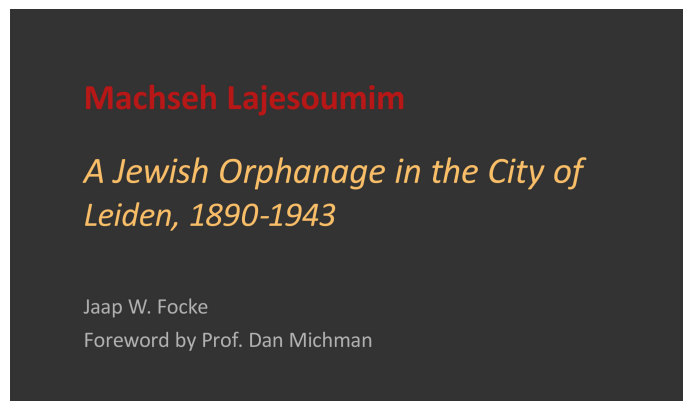


Review
Jaap W. Focke:
***Machseh Lajesoumiem: A Jewish orphanage in the city of
Leiden***

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 355 p.
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Reviewed by Peter Tammes



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The writing of this dedicated book dates to 1971 when an investigation started to examine what had happened to a Jewish orphanage in March 1943 when all children and staff were deported to the Nazi transit camp Westerbork. Several investigations by others contributed to “preserving the memory of the orphanage and its inhabitants” (xvii, 314) resulting in the book *Machseh Lajesoumiem* or *toevlucht voor wezen* (‘refuge for orphans’) authored by Jaap W. Focke, who gratefully acknowledged the work of all the “predecessors” and the willingness of Holocaust survivors to talk.

Following the belief that “people are really dead if they are not remembered anymore by anyone” (312), the primary objective of the book was providing the names and faces of all the 168 children who lived at least for a couple of months in the orphanage from 1929 onwards when the orphanage moved to a new building. Many children and staff could be identified by the overwhelming collection of photographs gathered over time in different (private) collections; hence, many (group) photos are printed in the book.

Machseh Lajesoumiem, originally established in 1890 in the City of Leiden in the province of South Holland, was one of the seven Jewish orphanages in the Netherlands around that time. Since the other Jewish orphanages were for older children, the Leiden orphanage was specifically to cater to children who were younger than six. The second chapter in the book describes the difficult first decades of the orphanage mainly due to inappropriate housing. From the early 20th century onwards, there were plans to relocate the orphanage, but it was not until 1929 that a new building designed by architects Buurman and Oesterman was built. Some 25 children moved to the new building at the corner of Roodenburgerstraat and Cronesteinkade. The number of actual orphans among the 168 children who had lived in the orphanage from 1929 onwards was very small. Mainly, these were children who had at least one parent (usually the mother) or children whose parent(s) were unable to support them.

In four chronologically ordered chapters, the small-scale history of the Leiden orphanage in the new building, until its liquidation in 1943, is told through the stories of a few selected children who are followed until their deportation to Nazi camps in the East; their individual stories across different chapters can be tracked via references to paragraph and figure numbers. About a year before its closing, the couple Hijme Stoffels and Emile Stoffels-van Brussel became the orphanage’s new neighbours. Owing to his many travels across Germany in the 1930s, Hijme Stoffels had no illusions about the Nazi’s intentions and through his connections he sought to help Jews to escape the Nazi persecution; after the war the couple was honoured at Yad Vashem (recognition for the Righteous among the Nations). Several times Stoffels had warned and strongly advised Nathan Italie, the orphanage director, to find hiding places for the children and his family, but

these warnings fell mostly upon deaf ears. Italie would not abandon the children by going into hiding himself and he did not want to do anything illegal.

Early 1943, it became clear that Jews in institutions were not safe anymore, as some medical institutions were forced to close. On March 17, 1943, the Leiden orphanage was dissolved, and 59 children and staff members were forcefully taken to Westerbork. Since Piet de Vries, one of the residents at the orphanage, arrived in 1935 after his non-Jewish father died, Stoffels set in motion a reclassification procedure of his Jewish status, which resulted in Piet's release from Westerbork. Similarly, Stoffels was successful in getting Hans Kloosterman's status reclassified. These reclassification procedures are well-documented in the book, and they show that this was a difficult and long process; for some too long, such as for Piet's sister who was deported. Within less than a week after their arrival, already 34 of them, including 9 staff members, were deported to Sobibor. Of the 59 children and staff, only Piet and Hans were not deported, while just two survived the deportations; nearly all were murdered in Sobibor in 1943.

