

The Situation of Belgian Jewry in 1942-1943

... The German edict of May 27 made it obligatory for all Jews over the age of six to wear a yellow star with the letter "J" whenever they go out of their houses. The Germans wanted the municipalities to distribute these badges. They were met with fierce resistance and had to undertake the task themselves, but they entrusted it later to the AJB [the Association of the Jews in Belgium]. The non-Jewish population expressed profound indignation to this vile measure of the Germans. The press, which had sold itself out to the Germans, lauded the fresh humiliation of the Jews.

By dint of an edict issued on June 1, Jews were barred from the medical profession. This restriction, in fact, was introduced in Belgium at a relatively late date in comparison to the neighboring countries. Another edict of the same date imposed a curfew on the Jews between the hours of 20:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m., and prohibited sheltering Jews between these hours. The aim of this measure was probably to facilitate the nighttime raids that were to take place later on. ... Mention should also be made of the last two anti-Jewish edicts of August 1 and September 21, which deal with the liquidation of the property of German Jews and the prevention of removing objects that were Jewish property from their former places without special authorization.

The only ray of light in this sad summer of 1942 was the creation of a Jewish school system by private initiative. The schools created and directed by Mrs. Dr. F. Perlman were perhaps the only signs of positive and spontaneous Jewish activity and are therefore worthy of special mention. Gradually, more and more Jews failed to obey summonses to Malines [Mecheln], despite a circular of the AJB, drawn up on Gestapo instructions, enjoining the Jews not to evade the labor summonses. A fairly large number of Jews, particularly young ones, fled the country, and many hid in France. Departure conditions, moreover, were very adverse; many Jews were misled by amateur smugglers, tricked or robbed by gangsters, and fell into the hands of the Germans shortly afterwards, either in Belgium or in France. In some cases, Jews were handed over to the Germans directly after having paid exorbitant sums to leave for

Switzerland or Spain. The percentage of Jews leaving Belgium who actually reached safety is unknown, but for the Dutch, the number is estimated at between ten and twenty percent.

In autumn, the number of people who voluntarily reported themselves at Malines became so small that the Germans decided to organize large-scale roundups. Parts of the Jewish quarters of the towns were surrounded from the early evening, searches of every Jewish house were made throughout the night, and the inhabitants were taken away. It is unnecessary to describe the harrowing scenes that took place during these tragic nights. Thousands of families were captured; entire streets in Antwerp and Brussels were rendered “Judenrein” in a very short time. The non-Jews, particularly in Brussels, did what they could to withhold the victims from the Germans but could do little against the force and organization of the Germans. The vile Gestapo men acted with their proverbial brutality during these roundups. Old women were thrown onto trucks like bundles of rags, children were beaten and injured, and the elderly, the blind and the very sick were manhandled! Neighbors attempting to at least save a few small children were prevented from doing so by the most Nazi methods.

At the beginning of the Sukkoth holiday, a dozen Jewish AJB leaders and others were summoned to the Gestapo, where they were subjected to floods of reproaches and vituperations on account of their lack of diligence in executing German instructions. Chief Rabbi Dr. Ullman, Mr. E Hellendahl, Mr. F. Blum, Mr. Eduard Rotkel, Mr. Benedictus, Mrs. S. D.V. Berg were then arrested. The five Belgians were sent to the Breendonk concentration camp and released a week later. Mr. Eduard Rotkel, however, who was of Hungarian nationality, was sent immediately to Malines, whence he was deported to the East.

It should be noted here that Mr. Eduard Rotkel distinguished himself, as general secretary and then director of the community, by a courageous and independent attitude toward the Gestapo, and it was more than probable that he was “wanted” for this reason. Mr. Rotkel had applied himself diligently from May 1940 until the creation of the AJB to the establishment of this truly unique Jewish community in Belgium. Even if the results were not what he had

sought to achieve, it was nonetheless thanks to his noble intentions, his great working ability, his political sense, his wisdom and intelligence, that certain results were achieved. After the creation of the AJB, he remained the right-hand man of a large section of the Jewish population of Brussels.

After the extensive autumn roundups, the situation became somewhat calmer. The Jews no longer wore the Jewish badge after these roundups. The Germans continued to take people away on a smaller scale but eventually ceased the systematic raids, probably because the number of Jews still living in their homes was so small that the chances of finding any in this way were small. Through denunciations, however, Jews were still arrested, particularly those in hiding. In the past five to six months, a relatively large number of Jews (over a thousand) has been taken due to denunciations by a Polish Jew working for the Gestapo, who drives around Brussels during the day, pointing out any passerby who looks Jewish. Since they examine whether the persons arrested are circumcised, there is no real hope in denying that one is Jewish.

