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The “Belgian” Jewish Experience of World War One

Janiv Stamberger

The history of Belgium’s Jewish community and its experience of the First World War has yet to be written. While during the last few years some articles have been published on Jews and the First World War in Belgium, a few notable ones in this journal, a detailed and exhaustive study of how the Jewish communities in Belgium fared during the war is still inexistent¹.

In this introductory article I do not intend to offer such an exhaustive overview, nor present radically new information regarding “Belgium’s Jews” and their fortunes between the fateful years of 1914-1918. Instead this paper is a first tentative synthesis of the Belgian Jewish experience of the First World War based on the existing literature, and a preliminary investigation into some of the primary sources. As such, in this article, I will aim to lay the basis of, and offer a first analysis into, some of the events which transpired in Belgium’s Jewish communities during the conflict.

¹ S. Renneboog, « De Antwerpse diamantsector en de Eerste Wereldoorlog », in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine - Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse Herinnering*, 9, 2010, pp. 13-35 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Armand Bloch : éloge de la liberté », in *Les Cahiers de la mémoire contemporaine - Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse Herinnering*, 11, 2014, pp. 13-21 ; A. Burnotte, « Armand Bloch, le rabbin patriote », in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine - Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse Herinnering*, 11, 2014, pp. 23-42 ; Y. Zian, L’Affaire Norden, « Le “judéo-boche” dans la presse belge (1914-1918) », in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine - Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse Herinnering*, 12, 2016, pp. 223-256.

First, I will present a general overview of the outbreak of the war and the reactions and responses of the Jewish communities. Subsequently, I will discuss how forms of “Belgian” Jewish life continued to exist in centres abroad, where “Belgian” Jews had found refuge. Next, I will analyse how the two principal Jewish communities in Belgium, in Antwerp and in Brussels, fared during the occupation. I will try to explain how different circumstances determined the trajectory of both communities and examine how in Antwerp Jewish life during the war was reduced to a state of near inexistence, while in Brussels different groups in Jewish society responded towards the difficult, political, and economic realities in a variety of ways. Finally, I will try to analyse the significance of the First World War on the development of Belgian Jewry from a more long-term perspective.

The start of hostilities

In the summer of 1914 the Belgian population and the Jewish community was still blissfully unaware of the immeasurable chaos into which Europe and much of Belgium would be plunged during the next four years. For Belgium, as well as for its Jewish community, the events of 1914-1918 – soon to be referred to as the Great War – proved to be a turning point in its history.

The outbreak of war on August 4 1914 took Belgium by surprise. Even though immediately prior to the conflict international tensions ran high, the German push through neutral Belgium still came as a complete shock². Panic and fear took hold over the streets in the cities of the country and soon turned to

² S. De Schaepdrijver, *De Grote Oorlog. Het Koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Antwerp, 2013, pp. 49-50.

rage and nationalist fervour. The anger against the flagrant violation of Belgium's sovereignty and neutrality was fanned by false rumours against the substantial German immigrant colonies residing in the country and led to a wave of popular fury. Mobs in the streets of Antwerp and Brussels turned on everything suspected to be German. German pubs and stores were smashed and looted and in a display representing some medieval charivari enemy nationals (Germans and Austrians) were subjected to mockery, insults and violence³. Members of the Jewish community of Antwerp, which included a relatively large group of German Jews, also became victims of this popular anger. As such, the department store of Leonard Tietz was damaged during the anti-German agitation in Antwerp, even though he had precautionary placed large Belgian flags on the facade of the store⁴. Except for some looting in the area around the Central Station, the Jewish neighbourhood was largely spared as most of the violence and rioting was restricted to the Fourth district and the Scheldt Docks⁵.

The popular anger and the decree issued by the Belgian authorities that all enemy nationals should leave the city within forty-eight hours, caused panic and distress in the Jewish

³ For the anti-German riots in Brussels and Antwerp, see : B. Majerus, « L'âme de la résistance sort des pavés mêmes ? Quelques réflexions sur la manière dont les Bruxellois sont entrés en guerre (fin juillet 1914 - mi-août 1914) », and A. Vrints, « Moffen buiten ! De anti-Duitse rellen in augustus 1914 te Antwerpen », in S. Jaumain, M. Amara, *et. alii.* (eds.), *Une guerre totale ? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, Bruxelles, 2005. In his article, A. Vrints has compared the anti-German riots in Antwerp to the medieval and early-modern practice of charivari.

⁴ L. Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn Joodse bevolking (1880-1944)*, Tielt, 2000, p. 75 ; A. Vrints, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁵ A. Vrints, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58.

neighbourhood. A week after these events, the Dutch Jewish weekly of the Netherlands, *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad*, reported on the desperate scenes its journalist had witnessed: « Especially [the neighbourhoods] *Zurenborg* and neighbouring *Borgerhout* were in a state of uproar. Under military escort the families who had not yet departed were driven towards the Central Station; from where the unfortunate victims of this brutal war left hospitable Belgium through Holland. *Zurenborg* is deserted and in the surrounding streets 80 residences remain vacant. The streets *Kievit*, *Leeuwerik*, *Lente en Zomer* are all but desolate. »⁶ Most of the German Jews and the Jews from Galicia, which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, left the city in the first days of the war without their possessions which were subsequently placed under sequester. Their departure was greeted with cheers, insults and mockery from the Belgian population. Salomon Dembitzer, a Krakow-born Jewish writer living in Antwerp, recalled that when the overloaded trains with Jewish refugees left the Central Station « Belgian women and girls raised their fists against us, called out curse words and laughed at us [them] »⁷.

The order for enemy nationals to leave the city also led to painful divisions within the Jewish community as the immigrants from Russia (an allied country) were exempt from the measures taken against the Austro-Hungarian and German Jews. This led to bitter resentment⁸. As the German army advanced, most Russian Jews chose to join their “brethren”, rather than risk falling under the rule of the German occupier. The

⁶ *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad*, August 14 1914, p. 3.

