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In the Port City We Meet ? Jewish Migration and Jewish Life in Antwerp During the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Veerle Vanden Daelen

This article on Jewish migration and Jewish life in Antwerp from the late 19th through early 20th centuries deals with a Jewish community in a port city which has seen a rather unusual development for Western Europe. Antwerp's small existing Jewish community was quickly outnumbered by Jewish newcomers, mostly from Eastern Europe, who brought along with them a whole range of different religious, cultural and political ideas¹. Was it because of Antwerp being a port and a trade city, because of the economic connection of this growing Jewish community with the diamond trade, that an unusual Eastern European-style Jewish life could develop in Antwerp ? How do we explain the unity in diversity which characterizes Antwerp's Jewish life (as Antwerp for example has had a unified Jewish welfare since 1920, in contrast to Brussels, Paris or Amsterdam). This article sheds light on paths of migration and integration of a Jewish minority group in Western Europe.

After the Second World War, Jewish life in Antwerp developed in what was a unique way for a Western European community, a way that brought together many kinds of Orthodox ten-

¹ This article first took shape after participating in the conference « Jewish Migration and Integration to the Metropolises of Europe, 1848-1918. A Comparative Perspective » (Vienna, 2009). I am very grateful to all the participants and most importantly to the organizers, as well as to Drs. Janiv Stamberger who provided me with a fresh set of remarks on the topic in 2017. All images in this article : © Musée juif de Belgique – Joods Museum van België.

dencies². Antwerp's Jewish population today almost certainly includes the highest percentage of Hassidic Jews among its numbers (25 % in 2004) of any city in the world, and all official Jewish life in the city is organized according to Orthodox religious standards³. This article focuses on earlier periods in Antwerp's Jewish history, and seeks to analyze aspects of change in Antwerp's Jewish life at the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century. This was a complex period marked by rapid growth in the number of Jewish inhabitants in the city, as the small Western European Jewish community was joined by large numbers of new, mainly Eastern European, immigrants. How did this immigration influence Antwerp's Jewish life in the subsequent years? Did such developments parallel developments in other European cities at the time, or was Antwerp already distinctive in such respects from the rest of Western European Jewish life before the Second World War?

In order to answer or to offer hypotheses to these questions, I will first present the Jewish life in nineteenth-century Antwerp and then offer a short demographical overview. After delving into the complex reasons for migration and more specifically why Jewish immigrants chose Antwerp as their final destination, I will discuss new developments initiated by this immigration wave, especially in terms of settlement patterns, religious life, and Jewish educational and organizational life. These developments led to Jewish life in Antwerp becoming both more visible and more heterogeneous. As concerns religious life, there will be special focus as to whether the heterogeneity of the larger group

² V. Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen. De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap in Antwerpen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog (1944-1960)*, Amsterdam, 2008.

³ J. Gutwirth, *La renaissance du hassidisme. De 1945 à nos jours*, Paris, 2004, pp. 28-31.

manifested itself only within Orthodox religious tendencies, or if there was in fact more variation within Jewish Antwerp of the pre-World War II period. I will examine institutional history and also try to “place” this Jewish history in its urban context, in a city that underwent major changes during the years covered in this article⁴. It is important to see how Jewish “places” (geographical, physical locations) and Jewish “spaces” (where Jewish things happen, performance) emerged and evolved over time, especially as to how they were influenced by the city’s development and the influx of Jewish immigrants⁵. I draw on historical documents and sources, as well as on novels by Sholem Aleichem and Esther Kreitman, in which this period of Jewish life in Antwerp is described⁶. As evidenced by various references in this article, much credit must be extended to Jean-Philippe Schreiber, who published the first academic study of Belgian Jewish history for the period before the First World War⁷.

⁴ Antwerp as a city was in full expansion in the last half of the nineteenth century and experienced huge growth in population (from approximately 100,000 around 1860 to over 300,000 in 1910). The larger agglomeration included, the numbers were even multiplied by 3.5 over this time (S.n., *Antwerpen 1860-1960*, Antwerp, 1960, pp. 12-14, 47-48).

⁵ J. Brauch – A. Lipphardt – A. Nocke, « Exploring Jewish Space. An Approach », in J. Brauch – A. Lipphardt – A. Nocke (ed.), *Jewish Topographies : Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, London, 2008, pp. 1-4.

⁶ Esther Kreitman was born in 1891 in Bilgoray (Poland) as Hinde Esther Kreitman. She was the oldest child of Hassidic rebbe Pinkhas Menakhem Singer and his wife Basheve. Her three years’ younger brother, Israel Joshua Singer, and especially her thirteen year younger brother, Isaac Bashevis Singer, are much more known authors. However, Esther Kreitman wrote three novels herself, two of which play partly in Antwerp : *Der sheydim tants* (*The Devil’s Dance*, 1936, translated as *Deborah*), and *Brilyantn* (*Diamonds*, 1944). She lived herself for a while in Antwerp after her arranged marriage with diamond cutter Avrom Kreitman in 1912 (H. Valencia, « Introduction », in E. Kreitman, *Diamonds*, London, 2010, pp. 9-27).

⁷ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Politique et religion. Le Consistoire central israélien de Belgique au XIX^e siècle*, Bruxelles, 1995.

Schreiber used the files of the Foreigners' Police, which remain an undervalued historical source⁸. His work continues to inspire my thinking. In terms of chronology, I focus mostly on the period 1880-1914, though to draw evolutions more clearly I also bring in the interwar period, and I occasionally refer to the post-World War II period.

Jewish life in Antwerp in the nineteenth century and the demographic explosion at the turn of the century

The history of Jews in Belgium arises primarily after 1815 though Jews remained a very small minority, in Antwerp and elsewhere, until the end of the nineteenth century⁹. Before 1816, when the small Jewish community of Antwerp was granted official state-recognition as a religious community, small numbers of New Christians and Marranos had settled in the city. Most of these newcomers were engaged in overseas trading. In 1808, when Antwerp was under French rule (which lasted from 1795 to 1815), the city counted just 37 Jewish inhabitants. However, prayer assemblies were not permitted without official authoriza-

⁸ Further research in the files of the Foreigners' Police will better our insights on patterns of chain migration, economic and residential clustering, and marriage patterns. It could provide a more detailed view of the social contacts between Jews in the city and more and more lead to the image of the "sociological Jews", meaning every Jewish person in town, instead of the "community Jews", meaning these persons engaged in community organizations (be it as a member or in a leading position) that already existed or were founded (J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Contribution à l'étude de la démographie dynamique de l'immigration juive en Belgique entre 1840 et 1890 », in S. Della Pergola and J. Even (ed.), *Papers in Jewish Demography. Selected proceedings of the Demographic Sessions Held at the 12th World Congress of Jewish Studies 1997*, Jerusalem, 2001, pp. 65-67.

⁹ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Contribution à l'étude... », *op. cit.*, p. 66 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive en Belgique du moyen âge à la première guerre mondiale*, Brussels, 1996, p. 132.

tion, and it was not until 1812 that such a request was submitted when a group of 22 Jews petitioned the state for official recognition as religious community. This recognition as the Israëlitische Gemeente was granted in 1816, after the city came under Dutch rule (which lasted from 1815 to 1830). In 1829 there were around one hundred Jews living in Antwerp. After 1830, when Belgium became an independent country, the Jewish population in Antwerp began growing significantly, especially after 1841. The small group of Jewish inhabitants who had already been living in the city was supplemented by a wave of immigration that lasted from 1841 until 1880. A survey of names undertaken by the municipal authorities in 1854 counted 457 Jews in the city. The newcomers were primarily of Dutch origins, though some came from Germany and France. This group was considered fairly integrated into general society. They spoke Dutch and/or French, and they were influenced by the Western European model of Jewish emancipation and assimilation. This migration wave differed considerably from the migration wave of 1880-1890 and other subsequent immigration waves¹⁰. Even though many of the newcomers were workers, mostly in diamonds, the leaders of the Israëlitische Gemeente of Antwerp were economically and often politically notable personalities. Jonathan Raphaël Bischoffsheim, for example, was the first president of Antwerp's religious Jewish community after Belgian independence. From 1833 onward he represented Antwerp's Jewish community at the Belgian Consistory, of which he was president from 1837 until 1840. Bischoffsheim, a major philanthropist, was not only among Belgium's most important bankers and entre-

¹⁰ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Contribution à l'étude... », *op. cit.*, p. 66 and p. 71 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-136.

preneurs but was also active in national politics, serving as senator from 1862 until his death, in 1883¹¹.



