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From Spectral to Real Jews: Recent Trends in Flemish Writing about the Holocaust

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Introduction: Dutch-language Literature and the Holocaust

The generic label “Dutch-language literature” is usually applied to the output of writers originating from the Netherlands and the northern part of Belgium (Flanders). Although both countries had a sizeable Jewish presence at the outset of Second World War – mostly concentrated in large metropolitan areas such as Amsterdam, Antwerp and Brussels – the different historical genesis of these communities exerted considerable impact on the way in which the Holocaust would be dealt with in literary production. The Jewish community in the Netherlands, to begin with, came into being already in the early modern period – including both Sephardic and Ashkenazi groups – and was largely integrated into Dutch society by the beginning of the twentieth century (both linguistically and culturally speaking).¹ The Jewish population in

1 It is estimated that some 100,000 Jews were living in the Netherlands around 1900 (a number that would rise to 140,000 right before the outbreak of Second World War). For an extensive overview of Jewish contributions to literary production in the Netherlands, see Daphne Meijer, *Levi in de Lage Landen: 350 jaar Joodse schrijvers in de Nederlandse literatuur* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1999).

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interwar Belgium, in contrast, largely consisted of much more recent arrivals – economic immigrants and political refugees from Central and Eastern Europe – as a result of which it was much less visible (and integrated) within local cultural practices.² In addition to this, an equally significant difference in demographic dynamics between the Jewish population in the Netherlands and Belgium respectively can be observed in the Holocaust survival rates: while it is estimated that no less than three quarters of the Dutch Jewish community perished during Second World War, only 40% of the Jews residing on Belgian soil prior to 1940 did not make it until the end of the war.

Paradoxically, however, although only a limited number of Dutch Jews survived Second World War – especially when compared with the much higher percentage of survivors in Belgium – most Dutch-language testimonies and documents about the Holocaust came into being in the Netherlands, including works by both adult survivors (Marga Minco, Hanny Michaelis, Abel Herzberg) and child survivors (Ischa Meijer, Jona Oberski, Gerhard Durlacher, Judith Herzberg, Harry Mulisch).³ Dutch-speaking writers from Belgium, for their part, tended not to write about the Shoah, focusing instead on the massive cultural and social impact of wartime collaboration and postwar repression (a topic to which we will return in the middle part of this article).⁴ An

2 A case in point is the city of Antwerp: while it is estimated that the harbor city in northern Flanders had no more than 5,000 Jewish inhabitants in the late nineteenth century (some of them becoming increasingly active in the diamond trade), the interwar period saw a rapidly growing influx of Jewish newcomers, first from Polish provinces and cities such as Warsaw, Łódź, Krakow and Lwów and then – after Hitler's rise to power – from the German-speaking lands. Significantly, around 1930, half of the entire Jewish population living in Belgium – some 50,000 in total – was located in the wider Antwerp area, but only a small number of these Jewish city-dwellers (some 8%) had Belgian nationality. At the outset of Second World War, their number had risen to approximately 35,000 (and some 70,000 for the entire country). See Lieven Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad: een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880–1944)* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000), 10–11; 19–20.

3 See Dick van Galen Last and Rolf Wolfswinkel, *Anne Frank and After: Dutch Holocaust Literature in a Historical Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996) and Elrud Ibsch, *Overleven in verhalen: Van ooggetuigen naar "jonge Wilden"* (Antwerpen: Garant, 2013).

4 This is not to say, of course, that the Holocaust experience has not been documented by Belgian camp survivors. Significantly, however, barely any of these texts has gained wider societal and cultural resonance. For an exhaustive overview of the corpus, see Gie Van den Berghe, *Getuigen: een case-study over ego-documenten. Bibliografie van ego-documenten over de nationaal-socialistische kampen en gevangnissen, geschreven of getekend door "Belgische" (ex)-gevangen: Belgen, personen die in België gedomicilieerd waren of verbleven, en andere uit België gedeporteerde personen* (Brussel: Navorsings- en Studiecentrum voor de Geschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1995).

in-between position, finally, can be attributed to the Antwerp-born Holocaust survivor Ida Simons, who operated both in Belgium and the Netherlands and who would become known as the author of the bestselling (semi-autobiographical) novel *Een dwaze maagd* [*A Foolish Virgin*, 1960].

