

**Review**  
**Pieter van Os:**  
***Liever dier dan mens: Een overlevingsverhaal***  
Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2019. 368 p.  
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*Reviewed by Krystyna Henke*



Pieter van Os received the 2020 Brusse Award and the 2020 Libris History Prize for writing *Liever dier dan mens: Een overlevingsverhaal* ('I'd rather be an animal than a human: A story of survival'). Honoured as the best Dutch language journalistic book of the year, as well as the best historical book of the year, it is a well-researched and self-reflexive account by the author of the remarkable life journey of Mala Rivka Kizel Shlafer, a Holocaust survivor. Kizel Shlafer, a resident of Amstelveen in the Netherlands since the 1970s, was born in 1926 into a large ultra-orthodox Jewish family in Poland, escaped the Warsaw ghetto and, against all odds, survived the genocide while living among Poles and Nazi Germans under various assumed identities during World War II. Losing her entire family to the Nazis' *Endlösung der Judenfrage* ('final solution of the Jewish question'), she alone remained alive to recall the individual members of her extended Yiddish-speaking Hasidic family and their way of life. Interestingly, because as a child she happened to attend a progressive school in Warsaw that was founded on the principles of respectful multiculturalism, while maintaining her own culture and religion she was exposed to Polish literature and Catholic prayers, learning to speak impeccable Polish, all of which she drew on to evade capture during the Nazi regime. In pivotal situations it became a tool of survival, enabling her to recite from memory Polish poetry and prayers, assuaging any doubts that she wasn't the charming blond and blue-eyed non-Jewish Pole (or German) she claimed to be.

The scale of the Nazi genocidal fixation that snuffed out the lives of millions of European Jews was unprecedented (Hilberg 1961). As shocking as the *shoah* ('total annihilation') was, unfortunately, other mass atrocities and genocides against ethnic minorities have followed suit elsewhere since then (Adelman 2003; Khan 2000; Shelton 2005). In trying to understand the Holocaust, the question of Nazi atrocities as historically unique has been a point of contention among some scholars, as seen in the German *Historikerstreit* ('conflict of historians') in which the Nazi crimes have been variously debated as unique or comparable to other events, even at the risk of trivializing the Holocaust altogether (Rosenberg & Silverman 1992). Providing context to better comprehend how and why the Holocaust happened is a sensitive issue, sometimes representative of a political agenda (sparing German pride and identity), but often a matter of nuance or theoretical positioning. For example, rather than viewing the Nazis as having been unusually cruel, with personalities that lent themselves to the mass murders, as has been Theodor Adorno's (1950) explanation, Zygmunt Bauman (1989) challenged the focus on an authoritarian personality, suggesting also that the emphasis "on the *Germanness* of the crime" (xii, italics in original) lets others off the hook. Instead, Bauman proposed that the favourable conditions for the Holocaust lay in a modernist society with its penchant for rationality, whereby morality could be logically explained away. Noting that Bauman's concern is with

*het systeem* ('the system') (181), Van Os contrasts it with that of Christopher Browning (1992), who insisted on the issue of individual responsibility. As Van Os writes: "*Iedereen kán massamoordenaar worden. Maar niet iedereen wordt het*" ('Everyone can become a mass murderer. But not everyone will') (181). Nevertheless, while it is tempting to think about guilt as the result of individual choice, the role of hegemony in how norms and values are understood by individuals is undeniable. Not wanting the root of the problem to be left unattended for the lingering peril it posed, Bauman aimed to have people remain alert to future dangers, not become complacent that the menace had passed. In that sense, Holocaust memory serves as a continuous warning, containing a message:

about the way we live today – about the quality of the institutions on which we rely for our safety, about the validity of the criteria with which we measure the propriety of our own conduct and of the patterns of interaction we accept and consider normal [...]. (Bauman 1989, xii)

However, Bauman worried that assigning guilt, locating and isolating it, thereby "exonerating everyone else" (xii), and not taking collective responsibility for the breakdown in humanity and civilization would render the message to conduct ongoing checks on the health of society ineffectual.