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The largest expansion in Antwerp's Jewish life came with the waves of mass Jewish immigration from Central and Eastern Europe from around 1880 onwards. Antwerp, being a port city, was usually either the arriving immigrants' final intended destination or, as was generally the case, their last stop in the Old World before continuing onward to America. Between 1873 and 1934 more than two million migrants, including many Jews, embarked from Antwerp for America aboard ships of the Red Star Line.

For some of these immigrants, however, the time between their arrival in the port city and their being able to embark for America stretched on too long. They remained in Antwerp, together

¹¹ E. Schmidt, *Geschiedenis van de Joden in Antwerpen : in woord en beeld*, Antwerp-Rotterdam, 1994, p. 96 ff. ; J.-Ph. Schreiber (ed.), *Dictionnaire biographique des Juifs de Belgique. Figures du judaïsme belge XIX^e-XX^e siècles*, Brussels, 2002, pp. 56-57 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, p. 132, p. 134. For the time under Dutch rule, see B. Wallet, *Nieuwe Nederlanders. De integratie van de joden in Nederland, 1814-1851*, Amsterdam, 2007 ; B. Wallet, « Brabantse joden tussen Oranje en "le peuple belge". Migratie en de joodse gemeenschappen in Brabant, 1815-1839 » in *Noordbrabants Historisch Jaarboek*, 26, 2009, pp. 170-189.

with those who had originally intended to settle there¹². One consequence of such resettling in Antwerp was that the city's existing, small Jewish community was soon greatly outnumbered by the newcomers. In 1880 there were about 1,200 Jews in Antwerp, yet shortly after the turn of the century the number had increased to around 8,000 people. By the outbreak of the First World War the figure reached approximately 20,000. Jewish immigration to Antwerp continued during the inter-war years, and by the eve of the Second World War the total number of Jewish inhabitants was estimated at 35,500¹³. Before the First World War most Jewish immigrants were Russian or Austro-Hungarian, and German. After the war, they were mainly citizens of the reestablished Poland. Today, Antwerp is estimated to have at least 15,000 to 20,000 Jewish inhabitants. These figures are estimates, as Belgium's liberal constitution did not permit registration of ethnicity or religion¹⁴. The approximate numbers, however, clearly show that Antwerp's Jewish population rose dramatically in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

¹² Ph. Heylen, « Voorwoord » and S. Hoste, « Antwerpen en zijn haven », in M. Nauwelaerts (ed.), *Red Star Line. People on the Move*, Schoten, 2008, pp. 7 and 60-62 ; E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, p. 84. More known and more important transit ports of that era were Hamburg, Bremen or Rotterdam (see for example the work of Tobias Brinkman).

¹³ L. Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880-1944)*, Tielt, 2000, pp. 10, 15 (restrictive migration laws), 201-202.

¹⁴ The only registrations available are a population survey of 1846 (which in fact violated the constitution) and the obligatory registrations during Germany's occupation of the country during the Second World War. The latter registrations cannot be considered complete, as many Jews had already fled the country or did not comply with edicts to present themselves for registration. Researchers have thus had no alternative but to work with estimates in order to describe evolutions in Jewish demographics (J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97 ; V. Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen*, *op. cit.*, p. 15, pp. 27-34).

Reasons for migration and for choosing Antwerp

Antwerp's Jewish immigrants left their hometowns and home countries for myriad reasons. Antisemitism, as well anti-Jewish measures and official discrimination of numerous kinds and degrees were certainly among them, and included anti-Jewish violence, economic discrimination, and discrimination in university enrollment. Economic reasons were another category of motivation for immigration, and often overlapped or combined with motivations stemming from antisemitism and anti-Jewish practices¹⁵. Jewish unemployment in Eastern Europe at the time was especially high because of the disruption and destabilization of the traditional Jewish *shtetl* economy, not least the typically "Jewish sectors" such as the leather industry and textiles. A third category, again overlapping or combining the first two, was that of young men seeking to avoid (often discriminatory) military prescription in Russia¹⁶. War, domestic instability, and changing borders and regimes offered further reasons to emigrate. A large group of immigrants, so-called chain migrants, were immigrants who joined family, friends, or other people from their hometowns after hearing stories about the possibilities and freedoms they enjoyed in their new lands. Even if the immigrant himself did not know anybody, he may still have carried a letter, for example from his *rebbe*, to a Hassid who lived in the town of destination¹⁷. Numerous factors (often in combination) influenced immigrants' respective decisions to immigrate. This overview does not take into account microfactors such as an immi-

¹⁵ R. Van Doorslaer, *Kinderen van het getto : Joodse revolutionairen in België, 1925-1940*, Antwerp, 1996, pp. 12-13, p. 24.

¹⁶ « They had come from Poland or Russia in order to avoid military service » (E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, p. 81).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

grant's family structure and personality, but instead enlists the major macro- and mesofactors that led to decisions for migration¹⁸.

Choosing Antwerp as a destination for immigration was similarly multifaceted as the decision for migration. A common and foremost reason for opting for Antwerp was the liberal residency policies of the Belgian state. Even during the years of economic crisis of the interwar period, there were no severe government restrictions on immigration, refugees, or foreign labour until late 1938¹⁹. For the Belgian authorities the most decisive factors for shaping immigration and residence policies were economic and political arguments. As long as immigrants were not political opponents (belonging to political parties or organizations deemed subversive by the state), criminals, or vagrants, and could support themselves without becoming state-burdens, immigration was fairly easy. This remarkably liberal policy became stricter during the interwar period, although exceptions could generally be ensured for immigrants who could support themselves on their own, or in the case of Jewish immigrants, were supported by Jewish private welfare. Of course, the Belgian government maintained measures for expelling "unwanted" foreigners, such as via not according them citizenship or permanent residence. Likewise, being born in the country did not automatically make one a Belgian citizen. Indeed, of the registered Jewish population in 1940, only 6.6 % held Belgian nationality. These were mostly families who had lived in Belgium before the mass

¹⁸ A. Winter, *Migrants and Urban Change : Newcomers to Antwerp, 1760-1860*, London, 2009, pp. 9-34 (Series : *Perspectives in Economic and Social History*) ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.

¹⁹ Fr. Caestecker, *Alien Policy in Belgium, 1840-1940 : the Creation of Guest Workers, Refugees and Illegal Aliens*, New York, 2000, p. 242.

wave of immigration at the end of the nineteenth century²⁰. Thus, on the eve of World War II, the majority of Jews in Belgium, even those having resided in the country for decades and often being the second (or further) generations of their families to have been born there, remained officially non-citizens and foreigners. This situation was starkly different as compared to France and the Netherlands, where 56 % and 80 % of the respective Jewish populations held citizenship at the eve of the Second World War²¹.

The liberal attitude of the Belgian state and the city of Antwerp toward Jewish migrants was also strongly shaped by economic issues and developments. In particular, around the same time that mass immigration of Jews to Antwerp had begun the diamond sector had also experienced a boom period : five diamond exchanges were founded between 1898 and 1929, and Jews held major positions in each. Few “native” Belgians played any significant role in the local diamond trade²², and by the eve of

²⁰ The others with Belgian nationality were members of the Jewish immigrant economic elites who had immigrated afterwards, and who had the economic profile and financial resources to successfully obtain the grand naturalization, and children of Jewish long-term immigrants born in Belgium who when they turned 22 could opt for Belgian nationality. (See Belgian Law of 8 June 1909 and adaptation of this law on 15 May 1922 ; H. Bekaert, *Le statut des étrangers en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1940, pp. 61-62).

²¹ Studiecommissie betreffende het lot van de bezittingen van de leden van de Joodse gemeenschap van België, geplunderd of achtergelaten tijdens de oorlog 1940-1945 (Diensten van de Eerste Minister), *De bezittingen van de slachtoffers van de jodenvervolg in België : spoliatie – rechtsherstel – bevindingen van de Studiecommissie. Eindverslag*, Brussels, 2001, pp. 35-36. Patrick Weil mentions 58 % of Jews in France with the French nationality (about 140.000 of the estimated 330.000 Jews in France did not have French nationality, P. Weil, « The return of Jews in the nationality or in the territory of France », in D. Bankier (ed.), *The Jews are coming back. The return of the Jews to their countries of origin after WWII*, Jerusalem, 2005, p. 58.

