

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

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“I Call You to Witness, Ruben”: Siegfried van Praag and his Jerusalem of the West

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

This is an excerpt from the 1961 novel *Jeruzalem van het Westen* by the Dutch Jewish writer Siegfried Emanuel van Praag (1899–2002). It shows one of the characters, a Jewish ‘Amsterdammer’ who had made aliyah long before the Shoah, posthumously addressing the protagonist, Van Praag’s alter ego Ruben Joseph, on a visit to Israel in the 1950s: “I call you to witness, Ruben, you, who has lived your youth in our Jerusalem of the West.” . The command epitomizes Van Praag’s motivation for writing the book, which is, in essence, a monument dedicated to pre-war Amsterdam Jewry. Before the Shoah, about ten percent of the population of Amsterdam was Jewish. Only a small number of them survived. The percentage of Jews from the Netherlands killed in the Shoah was much higher than in other occupied countries in Western Europe. In these pages, the major themes of the novel come together: Zionism, which strongly defined Van Praag’s Jewish identity and writing, the urban landscape of Amsterdam, the city of his youth, and, most importantly, the Jews who had inhabited it, in all their shades and colors. Van Praag finished the first version of *Jeruzalem van het Westen* in 1947. The manuscript was turned down by several publishers. Only ten years later and after being thoroughly rewritten, the Leopold publishing house in The Hague decided to publish what its director termed one of Van Praag’s “most poignant books.”^[1] The initial manuscript, as well as the writer’s personal diaries detailing his visits to Amsterdam after the war, are held at the [Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana](#) in Amsterdam. Studied alongside the final novel, these documents offer an interesting insight into how Van Praag related to the Jewish urban landscapes of his native city.

Jeruzalem van het Westen

Jeruzalem van het Westen^[2] is one of Van Praag’s most significant and successful works. It was well received in the Jewish as well as the non-Jewish press, being called, among other things, “a worthy memorial” ([Nieuw Israëlietisch Weekblad](#)), “a grand work” ([Levend Joods Geloof](#)), “a mighty epic” ([De Telegraaf](#)), “a golden mosaic” ([Nieuwe Haarlemsche Courant](#)), and a “magnificent depiction of humankind” ([Het Vrije Volk](#)). The novel generated a wide readership, won the Amsterdam Bookseller’s Prize in 1962, and inspired TV shows, radio plays, and a [documentary](#) with Van Praag in the main role. According to the writer himself, *Jeruzalem van het Westen*^[3] [was the book closest to his heart](#) — “Je tiens beaucoup à ce livre.”^[4] Although the novel has been out of print for many years and has barely attracted scholarly attention, its descriptions of Amsterdam’s cityscape offer an excellent window into the changing perceptions of Jewish places and spaces in the post-war period.

An engaged writer

The youngest of three brothers, Siegfried van Praag grew up on the border of Amsterdam's Plantage neighbourhood, east of the old Jewish quarter and home to many Jewish families. In *Een lange jeugd in joods Amsterdam*, Van Praag described the strong feelings of Jewish solidarity he developed from an early age, as well as his natural ease in getting along with people from all different social classes. Moreover, Zionism played an important role in the Van Praag household. Van Praag studied French, a language he had loved already since childhood. Although he worked as a teacher for several periods of his life, he was mostly a full-time writer, well-known for his novels and essays. He often portrayed Amsterdam's cityscape — in particular his beloved Plantage and the Jewish quarter, the 'ghetto' which fascinated him (Amsterdam had actually never had a true 'ghetto', such as in other cities in Europe where Jews were often confined within a closed-off area).

In 1924, Van Praag married the Jewish journalist Hilda Sanders (1899–1974), with whom he had two children. It was a love match, although Van Praag was unfaithful. From the outset, Sanders managed a large part of his affairs, including taxes, rent, correspondence, and everything that had to do with his writing, from contacting potential publishers to checking proofs. In 1936, the couple moved to Brussels. They survived the Second World War in London, settling again in Brussels in 1946. On the occasion of Van Praag's seventieth birthday in 1969, Rico Bolthuis identified the post-war era as the period in which Van Praag had become a truly engaged writer. In the direct post-war years, Jewish themes undeniably became even more pronounced in his writing. At this time, Van Praag worked on three novels, which he envisioned as a trilogy under the name *De brug der eeuwen*. While the first two books, *Saul* (1947) and *Jezus en Menacheem*^[5](1951), centered on important episodes in the history of the Jewish people, the third was quite different, and much more personal, focusing on the Jews of Amsterdam in the twentieth century.