Van Os, knowing the complexities he is facing in providing interpretive background information against which Kizel Shlafer's story unfolds, generally shies away from providing unilateral answers, asking questions instead. With a nod to subjectivity in memory work, he writes: "*Wat we vertellen over ons eigen verleden zegt veel over het heden*" ('How we narrate our own past says a lot about the present') (348). In a successful attempt at transparency, he deliberately makes himself part of the narrative, telling the reader how he went about researching elements of the biography by digging in archives, by consulting the literature, as well as by interviewing Kizel Shlafer and others, and by reflecting on what he heard and thought. Although not a scholarly work, *Liever dier dan mens* offers a hybrid model of how to investigate and narrate a powerful life experience through the literary journalism genre, using novelistic writing techniques of dialogue and scene setting that help to evoke a spellbinding, yet factual reality flanked by an aesthetic and emotional immediacy of place, time, and subject. At the same time, the book is grounded in a significant amount of pertinent literature, giving the story a universality. Each of its chronologically built twenty chapters – all named after a distinct river or a body of water, as if to suggest, after Heraclitus' *panta rhei* ('everything is in flux'), the meandering, changing force of life – ends with a section that roughly functions as endnotes, providing interested researchers with helpful details on sources. As the author describes his investigative travels through

Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine, meeting people and visiting the places that are part of Kizel Shlafer's tale of survival, he frequently mentions his eagerness to explore what in his own estimation may be considered to be tangents during his search for witnesses, buildings, streets, and other confirmation and enlargement of the particulars in Kizel Shlafer's biography. He is looking to find something beyond what he knows, beyond the obvious, beyond the formulaic, though he is not sure if he is on the right track, and he questions himself as he probes. It is an effective strategy that opens up Kizel Shlafer's chronicle to wider issues, such as the prevalence of hardcore and deadly anti-semitism in Poland, not just over the past century, but today. An accomplished journalist with a political science degree, Van Os provides a historical perspective, explaining that the Jewish presence in Poland initially came about because of the country's highly tolerant stance towards cultural diversity and religious acceptance. As Jews suffered pogroms and deportations elsewhere in Europe, beginning around the year 1000, Jews flocked to "*het joodse paradijs*" ('the Jewish paradise') (231), which is what Poland was called. Several hundred years later, by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, writes Van Os, two-thirds of all Jews in the world lived in Poland. However, in a few decades, as the Polish kingdom would see its demise and its nation would temporarily become part of the empires of Russia, Prussia, and the Habsburg monarchy, Polish leadership had little influence on any attempts to thwart growing attacks on Jews and of sustaining the increasingly fragile ideal of a multicultural society.

Previously stationed in Warsaw for four years as an Eastern Europe correspondent for two major Dutch newspapers, Van Os deftly weaves insightful contextual material into the gripping tale of how young Mala manoeuvred through numerous life-threatening situations during Hitler's rule and in the postwar period when Jews were viciously targeted by Poles, hastening their exodus to Palestine and what would eventually be the new state of Israel in 1948. Here, Van Os points out the bitter irony of the persecuted Jews becoming part of the persecuting new settlers in Palestine, noting that ethnic cleansings followed Kizel Shlafer to the Middle East, as her husband Nathan Shlafer, for example, also a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor, is offered a job as a guard of a freshly erected ghetto surrounded by barbed wire and filled with displaced Palestinian locals in the Shlafer's family new hometown of Lod, previously known as *al-Lydd* or Lydda, a city that would forever mark the Israelis as cruel perpetrators. In an all-too-familiar pattern of ethnic cleansing and violent displacement, Van Os discusses how the Israeli army had forced Lydda's original residents, Muslims as well as Christians, out of their homes to make room for the Jewish state. Nathan refuses to become a guard of the ghetto. He has not forgotten his own experiences in the

Nazi-established Łódź ghetto in Poland. In time, when Kizel Shlafer, her husband, and their children have an opportunity to move to the Netherlands, they take it.

Towards the end of the book, Kizel Shlafer reveals that she has often wondered what Jews would have done had the situation been reversed, “*als het omgekeerd was geweest, als de Duitsers alle katholieken hadden willen vermoorden en niet de joden, wat hadden de joden dan gedaan?*” (‘if it had been the other way around, if the Germans had wanted to murder all the Catholics and not the Jews, what would Jews have done in that case?’) (356). Her question not only demonstrates her ability to imagine herself in someone else’s shoes, it also suggests that victims, bystanders, and perpetrators may not be immutable categories, ultimately freeing her from any potential or residual feelings of anger, or of wanting revenge.

Mala (Marilka) Rivka Kizel Shlafer passed away in Amstelveen on November 17, 2020, at the age of 94 and was buried the following day, not far from the freshwater lake IJmeer, in the village of Muiderberg, the site of the oldest and largest Jewish cemetery in the Netherlands.

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