²² E. Laureys, *Meesters van het diamant. De Belgische diamantsector tijdens het nazibewind*, Tielt, 2005, pp. 58-60 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L’immigration juive...*, op. cit.,

the Second World War 90 % of the management, major merchants and brokers in the city's diamond sector were said to be Jews²³. The membership numbers for the Federatie der Belgische Diamantbeurzen (Belgian Diamond Federation) illustrates these estimates : 80 % to 90 % of the approximately 3,500 members were Jewish. As concerns the rest of the sector, estimates put Jews as having constituted between 15 % and 35 % (depending on whether one includes unofficial or illegal workers) of the city's diamond workers at the eve of the Second World War²⁴. By the end of the 1920s the diamond sector provided jobs to about 25,000 people. This was actually higher than the number of workmen in the port. About 100,000 people earned their living directly or indirectly through diamonds²⁵. As the diamond sector was a significant source of jobs for the local population, the benefit of having the Jewish inhabitants was quite high for Antwerp. This utility was further heightened by Jewish workers (and other Jewish inhabitants) contributing to the economy and trade, and adding to the national product. Diamonds were one of Belgium's most important export products throughout the twentieth century and consistently constituted around 5 % to 8 % of the country's export industry²⁶. However difficult it may have been to obtain Belgian citizenship, being active in the dia-

pp. 258-261 (the diamond sector started to develop seriously from the 1840s, but it was only by the last part of the century that we speak of a real "boom").

²³ The Jewish diamond dealers and merchants were mostly original from Galicia, Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The workers were mostly of Dutch and Eastern European origin (J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Contribution à l'étude... », *op. cit.*, p. 73 ; R. Hillen, *Joods-Belgische verhoudingen in de Antwerpse diamantindustrie, 1914-1940*, Leuven, unpublished MA-thesis, 1999, pp. 14, 30).

²⁴ E. Laureys, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-62, 131-132 ; N. Vermandere, *Adamastos. 100 jaar Algemene Diamantbewerkersbond van België*, Antwerp, 1995, pp. 89-90.

²⁵ This number fell significantly after the liberation, and remained at about 15,000 until the early 1980s, and is today probably quite less (E. Laureys, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

mond sector clearly helped facilitate the process, not least in obtaining the temporary residence permits that had been compulsory since the 1920s²⁷.

Antwerp has always held a strong “ideology of commerce”. During the sixteenth-century, the city’s domestic and international trade and its port (one of the largest in the world) guaranteed its wealth and welfare. After the reopening of the River Scheldt in 1795, the rhetoric and reality of commerce revived. Even today Antwerp presents itself as a port and trade city, rather than as an industrial center or college town²⁸. This metropolis, made by its port and trading, had a very liberal regime, and was lauded for its “openness” and multiculturalism, not least as this attitude had helped bring economic prosperity.

The institutional structure adapts to the needs of commerce, as safeguarding commercial needs was something of general interest. It is my premise that Antwerp has historically welcomed mercantile newcomers with open arms. I wish to argue that the economic success story of Jewish traders in the city has helped the free development of Jewish life in all its facets. The background of these successful traders, whose numbers included strictly Orthodox Jews as well as Zionists and other political and religious persuasions, made for a development of Orthodoxy and Zionism that was unusual in a Western European city.

²⁷ Fr. Caestecker, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

²⁸ I. Van Damme, « Het vertrek van Mercurius. Historiografische en hypothetische verkenningen van het economisch wedervaren van Antwerpen in de tweede helft van de zeventiende eeuw », in NEHA-Jaarboek voor economische, bedrijfs- en techniekgeschiedenis, Amsterdam, 2003, pp. 6-39. He refers to A. Kint, *The community of commerce: social relations in sixteenth-century Antwerp*, New York, 1996 ; <http://www.antwerpen.be/eCache/BEN/16/392.html>, consulted on 26 March 2010.

The Belgian and Antwerp authorities did their utmost to retain the lucrative diamond trade in the port city, even turning a blind eye towards monitoring the industry's bookkeeping, workplace conditions and adherence to employment laws. The major efforts of the local and national governments to convince “diamond Jews” – most of whom were officially non-citizens – to return to Antwerp after the two world wars should be seen in light of these commercial politics. I would argue that such policies are the clearest proof of the city's ideology of commerce and how it affected possibilities and opportunities for Jews to settle in the city. After each war governmental representatives were sent to discuss with representatives from the diamond industry the return of the Jewish diamond diaspora. The subsequent measures taken each time included wage rises, return bonuses, practical and financial help in repatriation, and granting of citizenship²⁹.

For Jews, the diamond sector was an important economic safety net as it was (and is) pre-eminently a sector where intercession plays a key role. It was a “closed” profession and most people entered via parents or other family members. The solidarity within the Jewish community made for an extension of family ties towards religion, ethnicity, and common places of origin. Indeed, this is the likeliest explanation for why the profession of cleaver has remained a Jewish “monopoly” in Antwerp, and why the industry's management was for such a long

²⁹ E. Laureys, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69, 365-374 ; L. Saerens, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15, 125 ; V. Vanden Daelen, « Negotiating the Return of the Diamond Sector and its Jews – The Belgian Government during the Second World War and in the Immediate Post-war Period », in *Holocaust Studies, special issue « Governments-in-Exile and the Jews during World War 2 »*, vol. 18, nrs. 2-3, Autumn/Winter 2012, pp. 231-260.

time dominated by Jewish traders and factory owners. Diamond workers often helped newcomers, such as by assisting them with financial costs or by teaching them the profession. However, it would have been a contravention of professional customs to teach someone not working for the same employer, though everybody knew someone to whom he could recommend a newcomer who wished to start in the sector. Such acute solidarity also existed inside the offices : faster workers helped those who were working more slowly³⁰. In such ways many newcomers started learning diamond-related trades with the help of fellow Jews. It is hardly surprising that such developments spurred stories about the wealth awaiting those who could join the trade. Such stories surely influenced the motivations of many who decided to settle in Antwerp, even if these “Antwerp dreams” rarely came true. As Esther Kreitman illustrates in her novel *Diamonds* : « The errand boys with long beard had to deliver the goods, while nostalgically remembering the time when they had arrived in Antwerp with their dowry in their pockets, full of hopes of becoming rich. But having no talent, they were soon fleeced in the Bourse or at the Club. And now this was how they made their livelihood. »³¹ Also, the ethnic solidarity and the general paternalistic relations which characterised much of the Jewish economy equally had a less noble side as economic exploitation and pressure to work long hours for a meagre loan in direct contradiction to Belgian social legislation became enhanced as a result of this socio-economic structure³².

³⁰ J. Gutwirth, *Vie juive traditionnelle. Ethnologie d'une communauté hassidique*, Paris, 1970, p. 79 ; Interviews author with Schamisso family and with Pinkas Kornfeld. Antwerp, respectively on 7 January 2009 and 3 March 2009.

³¹ E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

³² In the interwar period especially, with its highly politicised Jewish life, social disputes in the Jewish community and in the diamond industry became a recurring

The rising numbers of observant Orthodox Jews in Antwerp during the interwar years helps explain why we find for that time a much larger Jewish presence in professions like cleaving (which can be done alone, and at home, and are thus highly compatible with the strictures of an Orthodox lifestyle) and cutting (which is usually done in small workshops), rather than in sawing or polishing and grinding (which are done in larger workshops or factories)³³. This factor, together with the fact that from the end of the nineteenth century more and more Orthodox facilities had been established in the city, undergirded the attraction that Antwerp held for religious Jews. In the same novel, when the elderly rebbe Chaim Yoysef comes to visit his son Gedaliah in Antwerp, Kreitman writes: « He [the father] had heard that Antwerp was, praise God, a Jewish city and that Gedaliah kept, thank God, a Jewish home. »³⁴ The growing numbers of prayer houses, along with a Jewish day school, kosher food shops, and Orthodox rabbis, among other things, would certainly have helped convince Jews from the East, especially those who were strictly Orthodox, to migrate to the West.

Immigrants who came to study in Antwerp were also within the scope of economic reasons for immigration. The Hoger Handelsgesticht, the first school of commerce in Antwerp, was an important pool of attraction for foreign students, especially

phenomenon as left-wing Jewish groups unsuccessfully tried to unionise the Jewish labourers and led some successful strikes in the diamond industry (R. Van Doorslaer, « Joodse arbeiders in de Antwerpse diamant in de dertiger jaren : tussen revolutie en antisemitisme », in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine - Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse Herinnering*, 4, 2002, pp. 13-26.)