While some representatives of the so-called second generation entered the Dutch literary scene already in the 1970s and 1980s (Leon de Winter, Jessica Durlacher, Marcel Möring) – turning the Holocaust into a prominent theme of their creative output – the 1990s saw the emergence of new writers and new approaches. On the Dutch side, its most prominent manifestation is the literary output of Arnon Grunberg (born in 1971 out of a mother who survived Auschwitz and a father who lived through the war by hiding). In the decades to come, the prolific novelist, editor and essayist Grunberg would develop a very ambivalent (and highly ironic) attitude to his Jewish background and the legacy of the Holocaust.⁵ Flemish literature of the turn of the century, for its part, slowly shifted away from the predominant focus on wartime collaboration and saw a growing number of novels looking into the dramatic fate of Jewish characters, many of these stories being set, however, not in Belgium, but in distinctly foreign surroundings such as Germany and Italy.⁶ This brings us, finally, to another essential difference that sets the vast body of Dutch literature about the Holocaust apart from its Flemish counterpart, namely the extent to which the writers involved narratively engage with the metropolitan environment that hosted the largest group of Jewish residents right before and also during Second World War. Significantly, while the city of Amsterdam has come to occupy a prominent position in Dutch literature about the Shoah – starting already from early documents about wartime hiding such as Anne Frank's diary (1947) and Marga Minco's fictionalized chronicle *Het bittere kruid* [*Bitter Herbs*, 1957] – this is much less the case for the city of Antwerp which, until recently, has only occasionally appeared as the spatial backdrop of Holocaust-related fiction and non-fiction.

In view of this state of affairs, this article brings into focus two recent books by Flemish authors that refrain from relegating the Jewish residents of Antwerp and their profound entanglement in the Holocaust to the diegetic margins, namely Jeroen Olyslaegers's novel *Wil* [*Will*, 2016] and Margot Vanderstraeten's literary reportage *Mazzel tov. Mijn leven als werkstudente bij een Orthodox-joodse familie* [*Mazel Tov. The Story of My Extraordinary Friendship with*

5 See Yra Van Dijk, "Uitblinken in overleven: de erfenis van de Shoah bij Arnon Grunberg," in *Het leven volgens Arnon Grunberg: de wereld als poppenkast*, ed. Johan Goud (Kampen, Kapellen: Klement; Pelckmans, 2010), 74–104.

6 See Jan Lensen, *De foute oorlog: schuld en nederlaag in het Vlaamse proza over de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen: Garant, 2014), 204.

an Orthodox Jewish Family,⁷ 2017]. As I will argue, not only do these two books represent a new stage – or at least a new quality – in the Flemish literary engagement with the Holocaust, they also nicely complement each other in terms of narrative approach and in terms of historical scope.

Second World War and the Shoah Through a Flemish Lens

As already indicated in the introductory section of this article, the profound differences between Dutch and Flemish Holocaust representation in the long post-war era can partly be attributed to the fact that the Jewish population in interwar Flanders was much less linguistically and culturally integrated into the social fabric of the host community (notwithstanding the strong Jewish economic involvement in the Antwerp diamond trade). An equally important factor that turned out to have a decisive impact on Holocaust representation and the memory of Second World War in Flemish literature is the nationality conflict that started to dominate Belgian politics from the early twentieth century onwards, deepening the political divide between the Francophone elites, on the one hand, and Flemish nationalists striving for cultural and political autonomy, on the other. Importantly, while a considerable number of supporters of the so-called Flemish Movement actively engaged in wartime collaboration or even went to fight, alongside the Germans, on the Eastern Front, the repression that befell these wartime collaborators in the immediate aftermath of Second World War was used by people within the Flemish Movement to turn the perpetrator-victim dyad upside down and to shift focus to the disproportionate injustice and violence suffered by the victims of the postwar repression who, in their view, deserved to be rehabilitated by the Belgian state. Along similar lines, there has been a very strong thematic focus on the idealistic intentions of these Flemish collaborators, preoccupied, first and foremost, with the noble cause of Flemish autonomy and with the Catholic struggle against Communism rather than with the spread of national socialist ideology and antisemitism.

In his book *De foute oorlog* [The wrong war], literary scholar Jan Lensen offers a detailed overview of Flemish literary responses to the Second World War, from the early postwar years up to the first decade of the new millennium.⁸ The final chapter of Lensen's book is exclusively dedicated to the Holocaust and seeks to describe some of the patterns that return in Flemish literary

7 J. S. Margot, *Mazel Tov: The Story of My Extraordinary Friendship with an Orthodox Jewish Family*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle (London: Pushkin Press, 2021). First edition: 2017.

8 Ibid.

Holocaust memory.⁹ As Lensen's analysis neatly reveals, rarely if ever does the Holocaust occupy center stage in Second World War fiction from Flanders: Jewish suffering was perceived as only one element of many atrocities committed during the Second World War, and if there was a narrative focus on the concentration and extermination camps, then the predicament of the Jewish inmates would typically be focalized from the perspective of Belgian or Flemish resistance fighters. As the opposite side of the same coin, those wartime stories that do have a Flemish setting and feature Jewish characters, tend to highlight the Otherness of the Jews, on the one hand by foregrounding their foreign (non-Belgian) origins, on the other hand by connecting their outsider position to the long-standing tradition of antisemitism among Flemish Catholics. Finally and perhaps most significantly, there have barely been any novels that locate the action in the Belgian city that had the largest community of Jewish residents at the outset of the Second World War, namely Antwerp.¹⁰

