



SITE OF **DEPORTATION**  
SITE OF **MEMORY**

**The Amsterdam  
Hollandsche Schouwburg  
and the Holocaust**

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EDITED BY Frank van Vree,  
Hetty Berg, and David Duindam

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*The Amsterdam Hollandsche Schouwburg  
and the Holocaust*

*Edited by Frank van Vree, Hetty Berg, and David Duindam*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Table of Contents

Preface	7
<i>Emile Schrijver</i>	
Introduction	9
<i>Frank van Vree, Hetty Berg, and David Duindam</i>	
1. Occupation, Persecution, and Destruction: The Netherlands under German Rule, 1940-1945	13
<i>Frank van Vree</i>	
2. In and Around the Theatre: Jewish Life in Amsterdam in the Prewar Era	35
<i>Frank van Vree with contributions from Hetty Berg and Joost Groeneboer</i>	
3. In the Shadow of Nazism: Theatre and Culture on the Eve of Deportation	71
<i>Esther Göbel</i>	
4. 'Building of Tears': Sixteen Months as a Site of Assembly and Deportation	111
<i>Annemiek Gringold</i>	
5. Site of Memory, Site of Mourning	155
<i>David Duindam</i>	
Sources, Literature, and Quotations	191
About the Authors	203

## Preface

The first edition of this standard work on the Hollandsche Schouwburg was published in Dutch by Amsterdam University Press in 2013. It anticipated a need for information among the general public and quickly sold out. The need for this fully revised version, intended for an international audience, which includes the most recent insights, was just as great. I am pleased that this gap in the literature on the persecution and murder of 102,000 Dutch Jews has now been filled, thanks to the editorial team of Professor Frank van Vree, Dr David Duindam, and Hetty Berg. This is the first publication in English to be fully dedicated to this unique historical site in Amsterdam.

The Hollandsche Schouwburg is unique for various reasons. Nowhere else in Europe has another site of deportation in a large city been preserved in such good condition. In addition, its future has been assured by the Hollandsche Schouwburg Foundation, which supervises the site's use as a war monument, and by the connection with the Jewish Historical Museum, which has been responsible for its daily management for a number of decades. The Hollandsche Schouwburg is visited by an ever-growing number of visitors, many tens of thousands each year, who want to remember their family members, fellow believers or compatriots, or who are seeking signs of and information about the Holocaust in the Dutch context.

Since May 2016, this informative role has been shared with the National Holocaust Museum that is being founded; it is the final component in the Jewish Cultural Quarter, which also includes the Jewish Historical Museum, the JHM Children's Museum, and the majestic seventeenth-century Portuguese Synagogue. The National Holocaust Museum is being established in the former Reformed Teacher Training College, which played a role in the rescue of hundreds of children from the crèche that lay opposite of the Hollandsche Schouwburg. In a few years, the Hollandsche Schouwburg, as a site of deportation, and the former Reformed Teacher Training College, as a historical rescue site and the first and only museum in the Netherlands to be completely dedicated to commemorating the murder of the Dutch Jews, will together form the National Holocaust Museum. We believe that this will make an important contribution to the Dutch museum landscape, to the commemoration of the persecution in the Netherlands, to the provision of reliable information, and to countering growing indifference in society.

Professor Emile Schrijver  
General Director, Jewish Cultural Quarter

# Introduction

The Hollandsche Schouwburg, which lies opposite Artis Zoo in Amsterdam's leafy Plantage neighbourhood, is one of the most emotionally charged, contested, and meaningful sites in the Netherlands. In July 1942, this building – where famous names in the history of Dutch theatre once celebrated triumphs – was requisitioned by the Nazis as an assembly and deportation site for Jews, with the intention of making the whole of the Netherlands *judenfrei*. A great number of Jews from Amsterdam, but also Jews from elsewhere in the Netherlands, were assembled in the Schouwburg. Between 20 July 1942 and 19 November 1943, more than 45,000 Jews, including refugees from Germany and Austria, were interned at the Hollandsche Schouwburg for shorter or longer periods. They were then put onto transports, mainly bound for the transit camp Westerbork in the north of the Netherlands, or for the concentration camp Vught in the south; from there, they were sent onwards to the east, to the concentration and extermination camps of Sobibór, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen, Bergen-Belsen, and Theresienstadt.

In short, the Hollandsche Schouwburg fulfilled the same role as the notorious Drancy internment camp to the northeast of Paris, or the somewhat smaller Belgian assembly place at the Dossin Barracks in Mechelen. It is such an important site; yet, until today, no book – nor even an article – was available to enable those who do not read Dutch to discover what had happened there. This volume aims to change this, by telling the history of the Hollandsche Schouwburg from different perspectives: from its foundation as a theatre in 1892, to its establishment as a place of memory, and as a monument with an educational exhibition in the 1990s.

## Persecution and occupation

In order to allow us to put the developments that occurred around the Hollandsche Schouwburg during and after the Second World War into perspective, the book opens with an outline of the German occupation and the persecution of the Dutch Jews. In the introductory chapter, Frank van Vree paints a broad picture of how the National Socialist occupying forces, actively assisted by collaborators and Dutch agencies, gradually isolated and eventually deported the Jews, a process that ended with the death of more than 100,000 Dutch citizens in the National Socialist concentration and extermination camps. Less than a quarter of Dutch Jews survived the

German occupation, a number that is considerably lower than that in other Western European countries.

