbery itself, the aggressive treatment and humiliating body search also made it clear

[8] Karin Hofmeester (ed.), *Een schitterende erfenis: 125 jaar nalatenschap van de Algemene Nederlandse Diamantbewerkersbond* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2019).

[9] R.M. Meijer, Cullinan maakte Asscher wereldberoemd. *Ons Amsterdam* 1 February 1998 (onsamsterdam.nl/cullinan-maakte-asscher-wereldberoemd). See also https://royalasscher.com/cullinan/.

that the Jewish diamond traders were essentially completely disenfranchised. Traders who voluntarily surrendered their unregistered stock were given a *Sperre*, an exemption, which—for the time being—allowed them to stay in Amsterdam.[10]

The plan to establish their own German diamond industry required diamond workers as well as traders and manufacturers. The former because of their skills, the latter because of their expertise and international trade contacts. The first plan was to set up such an industry near concentration camp Vught, where some of the infrastructure of the Philips factory could be used. Later the location changed to Bergen-Belsen, in the heart of Germany. The diamond dealers showed themselves to be good negotiators: they were able to get a guarantee that the exemption would apply not only to themselves but to their immediate families as well. Later on, when their deportation proved inevitable, they managed to get a deal with better living conditions in the camp where they were housed better than the ordinary camp inmates. But the Germans, for their part, also used such concessions to squeeze from them even more money and diamonds.

In the end, the people who were able to obtain a diamond exemption represented only a fraction of the total number of diamond workers. Anyone looking for the term ‘diamond worker’ in the Dutch website of the digital Jewish Monument will find, page after page, many dozens of people who had that profession and were killed in Auschwitz in 1942 or in Sobibor in 1943.[11] In view of those days they must have been unable to acquire the coveted exemption.

People from the diamond group who were exempt from deportation were left untouched until 1943. Then most families had to go to Westerbork, where they stayed together as a group, though after some time a few men were forced to return to Amsterdam to continue working there under guard. But from early 1944 all diamond Jews were deported to Bergen-Belsen with various transports, the last one in September 1944.

[10] Bies van Ede and Paul Post, *De diamantenroof: Hoe hoge nazi’s met geroofde diamanten uit Nederland en België een nieuw leven opbouwden* (Utrecht: Omniboek, 2016). Lipschitz, *Amsterdam Diamond Exchange*, 85.

[11] http://www.joodsmonument.

Bergen-Belsen and Beyond

In Bergen-Belsen the diamond people shared the same barrack and were exempted from heavy forced labour in order to save their hands. Nevertheless, conditions became more and more precarious due to the increasing food shortage. In November their fate began to turn and privileges were withdrawn. On 4 December 1944, the last remnant of hope that they could escape a dire fate was abruptly dashed: without prior warning the men were deported to an unknown destination. Later it turned out to be Sachsenhausen, where most of them soon died. From there, the few survivors were later sent on to other camps in the infamous death marches. No more than 6 men of the original 177 survived.

One day after the men, the (smaller) group of women had to leave Bergen-Belsen as well. They were put to work in the aircraft industry in the underground salt mines of Beendorf in the Harz, a satellite camp of Neuengamme. The conditions and treatment were terrible, but because the work was underground, the women suffered somewhat less from the harsh winter weather. Moreover, in April 1945, just before the end of the war, a time when there were many deaths among the other prisoners, they were taken to Sweden by the Red Cross, reportedly thanks to the mediation of the Swedish diplomat Count Folke Bernadotte. Rumour has it that his quid pro quo consisted of a few cases of whiskey. Thus, a relatively large number of the women survived.

The children were left to fend for themselves and would have been doomed if not for a young Polish Jewess, Luba Tryszynska. With great courage and ingenuity she was able to pull the children through the last terrible months of Bergen-Belsen, despite the prevailing epidemics of typhoid and diphtheria and despite the acute and worsening food shortage. The help of Dr Ada Bimko in the background was indispensable. Like Luba Tryszynska, she was a Jewish prisoner who had first been to Auschwitz and had lost her husband and child there. Baby Philip de Goede, born on 16 November 1943 in Westerbork, could not be saved. He died on 31 January 1945. For 11-year-old Helena Rabbie the liberation came too late as well, although she did witness it herself, but she died of typhoid fever on 24 April 1945. Two others died shortly after the liberation. Except these, all the children survived.

