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Jan Maes, *De ster en het kruis. De Gereformeerde Jodenzending in Antwerpen en Brussel (1931-1948)*, Stichting voor de Eigentijdse Herinnering – Fondation de la Mémoire contemporaine, Brussels, 2020, 568 pages.

De ster en het kruis. De Gereformeerde Jodenzending in Antwerpen en Brussel (1931-1948) (henceforth referred to as *The star and the cross*) by researcher Jan Maes is a densely documented narrative which appears in a period in which in Belgium the interest, both scientific and popular, for the history of the Holocaust is being kept alive by, e.g., the publication of a highly debated and commercially successful analysis of the massive deportation of Jews from Belgium in 1942 by Herman Van Goethem¹. Contrary to the latter, *The star and the cross's* conception is purely scientific, notwithstanding its use of a highly accessible prose. It tells the largely unknown story of protestant reformist missions in Antwerp and Brussels from 1931 until 1948, and it is the result of Jan Maes's 7-year long research activities in archives both in Belgium (mainly Antwerp and

¹ H. Van Goethem, 1942. *Het jaar van de stilte*, Kalmthout-Amsterdam, 2019.

Brussels) and in the Netherlands (mainly Utrecht). Whereas Maes had already unearthed documentary evidence on the savior by Belgian protestants from Antwerp and Leuven of 22 Jews², the question of protestant involvement in the hiding of Jews during the Holocaust kept retaining his interest, and cleared the path towards his current research on protestant missionary work among Jews in Belgium (henceforth referred to as the “protestant mission”). The central question : did the protestant mission influence, directly or indirectly, protestants’ attitudes towards Jews in Belgium in this specific time period ? Or, more precisely : was the protestant mission in any way a catalyst for the various instances in which protestants – whether they were members of the mission or not –, helped Jews escape persecution ?

A central character in *The star and the cross* is Abram Czarnolewski, a former rabbi and protestant convert who fled Vienna in 1938, and who soon became a pivotal figure in the protestant mission in Belgium, until his 1942 deportation to Auschwitz, which became his final resting place. It is mainly thanks to the lengthy and meticulous description of the missionary work undertaken by Czarnolewski, based on an extremely rich corpus consisting of archival sources and primary periodical publications, that the reader gets a clear sense of the historical reality that is under scrutiny in Jan Maes’s book : that of a faith, c.q. Protestantism, and its efforts, which in the case of Czarnolewski were truly unrelenting, to translate its proselytizing nature into concrete action. All this at the expense of Czarnolewski’s health, and with only little result at the level of conversion. Indeed only very few Jews did turn towards

² J. Maes, ‘« Die Joden zijn bij mij per toeval gevonden ». Hoe protestanten Joden redden in de omgeving van Antwerpen en Leuven (1942-1944)’, in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire Contemporaine/Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Herinnering* 10, 2011, p. 271-317.

Protestantism, mainly, it seems, very poor individuals, immigrants who were not seldomly branded as social outcasts.

What clearly stands out in (at least our reading of) *The star and the cross* is the fact that, when protestants hid and saved Jews from persecution (and nearly sure death), they did so first and foremost as human beings, not because Church authorities suggested they do so. Indeed, Maes's analysis of the protestant mission paints a very lucid picture of the protestant Church and its members, c.q. its missionaries: they were interested in converting Jews, not saving their lives. In so doing, it pursued a religious, not a humanist agenda.

In the above sense, and without explicitly addressing such questions at the institutional level, *The star and the cross* is also a welcome contribution to the ongoing debate on Churches' attitudes *vis-à-vis* fascisms and the Holocaust. In addition, it should also be observed that in telling both the story of Church officials and Church policies regarding missionary work, and of individual protestants' efforts to save Jews from persecution, Jan Maes has craftfully avoided stepping into the historiographical loophole of identifying protestant Church authorities with individual believers, of identifying Church principles, the Church agenda (c.q. the conversion of non-protestants), with a certain humanist drive inspiring the actions of a part of the Church's followers.

The above interpretations of the research results presented in Maes's *magnum opus* also apply to the author's treatment of the immediate postwar period, during which the protestant mission was reinstated for a short time period, without meaningful success. Whereas Jewish -if indeed they already had notions of Judaism- children who had survived initially became a central target public for conversion, and whereas at the same time,

antisemitism seemed to have survived and had even gained some strength, near the end of the 1940s the creation of Israel definitively halted protestants' proselytizing efforts towards Jews. Indeed they now opted for more modern, less intrusive forms of 'interreligious dialogue', in a situation which has remained relatively unaltered until the present day.

Finally, and last but not least, it should be observed that *The star and the cross* is a neatly finished, solidly underbuilt study. Most notably, no efforts were spared in order to provide the reader with all the necessary information on events, theses and (above all) persons – even “minor” elements in the story –, both in the core text and in the lengthy footnotes. But the book's value goes way beyond this. Indeed the historiographical method applied here could be characterized as a highly modern “inner approach”, i.e., an approach in which the historian sets out to show reality first and foremost through the eyes of historical protagonists. The repeated and well-targeted use of citations – even if occasionally these are quite lengthy – is a helpful tool in such an approach, as is the narrative focus, within the books' chronological structure, on individual actors (Czarnolewski, but also, e.g., R. Bakker and J. Van Nes). The *ensemble* of their stories is the story of *The star and the cross*, a story of religious drive, of suffering and courage by people unknown to the larger public: a story that was waiting to be told.