⁷ S. Dembitzer, *Aus engen Gassen*, Berlin, 1915, p. 62.

⁸ V. Ronin, *Antwerpen en zijn Russen, onderdanen van de tsaar, 1814-1914*, UGent, 1993, p. 320.

Jewish exodus from Belgium was but a small part of the enormous army of refugees which at the outset of the war fled before the German onslaught. Some one and a half million Belgians would take to the road in search of a safe-haven and some 600,000 of them would spend the remainder of the war either in France, the Netherlands or Great Britain⁹.

Belgium's Jewish diaspora abroad

The Jewish refugees from Belgium mostly chose the neutral Netherlands and Great Britain as their destination. By the middle of October the *Jewish Chronicle*, the London-based Jewish weekly, reported that some 5,000 Jewish refugees from Belgium had settled in the British capital and more were arriving daily¹⁰. The number of Jewish refugees in London would soon dwindle as some of them chose to join family in France or simply moved on, by 1916 the number of Jewish refugees from Belgium was estimated to be around 3,000-3,500¹¹. Initially the Belgian Jewish refugees were sheltered by the Jews' Temporary Shelter, an organisation which since 1885 aided Jewish immigrants passing through London on their journey. In order to deal with the stream of refugees the organisation established the Jewish War-

⁹ P.-A. Tallier, « De Belgische vluchtelingen in het buitenland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog », in A. Morelli, *Belgische emigranten : oorlogsvluchtelingen, economische emigranten en politieke vluchtelingen uit onze streken van de 16de eeuw tot vandaag*, Berchem, 1999, p. 23 ; For a recent work on the Belgian refugees during the First World War, see : M. Verleyen – M. De Meyer, *Augustus 1914 : België op de vlucht*, Antwerp, 2013.

¹⁰ *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 16 1914, p. 6.

¹¹ *Bnai Brith Messenger*, December 15 1916, p. 35 ; *The Sentinel*, December 8 1916, p. 9 ; In 1919, some 3000 Jews who had resided in Belgium before the war were repatriated from London to Belgium, see : Consistoire central israélite de Belgique (CCIB), Rapport à l'Assemblée Générale des membres effectifs de la communauté de Bruxelles du 18 avril 1920, 1920, p. 21

Refugees Committee (JWRC) at the end of August which was supported by the Jewish community of London, Jewish communities throughout Great Britain, and the British government. Throughout the war the JWRC would aid some 10,000 Jewish refugees, predominantly from Belgium¹².

Upon arrival, in a typical British class-conscious fashion, the Jewish refugees were separated according to their social position. Although this admittedly was a “rough-and-ready” classification it was deemed necessary as it was argued that « a professor and a shoemaker are not ideal companions – though the shoemaker may be an excellent fellow in himself »¹³. Refugees who had held important functions and positions in their places of residence (most came from Antwerp) were sent to the Manchester hotel where « the middle class-genteel men, refined and well-clad women, far removed from the charity-receiver, [and] very akin to the members of the average London [Jewish] congregation » found a well-furnished establishment¹⁴. In November 1915 this group of Jewish refugees, which numbered 600, was moved to 35 houses in the north of London provided by the committee¹⁵. The working-class Jewish refugees were sent to the refuge in Poland Street where they had access to a workshop, a synagogue, and a school for the children. These refugees were mostly Polish or Russian Jews who had lived in Antwerp. The refuge in Poland

¹² M. Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale : France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas*, Brussels, 2008, p. 177 ; For an overview of the history of the Jews' Temporary Shelter, see : K. Weber, « Transmigrants between Legal Restrictions and Private Charity. The Jews' Temporary Shelter in London, 1885-1939 », in *Points of Passage. Jewish Migrants from Eastern Europe in Scandinavia, Germany, and Britain 1880-1914*, New York, 2013, pp. 85-104.

¹³ *The Jewish Chronicle*, November 13 1914, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ M. Amara, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

Street, located in the middle of Soho, soon became a microcosm of Eastern European Jewish life, the courtyard was colourfully described as resembling « a street in Łódź »¹⁶. Despite the obvious hardships, most of the refugees from Belgium seemed to have encountered favourable circumstances during their stay in Great Britain. In London, an important international diamond centre, the Jewish diamond merchants were greeted with open arms and business during the war years flourished. For the poor refugees who had worked as labourers in the diamond industry, the situation was more difficult¹⁷. Nevertheless, when the Jewish Belgian refugees were collectively repatriated in 1919 the *Jewish Chronicle* proudly reported that « the erstwhile refugees have no cause to grumble : in nine cases out of ten they have left us far richer in substance than when they sought the hospitality of these shores »¹⁸. Jewish refugee children had adapted more quickly to their new surroundings, as is often the case with children in similar situations throughout history, which made the return to Belgium difficult. Now more fluent in English than Flemish and being estranged from Belgium, many a tear was shed on departing British soil¹⁹.

Though London welcomed many Jewish refugees from Belgium in 1914, the vast majority of them would spend the war years in the neighbouring Netherlands. In Scheveningen, a seaside resort next to The Hague, a Belgian Jewish colony was es-

¹⁶ *The Jewish Chronicle*, November 13 1914, p. 16.

¹⁷ E. Laureys, *Meesters van het diamant. De Belgische diamantsector tijdens het nazibewind*, Tielt, 2005, pp. 67-68 ; S. Renneboog, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48 and 66-68 ; For the Belgian diamond diaspora during the First World War see also : Y. Vassart, *L'immigration des diamantaires en Angleterre et aux Pays-Bas durant la Première Guerre mondiale*, unpublished master thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2000.