³³ E. Laureys, *op. cit.*, p. 132 ; R. Van Doorslaer, « Joodse arbeiders in de Antwerpse diamant... », *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

³⁴ E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

those from Eastern Europe, such as Jewish students from Russia or Rumania³⁵. There were few schools of commerce in Europe at this time, and the costs of living and studying in Antwerp were much lower than in places like France or Switzerland. Many of these Jewish students remained in Antwerp after completion of their studies. Another important reason to come to Antwerp was to join family and friends who already settled there. Many files in the Foreigners' Police evidence this kind of chain migration. Newcomers often resided first with family or friends, often helping their hosts in their households or companies and in that way receiving their temporary residence permits³⁶.

A last group I would like to identify are those transmigrants who, for various possible reasons (sickness, lack of money, having started a new life and/or job while awaiting their ship, etc.), abandoned their original immigration plans (for example, to immigrate to America) and halted their migration in the transit city of Antwerp. As Sholem Aleichem mentions in his novel *Adventures of Mottel, The Cantor's Son*, many Jews opted to remain

³⁵ Phone interview author with J. Iarchy whose father came to study at this school from Rumania where the numerus clausus for Jews prevented him from enrolling (6 July 2010); J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, op. cit., p. 140; V. Ronin, *Antwerpen en zijn "Russen": onderdanen van de tsaar, 1814-1914*, Ghent, 1993, pp. 169-171, 182-185, 194-201. For more information on East European Jewish students during the interwar period in Belgium, see P. Falek, *A Precarious Life. East European Female Jewish Students in Interwar Belgium*, PhD, thesis, Departement of History and Civilization, European University Institute, Florence, 2011.

³⁶ See for example: Cywja S. who came to Antwerp to help her sister and brother in law in their household. Extra argument for their case was that Cywja was an orphan (State Archives of Belgium, Brussels, Foreigners' Police, file Rajczyk Z., 1.497.815); Malia C. came to Antwerp at the request of her uncle who wanted her to take care of his mother (State Archives of Belgium, Brussels, Foreigners' Police, file Edward S., 1.481.914. Other cases are for example: file Rosa W., A166.829; file Hersz S., 1.541.150; file Leib-Hillel S., 1.581.437).

in Antwerp and work in the diamond business rather than to continue their migration journeys: « Everybody deals in diamonds. Everybody wears jewels. Everybody knows the trade of cutting, grinding and polishing stones. Whoever you meet is either a cutter, a grinder or a polisher. Many youngsters from our gang have stayed behind to become cutters. »³⁷



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Whatever reason these migrants had for choosing to remain in Antwerp, they did so in order to improve their (or their families') lives. Files of the foreigners' police make this aspect quite clear. One file mentions a certain Czarne S., who arrived in Antwerp in

³⁷ Sh. Aleichem, *Adventures of Mottel, the Cantor's Son* (translated by Tamara Kahana), London-New York, 1958, pp. 191-192 (the novel was originally written in Yiddish. When Sholem Aleichem died in 1916, the book was not yet finished).

1932 and wrote to Queen Elisabeth of Belgium seeking residency : « My relative, Mr. rabbi [T.] at whose home I am living, wants me to stay here, and I equally do not want to return to that little village, when I see that Belgium can offer me a future full of promises to develop myself. »³⁸ Her request was denied, but she returned to Belgium in 1936, married a Polish diamond cutter who held a residence permit, and was allowed to stay based on the marriage. This was not enough, however, and Czarne S.'s hopes for a better life were subsequently shattered during the Second World War. She and her husband were deported and killed in Auschwitz.

Development and characteristics of Jewish life in town

Because of a rising and extensive engagement in the diamond sector, Jewish life in Antwerp – including the religious communities, Jewish organizations, Jewish schools, and the community's social life – came to follow the sector's cyclical movements and economic trends. When the sector boomed, these institutions flourished. But when the diamond trade faced recession, the Jewish community saw financial and social problems worsen and accumulate³⁹. Yet the diamond sector was more than the economic centre of Jewish life. It also became the geographical centre for Jewish life (as will be discussed later in this article), and the major figures within Jewish community life met almost daily in the diamond exchanges ; and it was here, within the exchange offices and meeting halls, that the policies of the Jewish communities and organizations were discussed semi-officially. A large

³⁸ State Archives of Belgium, Brussels, Foreigners' Police, file Leib-Hillel S., 1.581.437, letter Czarne S. to Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, undated [before 12 December 1932].

³⁹ V. Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen...*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

majority of board members of Jewish social welfare organizations and of religious communities were engaged in the diamond business⁴⁰. This semi-official role of the diamond business was also recognized in the Jewish community. In 1924, around Purim (a time in which in the local Jewish press occasioned the long-held tradition of inserting humoresque and sarcastic articles), an unknown author with the initials Bar-bar published a highly sarcastic, and thinly veiled criticism of the over-influential role of the diamond industry on local Jewish life in the Belgian Zionist periodical *Hatikwah*. In a piece entitled *Lettre de Schnorropolis : La Jérusalem du Diamant* (a witty word-play of the Yiddish word for beggar – *schnorer*) the author asserted : « *Mais la véritable opinion publique est faite dans la fumée des locaux diamantaires ; c'est là que sont prises de facto les grandes décisions que ratifient de dociles assemblées, là se décide le sort des candidatures, de là sont régies les destinées du judaïsme schnorropolisien. Tout le reste n'est qu'illusion.* »⁴¹

This rising economic concentration strengthened the social cohesiveness, or “social control”, within the Jewish community, though there always remained for Jews a diverse economic life in Antwerp outside of diamonds. In the first decades after the Second World War as many as 75 % to 80 % of Antwerp’s Jewish population made their livings directly or indirectly through the diamond sector (even though the Jewish left wing often criticized the diamond sector for being “unproductive” work and pointing to the risks by a too large concentration in one econo-

⁴⁰ See lists of boards of directors Centrale, and Jewish communities Shomre Hadas and Machsike Hadas.

⁴¹ Bar-Bar, « Lettre de Schnorropolis : La Jérusalem du Diamant », in *Hatikwah*, *Organe bimensuel de la Fédération des Sionistes de Belgique*, 4, 21.3.1924, p. 70.

mic sector)⁴². The period before the First World War and the interwar period had been characterized by more diversity. A varied occupational pattern had developed, especially during the interwar period with rising numbers of newcomers engaging in other “typically Jewish” sectors, such as textiles, leather goods, and peddling. The occupational pattern included establishment of Jewish unions and workers organizations, such as the Yidisher Hantverkerfareyn/Verbond van Joodse Ambachten (Federation of Jewish Craftsmen), which was founded in 1919 ; the Vereniging van Joodse Schrijvers en Journalisten (Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists), founded in 1925 ; the Yidisher Marshantn-vareyn/Vereniging van Joodse Marktkramers (Association of Jewish Market Merchants/Peddlers), founded in 1927 ; the Joods Koöperatief van Schilders (Jewish Painters Cooperative), founded in 1929 ; Achduth, Joodse Kruideniers Vereniging (Jewish Grocers’ Association), founded in 1934 ; the Vereniging van Joodsche Leurhandelaars (Jewish Peddlers Association), founded in 1936 ; and the Joods Syndicaal Huis (House of Jewish Union Members), founded in 1938⁴³.

As the numbers indicate (see earlier), the newcomers who began arriving in Antwerp at the end of the nineteenth century soon far outnumbered the city’s already existing Jewish community. These waves of immigration clearly affected the characteristics of Antwerp’s Jewish population and intra-communal Jewish relationships. What was the relationship of the newcomers with the “established” Jewish society, and how did the newcomers affect the cohesiveness of Jewish life in the city as a

⁴² V. Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen*, *op. cit.*, p. 86 ; for more information on the Jewish left wing see forthcoming PhD of Janiv Stamberger.

⁴³ E. Schmidt, *Geschiedenis van de joden*, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-127, 321.

whole ? Which institutions and organizations encouraged Jewish cohesiveness, and which ones stimulated diversity in Jewish life ? What were the dynamics between the sub-groups ?

Geographical shifts and the emergence of a Jewish neighborhood

A first clear change – parallel with the migration waves and the strong urban development of the city – was a geographical one. The already existing Jewish community life was situated in what is now the centre of the city, and which was until 1860 enclosed by the old city walls. The community's synagogue, at the corner of the Kleine and the Grote Pieter Potstraat, was used from 1846 until 1893, and is situated near the Antwerp city hall and cathedral. After the Antwerp South district emerged in 1875 as a prestigious new construction area, fostered in part by the city's plans to build the new Museum of Fine Arts there, the Jewish community purchased land in the area some years later, and for the first time built a synagogue in the city⁴⁴. Before that time the community had always used already existing buildings for prayer and study. This synagogue was the first building built expressly for such purposes ; it has been in use since 1893 and is still referred to as the *Hollandse sjoel*, or Dutch schul, a reference to the founding community's origins.