Quite ironically, one of the very few early books that do hint at the climate of wartime antisemitism in the Antwerp area was written by a contemporary Dutch writer, namely the bestselling novel *Twee koffers vol* [*The Shovel and the Loom*,¹¹ 1993] authored by the Amsterdam-based Carl Friedman.¹² The story is told in retrospect through the lens of Chaya, a student of philosophy who works in Antwerp as a nanny for the Kalmans – a large family of strictly observant Hasidic Jews – and whose (largely assimilated) Jewish parents are Holocaust survivors. Significantly, however, the girl's parents display strongly diverging attitudes towards the Shoah and its aftermath: whereas her mother wants to move on and tries to leave behind the past as much as possible, her father is obsessed with two suitcases full of personal belongings which he buried in the ground in Nazi-occupied Antwerp, shortly before being arrested as a member of the local

9 *Ibid.*, 197–207.

10 For the sake of completeness, it should be added here that there have been two novels set in the Antwerp region that feature Jewish protagonists, namely *De muggen* [The mosquitos, 1973] by Jos Vandelloo and more recently *Bewegingen* [Movements, 1999] by Rony Van Gastel. These books, however, concentrate on postwar and present-day antisemitism rather than on what happened to the Antwerp Jewish community during the war. Another case in point is Tom Lanoye's recent novel *De draaischijf* [The turntable, 2022] which – very much like Olyslaegers's *Will* – focuses on wartime collaboration and antisemitism in Nazi-occupied Antwerp and equally draws on recent historical research, but features as its main non-Aryan character an assimilated Jewish actress from the Netherlands, and not from Antwerp itself (Lea Liebermann).

11 Carl Friedman, *The Shovel and the Loom* (New York: Persea, 1997). First edition: 1993.

12 Friedman's book has been translated in English, French, German, Russian and Hungarian and was adapted for the screen in 1997, under the title *Lost Luggage*.

Jewish resistance. The final part of the novel features a highly symbolic scene that centers around two Antwerp police officers who have been summoned to escort the perpetually digging Jewish father back to his apartment:

“This afternoon we were called because this gentleman, your husband, was digging a hole in soil that is private property,” declared the older one of the two. He threw my mother a questioning glance. “The manager of the property had enjoined him to leave, but he refused. He said he was searching for two valises. Then we became involved and talked with him.”¹³

The intervention of the police crew ends on the following warning given by the second officer:

“The damage isn’t much. You’ll receive the bill, and that will be the end of the matter. But if you start digging again tomorrow or next week, then you’ll make things difficult for us. We’ll have to take other measures, whether we like it or not. Do you understand?” My father nodded. “After all, Antwerp is not a sandbox. If everyone were to start digging here and there, nothing would be left. That’s why we’re going to take possession of your shovel.”¹⁴

Through the lens of hindsight, the confiscation of the shovel by two Antwerp police officers who want to prevent their city from being transformed into a “sandbox” may be said to symbolize the long-standing absence of thorough academic research into the wartime fate of the Antwerp Jews in general and the involvement of the Antwerp police in their persecution in particular. Since the late 1990s, however, our knowledge about the specific situation in Nazi-occupied Antwerp has been significantly expanded and adjusted, most notably thanks to the efforts of two Belgian historians, namely Lieven Saerens – author of the book *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad: een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880–1944)* [Foreigners in a metropolis. A history of Antwerp and its Jewish population (1880–1944)] – and Herman Van Goethem – author of the recently published book *1942: het jaar van de stilte* [1942. The year of silence].¹⁵ In both monographs, the year 1942 is granted particular importance not only because it was the starting date of the deportation of some 25,000 Bel-

¹³ Friedman, *The Shovel*, 154.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁵ Lieven Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad: een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880–1944)* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000); Herman van Goethem, *1942: het jaar van de stilte* (Kalmthout, België: Polis, 2019).

gian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau, but also because it marked a series of violent incidents that point to the active involvement of the Antwerp police in anti-Jewish raids and roundups, under the supervision of the then Catholic mayor of the city (Leo Delwaide sr.). The compliant attitude of the local authorities vis-a-vis Nazi policies and instructions at least partly explains why a rather substantial amount of the Jewish residents of the city fell victim to persecution and extermination (bringing the survival rates of the Antwerp Jewish population much closer to the Dutch average than to the higher Belgian average). Importantly, although allegations against the mayor and the local police force had been made already in the early post-war decades, the historians involved managed to substantiate these lingering claims by means of extensive archival research (which would lead up, in turn, to a series of commemorative actions and symbolic interventions in the public sphere, most notably the official apologies on behalf of the city council offered in 2007 by the then mayor of Antwerp Patrick Janssens). Along similar lines, the first of the two books under discussion in this chapter – Jeroen Olyslaegers's thoroughly documented historical fiction *Will* – can be seen as a literary follow-up to these recent advances in Flemish Holocaust historiography. Its most obvious diegetic exemplification is the book's protagonist and narrator Wilfried Wils who, at the very end of his life, looks back at – and tries to justify – his involvement as an auxiliary policeman in antisemitic violence in Nazi-occupied Antwerp.

