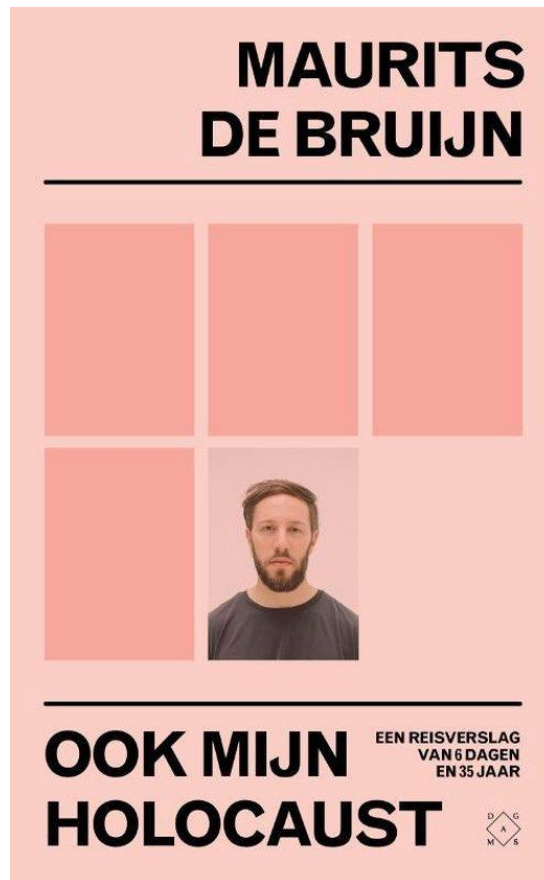


# My Holocaust, Too



## Maurits de Bruijn

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*A travelogue of 6 days and 35 years*

Maurits de Bruijn: thirty-six, author, queer, Jewish, raised in a Dutch Reformed household, sensitive, funny, fearful, flamboyant, brother of a young man who disappeared and son of a mother who as a baby was given to the neighbors when her parents and two sisters were deported to Sobibor.

Our life story is continually determined by others: genes, experiences, nature and nurture. In Maurits' case there was also a determinative trip to Israel, from which he returned a changed person.

*My Holocaust, Too* is a travelogue of that trip to Israel, but also of his life as a whole. A life in which the Second World War still resonates.

*'I was twelve and still a believer.*

*That belief was focused mainly on God, school, and the Spice Girls.'*

Press on *Ook mijn holocaust*:

'It circles around the question of what it means to be a person. A rich and sympathetic book.'

*FRIESCHE DAGBLAD*

'Keen observations and understated jokes. A tender tale of a journey, a family, and a life.'

*TROUW*

'A wonderful book. With lots and lots of humor.'

*MARGRIET VAN DER LINDEN, M*



Maurits de Bruijn

**Maasland,  
Friday, March 13, 2020**

I drive to my parents' house in my father's black Volvo. The car smells like car, the stick shift is fickle, there are pillows on the leather seats. My father is abroad, he's stranded there because of the virus. He's got issues with his lungs, it wasn't safe to fly and Spain is about to close its borders. Whenever my father is away, my mother almost always sleeps at the home of one of my brothers, the brother who stayed. He still lives in our hometown and is renovating his shed into a bedroom so our mother can stay there when she wants. He does more than I do; I think we both know this is how it will always be.

If my mother doesn't sleep at my brother's place, then she puts her heavy pillow on the back seat of her Toyota and drives to friends, where they've made up a fresh bed for her. On days when she doesn't want to bother my brother or her friends, she texts me, in her usual staccato style.

Time to stay here nxt wknd  
Let me know when  
Text me when you leave home

I drive into the town, past the vacant lot where the post-war church used to be and the new subdivision that has replaced my primary school. Recently I've come to appreciate the town's beauty. I lived here for as long as I haven't lived here, maybe the second eighteen years have erased the first eighteen years, which makes it possible for me to experience the town as a tourist.

I manage to parallel park on the third attempt, and start yawning. I always become uncontrollably tired as soon as I get back here. I don't know if it's that whenever I arrive, I give in to an exhaustion I would normally suppress, or if the fatigue hits me because coming back here is a chore, because there's always something expected of me.

Maybe I'm tired because I've caught the virus; this is also possible. When I said to my mother that maybe dropping by might not be such a good idea, she dismissed my concern: 'I've got plenty of vitamin C in the house.'