This book tells the story of the fate of the Amsterdam Diamond Jews and their children during the Holocaust as much as possible in their own words. The next chapter will account for the sources of these words and the theoretical background of their usage.

CHAPTER 2

Sources

The use of survivors' testimonies as a historical source is less controversial today than it was at the beginning of Holocaust historiography. Overviews of this methodological debate can be found with Zoë Waxman,[1] Donald Bloxham,[2] and Tony Kushner,[3] among others. I will just briefly summarise the main milestones.

The earliest historians of the Holocaust tended to look down on survivors' testimonies, both written and oral, as a source for their historiographies. Raul Hilberg, author of the encompassing *The Destruction of the European* Jews (1961) doubted their reliability.[4] The preference for the allegedly less subjective sources provided by formal documents even led Leon Poliakov to quote executioners rather than victims in his *Harvest of*

[1] Zoë Waxman, Transcending History? Methodological Problems in Holocaust Testimony. In *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 143–157.

[2] Donald Bloxham, The victims: Dealing with testimony. *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches*, eds Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 16–60.

[3] Tony Kushner, Holocaust testimony, ethics, and the problem of representation. In *Poetics Today* 26(2) (2006), 275–295.

[4] Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 49.

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Hate (1951).[5] Another reason to stay away from the use of testimonies is deference for the stories the victims or survivors have to tell as something that can't be looked at critically or mined for data like names, places, dates, and other hard facts. According to theorists like David Patterson and Elie Wiesel, doing so comes close to sacrilege.[6] But while the motivation may differ, the effect of dismissing victims' testimonies as a historical source is no different.

Martin Gilbert was the first historian who consistently quoted from victims' testimonies in his day-by-day account in *The Holocaust: A Jewish Tragedy* (1987), but he was criticised for his mainly illustrative use of these testimonies. Yet he may have paved the way for leading historians like Saul Friedländer,[7] Christopher Browning,[8] and Dan Stone,[9] who make full use of testimony for their histories of the Holocaust. As Orna Kenan, who abridged Friedländer's two-volume standard work, stated, these sources 'warn us against easy generalisations, and tear through the smugness of scholarly detachment.'[10] She is talking about sources such as diaries and letters written at the time of the events, but it is no less true for oral testimonies (though Kenan may judge differently, as just a few lines earlier she mentions 'fallible memoirs' with a touch of disdain).

Oral History

In general, historians agree that victims' testimonies should be used with caution. This is all the more true for oral testimonies. Human memory has always been a fallible instrument, and traumatic experiences from long ago pose an extra problem. In the late twentieth century a new discipline developed, Memory Studies, dealing with the interface of psychology, psychiatry, cultural anthropology, sociology, and history. Combining Memory

[5] Leon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate* (London: Elek Books), 1956, xiv, as quoted by Donald Bloxham, The victims, 32.

[6] Zoë Waxman, *Transcending History?* 143–144. She refers to David Patterson, *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 7.

[7] Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933–1945*, abridged by Orna Kenan (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

[8] Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: Norton, 2010).

[9] Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[10] Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, xi.

Studies and Trauma Studies,[11] as Cathy Caruth did,[12] proved a fruitful subfield. With regard to the Holocaust, scholars such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Lawrence Langer have been key. On the basis of mostly oral Holocaust testimonies these authors reflected on the functioning of memory in relation to traumatic events, such as in *Holocaust Testimony: The Ruins of Memory*[13] and *Testimony: Crises in Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*.[14]

Oral testimonies were collected starting shortly after the war. David Boder was the first to do so on audiotape in European displaced persons' camps. Several national research institutes on the war created their own collections, such as those in Amsterdam, Paris, Warsaw, and Jerusalem. Due to lack of available technology these testimonies were often taken down in shorthand instead of being recorded on tape. From the 1980s onwards this process of collecting testimonies received a major boost, becoming the aim of a number of projects, each with its own characteristics. The best known are those of Yad Vashem, the Fortunoff Collection at Yale University, and the Visual History Archive, also known as the Spielberg collection, initially called the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Archive, and in this book referred to as the VHA interviews. The latter, created from the mid-1990s with the revenue from Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*, comprises some 52,000 video interviews in 34 languages, recorded in 57 countries. The project met with serious criticism, in particular from scholars involved with the Fortunoff Archive,[15] and much of this criticism is legitimate, but the vast scope of the project and the well-designed search tools in the online catalogue make it a rich and very useful source for research for historians, as well as for memory scholars and trauma scholars.