## Jewish Amsterdam

In the following chapter, the reader is taken back in time, to Jewish Amsterdam in the decades preceding the occupation. To a certain degree, the history of the Hollandsche Schouwburg and Amsterdam's theatre life forms a leitmotif in this account. The theatre was founded in 1892, at a time when Amsterdam was becoming a bustling city with a rapidly growing population and rising prosperity – developments that also had a decisive influence on the city's Jewish population. A new middle class emerged, one that was strongly attracted to liberal politics and culture, whilst a sizeable working class turned *en masse* to socialism in a short period. In other words, from the turn of the century onwards, the Jewish community in the Netherlands was characterized by advancing integration and the secularization that came with this.

These developments were reflected in the history of the Hollandsche Schouwburg as a theatre: located in a new, prosperous neighbourhood, built in the dominant architectural styles of the day, it offered not only entertainment, but also serious, innovative theatre – naturalistic drama that also appealed to the emancipated workers, with the socialist playwright and director Herman Heijermans as their undisputed hero.

## A gateway to terror and death

The second part of the volume contains two chapters and covers the years of the occupation. These chapters are written mainly from the perspective of the persecuted Jews: the Hollandsche Schouwburg as an essential link in a process that began with the exclusion of Jews from social life, and ended with the mass deportations from the Netherlands to the concentration and extermination camps. Particularly in the sixteen months that the theatre functioned as a place of assembly and deportation, the character of the Hollandsche Schouwburg changed irrevocably: the site irreversibly lost its innocence.

Initially, however, in the summer of 1940, there was no radical break as far as the Hollandsche Schouwburg was concerned, as Esther Göbel shows in the second chapter. In the first year of the occupation, the usual programming



continued as normal. In June 1941, the theatre was made a site exclusively for Jews, where only Jewish artists were allowed to perform for exclusively Jewish audiences. When, three months later, the order was given that Jews were to be excluded from all other cultural and social activities, the theatre became a social-cultural centre, hosting weddings in addition to plays, operettas, and concerts and, for a short time, a school specializing in arts and crafts.

As mentioned above, between 20 July 1942 and 19 November 1943, more than 45,000 Dutch Jews were interned at the Hollandsche Schouwburg, as Annemiek Gringold, the author of the following chapter, has established on the basis of archival research. Some stayed for only a short time, most were there for around five days, and some were there for weeks. Packed into a stuffy, filthy space that was far from suited for this role, lacking as it did basic facilities, the Jews collected there were supported as far as possible by each other and by the employees of the Jewish Council. With external help, some of these people set up clandestine networks to help prisoners to escape and – in particular – to get them to a place of safety, for, without the prospect of a hiding place, such attempts were doomed to fail. In this way, hundreds of children and many adults were able to evade the clutches of the Nazi occupying forces and their Dutch accomplices. Most of the prisoners, however, were not so fortunate; for them, the Hollandsche Schouwburg was a gateway to terror and death.

## **A theatre of memory**

The final chapter of this book, by David Duindam, is written from the perspective of remembrance; a story that begins with endless controversies over what should be done with this tainted legacy of the occupation. The attempts by the new owners to restore the building to its original function as a theatre encountered so much resistance that an action committee was established to collect funds and purchase the building. Their efforts were successful, but the question became: what should be done now?

In the following years, Amsterdam's Jews proved deeply divided over the answer to this question, while the Dutch government took a restrained approach: in the first years after the liberation, the culture of remembrance was dominated by the national perspective, in which much attention was paid to fighters and heroes, but none to specific groups of victims. The idea that the 100,000 Dutch Jews, just like the Sinti and Roma, might form an exceptional category of victims – victims of a racist war of extermination – hardly played a role in the national culture of remembrance of that time.

This eventually changed: in 1958, the city council of Amsterdam approved the decision to transform the Hollandsche Schouwburg into a site of memory, as the first important public monument to commemorate the victims of the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands. Its unveiling on 5 May 1962 marked not only a milestone in the history of the Hollandsche Schouwburg, but also in the culture of remembrance in the Netherlands. From this time onwards, the mass murder committed by the Nazis would slowly but surely shift from the periphery to the core of the culture of remembrance. This process happened more rapidly in the Netherlands than in most other countries, as shown by the large number of similar monuments that were also established elsewhere in the country in the following years.

The question of the function of the Hollandsche Schouwburg was, in effect, no longer raised, including within the Jewish community. Now that the monument existed, it would gradually and increasingly fulfil the role that the socialist-Zionist Sam de Wolff, a major player in the initiative to establish the Hollandsche Schouwburg as a site of memory, had envisaged at an early stage: as a place of memory, a museum and/or a library, the theatre would form an exceptional site where all Dutch people would be able to keep the memory of the deported and murdered Jews alive.

The Hollandsche Schouwburg thereby became a theatre again – but a theatre in the sense propagated by the British historian Raphael Samuel: a theatre of memory. A place that gives shape to our relationship with the past. The Hollandsche Schouwburg is not only a monument, but also a site where we can learn, where we can imagine what happened; a site where we can engage in diverse forms of remembrance, from silent reflection to prayer, and from speeches to – indeed – drama and music.

*Frank van Vree, Hetty Berg, and David Duindam*