Despite the nearby site of this first synagogue, Antwerp's city center never had any sort of specifically "Jewish neighborhood" with high residential clustering. Schreiber gives information for how the Jewish population was spread over the four or five sec-

⁴⁴ <http://www.kmska.be/Templates/content.aspx?id=82>, consulted on 15 December 2008 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-139.

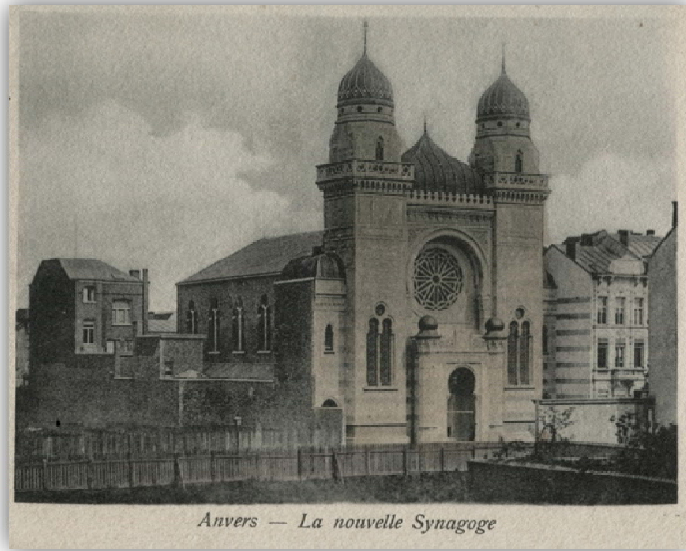
tions of the city in the nineteenth century⁴⁵. However, as Antwerp was an over-populated city of approximately 100,000 inhabitants, such indication of sections does not offer proof for real concentrations within certain streets, nor of a certain social or socio-economic reality. To examine this one should give the information per street, or even better at the level of house numbers⁴⁶. With removal of the old city walls in 1860, the area enclosed by the new Brialmont fortifications was in full development when the Jewish newcomers began arriving. The newly opened streets and parcels of land attracted the immigrants far more than did the area within the old city walls. The first official synagogue building was situated outside of the first Antwerp neighborhood to have a clear Jewish concentration. One can assume that there remained a physical and psychological distance between the “old” community (of mostly Western and Central European Jews) and the Eastern European newcomers. Yet some community members had opposed the location of the new synagogue⁴⁷. Schreiber notes that the new synagogue, in the South of Antwerp, does not appear to have been highly attended other than during High Holidays and special occasions such as bar mitzvas and weddings. He argues that the synagogue would likely have had a central role in Jewish life (Jewish “space”) if it had been built where Jews at that time were settling, namely, in the area (Jewish “place”) adjacent to the railroad tracks and the Central station⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-136.

⁴⁶ See T. Bisschops, « Ruimtelijke vermogensverhoudingen in Leiden (1438-1561). Een pleidooi voor een perceelsgewijze analyse van steden en stedelijke samenlevingen in de Lage Landen », in *Stadsgeschiedenis*, 2, 2007, pp. 121-138.

⁴⁷ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.

⁴⁸ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-141 ; J. Brauch - A. Lipphardt - A. Nocke, « Exploring Jewish Space... », *op. cit.*, pp. 1-4.



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The newcomers, rather than joining the Jews who had already been living in Antwerp in the city centre, settled mostly in the area around the Central railroad station, an area of the city that was undergoing intense development. The area was socio-economically highly diverse and included both more upscale streets and immigrant streets, all closely situated to each other. Along one side of the railroad tracks – which were easily crossed at various places – and very near the Central railroad station lay the diamond district, which was flourishing. This area emerged as the Jewish neighborhood of Antwerp, though it always remained a highly mixed area, both socio-economically and ethnically. No particular street appears to have ever been inhabited only by Jews. This whole area, including the old city center and

other land (almost everything within the Brialmont fortifications) was within the *eruv*, which was installed in 1902 and still exists⁴⁹. A 1902 address list of Jews living in Antwerp indicates that in general Jews settled throughout the city and that the highest concentrations were situated in streets by the railroad tracks and in adjacent neighborhoods⁵⁰. Even more so than for the area within the old city walls, the sections/quarters of the city do not represent respective socio-economic realities, as the sections are very large and very diverse.

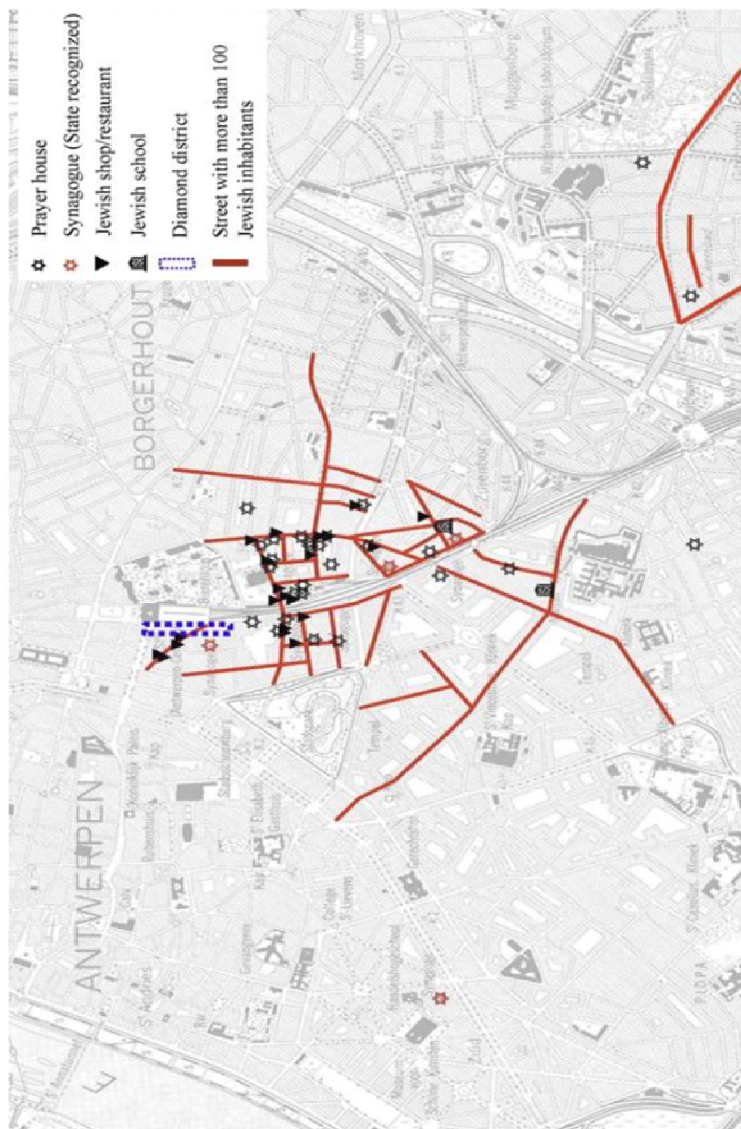
During the Second World War there were numerous streets with over 100 Jewish inhabitants (see map on the opposite page)⁵¹. Unfortunately, sources for determining the ratio of Jewish to non-Jewish inhabitants are not yet accessible for research. The major difference as compared to the 1902 address list is that, during the Second World War, in the lower income area there were more streets with high concentrations than in 1902. Many of the prayer houses and stores were also now situated in what had become a typical immigrant neighborhood. This neighborhood, on both sides of the railroad tracks near to Antwerp Central station remained associated with Jewish life throughout the entire twentieth century. During the Second World War, there were only three streets with more than 100 Jewish inhabitants outside the *eruv*. This second “Jewish neighborhood” developed primarily during the interwar years and

⁴⁹ About the Antwerp *eruv*, see P. Kornfeld, *Sefer rehovot ha-ir*, Jerusalem-Antwerp, 1989.

⁵⁰ S.n., *Nomenclature des Israélites résidant à Anvers* (Anvers, [1902]).

⁵¹ L. Saerens, « De Jodenvervolgung in België in cijfers », in *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent - Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, 17, 2006, pp. 224-225 ; E. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-316, 322-323 ; S.n., *Yidisher Almanak*, Antwerp, 1933, pp. 161-167.