¹⁸ *The Jewish Chronicle*, March 7 1919, p. 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

tablished which not only provided a home for Jewish refugees but also served as the temporary shelter for a number of Jewish institutions from Antwerp. During the war, the town became a centre of Jewish life with a myriad of “Belgian” Jewish organisations which would serve as a model for similar Jewish organisations in Antwerp after the return of the refugees. Jewish refugees mainly settled in The Hague, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. According to the Aliens register of The Hague, at least 329 Jewish families settled in Scheveningen during the war years but this is probably an underestimation of the true number as not everyone registered officially²⁰. In 1918 the number of Jewish refugees in the Netherlands, the absolute majority of them from Belgium, was estimated to be around 10,000²¹.

The Belgian Jewish colony of Scheveningen consisted mostly of Galician Jews and soon developed as a nucleus of East European Jewish life. Many Jewish refugees who had been active in the diamond industry reorganised themselves and founded the club Antverpia headed by the prominent diamond merchant Romi Goldmuntz²². Zionist organisations established in Antwerp during the first decade of the twentieth century such as Agudath Zion and Mizrakhi were re-established in Scheveningen and together reorganised the Zionist Federation of Belgium. Alongside the Zionist Federation, a number of other Zionist organisations were created by Jewish “Belgian” refugees, such as Hashakhar (the dawn), Tikvath-Israel (The Hope of Israel), a Maccabi sports-club, and a local Jewish boy-scouts movement. And for a brief period a local Belgian Zionist periodical was even pub-

²⁰ W. Willems - H. Verbeek, *Hier woonden wij, hoe een stad zijn Joodse verleden herontdekt*, Amsterdam, 2015, p. 356.

²¹ L. Giebels, *De Zionistische beweging in Nederland 1899-1941*, Assen, 1975, p. 107.

²² E. Laureys, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

lished²³. The Zionist Federation of Belgium in Scheveningen stayed in close contact with the Union of Dutch Zionists (Nederlandsche Zionisten Bond) but remained an independent organization. The arrival in The Netherlands of a large number of “Belgian” Zionists originally from Eastern Europe led to tensions with the Dutch Zionists²⁴. « The rigid, and even off-putting, organisation of Dutch Zionism did very poorly to accommodate the spirit, temperament, and the tendencies of our masses », wrote a Belgian Zionist in a letter to the Belgian Zionist periodical *Kadimah* after the war in 1919²⁵. This was a clear indication of the deep cultural and psychological differences which continued to divide Eastern and Western Jewry. Some Belgian Zionists, mostly long-time functionaries in the World Zionist Organisation, played an important role in the international politics of the Zionist movement during the First World War. Jean Fischer, for example, who served as the director of the central committee of the Keren Kayemeth Le’Yisrael (Jewish National Fund) which during the war was relocated from Berlin to neutral The Hague²⁶. Together with the Dutch Zionists Jacobus Kahn and Nehemia De Lieme, and later joined by Julius Simon, they established the Political Committee of The Hague, which attempted to define the Zionist post-war policy line in the future peace settlements²⁷.

In 1917 the British government issued the Balfour declaration expressing its favourable disposition towards the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine. This was rightfully

²³ *Kadimah*, 12, March 14 1919, pp. 9-10, « *Lettre de Hollande* ».

²⁴ L. Giebels, *De Zionistische beweging in Nederland...*, pp. 107-108.

²⁵ *Kadimah*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ L. Giebels, *De Zionistische beweging in Nederland*, p. 106.

²⁷ *Hatikvah*, 1, January 13 1930, p. 6.

seen as an enormous diplomatic victory by the Zionist movement. In Scheveningen the Belgian Zionists responded to the Balfour declaration with exultation. The president of the Belgian Federation, Ladislav Herz, wrote to Chaim Weizmann in London to express the gratitude of the Belgian Zionists to « the magnanimous government of his majesty the king of Great Britain for recognising the legitimate national aspirations of the Jewish people in Palestine and wishes to convey you our warm congratulations for your [Chaim Weizmann] success which crowns the Zionist efforts »²⁸. The Balfour declaration led to an increase in popularity of the Zionist cause and new adherents flocked to its ranks. A report of the second general assembly of the Zionist Federation of Belgium held on 7 April 1918 in Scheveningen stated that « the organisations have developed a lot ; the number of members has grown significantly »²⁹.

Not only the Belgian Zionist movement found a temporary home in Scheveningen for its activities. It also became a refuge for Antwerp's Eastern European Ultra-orthodoxy and its traditional way of life. A reporter of the *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad* in an article on the Chanukah celebrations expressed his warm admiration for the pious community in this local « Galicia »³⁰. In a colourful description of the Eastern European Jewish environment he marvelled at the « *chassidic bokher* », the *beth midrash*, and the typical « *nigunim* » and prayers during the service. For the Dutch orthodox Jews, who like their German counterparts had gone far along the path of acculturation during the nineteenth century, the encounter with “traditional” Eastern

²⁸ CZA, Z4-40019 The Jewish Agency for Palestine - Correspondents with Zionist offices in Brussels, The Hague (1918-1919).

²⁹ CZA, Z4-40019, *op. cit.*

³⁰ *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad*, January 12 1917, p. 5.

European Jewish orthodoxy – whose knowledge of Jewish tradition and religious texts had been honed since childhood by a strict education in *kheder* and afterwards often in *yeshivah* – was a stimulating experience. Notwithstanding the prejudices and lofty behaviour which often marked Western Jewry's attitude towards their Eastern European cousins the article clearly reflects the sincere respect for their religious knowledge and tradition. The Antwerp branch of the fiercely anti-Zionist orthodox party Agudath Israel, established in Antwerp in 1912 as a local branch of the world Agudath Israel Party (Katowice, 1912), also found a refuge in Scheveningen³¹. During its stay in the Netherlands the organisation formed close ties with Dutch Jewish Orthodox organisations which would lay the basis for the future good relations between Agudath Israel in Holland and Antwerp during the interwar period.