The back door is locked. My mother has done this since we left home. I just can't get used to it, don't even have a key. Through the wall-to-wall sliding doors, I see my mother sitting on the sofa, I know

she's watching Netflix. Any series she gets totally absorbed in, she calls a 'film', probably because of the high-quality production.

She's sitting only a few meters away, but doesn't hear me call out to her, knock on the glass door. So I dial her number, she looks at her phone, turns around, sees me, and laughs. The house has taken on a different smell since I've left home. Of fireplace and Windex. Nor is the furniture the furniture I grew up with. The floor tiles of my youth were square, twenty by twenty centimeters, brown and beige, with a rough groove in between them that chafed if I ran my hand over it. I remember the floors and rugs of my youth better than the stuff that stood on them. Since the makeover, the floor is white marble. My mother has bought mangos and avocados, because she knows I like them. She asks if I want to smoke.

We do that in the utility room, where the deep fryer has been replaced by an air fryer. A few years ago, a smoking ban was imposed on the rest of the house because of my father's lungs. Next to the antique chest there's a large, blue apparatus that filters the air. It turns on automatically when it senses meat on a griddle or when we light up a cigarette in the next room. Sometimes I think my father's heartache has nestled in his lungs.

Until last year, the utility room's walls were lined with cards. This was one of my father's projects, but lately they got so many death announcements and so little else that the place started getting morbid. The cards have been removed and the walls were painted. Cream-white.

My mother is wearing a sweatsuit, she looks good in it. It was expensive, she says. Way too expensive. 'Pity my hair's such a mess.' She needs to go to the hairdresser. As we leave the utility room, my mother asks if I would do something for her on the computer.

'I'm supposed to get money from the NS, but I don't know how to go about it.'

My mother will get money from the NS, the Dutch Railways, because during the war the company got paid by the Nazis for deporting Jews, Roma, Sinti, homosexuals, and resistance fighters. At least, if the Dutch people themselves didn't pay their own way. For my grandparents and their two daughters, the train tickets to camp Westerbork cost five guilders per person.

In total, the Dutch Railways earned some two and a half million guilders on the war. After a three-and-a-half-year legal battle waged by the former Ajax team physiotherapist Salo Muller, the courts agreed to compensation. So since August 2019 it's possible to file for damages, although there's hardly anyone alive anymore to claim them.

'I should be getting a bundle, you know. I'm pretty sure it's a lot.' My mother always takes the optimistic approach with things she doesn't know.

I am uneasy as I go to the Dutch Railways website. Nowhere do I see a button that says 'Holocaust victims'. I google the name of the commission that oversees the damages and find a link

to a sober, black-and-white website. My mother goes off to cook while I download and fill out the form. As she walks past, she grasps me by the shoulders and says, 'If we get it, I'll buy you a new sofa.'

According to the settlement, there are gradations when it comes to how much suffering one has endured. You have suffering, and you have suffering. An applicant who was interned in a concentration camp gets more than someone who stayed behind. The stay-behinds are then divided into widows/widowers and children. My mother falls under this last category. She doesn't get as much compensation as she thought, but if she's disappointed, she doesn't let on. My mother will receive 7500 euros for the deportation of her mother and 7500 euros for the deportation of her father. For the deportation of her two sisters, my mother gets nothing. In the case of elderly applicants, the commission will strive to process their claim quicker. I tell my mother she is probably too young for this.

We are in agreement, my mother and me. It is absurd that one of these days, 15,000 euros will appear in her bank account as compensation for the deportation of the family she was born into. The presumption that money should be comforting is more of an insult than an apology. Maybe this is not their intention; if it's that the NS has to pay back the money it earned seventy years ago, then these reparations are meant to right a wrong. But this particular injustice is part of a chain of other injustices. Setting it right is futile. This gesture does not demonstrate an understanding of the pain, but rather underscores precisely how irredeemable and intangible that pain is. Lose your family and get a sofa in return.

On the table is an exaggeratedly perky mug, trademark 'Blond', full of old tea. Aside from this tableware, my mother has pretty good taste. She realizes the mug gets no attention. So she intentionally takes it out of the cupboard and fishes for compliments.

My mother's mug reminds me of another unnerving specimen. I recently house-sat for a friend of mine for two months. I borrowed his life: ate breakfast at his kitchen table, cooked on his gas stove, slept in his bed, watered his plants, read his books. In the right-hand kitchen cupboard I came upon a white coffee mug with a swastika on it. Not the innocuous kind, not a Hindu or Buddhist one, but a genuine Nazi swastika. I took the mug out of the cupboard and looked at the bottom, saw the *Reichsadler*. I knew that my friend was not a Nazi sympathizer. I knew that he, like so many other millennials, was fond of irony. Moreover, we knew each other from art school, and our education there drove plenty of students to break the rules. And yet, that mug drew a line between him and me.