**Jewish residential patterns
circa 1940**



did not reemerge after the Second World War. A high percentage of the Jews in this second area were Dutch Jews who were more integrated and, often, less strictly religious⁵². Dutch Jews, together with Sephardic Jews (who were mostly from the former Ottoman Empire, Turkey, and Thessaloniki in Greece), formed a minority among the new Jewish arrivals⁵³. Both groups organized their own community life. Dutch Jews, who formed about 10 % of Antwerp's Jewish population in 1942, rarely intermarried (i.e. Dutch Jews married Dutch Jews). This was less pronounced in the Sephardic Jewish community, which was always much smaller, counting approximately 200 persons in 1903-1907 and about a thousand people in 1913. At its largest it constituted around 1 % of the total Jewish population⁵⁴.

The introduction and thriving of strict orthodoxy

Jean-Philippe Schreiber notes that the first wave of immigrants did not increase the official membership of Antwerp's existent Jewish community (at least not until 1909, and even then the number did not increase proportionally to the overall

⁵² L. Saeens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad...*, *op. cit.*, p. 24. Another reason for the origin of this neighborhood would be that it was far enough from the Dutch border to avoid compulsory military service in the Netherlands, and Antwerp itself was not (Interview author with Mr. and Mss. B. Drilmsa, Antwerp 25 September 2008).

⁵³ V. Vanden Daelen, « Dutch Jews at multiple borders, Antwerp, 1900-1950 » and « Minority or sub-minority ? Sephardic Jews in early twentieth century Antwerp », findings presented at international conferences, respectively at the CHIR-conference « Migration and Intercultural Identities in Relation to Border Regions (19th and 20th centuries) », Kortrijk, 27-29 May 2010 and the EAJS-conference « Judaism in the Mediterranean Context », Ravenna, 25-29 July 2010 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-148.

⁵⁴ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Contribution à l'étude... », *op. cit.*, p. 73 ; V. Vanden Daelen, « Dutch Jews... », and « Minority or sub-minority... ».

rise in the city's Jewish population)⁵⁵. Instead, the newcomers founded their own community life. As mentioned, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century there emerged a growing Orthodox Jewish life along with increasing numbers of Orthodox services and facilities. There was no real “plan” behind these developments, as the following examples demonstrate. Yitshak Hersch Ratzersdorfer and Jacob Eisenmann, two wealthy Orthodox Jewish merchants who had come to Antwerp around 1880 intending to settle in the city, are examples of Orthodox “frontmen”. Ratzersdorfer came to Antwerp in 1877 from Pressburg. He was a diamond dealer, as were later his five sons. Eisenmann, a wealthy business man (though not in diamonds) arrived in 1884 from Frankfurt am Main. He was a *talmid* (a scholar, a disciple) of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, and had been strongly influenced by him. In Antwerp Eisenmann continued to be a successful trader, even becoming president of a department of the Chamber of Commerce ; he can therefore be considered as having been a member of the high bourgeoisie of the city⁵⁶. Both settled in the upscale new neighborhood (avenue Léopold, now Belgiëlei), and needed Orthodox facilities for themselves and their families. They were highly motivated to establish such facilities, and may have employed a *shokhet* (ritual slaughterer) together⁵⁷. Ratzersdorfer had even come on a “probationary year,” promising his rabbi, rabbi Soifer, with a “*tekiat kaf*” (handshake that indicated an agreement) to do his utmost best

⁵⁵ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-142.

⁵⁶ About Eisenmann, see E. Bendheim (ed.), *The Synagogue Within. Antwerpen's Eisenmann Schul*, Jerusalem, 2004 ; about Ratzersdorfer, see E. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 143, 146.

⁵⁷ « He [Eisenmann] shared an apartment with one Ratzersdorfer. Together they employed a *shochet*, who also cooked for them (poorly) » (E. Bendheim, *The Synagogue Within...*, *op. cit.*, p. 69).

to find a *shokhet*, to establish an Orthodox community, and to provide a Talmud teacher and rabbi. He succeeded in these plans and received rabbinical permission to stay in Antwerp⁵⁸. Both men founded a *beth midrash* (Talmud study institute).

The presence of these and other Orthodox facilities attracted other Orthodox Jews, and more synagogues were constructed. Besides the Israëlitische Gemeente two more Jewish religious communities were officially recognized by the state and received state subsidies/allowances. One was the small Synagogue of Portuguese Rite, organized and attended primarily by Turkish Jews; the other was Machsike Hadas (of Russian-Polish Rite). In addition to these congregations many private prayer houses, often named for the families who had founded them (for example, Feiner, Goldmuntz, Eisenmann, Ratzersdorfer, etc.), were founded around the turn of the century, as were prayer houses from religious organizations such as Mizrachi and Agudath Israel. By 1912 there were at least two *mikvas* (ritual bath) in town (the first had existed since 1881, the other since 1902 or 1912). A report from 1911 mentions « at least 14 private prayer houses » in the city, and Schmidt mentions 35 pre-World War II synagogues and oratories, not including the additional prayer houses that were organized annually for the High Holidays⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ E. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101. Schmidt refers to the writings of rabbi Jozef Tswi Soifer (“Toldot Sofrim”). Rabbi Chaim Soifer, rabbi of Munkatsch, a member of the Ratzersdorfer family who was at that time visiting the family in Pressburg.

⁵⁹ Overview of synagogues and private prayer houses (the ones from officially recognized Jewish religious communities are underlined): +/- 1881, Ratzersdorfer-synagogue (side street corner Hoverniersstraat and Schupstraat); 1884, Feiner (Leeuwerikstraat 29); 1888, Ahavas Sjoelim (Van Diepenbeekstraat 32); 1893, Synagogue Bouwmeestersstraat (Bouwmeestersstraat); 1899, Steinfeld (Provinciestraat 265); 1907, Eisenmann (Oostenstraat 29); 1912, Agudath Israel (Oostenstraat 42); 1913, Synagogue of Portuguese Rite (Hoveniersstraat); 1918, Synagogue

Among the 35 synagogues in Schmidt's overview, 27 were from the interwar period, including several Hassidic ones (Alexander, Belz, Ger, Rab Chaïm Dovidl [Zanz], Sighet, Satmar, Tchortkov and Wiznitz)⁶⁰. Jewish restaurants and food shops also opened in this area around the railroad tracks, and were increasingly under rabbinical supervision (from two butchers in 1886 to at least nine in 1906)⁶¹.

The oldest officially recognized community, the Israëlitische Gemeente of Antwerp, which had its synagogue in Antwerp South, enlarged its membership by merging with Shomre Hadas, a community that had been established in 1920. In 1927 it inaugurated a second synagogue, this time near the railroad tracks, as the congregation felt it necessary to provide prayer and study facilities in this neighborhood, which lay about forty

Machsike Hadas (Oostenstraat); 1919, Chevrah Kadisjah Machsike Hadas (Van Spangenastraat 6) and Hollands Minjan (Fabriekstraat, former sidestreet of the Pelikaanstraat); 1920: Machsike Hadas (Oostenstraat 43); 1923, Chodosjim (Wipstraat 36) and Moriah (Terliststraat 35); 1924, Gitschotel (Sterrenborgstraat 13); 1926, Rab. Leibele Twersky (Provinciestraat 265) and Mizrachi (Stoomstraat 9); 1927, Annexe-synagogue Van den Nestlei (Van den Nestlei); 1928, Masel-Burack (Lange Kievitstraat 6), Siged (Provinciestraat 212), Tschortkow (Provinciestraat 167) and Wiznitz (Lamoriniëstraat 16); 1929, Béth Jitzchak (Somersstraat 12), Belz (Somersstraat 12) and Gur (Van Spangenastraat); 1930, Gitschotel (Junostraat 11) and Grodzisk (Velodroomstraat 32); 1934, Weiser, Moïsche Leib (Lange Kievitstraat 153); 1935, Achvah (Somersstraat 10), Menachem Aveilim (Lange Kievitstraat) and Tehuis voor Ouderlingen (Generaal Drubbelstraat 64); 1936, Rubinstein (Somersstraat 17), Talmud Torah (Leeuwerikstraat 37) and Alexander (Millisstraat 44); 1937, Rab. Chaïm Dovidl (Chass. Sanz, Van der Meydenstraat 33). The list is most probably not complete (the Goldmuntz prayer house, for example, is not included). (J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-144; E. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-317).