Jewish life in occupied Belgium

While in London and Scheveningen a resemblance of “Belgian” pre-war Jewish life continued, in “Belgian” Jewish enclaves ; across the border in occupied Belgium, it was reduced to a shadow of its former state. In Antwerp the Jewish community and its institutions almost came to a complete standstill and little remained of the bustling community of approximately 20.000 Jews which had resided in the « city on the Scheldt » before the war. During the siege of Antwerp in the beginning of October 1914 the historic centre of the city came under heavy artillery bombardment and aerial attacks from zeppelins and the main

³¹ For the history of Agudath Israel see : G. C. Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition : Agudat Israel in Poland, 1916-1939*, Jerusalem, 1996 ; For its ideology and intellectual development as well as early history see : A. L. Mittleman, *The Politics of Torah, The Jewish political tradition and the founding of Agudat Israel*, New York, 1996.

synagogue at the Bouwmeestersstraat was badly damaged. A heavy shell struck a direct hit and tore through the southern wall and the women's gallery landing next to the *hekhal*, the ark where the Torah scrolls are kept, causing destruction but luckily not a fire. Rabbi Wiener – who throughout the war would remain in Antwerp – rescued the Torah scrolls and safely stored them in the cellar of the synagogue³². The damaged building would be repaired during the war but services would be restricted³³.

The communal leaders who had stayed behind at the outbreak of war had hoped for a rapid return of Jewish life in Antwerp. They even called on their coreligionists to return in the Dutch Jewish press ; a call which however, remained largely unanswered³⁴. The collapse of the diamond trade in Antwerp and the uncertainty of the war meant that most Jews who had fled the city chose to remain in their places of refuge rather than risk facing the uncertainty awaiting them in Antwerp. By December 1914 the entire Jewish community of Antwerp reportedly consisted of some ninety families and while some basic necessities such as the provision of kosher meat were restored most of the synagogues and oratories, such as the Sephardic and the Dutch oratories at the Hoveniersstraat and Lentestraat, remained closed³⁵. This situation certainly did not improve as the war progressed and living conditions deteriorated, provisions became scarce and their prices soared. In the winter of 1916-1917 the nutritional situation in the urban centres of Belgium became

³² *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad*, October 30 1914, p. 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, June 4 1915, p. 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, October 30 1914, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, December 11 1914, pp. 6.

desperate and the population was nearing starvation³⁶. Especially the poor were hard hit and sometimes unable to provide for their families. This was the case of the majority of the Jewish population which had remained behind. The local Jewish orphanage closed due to a lack of funds and Antwerp's remaining Jews became desperate. The Dutch Jewish community, aided by the Belgian Jewish population in the Netherlands, started an action to help « the suffering Jewish children in Belgium ». Malnourished Jewish children, in an agreement with the occupying forces, were transported over the border to the Netherlands and were placed in the care of Jewish families and organisations³⁷. Jewish life in Antwerp throughout the war remained in a state of hibernation.

In Brussels the Jewish community seems to have fared a little better. While many Jews had fled the city at the outbreak of the war and the Jewish population was greatly diminished, Jewish community life in Brussels continued to an extent that was not possible in Antwerp. The strategic importance of Antwerp, and other fortified cities such as Namur and Liège, had meant that, at the outbreak of the war, the Belgian military authorities had assumed control over these cities and for security reasons cleared them of enemy nationals. The civil administration in Brussels too deported German nationals and some 5,100 (a third of the German population) of them were extradited to the Netherlands

³⁶ For the dire nutritional situation in Belgium during WWI see : P. Scholliers, « Oorlog en voeding : de invloed van de Eerste Wereldoorlog op het Belgische voedingspatroon, 1890-1940 », in *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 11, 1, 1985, pp. 33-37 ; G. Nath, *Brood willen we hebben ! Honger sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België*, Antwerpen, 2013, pp. 11-14.

³⁷ *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad*, June 4 1915, p. 6.

at the beginning of the war³⁸. However, the deportation of foreigners seems to have been less thoroughly executed than in Antwerp. The fact that Brussels was taken by the German army without a fight or protracted siege, and that the Jewish community in Brussels, or at least the members of the Jewish establishment, had made far-reaching inroads towards integration in Belgian society also helps to explain why Jewish life in Brussels was able to sustain itself. Throughout the war, the Israelite community of Brussels continued to function, as did the Jewish charity organisations under its control. These Jewish philanthropic organisations became a vital lifeline for the many Jewish poor in the city on which the war rationing took a heavy toll. Due to the perilous situation of many Jewish poor, the various Jewish charity organisations under the authority of the Israelite community of Brussels were reorganised in a loose federation, the *Assistance de Guerre*. As the war progressed and living conditions in Brussels deteriorated, an increasing number of Jews became dependent on the support of this institution, which in turn could rely on assistance from Belgian charitable organisations³⁹.

Not only the Jewish establishment and the “Belgicised” Jewish middle classes pursued their activity during the war years, Jewish immigrant society, composed of Eastern European immigrant arrivals after 1882 and predominantly after the failed Russian Revolution of 1905, also started establishing their own

³⁸ F. Caestecker, A. Vrints, « The national mobilization of German immigrants and their descendants in Belgium, 1870-1920 », in *Germans as minorities during the first world war : a global comparative perspective*, ed. P. Panayi, Ashgate, 2014, p. 131 ; Benoît Majerus however cites a number of 9.100 Germans who were deported to the Netherlands at the outbreak of the war. (B. Majerus, *op. cit.*, p. 37).

³⁹ Société israélite de Bienfaisance, Rapport du conseil d'administration pour les années 1915 à 1920, Bruxelles, 1921, pp. 16-22.

philanthropic, cultural and political organisations. On the 20 August 1917, the philanthropic organisation Ezrah was founded by Jewish immigrants as a Zionist answer to the philanthropic organisations dominated by the Consistory⁴⁰. Its committee was made up from the rising new immigrant middle class and bourgeoisie and counted among its prominent members M. Gratvol (president), Isaac Kubowitzki (vice-president), Israel Raindorf (treasurer) and A. Averbouch (secretary)⁴¹. In the first semester of 1918 the organisation assisted some 950 impoverished Jews suffering from the shortages of the war⁴². In the immediate post-war years the organisation reorganised itself and took upon itself to support the massive influx of refugees from Eastern Europe⁴³. It would thereby assume a similar role as its namesake in Antwerp.