When I mentioned the mug to a visitor, showed it to her, and told her how repugnant I thought it was, she took the Nazi mug and without hesitation smashed it on the tile floor of my interim home. I laughed before getting out the dustpan.

Soon thereafter, the owner came back from vacation. I told him about the visitor and the mug that couldn't be glued back together. The friend shifted in his chair, blinked a few times.

'You know I'm not a Nazi, right,' the friend said. 'But I did buy it. Online. It wasn't cheap, either. I'm not 100% sure, but it was supposedly an original.'

The mug intrigued him, because it symbolized an ideology that couldn't possibly have the same significance in his kitchen cabinet as it did in its day. The fact that symbols even existed that could carry so much clout, or in whose name so much could be executed, gave him a kind of thrill. And indeed, it was an ironic purchase. He ironically went to a website where he could exchange ironic euros for an ironic package that arrived a couple of weeks later, and he would ironically show it to his ironic friends.

'I didn't think it would bother you,' said the friend.

'Neither did I,' I replied.

'Funny, actually. Because I know about your family. About your mother.'

I should have made it clear to the friend right then that the story wasn't only my mother's, but mine, too. I shouldn't have waited till that day to say it, I should have said it long ago. I should have been making this clear all along, ever since I was young. And, says my psychologist, I have to learn to set boundaries. My psychologist is right about this.

The story of the Holocaust has been told countless times; it has been entirely absorbed as an essential element of our national identity. The story is showing wear-and-tear, it has evoked aversion and fatigue, it has allowed fascinations to sprout. The film industry, world literature, and education have served up hundreds of thousands of hours of Holocaust stories. This specific element of our history has been validated as an unequivocal tale of good and evil. It seems to be that absoluteness that invites resistance, incites people to challenge the boundaries of good and evil. Nobody wants to be told what to think or feel. Nobody wants to buy into an absolutist view of the past. Things dished up to us in bite-sized portions must be tested. Political correctness must be defied. With coffee mugs, if need be.

'You want me to pay for the mug?' I ask the friend in whose house I stayed for two months.

'Nah,' he said. 'Never mind.'

Holocaust fatigue. This term exists, as does the philosophy behind it. I can't say this to my mother, just as I cannot tell her about the mug, cannot tell her that her pain is being overtaken by the zeitgeist,

that there are people who have lost interest in Holocaust victims. That there is a generation for whom '40-'45 is no more than names on street signs and grainy black-and-white photos. But what my mother went through, still goes through every day, happened in color, happens in color.

As a response to irony and to the seventy-five years' distance between then and now, not only does my mother's story need to be told, but mine does as well. Now, while my mother is still alive, still capable of buying ugly coffee mugs and preparing absurd amounts of food when I come to stay.

Today, it's home-made shawarma. There's also cauliflower, potatoes, mini-pizzas, lentil soup, and beans. She can't leave it at just one meal, there is too much love.

I do not tell her about the Nazi mug. I tend to want to spare her, and I give in to that, but I do say I think the Blond mug is hideous.

'Well, I like it,' she says. 'Yes. I really do like it.'

'Does it worry you, Mom, that virus?'

'It'll be all right in the end, won't it?'

'Yeah, I think so, too. It's all so weird, Dad with his lung troubles and you not being able to be alone. What a hassle, those two things, now of all times.'

'Oh, for me it's been a hassle for a while.' My mother drizzles a rivulet of garlic sauce onto her plate, says offhandedly how delicious it is, that she could eat it all day. She has her own peculiar way of communicating, but I've had lots of practice, I see her expression change and know a new thought has entered her mind. 'I saw a photo somewhere,' she says, 'and in it, I'm a kind of toddler, maybe two years old. And I'm sticking my hand in the air.'

'I've got that photo, Mom. It's at my place.'

'Oh yes,' she says, 'so it is. Well, in that photo I'm reaching for the air, because I'm so glad to be outdoors. I had been outside before. In the playpen, they had put it in the yard in the sun. And someone walked past and said: *that is a Jewish child*. And in went the playpen, for good.'

Even years after the war, people reminded my mother of her time indoors.

'Here in Maasland, people stared at me and called me a Jew. And when they did, I'd think, *oh yes, that's true, isn't it*. I kept forgetting I was Jewish.'