⁶⁰ CAHJP, CC-files, 1957, 1957/019, Tifereth Israel aan Claims Conference, 06/06/1957; J. Gutwirth, *Vie juive traditionnelle...*, *op. cit.*, p. 29; S.n., *Der nayer binyen fun Beth Rakhel d'Satmar in Antverpn*, Antwerp, s. d., p. 10.

⁶¹ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

minutes' walking distance from their already existing synagogue. Their request had already been submitted before the First World War (and before Shomre Hadas joined the community). A temporary building, in the Hoveniersstraat, was used in the meantime. What we see happening is that the existing community (dating from 1816) actually had to adjust to the settlement pattern of the newly arrived immigrants in order not to lose its members and disappear⁶². Of the two initiatives that differed from the now "mainstream" Eastern European Ashkenazi traditions, only the Synagogue of Portuguese Rite has remained a small minority group until today. The Dutch religious community (Nieuwe Israëlitische Gemeente, or Nederlandsche Israëlitische Gemeente te Antwerpen), established at the latest in 1905, had its prayer house in the Zurenborg neighborhood, where many Dutch Jews lived, but no longer exists. According to Schreiber, its foundation was most probably caused by the stricter Orthodoxy introduced in the Israëlitische Gemeente upon the arrival of Russian and Polish Jews who joined the community and slowly but surely gained influence, even in the board of directors. The many Jewish labourers living in the workers' neighborhood of Borgerhout, an Antwerp suburb, also started an Orthodox community and sought official state recognition. The Consistory could do little else but accept the new tendencies in Jewish life, at least those that were officially recognized by the Belgian state⁶³.

⁶² J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, op. cit., pp. 140-142 ; V. Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen...*, op. cit., chapter 3. According to the archives of the Consistory, the community even opened a third synagogue in the Terliststraat for its Hassidic members in 1920 (Archives of the Central Israelite Consistory of Belgium, hand written notes, Correspondence and Communauté Israélite d'Anvers : Rapport 1920).

⁶³ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, op. cit., pp. 142-144, 148.

The foundation of Jewish day schools

In addition to the Sunday school type Jewish schools (which are not indicated on the map, as no specific address information has yet been found), full time Jewish day schools were founded in the Jewish neighborhood. The history of these schools offers clear evidence for how the newcomers started with ideas that were totally rejected by the already settled Jewish population but which were in the end successful and even accepted by the majority of Antwerp's Jewish population.

Since 1897, the Israëlitische Gemeente had refused to continue organizing Jewish day schools (which had existed in the city since the 1840s) and would only provide religious education after regular school hours. The head rabbi of the Israëlitische Gemeente, rabbi Wiener, held the opinion that Jewish children should attend public schools and receive Jewish education either during the two hours of the school day allotted for religion classes or after regular school time. Per the rabbi's thinking the children needed to be part of the regular school system ; this was a reflection of strong civic mindedness. Rabbi Wiener's philosophy here was in line with that of the Consistory, where a "religious liberalism" – often an ambivalent combination of integration and preservation of a specific religious-cultural tradition – was dominant until the First World War⁶⁴. Jewish day schools thus no longer fit into the picture. Such thinking held that the non-Jewish environment in which Jews lived had to be part of

⁶⁴ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Het joods onderwijs in België (1820-1914) », in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine - Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse Herinnering*, 6, 2005, pp. 277-292 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-146.

their lives. The children thus attended public schools and received their Jewish religious, cultural, and language education after regular school hours (such as via Sunday schools).

By the turn of the century, however, Orthodox newcomers in Antwerp had started a Jewish day school, *Jesode Hatora*, which was modeled after the example of Frankfurt am Main. This new school combined secular and Jewish education in a Jewish environment⁶⁵. As could be expected, the *Israëlitische Gemeente* of Antwerp was very much against this. Wiener wrote to the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in Paris about the “dissidents” who had founded a traditional elementary school, a *heder* (though this was not exactly the correct term for the kind of school he was writing about)⁶⁶. However, the new initiative proved very successful, and remained so throughout the twentieth century and until today. Moreover, it gave rise to other similar initiatives, both more moderately Orthodox (such as the *Tachkemoni* school, founded in 1920, and the *Yavne* school, founded in 1978), and more strictly Orthodox (such as the diverse Hassidic schools before and certainly after the Second World War). In many ways, the newcomers who arrived in the city from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shaped the unique character of Antwerp’s Orthodox Jewish life. Although for someone like Eisenmann (who belonged to Antwerp’s high society, yet was a

⁶⁵ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L’immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 146 *sqq.*

⁶⁶ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Het joods onderwijs... », *op. cit.*, pp. 277-292 ; Archives Alliance Israélite Universelle (Paris), Antwerp, B1 (17) : letter Rabbi Wiener (Antwerp) to J. Bigart (Secrétaire de l’Alliance israélite universelle, Paris), 18 March 1909. In 1879 the Brussels Jewish day school was closed as a result of the law Van Humbeeck (1879), which was supported by the Consistory. Almost fifteen years earlier, in 1865, the school had still attracted about 20 % of the Jewish children in the city. When the law was abolished in 1884, the Consistory did not plan on again founding a Jewish day school.

very *frum* [pious] man, who held the Frankfurt *minhag* [custom] close to his heart and supported the Jesode Hatora school) some of the strictly Orthodox traditions from Eastern European that were now appearing in the city seemed quite foreign, by establishing Orthodox facilities he (and others) had strengthened and attracted them⁶⁷.

However, not every religious Jew who arrived in Antwerp remained Orthodox : « Dovid came in, freshly washed and shaved. [...] The old man was greatly displeased that his grandson had shaved his beard off, God preserve us ! »⁶⁸ Many of the once-bearded religious men were soon working during prohibited times such as *shabbat* and even cut their beards and side-locks. Such actions often stemmed from desire to move up the social ladder as quickly as possible, and one way for Orthodox Jews to attempt this was to embrace the non-Jewish Western world surrounding them, including secular education, and to let go of particular Jewish strictures. We read similar stories in other places, not least in New York : « Although the vast majority of the newcomers were steeped in Orthodoxy, they soon encountered vexing difficulties in retaining and perpetuating their traditions in their new home [...] The newcomers' stress on secular education also contributed to their children's flight from Orthodoxy. They insisted that their youngsters attend the best schools and raise themselves above the pushcarts and sweatshops [...] The few established Americanized Orthodox synagogues were of little aid to the newcomer, since they were not located in the immigrant areas and were not geared to meet immigrant needs. »⁶⁹

⁶⁷ E. Bendheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-41, 70.

⁶⁸ E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁶⁹ A. Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel, builder of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Philadelphia 1972), pp. 3, 5, 7.

Heather Valencia notes in her introduction to Kreitman's novel that « the arrival of the old father, Reb Chaim Yoysef, brings into sharp focus [...] the collision of two worlds and the situation of the uprooted, Eastern European, Jewish immigrant in Western society »⁷⁰. The major difference with New York was that in Antwerp the Orthodox facilities were very soon available and were situated within the Jewish neighborhood and the economic centre of Jewish life.

Another historical development that should be noted is that Orthodoxy's "rigorousness" and "appearance" changed dramatically over the twentieth century, becoming all the more strict. Antwerp was one of the first places to evidence these stricter rules, which resulted in more conspicuous hairstyles and dress codes. However, the situation before the First World War differed considerably from that in the interwar period, just as the latter period was not really comparable to the Jewish Antwerp after the end of the 1960s⁷¹.

Bringing in Eastern European Zionism and Jewish organizations

The newcomers who began arriving in Antwerp around 1880, most of whom were of Russian, Austrian or German origin, in-

⁷⁰ H. Valencia, « Introduction », in E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, p. 23. See E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, p. 114-116.