One of the surprising developments in immigrant Jewish society in Brussels during the occupation is the incipient organisation of a Jewish national life in the city. Zionism in Brussels before the war had always remained marginal and the tiny Zionist organisations had been characterised by their ephemeral nature. During the occupation a number of Jewish cultural and political circles with Zionist orientation were created, invigorating the Zionist movement in the capital. The reason for this sudden uptake of Jewish national life can in part be explained by the arrival of dedicated activists and intellectuals such as Benzion Averbuch, who had fled besieged Liège and arrived in Brussels at

⁴⁰ *Kadimah*, 9, February 7 1919, p. 9.

⁴¹ *Œuvre juive de Secours Ezrah, Exposé de la situation générale, Exercice 1917, Bruxelles, 1917*, p. 7.

⁴² *Œuvre juive de Secours Ezrah, Exposé de la situation générale, 1^{er} semestre 1918, Bruxelles, 1918*, p. 1.

⁴³ *Hatikwah*, 1, March 6 1920, p. 15.

the outset of the war⁴⁴. The latter was together with Isaac Kubowitzki, Alexander Van Der Horst and Gustaaf Hildesheim, a member of The Zionist society Hatikwah (not to be confused with the periodical of the Zionist Federation), which organised lectures and other activities⁴⁵. This Zionist circle had a distinct bourgeois and General Zionist character, and was at odds with a more militant “progressive” organisation driven by young Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews and French-speaking Jews which took on the name Zeire Zion.

In a pamphlet distributed in September 1916, Zeire Zion called the Jewish youth of Brussels to action : « Your existence has a goal : to contribute to the wellbeing of your people, your studies have a goal : to know the science of your people, your leisure time has a goal : to work towards the regeneration of your people... don't be prejudiced, QUESTION yourself ; listen to your conscience, KNOW yourself, come to us, advise us, work with us for the honour of our common heritage. »⁴⁶ Its activities consisted mainly of cultural and political education of Jewish youth but also of (modest) fundraising for the work of the Zionist movement in Palestine. “Practical work” on the field in Palestine was impossible given the political circumstances. One of Zeire Zion's founders was the young law student Léon Kubowitzki, younger brother of the previously mentioned Isaac, who during the interwar period would become one of the most prominent leaders of the Labour Zionist movement in Belgium and one of the most influential figures in Belgian Jewish life. Despite their differences, in 1917 Hatikwah and Zeire Zion to-

⁴⁴ *L'Avenir Juif*, 167, August 18 1939, p. 5, « Benzion Averbouch ».

⁴⁵ *Hatikwah*, *op. cit.* ; The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labour Movement Research, III-17-493-3-3, « Letter from Léon Kubowitzki to Jean Fischer, August 9 1917 ».

⁴⁶ The Pinchas Lavon Institute for Labour Movement Research, III-17-493-3-3.

gether formed the Mercaz Sioniste. This organisation instituted a *Beth Zion* (a Zionist home), consisting of a small library and a reading hall where a range of activities could be held.

Also active in the capital during the war period was the Club Autodidactique Juif, which brought together the Jewish liberal bourgeois, professional intellectuals and Jewish labourers and, as its name suggests, organised a range of lectures and conferences. According to a post-war description by Ahron Weiss, one of the principle members of the Zeire Zion, this club was characterised as having a « superficial Jewish national character »⁴⁷.

Despite the small size of these organisations, mostly counted no more than a few dozen members, they served as important meeting points for likeminded Jewish immigrants where they could socialise, organise activities and lectures⁴⁸. In addition, the creation by a new generation of Zionist activists, part of a rising immigrant economic elite, of a philanthropic organisation directly challenged the Belgian Jewish establishment, which had long-since regarded Jewish philanthropy as the exclusive prerogative of the Consistorial elites of the rue de la Régence.

The Consistorial elites however were dealing with problems of their own. The First World War saw one of the most dramatic demonstrations of Belgian patriotism by the Consistory and its chief rabbi Armand Bloch. The German demands of loyalty from the official religious confessions had systematically been rejected by the Consistory, which was considered an act of defiance

⁴⁷ *Hatikwah*, 4, March 4 1921, pp. 71-72, « Un an de Zeiré-Zionisme ».

⁴⁸ In March 1920 the Zeire Zion in Brussels for example only counted some 30 members. (*Hatikwah*, 2, March 19 1920, pp. 38-39.)

making them suspect in the occupiers' eyes⁴⁹. On several occasions, rabbi Bloch zealously continued to deliver patriotic sermons and perform the traditional benediction at the end of the Shabbat services, for the Belgian state, the royal house, and King Albert I of Belgium. On April 1916, on the first day of Pesach, the chief rabbi, as was customary in the main synagogue, gave a rousing sermon entitled *On Modern Idols* (*Les idoles modernes*) in which he strongly linked the traditional message of Passover of the liberation of Israel from slavery to the contemporary situation in occupied Belgium, the ideals of universal rights, and liberty. « We are going through similar hours. Independence, never have we grasped its meaning so well, appreciated it so much, loved it so much, and our greatest happiness would be to see it, tomorrow, universally recognized and respected as the most sacred right. »⁵⁰ This explicit manifestation of Belgian patriotism aroused the ire of German Jewish soldiers attending the services who denounced the rabbi to the German authorities. After a brief trial he was condemned by a military tribunal to six months imprisonment in Saint-Gilles⁵¹.

