

"Anything but Mauthausen", The Fear of Mauthausen Among Dutch Jews During the Nazi Occupation: Dimensions and Impact
Nannie Beekman-Braunstein

Abstract

The question as to why such a high percentage of Dutch Jews perished, in a country where the majority of the Jews were Dutch citizens for generations, has been and still is a central theme among researchers, Dutch and others. Were there any factors specific to the Netherlands which contributed to this phenomenon? Some have been identified (and debated) in the literature over the last decades, such as the nature of the Nazi (civil and military) regime in the Netherlands, a servile and considerably obedient Dutch bureaucracy and police force, a lack of geographical places to which to escape, the late emergence of Dutch organized resistance organizations, a tradition of heeding authority by Jew and non-Jew alike, and lack of knowledge about the destination(s) of the deportations. In addition, little pre-war anti-Semitism, and the deep belief by Dutch Jews in being well-integrated into Dutch society, would have lessened their guard. Yet, one component has so far received only minor attention within the analysis of the low survival rate – the role played by the fear of Dutch Jews of punishment by deportation to Mauthausen which they had learned to mean certain death early on; a fear which was then manipulated by the Nazi authorities. By tracing expressions of such fear in primary sources, such as war-time diaries and war time documentation, discussions of the Jewish Council with and without German authorities, I examine perceptions and interpretations of Dutch Jews under quickly changing circumstances and threats, seen through their own prism. This perspective or approach of *histoire de mentalités* has not received much attention.

My thesis argues that fear of punishment with 'Mauthausen' became a 'magical concept' to be avoided, impacting behavior of Dutch Jews. Until the deportations in the summer of 1942, under the guise of 'work in the East', compliance with each anti-Jewish decree had 'livable' consequences, within the Netherlands, and for the most part at home. Non-compliance on the other hand, was interpreted as 'Mauthausen' and thus death. By means of increasing intimidation with 'Mauthausen', the German regime conditioned the Jews of the Netherlands into a high level of compliance up until the very moment of deportation: Jews were registered, deprived of financial means, segregated from general civil society, an easy prey for the stage of deportation. At that point even the final spelling out of the name 'Mauthausen' as punishment no longer had the expected full and immediate compliance result. The earlier equation of death with 'Mauthausen' versus a 'somehow livable life at home' changed to death in 'Mauthausen' versus a 'harsh fate' in the unknown East, where war was raging. The latter was often considered as possibly also resulting in death. Especially when the occupation regime turned to violent measures to reach its deportation quota quickly, the threat of 'Mauthausen' lost much of its deterrence. By that late point in time, 'Mauthausen' had firmly tightened the web around the Jewish community, from which there was little escape.

Until such sudden change in their reality, the search for a way out, such as by seeking a hiding place, had not been perceived necessary and thus many had not taken any action to this effect.

It is in this sense, therefore, that 'Mauthausen' is an important factor to be included in any analysis of the high death toll among Dutch Jews.