

Book Review

Behind Our Doors: A Memoir of Esther Warmerdam as Told to William Butt

Esther Warmerdam

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Esther Warmerdam, a Catholic Netherlander, was born in 1929 in Hillegom, a small town to the southwest of Amsterdam. Eleven years later, on May 10, 1940, Warmerdam's country was invaded by Nazi Germany. In *Behind Our Doors: A Memoir of Esther Warmerdam as Told to William Butt*, Warmerdam recounts her experience of the Second World War. While central to her story is her parents' providing refuge to over 200 Jews in their home, at great risk to their family, Warmerdam's recollection is more of a coming of age story of a young girl losing her innocence while grappling with the effects of war. Warmerdam's memoir is rich in detail, told with a childlike honesty that reflects her age during the war. Its simultaneously chronological and thematic organization, alongside its simple writing style, make it easy to read and suitable for a young audience as well as adults. Considering the book's mature subject matter, this memoir could serve as an excellent educational tool for students of history aged 13 and above, as it advances the wartime narratives commonly taught in educational institutions.

Behind Our Doors portrays life in the occupied Netherlands, a country that was directly affected by the Second World War, but which remained on the war's periphery through its limited experience of active combat. As such, the teaching of the Dutch war experience is often neglected in schools, Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) aside. Yet despite living on the fringes of war, Warmerdam explores the all too common wartime dilemmas that she and her family faced. Not only did Warmerdam have to contend with food rationing, unexpected house searches, and the disruption of her education, but she also had to learn to live with the individual isolation that often accompanies times of extreme stress and uncertainty. Warmerdam's experience thus moves beyond the sensational, beyond active combat or bombing or the Holocaust, to demonstrating how the consequences of war, however unusual, however small, become something to integrate into one's life to simply live.

Central to Warmerdam's wartime experience was her parents' decision to harbour Jews. According to Warmerdam, her parents were moved to do this by their Catholic faith, as well as the death of their infant daughter, Elizabeth, in 1942. In their minds, the death of their innocent daughter not only gave the family a guardian angel, but also reinforced that "life was what you loved and tended" (p. 13). Hiding Jewish fugitives from Nazi authorities was a constant source of anxiety, stress, and danger to her family, something that Warmerdam represents very well in her narrative. While the decision put great strain on everyone involved, Warmerdam describes a myriad of coping mechanisms for allaying the constant fear of discovery and arrest, from her

father's games (reminiscent of Roberto Benigni's 1997 film *Life Is Beautiful*) to her mother's emphasis on having "backbone" (p. 37) and emotional restraint to Warmerdam herself taking an avid interest in woodworking and journal writing. Despite these strategies, when Warmerdam asked her mother at the end of the war whether she would do it again, Warmerdam received a resounding no. Upon reflection, her mother modified her answer, responding that, "If people are in trouble, especially children, then you have to help, no matter what" (p. 178). These responses show how goodness is precarious in war, that it can have negative consequences, and that often it can be coloured with regret. Perhaps this recognition makes the heroism of the Warmerdam family, especially the parents, all the more poignant, as Warmerdam emphasizes their constant struggle to do what they deemed to be the right thing. Yet Warmerdam's parents were not lone heroes. Historians, such as Flim (2005) and Wolf (2007), have written detailed surveys about the rescue of Dutch Jews that provide a scholarly complement to Warmerdam's personal reminiscences.

Warmerdam also explores this human complexity and the question of who embodies good and evil during a war, and to what extent, through her discussion of German soldiers and Dutch collaborators. Much to her surprise, for example, her family establishes a firm friendship with Mark, a German soldier stationed in Hillegom. Mark made her understand that "Germans could suffer as the rest of us," (p. 116) and that being posted in a foreign village could ultimately be a lonely experience for soldiers, despite the power associated with their position. Warmerdam also reflects on Dutch collaborators, describing them as fanatical, worse than even the German soldiers, demonstrating that the categories of German, Nazi, collaborator, and resistor evaded any straightforward definitions and identifications. Her father, for example, joined the Dutch Nazi Party as a cover for his resistance work. Her neighbour, Sjaak, was also a party member. Somehow Sjaak knew of the Warmerdam's hidden Jews but, despite his assumed right-wing sympathies, he did not reveal her family's covert activities to the Nazi authorities. Through her descriptions of these people, Warmerdam's memoir moves beyond a mere duality of the good and evil of war toward a more nuanced tapestry of human experiences, decisions, and beliefs.