When the news of the incarceration of rabbi Bloch reached journalists of the free Belgian press operating from abroad, they responded with enthusiasm to his act of patriotism. In the French Catholic journal *Le XX^e siècle* a sympathetic journalist wrote emphatically that this « arrest... shows that all Belgians no matter which religion they adhere to find each other in the same patriotic feelings and that all are exposed to the same per-

⁴⁹ A. Burnotte, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

⁵⁰ A. Bloch, *Les idoles modernes, Sermon prononcé à la synagogue de Bruxelles le 1^{er} jour de Pâque 5676, 18 avril 1916*, Paris, 1920.

⁵¹ A. Burnotte, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

secutions from the hands of the Krauts [Boches] »⁵². The Belgian press continued to report on the affair and the imprisoning of rabbi Bloch, the « patriotic rabbi », later became one of the symbols of the Jewish loyalty to Belgium, which at least in the Jewish community was remembered long after.

While this affair demonstrated the loyalty of the Jewish citizens to the Belgian state, descriptions of less noble Jewish involvement in the war could equally be found in the Belgian exile press. The image of the Jew as war profiteer and auxiliary of the Germans became a recurring theme in the pages of the exiled Belgian (Catholic) newspapers who previously had reported passionately on the imprisonment of rabbi Bloch⁵³. Jews were portrayed as traitors who had sold the country to the Germans and were benefitting from the war to the detriment of the Belgian population. However, as Yasmina Zian has convincingly demonstrated, even though this depiction of the Jews rested on old deeply-engrained stereotypes, we cannot really speak of a systematic anti-Semitic campaign. Most of the negative stereotypes used against the Jews were conflated with the designator « Prussian ». « Jew » and « Prussian » were used interchangeably as mere synonyms of each other, and as such the attribution of « Jew » was meant to target, taint, and ridicule the German invader. The trumped-up patriotism in parts of the Belgian press strengthened these anti-German and anti-Jewish sentiments⁵⁴.

The close identification between Jews and Germans was certainly an overgeneralization, yet a grain of truth could nonethe-

⁵² *Le XX^e siècle*, May 20 1916 ; cited from : A. Burnotte, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁵³ Y. Zian, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-256.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-252.

less be found in these accusations. Like their non-Jewish German compatriots living in Belgium before the war some German and Austro-Hungarian Jews sided with the armies of the Central powers at the outbreak of the war and saw no issues in cooperating or establishing economic relations with the German occupying forces⁵⁵. Patriotism and identification with Germany and its culture led some to belief that the war aims of their former homeland were just and legitimate. The fact that Germany was fighting against Russia, the land of pogroms, persecution and oppression also led some of them to be supportive of the German war effort⁵⁶. For instance, on July 31 1914, after Germany had declared war on Russia and four days before the invasion of Belgium, the Brussels Jewish-owned department store Tietz demonstrated its support to the German empire, hanging out German flags in front of the store which led to some consternation in Brussels⁵⁷. During the occupation, Fritz Norden, a Jewish barrister in Brussels, published a book *La Belgique neutre et l'Allemagne d'après les hommes d'état et les juristes belges* in which he asserted that Belgium's neutrality carried no legal authority. The book aroused considerable controversy: in German circles it was readily used to demonstrate the legality of the German occupation, whilst in Belgian circles Norden's publication caused indignation. Some more vehement commentators in the press did not shy away from using anti-Semitic stereotypes in their expla-

⁵⁵ For the reaction of the non-Jewish German colony in Antwerp on the outbreak of the war see : A. Vrints, « De "klippen des Nationalismus". De Eerste Wereldoorlog en de ondergang van de Duitse kolonie in Antwerpen », in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, 10, 2012, pp. 7-41.

⁵⁶ For the patriotism of Jews in the Austrian Empire see : M. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity. The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I*, Oxford-New York, 2001.

⁵⁷ B. Majerus, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

nation of Norden's political motivations⁵⁸. Some Jews most likely felt that the war did not concern them and that they should remain neutral, thus adopting, although for different reasons, the official position of the Zionist movement. Some members of the Jewish community therefore had no scruples in doing business with the German occupying forces. The Jews of German descent in the Consistorial circles and economic elites shared national and cultural affinities with the occupying forces while the Yiddish-speaking Jews shared linguistic similarities. Post-war documents compiled by the Belgian state contain evidence of Jews who had amassed small fortunes by doing business with the Germans⁵⁹. After the war, there were even cases of spiritual leaders of some of the officially recognized communities, such as the rabbi of Liège Henri Lehman, and the rabbi of the orthodox community of Brussels Moizes Goldstein, who were accused of cooperation and vying for favours with the German forces and subsequently dismissed from their positions⁶⁰. In this respect Jews were no different from some of their fellow Belgian citizens who regarded the German occupation as an opportunity for their individual or collective ambitions⁶¹. The difficult economic situation of the war-years most likely also led some to, opportunistically, seek to accommodate themselves with the German authorities in order to make a living or to provide for the needs of their families or communities.

⁵⁸ Y. Zian, *op.cit.*, pp. 245-246.

⁵⁹ State Archives of Belgium, Foreigners' Police, General files, number 1029, Dossiers relatifs à la Société pour la Protection des Émigrants juifs Ezraï, 1908-1926.

⁶⁰ D. Dratwa, « The chief rabbi of Belgium confronting the Germans in the First World War », in *European Judaism*, 48, 1, 2015, p. 102.

⁶¹ For the collaboration of a part of the Flemish movement with the German occupier see : L. Wils, *Flamenpolitik en activisme, Vlaanderen tegenover België in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Leuven, 1974.

During the war, sharp divisions arose within the Jewish community. Belgian patriots found themselves diametrically opposed to those willing to establish relations with the German occupiers or perhaps even resorted to openly supporting the German war effort. While further research is required to determine the extent of German-Jewish cooperation during the war, the various forms of cooperation between a (sizeable) minority of the Jewish community with the German occupying forces was evidently more wide-spread than previously has been acknowledged⁶². This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that after the armistice and the departure of the German army a number of Jewish families in Brussels found it expedient to count their losses, pack up their belongings, and leave with the German army rather than facing the risk of possible Belgian repercussions. In the immediate post-war era, the Consistory saw its membership drop by almost twenty-five per cent so that it was forced to organise an intense propaganda campaign to attract new families to become members and fill its empty coffers⁶³.