[11] See for an overview of this combination: Karyn Ball, Trauma and Memory Studies. In *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Literature*, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1129. Accessed 26 October 2021.

[12] *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1995).

[13] Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimony: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

[14] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises in Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

[15] See, for instance, Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky, When is an interview an interview? Notes from listening to Holocaust survivors. *Poetics Today* 27(2) (2006), 431–449.

The VHA interviews are all roughly set up in the same way, using a predetermined schedule with time frames budgeted for each topic to be discussed. Such a schedule can work as a solid structure, but in some cases it can also have the effect of a constraining straightjacket. The interviews follow the chronology of the events, for which the survivor has previously filled out a questionnaire of more than 40 pages,[16] that the interviewer uses as a guideline to preserve the chronological order and the general outline of the story. About 20 per cent of the interview is allotted to the witness's pre-war life and another 20 per cent to his or her post-war life. The witnesses—the VHA prefers the term 'survivors'—are filmed in their homes with the camera in a fixed position, and the interviewer and camera crew do not pause for any emotional breakdowns or other disruptions that may occur. At the end the witness is asked for his or her message for future generations and each interview concludes with a portrait of the witness with his or her partner and offspring, and lastly with pictures of photos and artefacts that figure in the story.

Twenty-three interviews from this collection constitute the basis of this book. They will be supplemented by written testimonies, autobiographical texts, and personal interviews with 11 individuals, partly overlapping with the VHA, some of them new while others are survivors' children, and partly with witnesses close to the event but not part of the core group of Dutch diamond workers and their families.

The various testimonies are not mere illustration but the very power that drives the narrative. In a way, however, this book does use the testimonies for 'mining' facts that, put together, offer a coherent account of what happened to a group of Amsterdam diamond workers and their families. To this end, the book employs more or less the same method as, for example, Christopher Browning in *Remembering Survival*, Rebecca Clifford in *Survivors: Children's Lives After the Holocaust*,[17] and Diane Wolf in *Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden Children and Postwar Families in Holland*.[18] The result of studies like these is a kind of group biography.

The advantage of oral testimonies over any written source is the layer of non-verbal language that adds meaning. Facial expressions, hand gestures,

[16] Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015), 122.

[17] Rebecca Clifford, *Survivors: Children's Lives After the Holocaust* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2020).

[18] Diane L. Wolf, *Beyond Anne Frank: Hidden Children and Postwar Families in Holland* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2007).

posture, coughing, tears—while all these elements may not necessarily change the content of what is verbally told, they do contribute to the overall meaning of the story. Obviously, in written language such elements are difficult to transmit. Oral history theorist Lynn Abrams warns the oral historian to 'beware the power of the transcript to transform the source from its natural mutability into unnatural fixity.'[19] I have tried to include the most noticeable instances of non-verbal expression into the transcripts, but I add interpretations of them only in passing, so as not to interrupt the story unnecessarily. Almost every testimony quoted here would be deserving of a detailed description and analysis of those non-verbal elements and their meaning,[20] but that would be at the cost of the story these joint interviews have to tell, and it is telling the story of a group of Dutch-Jewish diamond workers and their wives and children, as much as possible in their own words, that is my main purpose.

The quotes from the oral testimonies are printed in italics to clearly distinguish them from the author's text, but—for the sake of readability—without reference to the source. They are rendered as literally as possible, with all the hiccups that are normal in spontaneous discourse, which means that sentences are sometimes left unfinished and that interviewees interrupt themselves and may make errors in grammar or choice of words. Repetitions are maintained as well, because these can be an indication of the importance the speaker attaches to what is said. Testimonies in Dutch are translated by me, without stating it each time those interviews are quoted; in the overview of the sources readers can see which interviews are originally in English and which are translated from Dutch. This poses an additional problem: the language errors made by survivors who emigrated to the United Stated or other English language countries. Sometimes one can detect their native Dutch in their grammar or choice of words. Wherever traceable and needed for a right understanding an explanation has been added in square brackets.

The first chapter offers an overview of the whole story of this group of diamond workers and their families, as well as, very briefly, the general background on the diamond trade in Amsterdam. The next chapters tell the story more in detail, quoting from a variety of testimonies. They

[19] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2016, 2nd edn), 24.

[20] See for instance Dawn Skorczewski and Bettine Siertsema, 'The kind of spirit people still kept': VHA testimonies of Amsterdam's Diamond Jews. *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 26(1) (2020), 62–84.