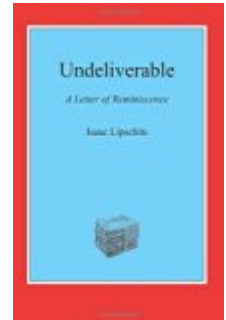


Isaac Lipschits. *Undeliverable: A Letter of Reminiscence*. Translated by Jeannette K. Ringold. London: Gainsborough House Press, 2015. 84 pp. \$11.50, paper, ISBN 978-1-909719-08-8.



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Originally published in Dutch in 1992 as *Onbestelbaar: Herinneringen in briefvorm*, Jeannette K. Ringold's translation of Isaac Lipschits's Holocaust memoir brings this book, well known in the Netherlands, to English readers for the first time. Lipschits, who died in 2008, was a renowned Dutch political scientist and historian who taught at various universities in Israel and ended his career as Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Groningen. Though Lipschits wrote many scholarly works, *Undeliverable: A Letter of Reminiscence* is not one of them.

Rather, it is a moving tribute of a son to the mother he never really knew, too young when they were separated to have ever understood her, struggling to find her through the cobwebs of half a century's worth of memories and forgetting. Mysteries lie at the core of the book—his mother's sadness, hints of his father's mental instability—mysteries that will never be unraveled, a son's understanding of his parents, their lives, their relationship, cut short by Auschwitz. Wisely, Lipschits does not try to discover the truth or speculate on

these issues. Things are left as they were for the twelve-year-old boy the author was when time stopped for the Lipschits family and, indeed, for the rest of the Jews in the Netherlands.

What Lipschits does, instead, is address his mother directly. First and foremost is his desire to absolve any guilt his mother might have had—a son reassuring his mother across time, a rhetorical reversal of the mother's role in comforting the son. He assures her that her decision to send her three youngest children away and go into hiding herself with her husband was the right one, the ramifications of which he only understood when his own son was thirteen. He writes, "What courage to go into hiding with three children. Darling to choose, not marching blindly with the crowd, thinking for yourself and not letting others think for you. For that act I still love both of you every day again. The five of us set out. Two of us were saved" (p. 41).

Told in this same terse prose throughout, this is a letter in book form detailing for his mother

what happened to the rest of the family during and after the war. The Lipschitses were a poor family with six children in working-class Rotterdam. They were so poor, in fact, that Isaac received Jewish communal charity to attend a summer camp each year, and the whole family lived in a few small rooms on the ground floor of Agniesestraat 59b, a house now bearing a plaque memorializing its residents. His father sold bananas at the market with the help of Isaac's older brothers. When the war began, Isaac's oldest brother, Levi, and only sister, Rebecca (Bep), were already married. Levi and his wife, Martha, had a daughter, "little Griet." The other brothers, Jacob (Jaap) and Maurits (Maup) still lived at home with Isaac, his parents, and his youngest brother, Alex, born in 1939 and just a very small boy when the war began.

Isaac tells his mother things she likely already knew, such as, "One day Jaap left. We never saw him again" (p. 45), though she no doubt had gone to her own death hoping that Jaap would have not been discovered and exterminated in Sobibór. With a succinctness bordering on brutal, Lipschits reveals the sad fate of his parents' families, his brothers, sister, brother-in-law, sisters-in-law, and little niece, Grietje, his parents' only grandchild. None of them survived beyond 1943. Written when Lipschits was 62 years old, he knew the letter and its grim accounting would never arrive. It was, as the title laments, undeliverable. His mother was murdered in Auschwitz when he was thirteen. He and his younger brother, Alex, were the only ones of the whole family who survived the war.