A further indication can be found in rabbi Bloch's Pesach sermon (*On Modern Idols*) of 1916 which can not only be read as a demonstration of Belgian patriotism but also as a strong admonishment of those Jews who compromised themselves with the German occupiers : « Those who prostrate themselves before success are slaves. Those who rank on the side which has the numbers, on the side of the majority, even when it is in error, are slaves. Those who allow themselves to be drawn into the current of reprehensible manners, those who count opinions, instead of

⁶² The few articles on Jews in Belgium during the First World War have focused on the role of rabbi Bloch and Jewish Belgian patriotism.

⁶³ CCIB, Rapport à l'Assemblée générale des membres effectifs de la communauté de Bruxelles du 26 avril 1919, 1919, p. 14.

appreciating them, those who wait to speak out, or to take a side, to see which way the wind blows, all of those are slaves. Slaves of fear, slaves of interests, slaves by calculation, by lowness or cowardice, these are the kind which, alas !, are so often found amongst us. »⁶⁴

The difficult position of the Jewish population residing in Belgium in negotiating their different identities and national attachments was exacerbated by the fact that family networks crossed borders, which meant that brothers found themselves supporting opposite sides during the war. Such was the case in one of the most prestigious Jewish families in Belgium, the Philipppsons. Martin Philipppson, former professor and chancellor of the University of Brussels before returning to Germany in 1891, wholeheartedly support the German war-effort in an article in a German Jewish journal, and even echoed the claim of Belgian civilian savagery against the Kaiser's soldiers, spread by the myth of the *Francs-tireurs* which had strongly influenced German public opinion⁶⁵. His brother Franz, who played a prominent role in the Belgian Jewish establishment in Brussels, became active in the Belgian relief efforts for the suffering population, and paid a high price for his loyalty when his son Jacques, second lieutenant in the Belgian *Chasseurs à cheval*, was killed at the battlefield on May 22 1918⁶⁶. The First World War

⁶⁴ A. Bloch, *Les idoles modernes, Sermon prononcé à la synagogue de Bruxelles le 1^{er} jour de Pâque 5676, 18 avril 1916*, Paris, 1920.

⁶⁵ U. Wyrwa, «German Jewish Intellectuals and the German Occupation of Belgium », in *Quest, Issues in contemporary Jewish history*, 9, 2016, p. 45.

⁶⁶ For Martin Philipppson's positions see : U. Wyrwa, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27, 44-45 ; The Belgian historian Geneviève Warland is currently working on a project regarding Martin Phillipson and the Philipppson family in Belgium. For the commemoration of Jacques Philipppson see : CCIB, Rapport à l'Assemblée générale des membres effectifs de la communauté de Bruxelles du 26 avril 1919, 1919, p. 13.

would forever shattered the idea of Jewish unity as Jews fought and killed each other in opposing armies, and were caught in the tide of nationalist fervour of the countries they were living in.

Jewish soldiers (Max and Raphaël Pevtschin), 1914. © MJB

In Belgium, most of the Jewish population, both the small number of Belgian citizens and the more recent immigrants, remained loyal to the Belgian state. At the start of hostilities, “war fever” gripped the Jewish population like any other group in society. Wishing to contribute to the Belgian war effort, Jews of foreign nationalities expressed their desire to volunteer for military or civil service. Immediately after the invasion, the government received a letter from a group of Jews requesting to be inserted into the ranks of the army, civil

guard, or the Red Cross out of « gratitude for the hospitality they had enjoyed »⁶⁷. Jewish nationalists were as well swept up by the wave of Belgian patriotism and solidarity with their host country. The Zionist Federation of Belgium in Antwerp offered the use of the local Beth Zion as a field hospital for wounded soldiers, while many of its members volunteered for the civil

⁶⁷ Cited from L. Saerens, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

guard to protect the city⁶⁸. Foreign-born Jews did serve in the Belgian military during the war, as evidenced by a number of decorations accorded to Jewish officers for their bravery and service which were proudly reported on by the Consistory after the war⁶⁹. Others, born in Belgium and having acquired citizenship, had been drafted into the army prior to war and served on the front at the Yser where some paid the highest price and fell « on the field of honour » for their fatherland⁷⁰. According to Bernard Postal, who in 1938 wrote an article on the Jewish combatants in the (First) World War for *The Jewish Veteran*, the journal of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States, some 1,000 Jews (including many Eastern European Jews) served in the Belgian military during the war, of which some 125 were killed in action and a further 200 wounded⁷¹. Even though these numbers need to be approached with some caution, as Jewish communal and veteran organisations had a vested interest in demonstrating Jewish loyalty towards their respective countries in the face of anti-Semitic accusations of Jewish cowardice – often basing their counterarguments on doubtful sources and statistical material – it stands beyond doubt that Belgium's tiny Jewish community accorded itself valiantly in the field of battle⁷². “Belgian” Jews not only volunteered from Belgium but a number of Jewish refugees in the London shelters chose, or were

⁶⁸ N. Torczyner, « Der Belgisher tsienizm biz tsum velt-krig », in *Yidisher Almanakh*, Antwerp, 1933, p. 59.

⁶⁹ CCIB, Rapport à l'Assemblée générale des membres effectifs de la communauté de Bruxelles du 18 avril 1920, 1920, p. 32.

⁷⁰ CCIB, Rapport à l'Assemblée générale des membres effectifs de la communauté de Bruxelles du 26 avril 1919, 1919, p. 6.

⁷¹ B. Postal, « The Jews in the World War, a Study in Jewish Patriotism and Heroism », in *The Jewish Veteran*, November 1938, p. 13.