Will Wils: Facing the Jewish Spectre in Wartime and Postwar Antwerp

Quite obviously, with its focus on the ambiguities surrounding Flemish wartime collaboration, Olyslaegers's *Will* may be said to further develop certain tendencies and topics that have been central to Flemish literature throughout the long postwar period. From the very outset of the book, the first-person narrator puts much effort into portraying his opportunistic behavior against the backdrop of the increasingly chaotic and confusing playing field of wartime occupation. Through the eyes of Wilfried Wils, it is Pieter Bruegel's world-famous painting of the "Dulle Griet" ("Mad Meg") – twice referred to in the novel – that captures most aptly this chaotic playing field:

Mad Meg rages and rants through an insane landscape full of war and memories, rendered in bright reds, blacks and browns. Eyes wide to see everything and nothing. Has she caused this horror or is she just caught up in the general bastardry and playing along?¹⁶

¹⁶ Jeroen Olyslaegers, *Will*, trans. David Colmer (London: Pushkin Press, 2020), 19.

After joining the Antwerp police force and “playing along” with the local Jew hunter Meanbeard in the early 1940s, Will’s personal situation becomes even more complicated when the relatives of his girlfriend Yvette decide to involve him in providing (remunerated) assistance to a hiding Jew, Chaim Lizke. The ambiguity of Will’s position is nicely captured by the very name of his function in Dutch (“hulpagent,” which literally means “auxiliary policeman”): rather than being a mere bystander, he is an agent who offers – not quite disinterestedly – help on both sides, to the German perpetrators and the persecuted Jews alike. What is more, since the novel presents itself as a story being told in retrospect by an unreliable and manipulative narrator complicit in war crimes, Olyslaegers’s book could be seen as another variation on what has been called “first-person perpetrator fiction” about the Holocaust.¹⁷ In addition to this, the very fact that the narrator repeatedly addresses his great-grandson – the fourth generation – as the narratee of the text raises a series of questions about the role of familial and communicative memory some seventy-five years after Second World War has ended.

For the specific purpose of this article, however, more significant and important is the protagonist’s repeated engagement with the novel’s most prominent Jewish character, the aforementioned Chaim Lizke. The scene of their very first encounter – depicted in the first part of the book – is a key moment in the storyline, as it portrays Will and his colleague Lode quite literally acting as *Mitläufer* vis-à-vis the Nazi occupiers: the two Antwerp cops serve as city guides for two German field gendarmes who are expected to bring the Lizke family to the point from which they will be deported. As such, the scene marks the very beginning of the slippery slope on which Will begins to move as a “helping agent” and which culminates in his active involvement in the anti-Jewish raid of August 28, 1942:

And off we go. Us in front with one of the Germans beside us, behind us the foreigners with the other field arsehole. The woman won’t stop crying. Her husband whispers quietly, trying to keep her spirits up. In Polish, I think, but it could be Hebrew or God knows what. [...] But we’re a part of it, we’re walking along, we’re being obedient and respectable and accompanying the stinking gang to an address on a scrap of paper.¹⁸

17 Erin Heather McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2021).

18 Olyslaegers, *Will*, 10–11.

The linguistic and cultural distance that separates the narrator from the Lizke family – a “stinking gang” of “foreigners” – is made even more palpable in the scenes that are set in Lizke’s hiding place (after the Polish Jew has managed to escape from deportation, in the second part of the book).

Importantly, there is one particular qualification that the narrator repeatedly uses in his close encounters with the hiding Jew, namely “enigma.”¹⁹ In the original version of the book, Olyslaegers uses the Dutch word “raadsel,” which can be translated either as “riddle,” “enigma” or “mystery.” As it appears, its meaning can be situated at three different, but interrelated levels, namely the cultural, the cognitive and the psychological. First of all, the motif exemplifies the (perceived) cultural distance that separates both characters and the profound lack of communication that goes along with it.²⁰ In this line of interpretation, it is fair to say that Olyslaegers’s novel builds further on the profound atmosphere of Otherness that has tended to surround the portrayal of Jewish characters in Flemish Holocaust writing of the past few decades. Meanwhile, however, in view of the fact that the text of *Will* abounds in metaphors taken from the semantic fields of performance, playing and gaming, the notion of “mystery” may be said to operate on a different level as well. In fact, there are two types of games that play a prominent role throughout the novel – chess and card-playing – each of which evokes different associations. Inasmuch as game theory defines the first type as a game with “perfect information” – meaning that each player has the ability to make calculated decisions based on the knowledge of previously occurred events and actions – most card games, in contrast, strongly rely on secret and fragmented information (epitomized by those cards that remain hidden from view for the other players) and on chance (lack of control over which cards each player will be dealt).