Walking through a necropolis

Siegfried van Praag arrived in Amsterdam for the first time again in mid-December 1945. Next to searching for surviving relatives and acquaintances, one of the first things he did was visit the Plantage neighborhood and Artis, the zoo, which was very dear to him. He noted the agonizing absence of Jews from the streets, and described the ruins in the eastern part of the city center where many Jews had lived. Due to neglect and the looting of wood, the neighborhoods Jews were deported from changed beyond recognition between 1942 and 1945. Almost one-fourth of the buildings in the former Jewish district were demolished or collapsed in the severe last winter of the war, the highest figure by far for the entire city. "On a démolit les quartiers juifs d'Amsterdam. Cela a ouvert la ville plus encore à l'eau et du vent."^[6] On later visits over the course of 1946 and 1947, Van Praag's descriptions of Amsterdam in his diary reveal how the city felt less and less like it was once his. Around the time he delivered the first draft of *Jeruzalem van het Westen*, a longing for the Amsterdam of the past consumed him — "[L]a nostalgie me ronge."^[7] In the first few pages of the manuscript, even Joseph's name is not even mentioned (instead, he is "the man"), which increases the reader's confusion over where he ends and Van Praag begins. In the 1961 novel, Van Praag plays with perspective changes, using the omniscient narrator at one time, then describing Ruben in the third or even the first person singular the next. Throughout the 1947 draft however, the narrator himself is even more present compared to in 1961. He is searching, perhaps not yet establishing a monument so much as processing what had happened to him and his community. The

portrait Ruben/Van Praag paints of Amsterdam's urban landscape ("my necropolis") is more elaborate, raw, and dark, the feelings of loss more pronounced. While in the 1961 published book, Ruben admits he sometimes forgets about Amsterdam's Jewish past while going about his daily business, there is no question of that in the early manuscript. "He walked [...] across the bridges, from which one could so easily drown oneself, to get to the others, and he went to those bleak neighborhoods [...] where the Jews had saturated the walls and the pavement with their warmth." [8] Indeed, Van Praag's early encounters with Amsterdam's Jewish district after the war weighed heavily on the initial version of *Jeruzalem van het Westen*. In the final version, Ruben tells the story of Amsterdam's Jews while staying in Jerusalem in the 1950s (where Van Praag traveled for the first time himself in 1950). In the 1947 manuscript, however, the central focus point is Amsterdam right after the war. The four parts it consists of, 'Before the Wall', 'The Morning', 'The Evening', and 'The Hole behind the Wall', refer directly to the stone walls that were erected by the municipality of Amsterdam to hide from view the ruins and the gaps in the rows of houses. At the end of the first part, Ruben climbs the wall and falls over. In the second and the third part, he goes back to pre-war and wartime Jewish Amsterdam, respectively, introducing the rough first sketches of the characters populating the (many more) chapters of the 1961 novel. The fourth part of the 1947 draft depicts the dead standing in groups in front of Ruben, a scene that made it to the published book, though in less (gruesome) detail. Apart from being an emotional testimony, the early version of *Jeruzalem van het Westen* also contains numerous accusations over the wartime and post-war conduct of non-Jewish 'Amsterdammers'. "History places walls before the persecutions of Jews. [...] The people do not have to know, what is behind them." "Muren zet de geschiedenis voor Jodenvervolgingen. [...] De mensen hoeven niet te weten, wat er achter staat." Perhaps one of the unspoken reasons Van Praag struggled to get it published in the late 1940s was his provocative tone at a time when the national 'resistance myth' was rife. The 'resistance myth' refers to the idea that most Dutch citizens, despite perhaps not having been resistance fighters themselves, had at least retained a spirit of resistance. Moreover, during this period, Van Praag's marriage was in a very bad state. He acknowledged that for the ultimate publication of *Jeruzalem van het Westen*, "le fruit d'un assez grand effort", he relied heavily on his wife.[9]

"What are the Jewish neighbourhoods without their people?"

The agency of the figures in his books was very important to Siegfried van Praag. He wished to portray Jews not as victims but as compelling individuals. Looking back on a long writing career, he once said: "Some call me a Jewish author. I am. But that also entails an author on people and, if possible, a humane author." "Sommigen noemen mij een joodse schrijver. Dat ben ik ook. Maar dat houdt in ook een schrijver over mensen en als het kan een menselijk schrijver." Using Ruben Joseph as a protagonist in *Jeruzalem van het Westen* and giving pseudonyms to other characters enabled Van Praag to derive entire stories out of facts from the lives of the people of his youth, as well as from his own life. His characters are, although clearly dramatized, also true to life in their manners, choices, and ambiguousness. The people made the place — they are the most important. Or as Van Praag described it ten years after the publication of *Jeruzalem van het Westen* in another novel on Jewish Amsterdam, *De oude darsjan*[10]: "What are the Jewish neighbourhoods [...] without their people? They inspire the stones of the streets and the houses." [11] When he wrote these words, urban renewal had irreversibly altered the cityscape of Amsterdam. During the 1960s and 1970s, large parts of the former Jewish district were demolished and replaced by futuristic newbuilds and a city highway. Only from the 1980s, efforts to preserve Jewish heritage became