⁷² See the relevant chapters in : D. J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military: A history*, Princeton, 2013.

later – as part of the Russian-British military agreement – coerced to repatriate to Russia in order to fight for the allied cause or later in the revolutionary wars⁷³. After the war, the Jewish war-refugees committee successfully negotiated with the Belgian government for the collective repatriation of 116 women, elderly and children who prior to the conflict had lived in Antwerp and whose husbands, sons, or fathers had been enlisted in the Russian Army⁷⁴.

The First World War : the long-term perspective

Just like elsewhere in Europe, the Great War left a lasting mark on Belgium and its Jewish population. War and, consequently, post-war international events caused a rupture in the development of Jewish life in Belgium.

The reshaped geopolitical map of Eastern Europe, the recognition of the Zionist aspirations by one of the victor nations of the war and a major international power, as well as the introduction of a new more restrictive migration regime significantly altered the political position of Europe's Jewish populations⁷⁵. This directly affected the development of the Jewish community in Belgium, which during the 1920s evolved from being pre-

⁷³ *The Sentinel*, November 20 1914, p. 22 ; Regarding the forced conscription of Jewish refugees residing in Great Britain after the British-Soviet agreement in 1917 see : H. Shukman, *War or Revolution. 1917 : Russian Jews and Conscription in Britain*, Elstree, 2006.

⁷⁴ State Archives of Belgium, Foreigners' Police, General files, number 1029, Dossiers relatifs à la Société pour la Protection des Émigrants juifs Ezrah, 1908-1926.

⁷⁵ For a general overview of the changed situation of the Jewish communities in Europe after the First World War see : M. I. Rozenblit, « The European Jewish world 1914-1919. What Changed ? », in *World War I and the Jews. Conflict and Transformation in Europe, the Middle East, and America*, New York, 2017, pp. 32-55.

dominantly a transit centre for Jewish emigrations to becoming a final destination point.

In terms of Jewish demography in Belgium, the First World War seems to have had a significant impact. At the outbreak of the war, a large part of Belgium's Jewish population fled to neighbouring countries. While the lack of concrete data in the sources make it impossible to give even rough estimates on how many Jews who had lived in Belgium prior to 1914 (estimated at some 50,000⁷⁶) returned after the war, the available sources do indicate that a significant number of the Eastern European immigrants who had settled in Belgium from the late nineteenth century did not return⁷⁷. The immediate effect of this decrease on the economic or political position of the Jewish population was probably limited, as well-established Jews who had secured a good economic position in Belgium prior to the war returned (with the exception of many Jewish German nationals).

⁷⁶ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive en Belgique du Moyen âge à la Première Guerre mondiale*, Bruxelles, 1996, p. 208.

⁷⁷ The foreigners census of 1939 for instance shows that of the Polish nationals above the age of 15 (both Jews and non-Jews), only 1758 (4.3%) arrived in Belgium before the date of 1914. This of course does not take into account the (relatively few) Jews from the Polish regions in the former Russian Empire who received naturalisation after the First World War, nor the stateless Jews from the Polish regions, or the limited number of Jews who chose Russian citizenship. It does however clearly indicate that absolute majority of the Jewish population with Polish citizenship (roughly 50% of the Jewish population) in the interwar period arrived in Belgium after 1918 (Statistiek van de vreemdelingen van 15 september 1939, Centrale Dienst voor Statistiek, 1941, p. 39.); a further indication are the previously mentioned numbers of 10.000 (Belgian) Jewish refugees living in the Netherlands, and the 3000 Jewish refugees from Britain returning to Belgium after the war. Even if we assume that all returned from Holland, this brings us to a total of 13.000 Jews. Which begs the question: what happened to the rest of the perhaps as many as 30.000 Jewish refugees who fled Belgium at the outbreak of the war?

After the war, the Jewish population would expand significantly as a new immigration wave of Eastern European Jews arrived in Belgium, which by that stage meant that the entire integration process had to be repeated. These new immigrants were highly politicised, and introduced new forms of Jewish (and non-Jewish) ideologies in the local communities.

From an ideological perspective, the First World War served as the ultimate demonstration of consistorial ideology. The war provided the consistorial circles an opportunity to manifest the loyalty of Belgium's Jewish population towards the fatherland and served to exemplify Jews as equal, productive and loyal citizens. Yet, even while in Consistorial circles the heightened Belgian nationalism reinforced their worldview and commitment, the First World War also signalled the final breakthrough of one of their strongest ideological opponents which since the turn of the century had challenged the primacy and ideological foundations of the Consistory⁷⁸.

The Balfour Declaration emboldened the Zionist movement and gave it political legitimacy. Recognized by the world powers as a representative of the Jewish people, the movement gained in prestige. In Belgium, the Zionist organisations would emerge strengthened from the war. In the interwar period, the Zionist movement would only progressively gain in influence in local Jewish life as Eastern European immigrants joined its ranks.

⁷⁸ For a brief overview of the relations between the Consistory and the Zionists see : J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Orthodoxie contre modernité. Les effets institutionnels de l'immigration juive en Belgique entre 1880 et 1914 », in *Le Figuiier*, 3, 2009, pp. 56-59.

Regarded from a long-term perspective, the First World War can be seen as a transformative period in Jewish life in Belgium. It served as the catalyst for several processes which since the turn of the century had gradually been reshaping Belgian Jewish society : the decline of the Consistory as a leading force in Jewish life, the emergence of new forms of Jewish identity, and the diversification of Jewish life. While a high degree of institutional continuity can be discerned in the pre- and post-war periods, the First World War nonetheless can be regarded as a defining turning point. Both international, and local developments, would signify a dramatic shift in the political and societal paradigms of Jewish life (both locally and internationally). This would have an enormous impact on the general outlook, and the fortunes, of the Jewish communities in Belgium during the interwar period.

Mizrah referring to World War I, the Netherlands, 1918.

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