Both as the novel’s main character and as its narrator, Wilfried Wils may be said to act and behave as a player of sorts, which also informs his transformation from being a mere bystander to becoming a helper, on the side of the collaborators and the resistance movement alike. As a matter of fact, one could argue that the first important calculated decision he makes at the very outset of the war – becoming an auxiliary policeman in order to avoid forced labor in Nazi Germany – is a chess move based on “perfect information.” Soon after, however, the playing field generated by Nazi occupation becomes much

19 “Knock-knock, the door opens and I am welcomed by the enigma Chaim Lizke. [...] That was how, soon afterwards, I came to appear before the enigma Chaim Lizke with a linen bag full of books, all German.” *Ibid.*, 152–53.

20 Significantly, throughout the novel, Will and Lizke exchange no more than seven or eight sentences, and the only common ground between them, as it appears, is their joint interest in literature, embodied by the German-language books that Will brings along.

more chaotic and replete with fragmented information (of which the previously quoted reference to the “Mad Meg” painting bears obvious evidence). Will’s repeated encounters with the Jewish diamond trader Lizke add to his profound confusion, as he tries to figure out how the relationship and the interactions between Lizke and the relatives of his girlfriend actually look like. Significantly, when he is speculating about the actual nature of their “deal,” the motif of card-playing resurfaces once again.²¹ However, in spite of the narrator’s claim that the “cards are on the table,” Lizke and his intentions ultimately remain an enigma to him, and Will continues to be cognitively struck by the Jew’s apparent indifference and detachment.

Last but not least, Will’s encounters with the Polish Jew Chaim Lizke do not only constitute a cultural and a cognitive challenge, but also turn into a psychological burden. While, initially, it is Will who tends to “appear before Lizke” in the Jew’s secret Antwerp hideout, the roles are soon reversed, when Lizke starts to appear before Will, outside the narrow confines of his hiding place, first of all, in the policeman’s dreams:

I can’t have him staying here much longer. He’s started appearing in my dreams, sometimes wordless, but very present. [...] Lizke has to go. He’s getting under my skin, without me being able to work out why.²²

Lizke’s next unexpected and unsettling appearance is situated against the backdrop of the antisemitic roundup in the city reception hall in late August 1942, during which the Antwerp Jew hunter Meanbeard tries to catch as many Jews as possible, not without Will’s direct involvement as a “helping agent”:

Cries of horror pass through the hall. Then I finally recognize the shadow on my left as he takes advantage of the confusion to make himself scarce. For less than a second our eyes meet. Chaim Lizke. I don’t know if he recognizes me and before I’ve had a chance to let it sink in, he’s gone. It’s almost incomprehensible.²³

Significantly, as the story further develops, the “enigma” Lizke begins to take up yet another form, that of a shadow or a specter, located somewhere between

²¹ “Am I the first one to think of this or have father and son considered it too? Can the father still think clearly without being distracted by greed and profit? Because the cards are on the table. If this is just about the money, it’s the stowaway who’s in charge of the boat.” *Ibid.*, 153.

²² *Ibid.*, 155.

²³ *Ibid.*, 147.

life and death, presence and absence. Even after his mysterious disappearance at the Antwerp railway station, Lizke's silhouette continues to haunt Will, for instance at the public presentation – already after the war – of his poetry debut (ambiguously titled *Confessions of a Comedian*):

The door opens and I think, "Not him, surely?" No, it's not Chaim Lizke. Just some wanker who looks like him. He's been swallowed whole by history and then discreetly puked up in a corner as a ghost. He sometimes appears here in this bar, on other occasions, somewhere else. Sometimes his spirit demands atonement, sometimes he's melancholy. Sometimes he seems to belong, mostly not at all. That's no way to find peace, anyone could tell him that. But having a wandering ghost that terrifies everyone now and then is preferable to being forced to admit that he was ever real.²⁴

Slowly, but surely the unresolved enigma "Lizke" – ephemeral rather than real – becomes the main figure onto which the first-person narrator projects his feelings of remorse and regret, in a desperate attempt to render the decisions he made during the war comprehensible for his great-grandson, the addressee of the text. Quite obviously, the trope of the Jewish revenant can be closely connected to what has been called the "spectral turn" in memory studies, that is, the increasing attention for the supernatural and the fantastic – ghosts, spirits and other spectral creatures – in contemporary artistic responses to the Holocaust and other traumatizing events.²⁵ Lizke's uncanny reappearances throughout Olyslaegers's novel may be said to epitomize the enduring lack of closure caused by enforced disappearance – of Lizke himself (within the diegetic world of the novel) and the more than 10,000 deported Jews who did not return to Antwerp after the war (outside the story world). What is more, the trope of the wandering (Jewish) ghost in *Will* cannot be separated from the particular way in which urban topography is dealt with throughout the novel: more often than not, Will's retrospective narration is physically anchored in specific places which the protagonist revisits in the long post-war period and which set in motion a wide range of associations and reminiscences related to the space and time of Nazi-occupied Antwerp.

