

## 22 May 2017 SYMPOSIUM Comments

Thank you for your invitation to participate with distinguished colleagues on this panel. First and foremost I want to congratulate the editors and contributors of this splendid volume on their achievement which synthesizes the findings of a remarkable scholarly generation of study of Dutch Jewish history. It is a veritable *tour de force*.

I have been asked to discuss to what extent Dutch Jewish history offers special characteristics. This goes to the heart of one of the main stated objectives of the work. Wertheim, in his thoughtful introduction to the book, writes that the editors have aimed to place Dutch Jewry more effectively within the context of international Jewish history. "Dutch Jews or a people without borders?" – Zwiép calls this question the *fil conducteur* that running through the book and Jewish history in general. Was there, is there such a thing as the *species hollandia Judaica*, conjured up by Sigmund Seeligmann in 1923 and discussed by several of our authors. And if such a creature ever existed, is it now extinct?

By coincidence, I have recently been asked to contribute a commentary to a study of the genealogy, demography, and social history of another Jewish community, that of Scotland, the community in which, incidentally, I grew up. There too I was asked to comment specifically on the uniqueness or otherwise of that community's experience.

Of course, there are several significant differences between the two cases. Unlike Holland, Scotland has no Jewish history before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is a difference of scale. Scottish Jewry at its peak in the mid-twentieth century numbered no more than 24,000 whereas Dutch Jewry in 1940 was six times that size. Scottish Jewry has always been in some sense provincial, within the UK and the Diaspora, whereas Dutch Jewry in the golden age was, economically and culturally, in many ways central. Scottish Jews were almost entirely Ashkenazi, whereas Sephardim played a vital role in the Netherlands. Dutch Jewry before the war, in spite of the dominance of Amsterdam, was scattered throughout the country whereas Scottish Jewry was much more geographically concentrated, with a much greater majority living in one city, Glasgow.

I am not aware that anyone has hitherto proposed a *species caledonia Judaica*. Scottish and Dutch Jewries share several characteristics. Both existed within a comparatively benign social context, in which Calvinist and Enlightenment influences played a significant role. Both the Netherlands and Scotland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were pipelines for transmigration for Jews, principally from Congress Poland and the northern parts of the Pale of Settlement, to north America. This phenomenon appears more distinctly in this edition, for example in a paragraph that has been added to the chapter by Blom and Cahen that discusses, on the basis of recent research, the fact that between 1889 and 1913 some 26,000 Jewish migrants passed through Rotterdam on their way to settle overseas, mostly in the United States.

As in Scotland and most other countries in Europe, Dutch Jews became more concentrated in larger urban centres in the early twentieth century. In the same period the movement of Jews out of the old Jewish districts in the heart of Amsterdam towards outer suburbs became steadily more pronounced – as in Glasgow, and as in London, Paris, Berlin, Chicago, and New York.

Dutch and Scottish Jewries before World War II both embraced a conception of *Einheitsgemeinde*, combining formal orthodoxy with lax religious observance. This model, different from those of central Europe or North America, was, as Zwiép points out, hailed as uniquely Dutch, though, in fact, it was shared, if in somewhat different form, by other west European communities.

In recent decades, Scotland, like Holland, has received large numbers of Muslim immigrants, particularly from former imperial possessions. This immigration has elicited less political and social hostility in Scotland than in Holland. Nevertheless, as in Holland, ripple effects have complicated Muslim-Jewish relations and the Jewish position in general society.

Both Dutch and Scottish Jewries have contracted to less than a quarter of their peak size, one as a result of mass murder in World War II, the other as a result of emigration and natural population decrease. As this book points out, leaving aside net migration, a decline in the Dutch Jewish population, based on below-replacement-rate natural increase was already registered in 1920.

It might perhaps have been stressed a bit more in this book that the stability of Dutch Jewish numbers since 1945 is owed entirely to net immigration. This places a question mark over the community's long-term demographic viability, as in the case of European Jewry as a whole.

There has been a huge outpouring over the past twenty years of research and publication on Dutch Jewry during the occupation. Yet Romijn's penultimate chapter, on World War II, contains revisions that are more matters of detail and emphasis than of grand interpretation. This is not a criticism – more a reflection of the fact that broad outlines of the story were already visible by the 1990s.

This edition, for example, records the somewhat higher estimate of the number of Jews now believed to have gone into hiding during the occupation, about 28,000, though the number these who survived is still reckoned as no more than around 16,000.