⁷¹ V. Vanden Daelen, « Markers of a Minority Group. Jews in Antwerp in the Twentieth Century », in J. Frishman - D. J. Wertheim - I. de Haan - J. J. Cahen (eds.), *Borders and Boundaries in and around Dutch Jewish History*, Amsterdam, 2011, pp. 45-61 ; K. de Haan, *Een handvol illusies ? Overlevingsstrategieën van Pools-Joodse migranten te Antwerpen, 1920-1930*, Brussels, unpublished thesis, 1990, p. 141.

troduced not only the Orthodoxy of Frankfurt am Main, but also liberal and religious Zionism and various leftist tendencies. For a Western European city, Antwerp's Zionist life was remarkably well developed in the pre-World War II period. The interwar immigration waves, dominated by Polish migration, brought more Eastern European elements, especially the leftist scene, which was also reflected in the foundation of several Jewish workers' organizations (see earlier overview). A selection of political and/or cultural Jewish organizations gives an indication of the different tendencies present in Antwerp. Interestingly, most of the organizations were founded soon after the parent organizations were established: 1898, Agudath Zion (followed by women's and youth organizations); 1905, Mizrachi (followed by women's and youth organizations, Bne Akiva and others) and local Zionist Federation; 1912, Agudath Israel and its youth organizations; 1920, Maccabi, WIZO and Bar Kochba; 1924, Hashomer Hatsair and the Bund; 1926, Revisionist Party with youth organization Betar; 1927, Linke Poale Zion; 1931, Verbond van Poolse joden (Union of Polish Jews); 1932, Poale Zion – Zeire Zion (founded in respectively 1908 and 1904); 1934, Prokor; 1935, JASK (Jewish workers sports club); 1937, Council of Jewish Organizations; 1938, Geoulah (and Bené Zion)⁷². As can be seen from this overview, the religious and Zionist organizations were founded and active before the First World War, whereas the leftist scene (apart from Poale Zion) began to develop its structures in the interwar period. The launchings of new Jewish periodicals also offer clear proof of an always developing and ever colourful Jewish life. Five to eight Jewish periodicals were published in the pre-World War I period, and the

⁷² E. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-321.

interwar period saw 63 to 80 new periodicals (leftist and rightwing periodicals were especially prevalent in the 1930s)⁷³.

From 1875 onwards, Jewish Antwerp saw many new initiatives for aid to orphans, pregnant women, the elderly, the sick, the unemployed, the poor, migrants (both those who settled and those in transit), and for undertaking the ritual burials of poor Jews who had died in the city. Antwerp Jews also sought to send help to their families' places of origin (Central and Eastern Europe, especially Russia, Austria, Hungary, etc.). Before the First World War many parallel initiatives existed alongside each other ; in 1920 a unified organization for Jewish welfare was established. This was the Centrale, which is still one of the only centralized organizations of Jews in Antwerp⁷⁴. It was definitely an exception in Western Europe in the pre-World War II period : Brussels, Paris and Amsterdam did not have unified Jewish social welfare. The Centrale is supported by almost everyone who calls him- or herself Jewish. The unwritten rule was and remains : « you either give to the Centrale or you are supported by it ». Historically this unity however needs to be nuanced somewhat as during the entire interwar period the Centrale vigorously fought to defend its dominant position in Jewish life as can be asserted from its repeated calls to the Jewish community in its periodical *La Centrale*, and other Jewish organs, to refrain from subsidising various Jewish philanthropic organisa-

⁷³ D. Dratwa, *Répertoire des périodiques juifs parus en Belgique de 1841-1986* (Brussels, 1987) and E. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-330 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150.

⁷⁴ The present full name of this organization is Centraal Beheer van Joodse Weldadigheid en Maatschappelijk Hulpbetoon.

tions not under the control of the Centrale⁷⁵. Throughout the 1920s, the Dutch Jewish colony in Antwerp, centred around the Nederlandsche Israëlitische Gemeente te Antwerpen with its synagogue at the Leeuwerikstraat 43, for instance would retain its own philanthropic institution unaffiliated with the Centrale and even established rival institutions such as NIZA (Nederlandsche Israëlitische Ziekeninrichting) which directly encroached upon the philanthropic terrain of institutions under the control of the Centrale (Bikur Cholim), which sometimes led to rather farcical situations⁷⁶. Despite these challenges the Centrale was able to maintain its dominant position in philanthropic and social work in the Jewish community and by no means could the situation in Antwerp be compared with the total anarchy which reigned in the Jewish community of Brussels or the smaller communities in the rest of the country.

Along with the strengthening concentration in one economic sector, this made for a stronger group cohesion, also to the outside world, but leaving room for differences within it. We could see it as a multicultural organization unifying various social and communal social segments of Jewish life. This group cohesion should at the same time not be overly idealized, as both with the First and the Second World War, different places of origin, and different decisions taken during the conflict (especially for the diamond diaspora during the First World War) led to schisms and hostile attitudes within Jewish life before, during, and after the conflict : « So the Russian, Polish and even Lithuanian Jews

⁷⁵ For a few examples see : *La Centrale*, 2, February 1935, pp. 4 ; *La Centrale*, 3, March 1935, pp. 7 ; *La Centrale*, 5, May 1938, pp.1 ; *Di yidishe presse*, 4, January 23 1931, p. 2.

⁷⁶ See the 1928-1929 periodical *NIZA*, *officieel orgaan der Nederlandsche Israëlitische Ziekeninrichting* of this organisation for more information.

forgot for a moment that they were all supposed to hate each other like the plague and made a united front to drive back the impudent Galicians. They mocked the Galician “heroes” who were rejoicing prematurely and boasting of German superiority. Even Hassidim, who went to the court of the same *rebbe*, and normally ate the remnants at the same *rebbe*’s table and trembled together at the door of his study, divided into two camps and wages war on each other day and night in their synagogues and prayer houses [...] Mixed marriages were a terrible problem ; if a Galician woman had a Russian husband, or vice versa, she would suffer double pain, on account of both her husband and her country. Even children were drawn into the battles. This wasn’t just happening in Leeuwerikstraat. All of Antwerp had taken to the streets. »⁷⁷

Conclusions

The wave of mass immigration did not go unnoticed in the Western European cities where Eastern European Jews arrived. Differences in Jewishness were myriad, especially with the more traditional and less assimilated character of the newcomers, as compared to the integrated and fairly assimilated small Jewish presence in the city. In Antwerp the Orthodox character of the immigrants was, to a degree not seen elsewhere in Western Europe, able to establish itself to a remarkable magnitude. This even led to Orthodoxy defining almost all characteristics of the local Jewish community in the post-World War II period. The quick reconstruction of the Orthodox religious communities and

⁷⁷ Y. Vassart, *L’immigration des diamantaires en Angleterre et aux Pays-Bas durant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Brussels, unpublished MA-thesis, 2000 ; E. Kreitman, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166, quote from p. 166.

of their facilities again attracted Hassidic and other Orthodox newcomers to the city. In many ways, this seems like an almost fast-forward repeating of Antwerp's Orthodox history from the pre-war period. Antwerp may have had strong Zionist, leftist and Communist Jewish tendencies before the Second World War, but these disappeared after the war. But Antwerp never had any religious life other than Orthodox life officially recognized in the city over the whole twentieth century. This could be where the Antwerp case differs from other Western European cities of the time.

A part of the explanation lies in the fact that there was not a large community in Antwerp with a longstanding tradition before this immigration. Another key element appears to be the combination of religious Orthodoxy and economic profile of some of the newcomers. First, in Antwerp the first cracks in the Consistory ideals of "religious liberalism" and integration were introduced by the upper class layers of the late nineteenth century Orthodox immigrants (Antwerp's Jewish community had most likely surpassed that of Brussels by 1914, and by that time Antwerp had more Jewish organizations than any other city in Belgium)⁷⁸. After the Second World War, the Consistory would develop into the defender of Orthodoxy, excluding any other religious tendency⁷⁹. Another challenge to the pre-war Consistory ideals was Antwerp Zionist activity (liberal and religious Zionism dominantly). This aspect however did not remain one of Antwerp's Jewish characteristics after the Second World War. Second, the diamond sector with its Jewish management provided jobs which afforded Orthodox Jews the freedom to adjust

⁷⁸ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive...*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

their working schedules to the high demands of a strict religious life.

Historian David Feldman's premises for English Jewry that the immigration waves were a challenge for the existing Jewish life, and caused not only adaptation from the immigrants, but also from the existing community to the newcomers (a multiple way process), comes clearly to the fore in this Antwerp case study too⁸⁰. With the massive coming of the newcomers, the existing Jewish community in Antwerp had to adjust geographically, and saw its membership becoming more Orthodox. Even on a national level, the Consistory could not impose its model of integration to the new immigrants, and had to see Jewish day schools being founded. Of course, the newcomers acculturated as well, naming their children for example with more Western European first names (so more often "Jacques" than "Jacob"; "Joseph" instead of "Yossele", or "Alfred" instead of "Abraham"). But all in all, the newcomers did not only challenge Antwerp and Belgian Judaism, they changed it dramatically in the long run. Their socio-economic, demographic, religious and cultural impact transformed not only Jewish life, but the outlook and characteristics as well as economy of Antwerp as a city, and even Belgium as a country.

⁸⁰ D. Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews : Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840-1914*, New Haven, 1994, pp. 1-2, 6-7.