The haunting reappearance of the "spectral Jew" strongly intertwines with the particular narrative framework within which Wilfried Wils tells his story, in the seemingly confidential form of a testament and a testimony written for and addressed to his great-grandson. The familial context adds a sense

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁵ Zuzanna Dziuban, ed., *The Spectral Turn* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018).

of sincerity and confession to the story which the narrator shares with his offspring. Along similar lines, as a result of the familial narrative setup, the reader becomes part of an intimate relationship and is made familiar with what seem to be long-hidden family secrets. The need for authentic and sincere intergenerational communication about the lingering legacy of Second World War and the Holocaust gains additional salience and prominence when we are informed – only at the very end of the novel – that Will's one and only granddaughter has committed suicide after learning (indirectly) about her beloved grandfather's double-faced behavior and actions during Second World War (leaving behind a death note with the telling message "Granddad is a bastard"). Importantly, however, unlike many trauma-laden stories created by representatives of the second or third generation, Will's account is not told from the perspective of a child or grandchild that embarks on a detective-like quest for the truth about the war, but rather by the perpetrator himself. To return, once more, to the motif of card-playing, it is ultimately the narrator who holds the cards against his chest and decides which information will be revealed at what point, which – apart from being a common suspense strategy in mystery fiction – can also be related to the common technique of shielding in first-person perpetrator fiction.²⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly, the most astonishing "revelation" comes at the very end of the storytelling act, when the unreliable and manipulative narrator plays his last trump and the reader suddenly learns that there is no great-grandson at all.

While the metafictional *coup de théâtre* at the end of the novel may leave the reader with a feeling of unease and discomfort – urging them to reconsider the entire narrative construction of the book – it also reveals an alternative, artistically attractive way of evoking a sense of connectedness and communality with the wider audience in a time when the Second World War and the Holocaust cease to be the direct object of communicative familial memory. Not coincidentally, in the closing sentences of the novel, the narrator addresses his imagined audience not with the word "reader," but with the word "listener," which adds a sense of spatial proximity between sender and receiver. While, on the one hand, the suicide of the granddaughter and the non-existence of the great-grandson epitomize the problematic lack of intergenerational communication and continuity within the Wils family itself, Olyslaegers's engaging text about the legacy and impact of Second World War and the Shoah, on the other hand, displays a strong desire to establish a "living connection" with the "fourth generation" as the first one deprived of a direct

26 Significantly, from the very outset of the novel, the narrative act is associated with card-playing: "Does that name ring any bells? It may very well. But I'm not going to lay all my cards on the table at once. Read on and all will be revealed." Olyslaegers, *Will*, 8.

physical bond with those who actually made it through the war (inflictors, observers and targets of antisemitic aggression alike).

The Flemish Nanny in *Mazel Tov*: Facing Jewish Reticence after the Holocaust

Inasmuch as Olyslaegers's thematic focus on the active involvement of the Antwerp police in anti-Jewish wartime violence adds a particular twist to the shovel confiscation scene from *The Shovel and the Loom*, Margot Vanderstraeten's literary reportage *Mazel Tov* at least partly resonates with another prominent motif from Friedman's 1993 novel, namely the main character's part-time occupation as a nanny employed by a large family of Hasidic Jews based in Antwerp. In three chronologically ordered parts that cover a period of almost thirty years, from the late 1980s up till the 2010s, the Flemish journalist Vanderstraeten extensively relates about her former work as a tutor for the children of the Schneiders, an Orthodox family living in the Jewish district in Antwerp. If *Will* revolves around the forced disappearance of the Antwerp Jews during wartime occupation, then *Mazel Tov* is all about their reappearance and reemergence in the long postwar period. What is more, in contrast with the unreliable narration developed by Olyslaegers in *Will*, Vanderstraeten's *Mazel Tov* is much more solidly grounded in an autobiographical and referential pact with the reader (which urges us to believe that the first-person narrator indeed worked for and engaged in a close friendship with an Orthodox Jewish family during her college days in Antwerp).

Significantly, although the primary purpose of the book is to gain and provide insight in the world of contemporary European Jewry, the experience and the legacy of the Shoah run like a leitmotiv through the three subsequent parts of *Mazel Tov*. Throughout the book, the Second World War is repeatedly brought up by the narrator and her interlocutors, seemingly only in passing, but with increasing resonance (of which the repeated recurrence of signifiers such as "the Holocaust," "Auschwitz" and "the camps" bears obvious evidence). The inevitable interconnectedness of the author's present-oriented (semi-journalistic) approach and a past-looking reflex is aptly exemplified in the scene that describes the female narrator's first encounter with the grandmother of the Schneider children, Auschwitz survivor Gabriella Pappenheim:

Before I knew the Schneiders, I'd never met any Orthodox Jews. Now, for the first time, I was in the company of someone who'd been in a camp, who'd survived the Holocaust.²⁷

²⁷ Margot, *Mazel Tov*, 56.