more widespread. In 1961, *Jeruzalem van het Westen* seemed to meet a need of Jews and non-Jews alike for reading about Amsterdam's Jewish district in stories and novels which tried to preserve and monumentalize its distinctive atmosphere and inhabitants on paper. Through the Jews from all strands of life, the main character of *Jeruzalem van het Westen*, the city of Amsterdam, was brought to life and mourned.

Conclusion

Already in 1947, Van Praag wrote in the final pages of the first draft of his novel: "Amsterdam is on the water, always on the water. Then I will think of the sea, which connects me with Zion. Until I will go to Zion myself." [12] In the 1961 published version of *Jeruzalem van het Westen*, the references to the Holy Land are far more numerous. In Israel, Jewish Amsterdam, in a way, lived on, through the remnants of its religious heritage, taken from Amsterdam's synagogues, through the names of its citizens given to streets and parks, and of course through the survivors who made their new home there. Van Praag was conscious of the fact that this was not only the fate of Amsterdam but that of many urban Jewish centres in Europe. Ultimately, he considered the future of the Jewish people to lie in Israel, which is illustrated, for example, by the fact he lets Ruben contemplate in a dream: "After so many centuries this city [13] had become the true Jerusalem again. And his own youth, his Jerusalem of the West, became a dreamlike Jerusalem, like the city above which he floated had been for him before." [14]

With special thanks to Rachel Boertjens, curator of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana.

Archive material

Short biografie, without date;

Diary 1940-1947, Part 8, 9 and 10;

First version *Jeruzalem van het Westen*, 1947;

Correspondence, 1949-1950;

Diary July 1959-July 1960;

Diary December 1960-January 1962;

Letter from Kees Kingmans to Siegfried van Praag, 29. September 1960;

Letter from Hilda Sanders to Uitgeverij Leopold, 19. March 1965

All archive materials originate from the collection Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, UBA189, Archive Siegfried van Praag, uninventoried.

Auswahlbibliografie

Bolthuis Rico (Hrsg.), Siegfried E. van Praag. Een schrijver en zijn werk, Den Haag 1969.

Van Praag Siegfried, Het ghetto. Beschouwing en bloemlezing van west-en oost-joodsche ghettoschetsen, Zutphen 1930.

Van Praag Siegfried, Saul, Amsterdam/Brüssel 1947.

Van Praag Siegfried, Jezus en Menacheem, Den Haag 1951.

Van Praag Siegfried, *Jeruzalem van het Westen*, Den Haag 1961.

Van Praag Siegfried, *De oude darsjan. Over Jodenbuurten en joodse buurten*, Den Haag 1971.

Van Praag Siegfried, *De arend en de mol. Autobiografische schetsen*, Den Haag 1973.

Van Praag Siegfried und Lindwer Willy, *Een lange jeugd in joods Amsterdam. Een visie op joods Amsterdam*

in foto's, Den Haag 1985.

Notes

- [1] Letter from Kees Kingmans to Siegfried van Praag, 29 September 1960, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, UBA189 Archief Siegfried van Praag, uninventorised
- [2] *Jerusalem of the West*
- [3] *Jerusalem of the West*
- [4] Diary July 1959-July 1960, entry 17 January 1960, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, UBA189 Archief Siegfried van Praag, uninventorised.
- [5] *Jesus and Menachem*
- [6] Diary 1940-1947, part 8, entry 14 December 1945, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, UBA189 Archief Siegfried van Praag, uninventorised.
- [7] Diary 1940-1947, part 10, entry 9 September 1947, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, UBA189 Archief Siegfried van Praag, uninventorised.
- [8] First version Jeruzalem van het Westen, 1947, p. 3, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, UBA189 Archief Siegfried van Praag, uninventorised.
- [9] Diary July 1959-July 1960, entry 17 January 1960, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, UBA189 Archief Siegfried van Praag, uninventorised.
- [10] *The old darshan*
- [11] Van Praag, De oude darsjan, S. 13-14.
- [12] "Amsterdam ligt aan het water, altijd aan het water. Dan zal ik aan de zee denken, die me met Tsjion verbindt. Totdat ik zelf naar Tsjion zal gaan."
- [13] Jerusalem
- [14] Van Praag, Jeruzalem van het Westen, S. 11.

About the Author

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