As you fly into the Netherlands I thought it would be good to give you a brief synopsis of the vexing question how is it possible that, in a nation known for centuries as “tolerant”, the rate of the destruction of Jews in the Netherlands was proportionally worse than in any other occupied country in the western part of Europe, worse than France, worse than Belgium and worse—of course—than in Denmark.

First the facts:

In a 1941 Dutch Population registry count there were 140,425 Jews in the Netherlands, 118,455 Dutch Jews, 14,493 German Jews, and 7,297 from other counties. At the end of the war, 107,000 Jews had been deported: 5,200 survived—another 3,700 survived having fled; 1,000 had legally emigrated, and another 15,000 survived in hiding (thousands of others were betrayed). What are the factors that contributed to this carnage?

Sure, it was difficult to escape across several borders to the one place one might be safe; Portugal. Sure, the Netherlands lacked the vast forests that allowed for hiding and even resistance elsewhere—think of the Bielski brothers.

Sure, the duty to be registered in one’s locality in the aforementioned Population Registry made many victims sitting ducks, easily rounded up by the Nazis but here we encounter the first problem. Many Jews were rounded up by Dutch Nazi headquarters and by the Dutch Police, often with nary a German in sight. Data indicate that the Dutch were not particularly anti-Semitic yet the state apparatus gained the praise of Adolf Eichmann. By and large, the Dutch police, the railroads, and the bureaucracy had become, if not Hitler’s willing executioners, at least Hitler’s willing neighbors. It is true that the occupying forces were not under Wehrmacht control as happened elsewhere, but under a civilian administration of fanatic Nazi antisemites led by the Austrian Seyss-Inquart.

But the quintessential failure in the Netherlands rests squarely with the Dutch authorities. Instructed by the Dutch government-in-exile based in London, the bureaucracy was told to cooperate with the Nazis as much as possible, “...to avoid worse.” The Dutch Queen, Wilhelmina, showed indifference to the fate of Dutch Jewry before, during and after the war—before the war she vetoed the establishment of a refugee camp for German Jews near her palace, “t Loo, and the Dutch government made Jewish organizations solely responsible for the financial caretaking lists of such refugees. Her war broadcasts from London rarely mentioned the Jews, and then only obliquely.

Thus, a bi-furcated situation developed quickly: as Jews were restricted from public places, employment and through other measures before the round-ups began in earnest,
the fate of non-Jews did not change much, until round-ups of non-Jewish workers for labor in Germany much later in the war.

Consequently, the resistance did not really take flight until the middle of the war, after many Jews had already been deported: the Dutch had become bystanders, and the complicity of the civil service bureaucracy, with its deadly Population Registry, its courts, municipal councils, railroads and postal services played a critical role.

Therefore, when you enter the Anne Frank House later today, be mindful that her story, for way too long, sustained the myth of the “good Dutch”: it was not until the 1970s when more critical examinations of Dutch society shed light on the central role the Dutch had played. I like you to keep that thought in your mind, and also the comment made by Yehuda Bauer years ago: the Anne Frank story is not really about the Holocaust; the diary, after all, ends before the Franks are sent to the camps where Anne’s mother, Anne and Margot would die.

Of course, the thousand of Jews who survived in hiding were helped by thousands of righteous gentiles of all walks of life. The parents of Jack Koopman were hidden by a Catholic family in the south of the country. Jack lost nearly a hundred family members, including all his grandparents who were killed in Soliber.

One place where you will see the dark contrast between good and evil will be the Hollandsche Schouwburg which I hope you will visit tomorrow. The theatre was used as a staging ground where the Jews of Amsterdam were registered and housed in abysmal circumstances before being sent off to transit camp Westerbork and from there to the east. And yet, across the street you will see a day care center, used as an annex of the Schouwburg, for children under 12. Of the c 4,000 Jewish children who survived, no less than 1,000 were saved right under the noses of the Nazis.

Registration lists were falsified, children with chaperones were put on the trolleys in clear daylight but out of the vision of the Germans, and hundreds escaped via a “normal school” next door and then were hidden elsewhere in the country. Hair-raising stories abound but the helpers, like Miep Gies, are reluctant to tell them: to them what they did was just the obvious choice.

You may tomorrow meet Max Léons, a Jewish lad who as a young man, together with a son of a pastor, saved dozens of Jews operating in the north of Holland with nothing but two bicycles and a whole lot of chutzpah. I might tell you the story of Marion Pritchard (née van Binsbergen) who helped save dozens of Jews in my hometown—she was about twenty when that started.

And it is this type of story we tell our students at the College. Stories of individual responsibility, of courage and of character: only in such a context does the legacy of Anne Frank have in proper meaning.

In doing so, we honor those who helped, and those who perished. Let us give a face to one of them. There was an abandoned child in the day care center, the darling of the director. She had named him Remi van Duinwijk, Remi after the central figure in “Alone
in the World” and van Duinwijk as he came from the dunes region of Holland. He arrived as a baby and had just learned to stand up in his crib when he had to go on a transport. The police had brought him, nobody knew whether he was Jewish or not, but the Germans had decided he was from his appearance. The director personally took care of him; nobody else was allowed to touch him.

Alas, he also was the darling of the SS: everybody knew him and that led to his ruin. He could simply not be smuggled out. He left on the last transport. With a big teddy bear given to him by Wolf, a SS guard.
It is true that the Anne Frank story is the iconic introduction of many children to the Holocaust. But, in our case, it is the image of Remi that explains what the College and the community do. Welcome to Holland.

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