Characteristically, the legacy of the Holocaust moves center stage in four subsequent conversations, each one of which represents a different generational perspective. It opens with a conversation with Jakov Schneider (the grandson), in chapter 16 of Part 1, about his school visit to the former Nazi internment camp Fort of Breendonk (located 20 km south to Antwerp) and the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, then followed by a longer conversation between the narrator and Aaron Schneider (the son) about his mother's wartime experiences and his own (as a child survivor), in chapter 22 of Part 1, and culminating in a conversation with the mother herself, in Chapter 42 of part 1. In each of these three cases, however, Vanderstraeten's curiosity about the Holocaust experience is met with great reserve from the part of her Jewish interlocutors. At the core of this omnipresent reticence is the repeated claim that the Shoah is definitely not a taboo topic for the Schneiders, but first and foremost something that should be dealt with within the familial context. Characteristically, another lexical signifier that often reappears in this context – some 15 times throughout the entire book – is the word “silence.” As Aaron Schneider tries to explain to the Flemish tutor of his children:

We Jews have always had a great feel for language. But all the words in the world would not suffice to describe what it was like in the camps or to comprehend the manifestation of so much evil. How could anyone who has not experienced these horrors talk about them? When even those who *have* gone through these things and survived are unable or unwilling to find words to describe them? Do you understand why we choose to be silent? Silence is the way of least betrayal.²⁸

Later on, this viewpoint is seconded by his mother Gabriella in the following way:

“After our first anniversary, my husband and I resolved never again to speak of the war and the camps,” she said. “Only if the children asked us about it. Then we would answer their questions. But they rarely if ever did.”²⁹

As a result, the reader is given only very scarce information on the wartime fate of the Schneiders. We learn, in passing, that the Antwerp-born Aaron Schneider survived the war as a child, but whether he eventually ended up with his mother in Auschwitz can be deduced only indirectly. Along similar lines, we can only speculate to what extent the Schneider family was directly

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

affected by the violent events in Antwerp that have been extensively documented by Second World War historians such as Saelens and Van Goethem and subsequently portrayed by a novelist like Olyslaegers. As such, *Will* and *Mazel Tov* nicely complement each other in their thematic engagement with the Holocaust experience in a distinctly Flemish (Antwerp) context and invite to be read in tandem. Whereas Olyslaegers gives an – admittedly rather enigmatic – face to the direct victims of the collaborationist tendencies of the Antwerp authorities under Nazi occupation, Vanderstraeten’s investigative approach offers a rich sociological panorama of the city’s Jewish community, both through an historical and a present-day lens.

In the final part of *Mazel Tov*, Vanderstraeten’s learning process as a non-Jew comes full circle in her fourth and final conversation, this time with a representative of the fourth generation, Benjamin Schneider (son of Yakov, grandson of Aaron and great-grandson of the late Gabriella), who turns out to be very eager to ask his grandparents about their war experience. If these curiosity-driven conversations point to Vanderstraeten’s desire to approach the Holocaust in a rather direct and straightforward manner, then most of the book, however, bears evidence of a different strategy. More often than not, in her approach of Jewish issues, Vanderstraeten combines a dialogic stance – asking questions in order to further understanding – with what could be called a relational perspective: when engaging with her Jewish acquaintances, their values and their experiences, she tends to look for points of connection within her own familial, social and cultural background. This applies, for instance, to the numerous references to the childhood years she spent in the multiethnic and multireligious environment of the coal mining region in the eastern part of Belgium (the province of Limburg). The same goes for the way in which some of her relationships – most notably her two partners, first the Iranian refugee Nima and then the Dutchman Martinus – are inscribed into the Jewish storyline and serve to shed additional light on her experiences and interactions within the Antwerp Orthodox Jewish community. Less prominent, but equally striking are the fragments in which the narrator suggests a sense of communality between the position of Holocaust survivor Gabriella Pappenheim and that of Nima’s mentally tormented sister, the Iranian refugee Marjane. The aforementioned quote about the Jewish grandmother continues as follows:

I felt a deep longing to tell her [Gabrielle Pappenheim – author’s note] all about Marjane. It seemed to me she’d be able to understand Marjane’s pain, and perhaps know how we should deal with it.

Granny Pappenheim took my hand. Looking at her hand, it was impossible to conceive that less than fifty years ago, this imposing woman had been taken

off to Auschwitz. That *that* hand had experienced the camp. She smiled at me, then looked at the chair next to her, which I took to be an invitation to sit down. [...] She continued to hold my hand for a while, squeezing it as children do, and lovers. Her warmth spilt over into me, but the sweat on my back felt cold.³⁰

Importantly, the sense of intercultural and intergenerational connection that is suggested here takes on a purely physical and affective form, without being expressed on the verbal level. This fragment, alongside many others in Vanderstraeten's book, bears evidence of the narrator's attempt to strike a balance between the universal and the particular, the familiar and the unknown, the generic and the unique, without falling in the trap of either universalist generalizations or culturalist reductionism.