It makes me think of all the times as a kid that I was called 'girlie' or 'homo'. Back then, I often thought, *that's true, isn't it, I'm different, I don't belong*, like when walking past a mirror can suddenly remind you of your new haircut.

My mother never told her parents about being called names. Just like I never told her or my father about being teased at school. Maybe she unwittingly taught me that self-reliance, that eternal sparing of others, that swallowing of your pain.

A confrontation with her Jewish identity was a confrontation with the inexplicable, with pain. In my eyes, too, being Jewish meant war, exclusion, hate, deportation. The word itself was interlaced with an immeasurable grief that I did not claim but that I stood next to, grief whose lap I sat on, that I tried to comfort, that was my mother's. Until I was twelve, when the realization began to unfurl that everything that happened to my mother had left its mark on me.

'Do you know when I first felt Jewish?' I asked. My mother looks through her glasses at the cauliflower, slides a floret onto her plate.

'When your nose started growing?'

'Then, too. But even earlier. In Israel, when I went there with Dad. When I was twelve.'

In those six days I discovered that I had a place in the world that had already been determined, that a narrative existed in which not only my mother is Jewish, but I am, too. During that fall break I learned that there was more to being Jewish than victimhood; a complete Jewish culture opened up before me. Those six days marked the beginning of a self-examination that apparently could not take place in our family home and made clear that the war did not end with my mother. There, in Israel, I began to realize what impact her history had on me.

I have a bad memory. None of us has a good memory. They say that's a symptom of a trauma. Whenever our family talks about the past, we're almost never capable of getting the story completely right. But those six days are an exception, they are still very clear in my mind. I can easily recall my twelve-year-old self, as though right then there is a gap in time. By looking back, I hope to discover where my mother's story ends and mine begins.

People think they know the war, some people are even tired of it, without understanding what it inflicted. If I don't manage to figure out my pain and make it known, then no one will know it's still festering, and the generations that come after me won't know what hit them when, in *their* body, too, the Holocaust wakes up.



This story has more than one beginning. I'll begin with my beginning, on:

**Maasland,  
Friday evening, October 18, 1996**

I was twelve years old and still a believer. That belief was focused mainly on God, school, and the Spice Girls. I was an extremely conscientious student and packed my schoolbooks in the suitcase I shared with my brother whenever we went on vacation.

This time I had my own bag. I brought not only my math books, but history as well. The suitcase was not big. True journeyers traveled light, my father believed. He taught me to roll up my clothes rather than fold them, that way you could take more with you and they wouldn't get wrinkled. I had to force myself not to unpack everything immediately to see if he was right.

Outside, Westland glowed with the lights of the huge greenhouses surrounding the town. At night they turned overcast skies orange. Sometimes during the winter, the sky was brighter after sundown than during the day. It drove the animals crazy. Maybe the people, too.

It was the first trip my father and I took alone. He had taken this kind of trip before with my brothers. They went to Paris, or Austria. My trip came later because when you're the youngest, everything comes later.

Tomorrow was the big day. Ria would give my father and me a lift to the airport. Ria was a woman with green teeth, but it was a pretty shade of green. She was a friend of my parents and would drive us from the town to Schiphol in her old car. My father would wake me, but if I stayed awake, that wouldn't even be necessary.

The upcoming trip made sleeping impossible. But if I'm honest, I made sleeping impossible for myself every night by running a nightmare scenario in my mind.

As soon as I got into bed, I would count how many steps my bunk bed was from the door. Then I would trace in my mind the route from my bedroom door to the entrance to the house. Back door, kitchen, hall, stairs, my door, step by step, the faceless intruder came closer. He had a gun or knife with him, the weapon varied per night, sometimes he was empty-handed.

I lay in bed, watched as he grasped the handle on our back door and stepped over the threshold. That door was never locked, not even at night; that's the kind of trust we had in the town.

Every night, the faceless man walked down our carpeted hallway, determined to massacre all the members of our family. There were various ways he could do this, depending on the murder weapon and the route he chose. In the best-case scenario (for me, anyway), the faceless man would go not one, but two, flights up. That is where my two older brothers slept, each in a room taking up half the attic. To the left was the eldest, the brother who would leave. He was tall, taller than my father, which I thought was pretty selfish of him. It was a direct assault on my father's authority. The brother who would leave was invincible, but a brooder, too, he had other people's best interests at heart and constantly listened to music. In the room to the right was my next-to-eldest brother, the brother who also felt it. He was the gentlest person I knew. The brother who would leave was his idol. Within the family, these two brothers were friends, as though they knew each other from somewhere else.