Events, momentous events, such as Isaac kidnapping his brother Alex from the Christian family hiding him in the province of Zeeland during the war—a family who wanted to adopt him and raise him as a Reformed Protestant—and Isaac taking him to Israel, where he was lost again, are told almost in passing, as afterthoughts. This is just like the author's service in the Hagenah, the

Israeli army, during the heady days of the declaration of Israeli statehood and the subsequent war. And, indeed, these events are extraneous to Lipschits's story. They are afterthoughts. A quick summary for his mother. For his story is the one that precedes these events. It is the story of trying to remember, trying to reach back across time to recapture a past lost forever in the wake of Nazi destruction and a willful desire to forget on the part of the Dutch public, eager to absolve themselves of the fact that the largest percentage of foreign volunteers for the SS were Dutch,[1] to move beyond the shockingly low percentage of Jews who survived the war in the Netherlands—27 percent versus 60 percent in Belgium and 75 percent in France.[2]

It is against this forgetting that Lipschits fought for the rest of his life. In his later years, he battled the self-satisfied pride of the Dutch, who basked in the glow of the good public relations provided by the families who did hide Jews. The story of Anne Frank is world-famous, and one might get the impression that most Dutch people had Jews hidden in their attics, as were Isaac, his brother Alex, and their parents, before they were betrayed, just as the Franks were. The fact that many of those Jews were betrayed, like the Franks and Isaacs' parents, and that many of those hiding Jews, especially Jewish children, hoped to convert them to Christianity—like the Klompe family, who hid the author's brother, Alex—was largely ignored or swept under the rug. Lipschits wrote *Kleine Shoa: Joden in naoorlogs Nederland* (Small Shoah [Holocaust]: Jews in the postwar Netherlands) in 2001, in which he castigated the Dutch government and citizens for their treatment of the few Dutch Jews who returned to the Netherlands after the war. He describes how they had to fight to get their goods and property back, how little they ultimately received and, indeed, how they were charged administration costs by the Dutch government for their own stolen property. This was a theme he had first dealt with in *Tsedaka: Een halve eeuw joods maatschappelijk werk in*

Nederland (Tsedaka [Charity]: A half century of Jewish social work in the Netherlands), published in 1997, in which he first uncovered the extent of the theft of Jewish property by the Dutch, as well as the widespread collusion of Dutch notaries to hide the proceeds of Jewish estates. Perhaps most lastingly, he was the founder of www.joodsmonument.nl, an interactive memorial to the 102,000 Dutch Jews murdered in concentration camps. *Undeliverable* is yet another testament. This story of loss and the cry across time to understand and reach one's mother again has universal resonance, a reason, no doubt, that the City of Rotterdam chose to distribute the book, free of charge, in 2007 to all households in the city in an effort to promote tolerance.

Nine years on, one wonders if this has had any effect. In Rotterdam itself, the supporters of the local soccer team, Feyenoord, still shout loudly and proudly when they play Ajax, the Amsterdam team: "We're going on a Jew hunt" (*Wij gaan op jodenjacht*), "Death to the Jews" (*Dood aan de Joden*), and "Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas [chambers]" (*Hamas, Hamas, Joden aan het gas*)—admittedly the last two sound catchier in Dutch. Ajax is still known as the "Jewish" or "nose" soccer club, apparently due to the large number of Jews who, prewar, lived in Amsterdam, about 13 percent of the population, and the location of the club in the eastern part of the city, close to the traditionally Jewish neighborhood.[3] And if one objects to these chants, one is accused of not having a good sense of humor, and of taking things too seriously. After all, it's all in good fun, right? In fact, a soccer player for another Dutch team, ADO The Hague, got off scot free in 2012 after chanting antisemitic slogans in a game against Ajax because it was said he didn't realize that he was insulting Jews.

And it is not just in the realm of soccer. The CIDI, a Dutch organization that tracks antisemitic incidents in the Netherlands, registered sixteen episodes in schools (from elementary through

universities) in 2015 alone, the third year in a row that such antisemitic occurrences have increased. [4] Nor, of course, is it just isolated to the Netherlands. In 2014, a gunman opened fire at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Belgium, killing four people. This year, the large Jewish community in Antwerp was told not to celebrate Purim, a holiday involving parties and costumes, too publically, for fear of provoking attacks. Meanwhile, after four people, including three children, were gunned down at a Jewish school in Toulouse, France, in 2012, and in the wake of increased antisemitic incidents, record numbers of Jews are leaving France—8,000 in last year alone.