Last but not least, Vanderstraeten's both prudent and thoughtful engagement with the delicate legacy of the Holocaust is in line with another element that gains prominence and significance over the course of the book, namely the awareness that cultures should not be seen as enclosed static entities that allow for easy categorization and clear-cut distinctions. Already in the first part of the book, the complexity of national, religious, ethnic and linguistic identities and affiliations is neatly exemplified when Aaron Schneider introduces himself to his female interlocutor – and to the readership of the book – as “a French-speaking Flemish Jew born in Antwerp, with roots that started off somewhere in Hungary, but also lie in the Netherlands”³¹. One could say, of course, that this kind of transnational self-identification ties in with the well-established perception of Jews as the “ultimate Europeans.” Towards the end of the book, however, the historically rooted identification with Europe is given a more pessimistic twist, especially when it turns out that most of the Schneider children and their offspring ultimately seek their fortune beyond the European continent, either in Israel or in North America. Along similar lines, the centrality of Antwerp as the spatial backdrop of the story – most notably in the 44 chapters that cover the first “phase” of the book (1987–1993) – gradually gives way to the growing prominence of more distant locations such as New York and Tel Aviv. That being said, it should be noted here that the publication of *Mazel Tov* in 2017 – followed by multiple reprints and foreign-language editions – has been one of the key drivers in the growing public interest in the cultural, religious and professional activities of the Antwerp Jewish community (of which the recent Israeli-Belgian Netflix series *Rough Diamonds* is perhaps the most obvious international example).

³⁰ Margot, *Mazel Tov*, 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

Concluding Remarks

It would, undoubtedly, be a broad interpretive stretch to state that the Holocaust experience occupies center stage in the two recently published Flemish books under scrutiny in this article. Quite obviously, the two authors involved remain at great distance from the “concentrationary universe” of ghettos, railway platforms, cattle trains, extermination camps and gas chambers as it has been depicted in so many documents, testimonies and texts about the Shoah. At the same time, however, by bringing into view both the city and the community that were most deeply affected by antisemitic violence in Nazi-occupied Belgium, both Olyslaegers and Vanderstraeten and the first-person narrators of their respective Antwerp-set books may be said to bring the Holocaust “home” to a Flemish readership. What is more, in their close engagement with the wartime fate of the Antwerp Jews, *Will* and *Mazel Tov* may be said to represent two opposite sides of the same coin. Whereas Olyslaegers’s novel deploys the framework of imaginative literature to foreground and criticize the homogenizing features of antisemitic discourse – the radical racialization of Jewishness that ultimately led up to the Holocaust – Vanderstraeten’s anthropological and investigative perspective turns its eyes and ears to the complex amalgam of national, religious, ethnic and linguistic identities and affiliations that has shaped (and continues to shape) the Jewish world both before and after the Shoah. While Olyslaegers’s largely fictional, but extensively researched approach uses the mysterious figure of diamond trader Chaim Lizke to tackle the long-standing silence surrounding the wartime fate of the Antwerp Jews and the complicity of local officials in their extermination, Vanderstraeten combines a past-looking perspective with a present- and future-oriented point of view, using her close encounters and conversations with the family of the much less fictional and much less mysterious diamond trader Aaron Schneider to equally fill up some of the historical and memorial gaps that have arisen over the course of the long twentieth century. Returning, by way of conclusion, to some of the motifs introduced by Carl Friedman in her 1993 novel *The Shovel and the Loom*, one could say that both Olyslaegers and Vanderstraeten have been eagerly digging holes in the “sandbox” of twentieth century Jewish Antwerp, equipped with very different tools and starting out in quite different places, but eventually bumping into each other somewhere halfway.

Abstract

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From Spectral to Real Jews: Recent Trends in Flemish Writing about the Holocaust

This article looks into contemporary Dutch-language prose related to the Holocaust, with a particular focus on two recent bestselling books authored by Flemish writers, namely Jeroen Olyslaegers's novel *Wil* [*Will*, 2016] and Margot Vanderstraeten's literary reportage *Mazzel tov. Mijn leven als werkstudente bij een Orthodox-joodse familie* [*Mazel Tov. The Story of My Extraordinary Friendship with an Orthodox Jewish Family*, 2017]. After sketching out the specificity of Flemish Holocaust representation and memory within the broader context of Dutch-language literary and cultural production, the article concentrates on the diverging ways in which the two Antwerp-set books under discussion thematize the presence of a significant Jewish community in the largest city of Flanders as well as its profound historical entanglement in the Holocaust. As will be argued, not only do these two books represent a new stage – or at least a new quality – in the Flemish literary engagement with the Shoah, they also nicely complement each other in terms of narrative approach and in terms of historical scope.

Keywords

Dutch-language literature, Holocaust memory, Flanders, Second World War, Antwerp