A separate chapter describes the fate of some children who had left the orphanage in the 1930s or early 1940s. Among Jews caught in the first round-up in Amsterdam in February 1941 – as a revenge for street fights in the Jewish neighbourhood – was Karel van Santen who had left the orphanage around 1937. Together with 388 others, Karel was deported to Mauthausen where he soon perished and became one of the first Jews from the Netherlands to become a victim as a result of the Nazi regime. Karel's sister Esther had left the orphanage in 1939 but returned in September 1942 as these institutions were then still seen as safe places. She left again in February 1943, a few weeks before its liquidation, and survived the war in hiding ('*onderduik*'). A few others tried to escape to Switzerland or Spain but were caught and deported from Belgium and France to Nazi camps. Detailed narratives in another chapter describe how nine (former) orphanage children survived the Holocaust. These stories show different ways of escaping Nazi persecution; by getting (temporary) exemption from deportation, finding hiding places, fleeing to safe countries, reclassification of Jewish status, or getting false identity papers.

The list of (former) orphanage children at the end of the book provides information on who survived and who was murdered when and where. About 26% of all children who had lived in Machseh Lajesoumiem in the 1930s and 1940s and still lived in the Netherlands when Nazi Germany invaded, survived the Holocaust; this percentage is close to the national Jewish survival rate of about 27%. Though, it seems that among the (former) orphanage children the age group 0-5 had the lowest survival rate (13%), while the age group 15-30 the highest (31%) and the age group 6-14 had a survival rate (23%) in between those two age groups. This contrasts with the overall picture of survival of Jews in the Netherlands; the

youngest age group had lower chances of being deported, while the age group 6-14 had higher chances of being deported than other age groups (Tammes 2019). The lower chances of survival for the youngest children in this case might be attributed to the fact that many of them still lived in the orphanage in 1943.

The individual stories in the book provide some insight in the conditions and circumstances determining the fate of the children during the Nazi German occupation. This book fits in with the work done lately by remembrance organizations such as the Jewish Monument, Camp Westerbork Memorial Centre, and Project *Oorlogslevens* ('war lives') to give victims a name, a face, and a history. It also aligns with the current notion in Holocaust research to return Jewish people their agency by describing and analyzing their choices and actions or survival strategy to escape the Nazi persecution (Finkel 2017), including the offered help and small gesture of aid and protection known as *social reactivity* (Sémelin 2019; Burzlaff 2022), using individual-level data. With the focus on collecting and merging individual stories or data from several sources, it appears that remembrance efforts and academic research are being linked in the Netherlands. This can lead to developing a comprehensive view and a better understanding of the Holocaust. For as Jaap W. Focke rightly observes in his book, "that process has not been concluded to this day" (289).

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About the reviewer

Peter Tammes is an honorary researcher in the Population Health Sciences at Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, and a senior research officer at the Office for National Statistics (UK). He received his PhD from the Department of Sociology at Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands) and was awarded the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation's Research Prize 2004 for his research on the Holocaust. Using original registration lists of Jewish inhabitants in 1941–42, as well as post WWII victimization lists and other administrative sources, this research

resulted in the first systematic overview of variation in Holocaust victimization rates among Dutch municipalities, while statistical analyses of the data improved understanding of these local differences. Follow-up research focused on differences in survival chances of Jews in the Netherlands related to individual socio-demographic characteristics and contextual factors. His research findings are published in a range of journals, including *Social Science History*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, *European Journal of Population*, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, and *American Journal of Epidemiology*. In addition, his blog “Anne Frank and the Holocaust: How death rates varied across the Netherlands under Nazi occupation” was published online in *The Conversation*. Among his other publications are a booklet on the Jews of his home village Bergen in the Netherlands during WWII, *‘U draagt geen ster’: De vervolging van Joodse inwoners in Bergen* (Bonneville, 2005) and a biographical article on the Jewish entrepreneur Salomon Frenk from Rotterdam, “Het ondernemersleven van Salomon Frenk (1915-1999),” in *Rotterdams Jaarboekje 2008* (Stadsarchief Rotterdam, 2008).

