



## PANDORA'S BOX: REVISITING THE DUTCH POSTWAR HOLOCAUST RESTITUTION PROCESS

*Judging the Netherlands: The Renewed Holocaust Restitution Process, 1997–2000*,  
by Manfred Gerstenfeld, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2011, 217 pp.

Reviewed by BART WALLET

In the middle of the public debate on the renewed round of Holocaust restitution in the Netherlands, one of the leading Dutch newspapers, *NRC Handelsblad*, remarked that the government had opened a Pandora's box. The various official commissions that had been instated to investigate the restitution of looted possessions of Dutch Jews in the postwar era came to shocking results. Each of the published reports contained painful information, documenting the cold and bureaucratic treatment of Jews in the years immediately following 1945. Partly because of international developments, it was impossible to close the box again. The truth had to be brought to light, and the faults of postwar restitution policies had to be corrected.

The subject of Manfred Gerstenfeld's *Judging the Netherlands* is this second round of Holocaust restitution, aimed at correcting the restitution policies in the immediate postwar years. Gerstenfeld, who survived the war in hiding in Amsterdam and whose family played a major role in the postwar reconstruction of the city's Jewish community, closely followed the restitution process during the second half of the 1990s. As he discloses in the introduction, he declined the offer to participate in the restitution negotiations on behalf of the Dutch Jewish immigrant community in Israel but accepted an informal advisory role and was a commentator on the process in the international press. This explains why *Judging the Netherlands* is particularly well informed about the negotiations and the personal attitudes of the principal players. It documents not only the final outcome of the process but also the routes not taken.

During the last decade, a number of important studies have been published on the immediate postwar restitution process, such as the reports of the governmental commissions, and studies by Gerard Aalders en Wouter Veraart. Gerstenfeld, however, is unique in his approach to the most recent round of restitution. His book gives a fascinating inside look into the development of the restitution debates in the Netherlands, triggered by the international attention that was prompted, in turn, by the dubious role played by the Swiss banks during and after the Holocaust. Gerstenfeld skillfully unravels the rather complex structure of

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various official commissions dealing with different aspects of postwar restitution policies. The Kordes Commission dealt with claims on privately owned goods of Dutch Jews stolen during the war. The Scholten Commission researched the looting of securities, bank accounts, and insurance policies; while, for its part, the Van Kemenade Commission concentrated on the gold-pool restitution and claims against the Dutch state.

Predominantly based on a close reading of the commission reports, media coverage, and conversations with the main players—such as former prime minister Wim Kok and finance minister Gerrit Zalm—the author highlights two important aspects of the second round of Dutch restitution. First, he stresses the importance of international developments such as the affair of dormant Swiss Bank accounts which broke out in the mid-nineties. The Dutch process was not an isolated case; both at the start and over the years, international contacts, research, and pressure propelled the debate. Second, the oral history conducted by the author conveys the personal dimensions of the process. Each of the major players, in the government, the commissions, and in the representative body of the Jewish community, experienced clear and often outspoken emotions while dealing with the somber task of bringing justice to Holocaust survivors and their descendants. This personal dimension sometimes resulted in a quick and satisfactory solution, while in other cases it greatly hindered such a result. The interplay between international developments, the debate in Dutch society, and the personal dimension contributed to the outcome of the restitution process as a whole.

There seems to have been some controversy over the role of the World Jewish Congress (WJC). In most cases the Dutch Jewish community, represented by the Centraal Joods Overleg (CJO), deliberately kept the WJC out of the process as a whole. Its representatives claimed that the WJC was ill-informed, too American in its approach, and unsuited for the Dutch “Poldermodel” of searching for a consensus. Furthermore, Stuart Eizenstat, then the U.S. ambassador to the EU involved in the European-wide restitution process, notes in his foreword to *Judging the Netherlands* that he considered it wise to keep the negotiations private and restrained. Gerstenfeld, however, seems to suggest throughout the book that the WJC’s involvement in the process would have brought better results in terms of monies returned to the Jewish community. Whereas the CJO and Eizenstat praise the Poldermodel, Gerstenfeld regards it as an appeasing approach that prevents an honest but necessary confrontation with the past.

One might ask if Gerstenfeld’s description of Dutch Jewry as a rather weak community, and the CJO as an organization made up of well-meaning volunteers but generally lacking in professionalism, reveals a difference in approach. Whereas the Dutch Jews, as part of Dutch society, prefer to solve problems through negotiations and searching for a compromise, many of their relatives who now live in Israel took a different position. As the book demonstrates, the organization

of Dutch Jews in Israel, Stichting Platform Israel (SPI), pushed harder and even decided to bring the WJC into the negotiations with the banks. Gerstenfeld correctly points out that, for the CJO, it was also important that after the conclusion of the restitution process, Dutch Jewry should remain on good terms with the government and society—whereas for others, living in Israel or the United States, this was just a single, separate case.

As the title indicates, the author interprets the renewed Holocaust restitution process as a means of judging the Netherlands. If the bare facts are taken together, including the failure and shortcomings of postwar restitution policies, one must agree with Gerstenfeld that the verdict is painful for the Dutch government. Another historical issue is why the policies in the 1940s and 1950s were as they were. But that, to be sure, is a topic for another book.<sup>1</sup> Gerstenfeld has provided a clear and insightful analysis of the most recent Dutch restitution debates. The many citations from the interviews he conducted, moreover, make *Judging the Netherlands* not only analytically astute but also a good read for scholars and all those who are interested in restitution policies.

NOTE

1. Editor's note: For the background history of the immediate postwar era in the Netherlands, see J. S. Fishman, "The Reconstruction of the Dutch Jewish Community and Its Implications for the Writing of Contemporary Jewish History," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978): 67–101.

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ISRAEL AND EASTERN EUROPE:  
FROM DISRUPTION TO RESUMPTION

*Relations with the East European States: From Disruption 1967 to Resumption 1989–91*, by Yosef Govrin, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011, 322 pp.

Reviewed by WOLFGANG G. SCHWANITZ

What a day in history it was, that Saturday, June 10, 1967. It was a frightful scene, as if the mob would at any moment break into the courtyard and the embassy itself. It lasted for hours, writes Yosef Govrin, as the outraged Soviets departed. In