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*Jewish Amsterdam after the Holocaust*  
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As a scholar of Judaism, I have spent a good deal of time researching, thinking and teaching about the Holocaust, that is, the Nazis' cold-blooded killing of six million European Jews during World War II. I have twice visited extermination camps in Germany and toured their gas chambers. But it was not until I visited the Dutch city of Amsterdam this past summer that I saw what the Nazi actions meant for a community, for Jews lived happily in Amsterdam, indeed in all of Holland, for several centuries and then they just disappeared, taken away by the soldiers, never to return.

Holland has long been a country that has welcomed newcomers, believing that they strengthened the nation with vibrancy and new skills. Amsterdam's first Jews arrived in the late 1500s. The families were from Spain and had been kicked out in 1492 along with the rest of Spanish Jewry. They joined an already active trading culture in Amsterdam.

Over the following centuries additional Jews arrived, and they and their descendants took their places in all levels of Dutch society. Most were poor, some were middle class, and a few became wealthy. A few rich Jews even belonged to the Dutch East India Company, and later to the Dutch West India Company. These were the trading firms that brought wealth to Amsterdam from the Far East and the New World. Thus the Jews were part of Dutch society and were integrated into it at all levels.

Some three and a half centuries after the first Jews arrived in Amsterdam, almost twice as long as the United States has been an independent country, the Nazis invaded Holland. This was at the start of World War II, and the Nazi armies just rolled right in, since Holland is flat and has no natural defense lines, such as mountains. Thus Holland suffered little damage from fighting.

This is what makes Amsterdam's loss of its Jewish community so striking. In war, wide-scale death is usually accompanied by widespread

destruction, caused by bombing, house-to-house fighting, and so on. In Amsterdam, since there was no fighting, the Jews were simply taken away, leaving their empty houses, synagogues, and businesses behind them. By 1944, the downtown area of Amsterdam where the Jews lived was empty. They had been, as it were, surgically extracted without cutting into the society around them. Since nearly all the 100,000 Jews who lived there were taken to the death camps and gassed, almost no one returned after the war.

While this disappearance creates a number of administrative problems (such as who owns the property, since there are no owners or heirs?), the bigger problem is that of heritage. Who will carry on the memory of the Jews' contribution to the life of Amsterdam over the centuries? The only people left, the Christians. Until WWII, Amsterdam's four main synagogues were quite close together: three on one block and the fourth, largest synagogue on the next. The three have now been converted into the Jewish Historical Museum, run largely by Christians.

Given its size, the fourth synagogue was preserved by the Nazis as a meeting place. Since the war, it has been restored and reconsecrated, but has no permanent congregation. I attended a memorial service there, and it was strange to find that its traditional practices and character were being emphasized and reinforced by Christians. While it gave us a sense of the synagogue's importance among its congregants and to Amsterdam, there was an eerie, almost ghost-like character to the proceedings, one which emphasized the lost past. Despite the people around me in the service, the building felt empty, for those who worshipped in it and loved it had been taken from it.

So although Jewish Amsterdam lacks the horror of the concentration and death camps, it reminds us of a centuries-old way of life suddenly snuffed out by hatred, like a candle put out by a gust of wind.