The conditions at Malines, where the deportees were held in the old Dorsin barracks, were bad at first. Vexatious, petty sanctions were frequently applied, and the prisoners were treated very poorly. Soon afterwards the situation improved. Workshops were organized, but the Jews were accorded a certain freedom, since the work was not compulsory. Food was insufficient and parcels had to be sent from outside. It was almost impossible to escape from Malines. Frequently, however, during the transports, many young people jumped from the train. In the last transport, the Germans used cattle cars to prevent such escapes. Nonetheless, many youngsters succeeded in getting out of the cars while the train was traveling at speed. They removed the bars from the windows and climbed down onto the tracks using ropes.

Little news has been received from people who have left for the East. Some packets of letters have arrived, with much the same text. The deportees wrote in general that the work was hard, the food sufficient and that they were not discontent. The last news received dates from early 1943 and comes from people working in a coal mine in Upper Silesia.

The few rare people who have managed to escape speak of extremely hard work under inhuman conditions with totally insufficient food. One young man

reported that after two and a half months, 25% of the population of his camp were sent elsewhere as “Arbeitsunfaehige” – unfit for work.

Sometimes Belgians working for the Germans provide information on the treatment of the Jews in Poland, information that corresponds with what is known in Jewish circles abroad.

AJB activity is limited to sending parcels to the prisoners at Malines and in the prisons, and managing an old-age home and a children’s home at Wesembeek. It has quite serious financial difficulties, but thanks to the contributions of a few wealthy persons, it has managed to balance its budget.

Since the period of the round-ups (July-October), the work of the AJB has increasingly lost its political character, and now it can be said that it deals almost exclusively with supporting the Jews still at liberty and feeding and clothing those at Malines, Breendonk and in the prisons. The German authorities in general do not interfere with this work and leave a certain liberty to the institutions, respecting the special cards carried by the collaborators and employees. However, there have been exceptions. One of the most notable exceptions was the arrest of Mr. Teitelbaum, secretary of the local committee of the AJB in Antwerp, who was deported. It should also be noted that the Gestapo raided the children’s home at one point and transported all the children and the entire staff to Malines. Following vigorous protests to the secretary general of Justice and other authorities, they were all returned to the Home on the same day.

Apart from the Belgian Jews, a certain number of AJB collaborators hold a special card which protects them from deportation by the Germans. These cards are obviously in great demand, and the AJB sometimes has been able to balance its budget only thanks to the “gratitude” of people acquiring these cards.

When the AJB commenced its activity, the number of people registered was 60,000 (I am giving these figures from memory), while in 1940, 100,000 to 105,000 Jews had lived in Belgium. In early May, it is estimated that about 20,000 had been deported, and 25,000 Jews remained in the country, including about 3,000 Belgian nationals and 22,000 foreigners. Most of the latter are in hiding. These figures, obviously, are only approximate. The Jews

of Antwerp have been particularly affected by the occupation measures, and only a few thousand remain of this once flourishing community, many of whom live in great distress. In the industrial cities of Liege and Charleroi, a very large part of the population has been able to survive in hiding. The help of the non-Jews has been particularly effective in these regions. The number of Jews hiding in Brussels and its environs is also very large. Besides a half-successful effort by Flemish speaking elements to set fire to the synagogue on rue de la Regence in Brussels earlier this year, there have been no more incidents.

Since the month of September, an illegal Jewish group affiliated with the large illegal group in Belgium has performed useful work, most notably sheltering about 1,300 Jewish children in non-Jewish homes and in secular and Catholic institutions under conditions that have kept them from being discovered by the occupation authorities. Based on this experience, the safety of these children is thus assured. The group also assists victims of the regime, helps to smuggle people out of the country, and, in principal, supports all those living in hiding. Additional active resistance is effectively maintained and encouraged. Over a quarter of the 1,700 aboard the last train that left for Germany were able to escape thanks to daring assistance during the transport: the partisans stopped the train by force and opened a large number of cars, allowing those held inside to escape. Some of the wounded, kept in a hospital under strict German surveillance, were also freed after the German guards were killed.

There is currently an illegal Jewish press in Belgium, which appears regularly in French, Flemish and Yiddish.

Very serious financial difficulties currently threaten to compromise the group's activity. While it had found extensive funds within the country, it is no longer receiving the sums necessary to assist all those who depend upon it. Needless to say, this work is of utmost importance for saving those Jews that are still at liberty in Belgium even after the havoc wreaked on the Jewish population by the Germans.

Source: A report by Maurice Benedictus, member of the AJB (Association of the Jews in Belgium), written after his escape to Lisbon in late 1943.