If the faceless man were to attack my two older brothers first, my parents would hear the ruckus and be able to subdue the faceless man. Then we would all survive, and years later would laugh about our narrow escape. I could easily picture that, because in our messy family, we laughed a lot.

If the faceless man did not go up two flights, but just one (which I felt was more plausible) then my scenario branched into two subscenarios. The most disastrous one by far was the variant where he first went into my parents' bedroom and would shoot them from the doorway, through the down quilt, so that the flowers on the quilt cover would turn dark red. Without parents, I knew, we were goners.

In the second subscenario, the faceless man would enter the bedroom of the brother who stayed, the third, incredibly energetic child who stood apart from the rest of the family, not least of all because problems just seemed to glide off him. The brother who stayed might even be quick enough to evade the faceless man's knife slashes. He slept in the room we shared until recently. He and I did not really jell: the brother who stayed moved so effortlessly through life that alongside him I felt hopelessly incompetent.

The brother who also felt it was older than the brother who stayed, but was closer in character to me, because there were moments that I saw my fear reflected in him. Often, he would come downstairs at night to ask if the brother who stayed would switch beds with him, so that he, the brother who also felt it, and I could spend the endless, fearsome night together. He exhausted me with chitchat until I had to beg him to go to sleep, at which point he would reassure me that I could rest by simply lying still. This happened without exception whenever there was a thunderstorm and the shutters on my bedroom window would slap against the house with every gust of wind.

There was a sort of competition between the brother who also felt it and the brother who stayed that did not occur in the rest the family. The brother who stayed was younger but shrewder, keener, less wavering than the brother who also felt it, and as such gave us both the feeling of being losers. At least, if you ask me.

If the brother who stayed could get away and raise the alarm, we could trap the faceless man in his bedroom, call the police, and wait downstairs on the sofa in our pajamas for them to come.

And then the last, most plausible, and for me the worst subscenario: the faceless man would open my bedroom door first. Most plausible, because my door was right at the top of the stairs. I was convinced I would be defenseless against his strangling hands. I was the youngest and by far the weakest of the family. The only hope I had in this scenario was that I would make enough noise to rouse the family and that they would come running to my tiny room and strangled the man while he was strangling me. I lay there hoping for this, the night before my father and I traveled to Israel. I lay there every night hoping for exactly this, while the Spice Girls watched me silently from their poster and God kept his distance.

*English translation © Jonathan Reeder 2021*

## **“Holocaust pain is still very much there”**

Maurits de Bruijn on *My Holocaust, Too*

14 June 2020, Martijn Tulp in *Winq* (Dutch queer lifestyle magazine)

**Maurits de Bruijn’s third book, *Ook mijn Holocaust*, appeared earlier this year. In what is being called his non-fiction debut, *De Bruijn* (35) talks about his mother’s extraordinary past, and the effect it had on the family and himself.**

In *My Holocaust, Too*, we learn that Maurits de Bruijn’s mother, the youngest of three daughters, was born to Jewish parents in the middle of World War II. When her parents and sisters were deported to Sobibor, she—still a baby—was whisked into hiding with neighbors who promised to look after her. She eventually ended up being taken in by another family in Maasland who would shelter her for the duration of the war. When visitors came around, the baby was hidden in a drawer under the stairs. As an adult, this trauma has had an impact on her everyday life: she suffers from anxiety and is uneasy being alone. She has a particularly strong bond with her youngest son Maurits, but also passed her wartime trauma on to him. The book also deals with Maurits’ discovery of his own identity as a Jewish man, and his relationship with Israel.

**Why is this being called your non-fiction debut? Wasn’t your first book *Brother* about your brother who disappeared?**

‘In *Brother* I didn’t really try to be faithful to reality. The book doesn’t go into where my brother disappeared, under what circumstances, or when we last had contact with him. I made it into my own story, even though it’s based on real-life elements. But then, *My Holocaust, Too* isn’t your standard non-fiction book either. These genre categories aren’t that important to me.’

**You share intimate details about your family in the book. Did you clear this with them beforehand?**

‘The book does contain a lot of intimate things about our family, particularly my mother, and, to a lesser extent, about my father and brothers. There was no other way to tell the story: its origins had an effect on the entire family. I’m not afraid to show my vulnerable side when I’m writing. But having to reveal things about someone else—this, I find harder. Of course, I wanted to avoid causing

any sort of strife or alienation within the family. I asked for, and got, my mother's permission for this project. Everyone in the family read it before it went to print and had veto rights. But it's not like I've thrown my family to the wolves.'