Warmerdam's story also provides a revealing complement to Anne Frank's diary. In juxtaposition to Frank's confinement in Amsterdam, Warmerdam had freedom of movement during the war, a freedom granted to her by her Catholicism and Dutch heritage. Despite this freedom, however, Warmerdam portrays herself as a casualty of the war, highlighting the different kinds of suffering that she experienced as a child, be it the confiscated family pet goat, food rationing, having to wear old clothes and knitted stockings (which she saw as "[her] minor yellow star," [p. 51]), the emotional isolation stemming from her parents' secret activities, or seeing her father repeatedly held at gunpoint by Nazi soldiers. She remarks, "In the scale of wartime suffering these were not large matters; we knew that, even then . . . [w]e were the smallest casualties of the war, not the kind that books get written about" (pp. 53-54). This statement, alongside this book's publication, underscores her belief that these stories, the stories of children at war, must be told, and that these stories are also valid. Perhaps this statement is where the power of her narrative lies. It is the seemingly mundane story of a child coming of age set in the sensational context of the Nazi-occupied Netherlands. The same can be said of Wolfgang W. E. Samuel's (2000) *German Boy: A Refugee's Story*, which is a poignant recollection of growing up in Germany in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Such vivid accounts, told from the perspective of a child, offer insights into the often forgotten minutiae of the civilian experience of war.

Warmerdam's recollections are also intrinsically tied to the Holocaust through, what she

terms, “the hidiers” (p. 59). While her memoir speculates on the fates of the Jews who passed through her home during the Second World War, Warmerdam is able to provide details of the four Jewish children and youth who were integrated into her family: Jetje, Max, Elly, and Cory. Their lives provide personalized vignettes into the horrors of Hitler’s extermination of the Jews and their different ways of coping. Elly and Cory, for example, converted to Catholicism, thus gaining freedom of movement in Hillegom (somewhat surprisingly), whereas Max refused, feeling “his Jewishness far down in his flesh, deeper than faith and deeper than a church; something no war could shed” (p. 103). Learning of what happened to these youngsters after the war ended was specifically touching, demonstrating the unexpected consequences of peace and even the heartbreaking repercussions of having done good. Jetje, for example, still a toddler at war’s end, was forcefully taken from the Warmerdam family by her Jewish father, a concentration camp survivor. According to Warmerdam, Jetje’s father was incapable of looking after his daughter due to financial hardship, thus colouring her childhood with neglect rather than the care that she had felt during the war. In considering the stories of these young Holocaust survivors, recounted through the eyes of Warmerdam, *Behind Our Doors* can be read alongside books about other children and youth who experienced the Shoah, such as Elie Wiesel’s classic *Night* (1960) and Karen Levine’s award-winning *Hana’s Suitcase* (2003).

The touching nature of this account should not prevent a critical reading of this text. While Warmerdam kept a diary for much of the war, this document was burned by her mother in 1944 because her mother felt that it compromised the family’s security. Warmerdam is thus speaking strictly from recollection, decades after the war ended. While in her concluding chapter Warmerdam emphasizes that these memories came back to her in 1988 as “supernaturally clear and real” (p. 187), and William Butt marvels at Warmerdam’s “astounding capacity to remember precisely her emotions during long-ago moments, to remember vivid details of sight, sound, smell, and touch” (p. vi), it must be acknowledged that *Behind Our Doors* is a recollection of events long ago. After the war, Warmerdam pursued a career in nursing and then moved to Canada for marriage. The passage of time, her post-war experiences, and the way that the war was remembered by the general populace would have affected the way that she herself reflected on and remembered the war.

While her wartime experiences are recounted with warmth, a warmth stemming from her strong family life, the war was ultimately a traumatic experience for Warmerdam, the memories of which caused her three weeks of nightmares in 1988 to which she consistently “woke up drenched and hoarse from shrieking” (p. 188). Many survivors of trauma use the power of storytelling as a mechanism for processing their experiences, for establishing a narrative that they can live with. Perhaps this memoir is an example of this strategy. Warmerdam discretely addresses this burden of memory: “In most stories of wartime, children rarely count. But children have to live with memories longer than the older generation” (p. 133). In the 1980s, Warmerdam also felt her wartime experience being challenged. As Hayley Faulkner, a long-time friend of Warmerdam, points out in the foreword, Warmerdam “was motivated to make her story public by her frustration from the publicity Holocaust deniers began to receive in the early 1980s” (p. iii). Such political motivations must also be taken into consideration when reading this text, as they could have influenced what Warmerdam chose to emphasize in her narrative, and what to leave silent.

Warmerdam also did not write her memoir herself. Rather, the book was a coproduction between her and writer William Butt. Butt sheds some light onto the writing process in the foreword, stating that the book is based on over 30 hours of recorded conversation. Through his

presence and participation in these conversations or, more precisely, oral history interviews, Butt contributed to the shaping of Warmerdam's recollections. As the writer, it was likely Butt who moulded Warmerdam's story into a readable narrative, thus making important editorial and stylistic choices that affect the reader's understanding of her experiences. Also, as this book was meant to be a personal memoir, and likely due to geographical and linguistic constraints, it appears that Butt did not interview any of the other people mentioned in the book, thus providing only a one-dimensional account of events, the veracity of which might be questionable.

These critiques, however, do not discount Warmerdam's telling of her story. They imply merely that *Behind Our Doors* should be examined critically in the classroom, just like any other historical source. This memoir is an excellent resource for students of history, as it significantly contributes to discussions of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and human agency as well as memory, narrative, and the writing of history.

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