Yet it is not only antisemitism. Xenophobia writ large is also on the rise. In the wake of the attacks on the Brussels airport in March of this year, the hashtag #StopIslam was among the most popular on Twitter within hours of the event. Dutch populist party PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid/ Freedom Party) leader Geert Wilders led his supporters in chanting "fewer Moroccans" (*minder Marokkanen*) at a campaign event in 2014, and the influx of refugees from war-torn Syria and environs has led to a concomitant rise in anti-immigrant and anti-Islam parties across Europe. Germany's once libertarian Alternative for Germany party (AfD) has now squarely joined the anti-Islam ranks. In recent weeks, the AfD unveiled a scathing denunciation of the faith, warning against "the expansion and presence of a growing number of Muslims" on German soil. Saying it wants to protect women's rights, national security, and German culture, the party—supported by almost 1 in 6 voters—is calling for a ban on headscarves at schools and universities and is preparing to release an anti-Islam "manifesto" based on "scientific research." [5] Sadly, the AfD is not an exception. The Netherlands's PVV, Austria's Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Belgium's Vlaams Blok, France's National Front ... the list goes on.

So in these dark days, I wonder if Lipschits's valiant efforts to bring the Dutch and, by exten-

sion, the world, to account, might not have been in vain. These are days in which we are possibly in the midst of the breakup of the European Union, a union born of both necessity and hope, in the wake of the destruction about which Lipschits writes. It was created as an antidote to hate and strife, with the idea that never again should the same tribal nationalism that destroyed the Lipschits family and 73 percent of the rest of the Jews of the Netherlands emerge in Europe. But it seems that noble ideal has fallen to the wayside, cast aside as fear of perceived “others” grips the Continent.

A timely moment for a translation of this book, perhaps, but a sense of futility pervades me. [6] Isn't the justification that I and my fellow historians give to ourselves and others, to university committees perpetually threatening to cut our funding, to governmental agencies with ever-shrinking budgets for research, that by understanding the past, we help keep generations from repeating it? But have we? I wonder.

Notes

[1]. NIOD, Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies website, <http://www.niod.nl/en/projects/dutch-volunteers-waffen-ss>.

[2]. The issues around the very low survival rate of Jews in The Netherlands is much debated. See, for instance, the following works: J. C. H. Blom, “The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands: A Comparative Western European Perspective,” *European History Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1989): 333–351. For more recent publications, see Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller, “Comparison of the Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, France and Belgium, 1940–1945: Similarities, Differences, Causes,” in *The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940–1945: New Perspectives*, ed. Peter Romijn et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press/Vossius Pers/NIOD, 2012), 55–91; Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller, “Anti-Jewish Policy and Organization of the Deportations in France and the Netherlands, 1940–1944: A Comparative

Study,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 3 (2006): 437–473; and http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/languages/dutch/pdf/article_croes.pdf.

[3]. For more on the identification of Ajax with Jews see David Winner, *Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Football* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), chapter 15; and Simon Kuper, *Ajax, the Dutch, the War: The Strange Tale of Soccer During Europe's Darkest Hour* (London: Avalon, 2012).

[4]. Guy Muller, “Cidi-monitor: Antisemitisme-op-scholen gestegen,” May 2, 2016, Centrum Informatie en Documentatie Israel website, <http://www.cidi.nl/cidi-antisemitisme-op-scholen-gestegen/>.

[5]. Anthony Faiola, “‘This reminds us of the times of Hitler’: In the heart of Europe, anti-Islam politics are on the rise,” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/trump-like-opposition-to-islam-is-growing-in-europe/2016/06/06/1fb58be8-21b7-11e6-b944-52f7b1793dae_story.html.

[6]. Unfortunately, the volume's introduction does not explain the impetus for the translation, aside from a sense of responsibility on the part of Lipschits's friends to have the memoir appear in English.

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