**How did your mother react after reading the book?**

'My boyfriend and I were there when she read it, which was good. She read it twice. At first, fortunately, she laughed a lot. Much of the book's humor is hers, the way it used to be at home. She also said right away that she realized her shortcomings as a mother. That surprised me: I mean, I thought it was already pretty clear. The relationship between me and my mother was so different than what I observed with friends or cousins.'

**She wasn't aware of how much she leaned on you?**

'No, it was a real revelation for her. It's not that cut-and-dried, though: I'm the youngest [of four sons], and my mother and I happen to have a very strong bond. We really gravitate toward the other. Within the family, there were always jokes about us being in cahoots. But the point is to see a parent leaning so much on her child, rather than vice versa.'

**You're also open about your own anxiety disorder, and you write about things you hardly even share with close friends. Was it difficult to be so open?**

'During the writing process I didn't give it much thought. But many of my friends weren't aware of this side of me. If I could write a book that no one I knew would read, I'd jump at the chance. I don't tell these things in the book to grab the spotlight for myself, but to raise more universal issues. I think that only for my boyfriend there were no surprises in the book. I'm so glad that there's at least one reader who that counts for. Otherwise I'd have felt incredibly dysfunctional.'

**Your book is also about your Jewish identity. How do reports of an increase in anti-Semitism in the Netherlands make you feel?**

'Personally I haven't experienced it myself, but I do feel responsible for the anti-Semitism that others experience. Writing the book is related to this, because I noticed how many people frame the Holocaust in whichever way suits them. Often for political advantage; or it gets injected into the societal debate, usually as a means to achieve something else, to draw parallels, or for the shock factor. For that reason, it's important for me to tell my family's story.'

**The Holocaust era is gradually receding in time. In your book you write that war traumas are genetically passed on to subsequent generations. Do you think this helps emphasize the urgency of keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive?**

‘You can’t just put the five years of the Holocaust under a bell jar and call it quits. But this seems to be the general attitude: society wants to move on. It’s like when someone grieves for a loved one: at a certain point, friends and family want to get on with life. Of course, there are organizations that focus on keeping the memory alive, but it’s mostly about the memory of a particular period in our country’s history, about what the nation as a whole went through, and not so much the individual groups that were affected in their own specific way. It’s less about the fact that the suffering—certainly in my mother’s case—is still very much there.’

**Hence the title?**

‘Yes, because some people cast doubt on whether it’s even my mother’s Holocaust. If she has no active memory of the Second World War, they think, how can she claim to have been traumatized by it? I chose the title because I’m the one who eventually has to pass down my mother’s story. If the Holocaust only belongs to the people who experienced it first-hand, then pretty soon it will be gone for good. Then, people really *will* say: basta, let’s move on. Although the issue I address—the concept of second or third generation victimhood—is a widely occurring phenomenon. For other collective traumas, too, such as slavery. I thought it was important to make that link clear as well.’

**You were raised in the Dutch Reformed church. Would you rather have belonged to the Jewish community?**

‘Yes. Even from an early age. I found it fascinating, in an exotic way. I wish there had been rituals in our family, even if it was just eating matzo ball soup on Fridays. Now my mother has some Jewish friends, which feels right for her. She identifies as Jewish nowadays, but I don’t think she minds that it never really had a place in our family life. Maybe because her Jewish background is too associated with pain. It took a long time for my mother to want, or dare, to go to Israel.’

**And you? You write that you first regarded Israel as a magical country, the place where all the Bible stories originated, but that later you couldn’t relate to it because of the Palestine-Israel conflict. After that you went there with your boyfriend. Do you envision yourself ever living there?**

‘I considered it when I finished at the art academy. Because of my Jewish parentage I could ‘make *aliyah*,’ an Israeli law that more or less enables subsidized immigration to Israel. But like I wrote in

the book, it didn't feel right. The history of the creation of Israel will never change, and politically, Israel's near future doesn't exactly look rosy. And it's safer in the Netherlands than in Israel.'

**Do you have plans for your next book?**

'I sure do. That one will be more explicitly about my homosexuality. I do touch on it in *My Holocaust, Too*, but more in the context of the bigger story. The next book will be more my reflections on homosexuality, combined with personal things.'

*translation: Jonathan Reeder © 2021*