Romijn now lays greater stress on what he terms the “detached attitude” of Dutch officialdom as well as the general reluctance of the Dutch government in London to appear to lay too great emphasis on the suffering of Dutch Jews as distinct from the rest of the population. Such attitudes were shared by other governments-in-exile, including the Free French Committee, and, as David Engel has shown, by the Polish government in London. Incidentally, it was also shared by the British Political Warfare Executive which effectively controlled all Allied propaganda emanating from London. The revised account of the attitude of Dutch officials and police is somewhat darker than in the previous edition. Romijn shows that by and large the Dutch administration was not merely passive but that its interventions with the Germans, rather than seeking to protect Jewish citizens, were primarily designed to shirk any appearance of responsibility for actions taken against Jews.

As in the previous edition, Romijn makes a salutary effort to overcome Arendt-style denunciation of the Jewish Council and to treat, in an analytical manner, the impossible dilemmas that faced its leaders, in particular David Cohen. I notice that in the new edition there are one or two subtle changes. For example, in a passage discussing Cohen's notorious statement in Theresienstadt in September 1944 to a Dutch Jew about to be deported to Auschwitz, “I can do nothing for you. But remember, you're only going to work. You are still young and healthy.” The previous edition commented: “Cohen may have been naïve but he was also sincere.” This observation is prudently omitted in the new edition.

The final chapter, dealing with the post-war period, has been completely rewritten by a new author. One of the dangers in historical writing arises from the fact that institutions tend to preserve their records better than individuals. Historians inevitably deal with the sources that they have got and that sometimes leads them to exaggerate the importance of institutions. That is a trap that David Weinberg falls into in his recently published book on the post-war Jewish communities of France and the Low Countries. Weinberg adduces organizational hustle and bustle in the decade and a half after 1945 as evidence of what he claims was a revitalization of Jewish communities. As a result I fear he fails to convey adequately the demoralization, disorientation, and atomization that were the fundamental life experiences of so many Dutch Jewish survivors after the war. One aspect of that was large-scale disengagement from organized Jewish life, save, in many cases, as a source of economic aid.

It is therefore all the more important, when writing about contemporary Jewish history, to deal with the periphery as well as the centre, the so-called “marginal” as well as the so-called “committed” Jews. Wallet does a better job than Weinberg in placing Jews within the broader context of the rapid secularization, depillarization, and individualization of post-war Dutch – and indeed European – society as a whole.

Wallet suggests that Dutch Jewry, relatively self-contained and self-satisfied before the war, moved after 1945 to much greater involvement with and dependence on World Jewry and Israel. As a result the *species hollandia judaica* has become less distinctive. As in Scotland, the term provincialism might reasonably be applied. Wallet almost uses it – but not quite.

Increasingly Dutch Jews in the post-war years withdrew from active membership of Jewish institutions. No more than twenty percent of Dutch Jews today are reckoned to be members of a Jewish organization or regular participants in activities organized by such organizations. The remainder may retain some Jewish customs, generally in family or private settings – for example, male circumcision. For the most part, however, their only connection with organized Jewish life is

through what Wallet calls “ad-hoc participation,” notably in memorialization of the Shoah and engagement with Israel. As the generation of World War II disappears, and as Israel, in recent decades, has become less an object of pride, more a source of embarrassment or pretext for attack on Jews, so these last two links are in danger of becoming attenuated.

One might well ask: is there really such a thing as a Jewish *community* in the Netherlands any more? Save in a superficial, organizational sense, I wonder. Sociologists of religion sometimes maintain that the overwhelming European trend towards secularization is deceptive. They point towards new forms of spirituality, the continuing vibrancy of pilgrimages, and personal searches for religious understanding. There may be some substance to all this – but in the Jewish context it is misleading. Judaism historically has always been a matter of collective participation as much as, indeed far more than, personal religious faith. The old joke about the Jew on the desert island has meaning precisely because Jewishness is a social as much as a spiritual concept. An atomized, individualized Jewry has little meaning. The Christian hermit can sit on a column in the desert for decades. The Jew cannot: he needs a *minyán*.

Wallet talks about the “cultural Jew” but kabbalah centres, klezmer bands, Ottolenghi cookbooks and so forth are meagre substitutes for the thick culture and cohesive social bonds that characterized traditional Jewish life. This, I submit, holds for *genus judaicum* in general as well as its species variants.

One small, final point: while it is good to see that Jewish women and children receive greater attention in this edition than in the earlier one, I am puzzled that, for save for one oblique reference, by far the most famous Jew, female, and child who ever lived in the Netherlands is not mentioned at all in this book.