

## Why Did So Many of the Jews in Antwerp Perish in the Holocaust?

Lieven Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880–1944)*, Tielt: Lannoo, 2000, 847 pp.

Reviewed by

Dan Michman

### The Book and Holocaust Research in Belgium

Researchers of modern Jewish history have paid little attention to the history of Jews in Belgium. Most comprehensive Jewish history books that were written over the past 100 years by well-known historians (such as Simon Dubnow, Ismar Elbogen, Raphael Mahler, Howard Morley Sachar, Lloyd Gartner, Shmuel Ettinger, and David Vital) totally overlooked Belgian Jewry or, at best, mentioned it only in random ways.

Belgian Jewry was a young community (when the Belgian state was founded 1830, it had just over 1,000 Jews), demographically unstable (even when Jewish migrants reached Belgium at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many spent only a short time there, resulting in a constant fluctuation in the size of the community<sup>1</sup>), and small (about 70,000 on the eve of the Holocaust). Since Jews did not sink deep roots in Belgium, local researchers and research institutes in Jewish studies did not develop in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Had they existed, such researchers and institutes might have called the attention of the research world to developments with regard to Belgian Jewry, as was the case in neighboring Jewish communities in Germany, France, and the Netherlands.

Research on the more limited subject of the fate of Belgian Jewry during the Holocaust met with a similar fate: the first signs of serious scholarly research emerged only in the 1960s, and it took until the 1980s for the first

---

<sup>1</sup> There were 4,284 Jews in Belgium in 1880; 17,250 in 1890; slightly more than 40,000 in 1914; 17,000–20,000 (!) in 1920; 50,000 in 1930; and slightly more than 70,000 in 1940. See p. XVI in the book reviewed here, and also Jean Paul Schreiber, *Immigration et integration des juifs de Belgique, 1830–1914*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Universite Libré, Brussels, 1993).

comprehensive study about the Holocaust in Belgium to appear.<sup>2</sup> Such studies as have been written are noted for their limited, parochial Belgian perspective; they provide little indication of the broad contexts of the history of the Holocaust and Nazism, on the one hand, and of modern Jewish history, especially of Belgian Jewry, on the other hand.<sup>3</sup>

Since the 1980s, however, there has been a change. When interest in the Holocaust throughout the West and particularly in Europe grew, a new generation of researchers in Belgium (whose numbers, however, are still small) also began to take an interest in the Holocaust. Universities began to turn out more works at various levels of study, including several doctoral dissertations.<sup>4</sup> An international symposium on “The Holocaust Period in Belgium,” held at Bar-Ilan University in May–June 1989, also helped enhance relations between researchers in Israel and their counterparts in Belgium and between young and older researchers and called attention to broad contexts that had not been addressed until then.<sup>5</sup>

Questions concerning the fate of Jewish property, which have been on the public agendas of many countries since the mid-1990s, have been taken up in Belgium as well. An investigative committee on the disposition of Jewish-owned property in Belgium began to operate there in May 1999, and presented its summary report in July 2001.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For a broader discussion, see my introductory article, “Research on the Holocaust in Belgium and in General: History and Context,” in Dan Michman, ed., *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1998), pp. 3–38, esp. pp. 20–28. The comprehensive study is Maxime Steinberg, *L’Étoile et le fusil*, I–III (Bruxelles: Vie Ouvrière, 1983–1986).

<sup>3</sup> Two factors brought this about: the belated development of research, as noted above, and the fact that most researchers on this topic in Belgium were Francophones, who do not read studies in other languages extensively. See Dan Michman, *Pour une historiographie de la Shoah. Conceptualisations, terminologie, définitions et problèmes fondamentaux* (Paris: In Press Éditions, 2001), pp. 462–466.

<sup>4</sup> Two books that discuss the 1930s, and point to the importance of their research topics for the era of German occupation are especially noteworthy: Rudi van Doorslaer, *Kinderen van het getto. Joodse revolutionairen in België (1925–1940)* (Antwerpen-Baarn-Gent: Hadewijch AMSAB, 1995) and Frank Caestecker, *Ongewenste Gasten. Joodse vluchtelingen en migranten in de dertiger jaren* (Brussels: VUBPress, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> The proceedings of this symposium are available in English: Michman, ed., *Belgium and the Holocaust*.

<sup>6</sup> *Les Biens des victimes des persécutions anti-juives en Belgique. Spoliation—Rétablissement des droits; Résultats de la Commission d’étude. Rapport Final de la Commission d’étude sur le sort des biens des membres de la Communauté juive de Belgique spoliés ou délaissés pendant la guerre 1940–1945* (Brussels: Services du Premier Ministre, 2001).

The thick research tome reviewed here (*Aliens in a World City: A History of Antwerp and its Jewish Population [1880-1944]*), which retells the history of Antwerp and its Jewish population between 1880 and 1944, should be viewed in this context. Its author is the Belgian scholar Lieven Saerens, a researcher at the Catholic Center for Documentation and Research (Katholiek Documentatie Centrum - KADOC) in Leuven, east of Brussels. It is a book version of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, written for the Department of History at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (a veteran Dutch-speaking institution) and approved in December 1999. The study took almost fifteen years to complete. During that time the author thoroughly inspected thirty-seven (!) archives - governmental, municipal, public, and private - in Antwerp, Brussels, Aartselaar, Beveren, Gent, Diest, Leuven, Lokeren, Liège/Luik, Mechelen/Malines, Merksplas, Amsterdam, Bonn, and Halle. He conducted interviews and maintained extensive correspondence, went through some 200 newspapers and journals from that era, and read several hundred memoirs. His research bibliography includes nearly 800 titles. Thus, he has produced a truly monumental work that, if only for this reason, is unique in the research on Belgian Jewish history and the Holocaust in Belgium.

The author's 1983 M.A. thesis discusses the attitude of the Belgian population toward the Jews in the years preceding World War II (1933-1940), as reflected in the mass-circulation Flemish newspaper, *De Gazet van Antwerpen*.<sup>7</sup> This early work, too, was interesting and very different from the accepted opuses in Belgian research, in terms of both the research topic - the population's attitude toward the Jews - and the author's critical conclusions. By the nature of things, however, it did not produce widespread reverberations.

Since then, however, Saerens has published a series of articles. Several were based on his M.A. thesis and its offshoots, and most of them became building blocks for the doctoral dissertation that he was preparing.<sup>8</sup> These

---

<sup>7</sup> Lieven Saerens, *De houding van de Belgische publieke opinie tegenover de Joden in de jaren vóór Wereldoorlog II: De Gazet van Antwerpen tijdens de periode 1933-1940*, 2 vols, Licentiaatverhandeling Geschiedenis (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Two of them—on the attitude of the Belgian Catholic priesthood and the population of Antwerp toward the Jews before the Holocaust—originated in lectures at the aforementioned 1989 symposium at Bar-Ilan University and were published in the book of proceedings. See Michman, ed., *Belgium and the Holocaust*, pp. 117-194.

articles did attract interest and called much attention to Saerens's work. It is no wonder, then, that the publication of his comprehensive study was accompanied by great expectations. Indeed, immediately after his dissertation had been approved, a great debate erupted in the Belgian press, especially in Antwerp, about some of his conclusions with regard to the authorities' participation in anti-Jewish persecution in Antwerp. One writer alleged that such a dissertation "besmirches the honor of the University of Leuven." Another stated that "Lieven Saerens's dissertation should not be considered a historical document."<sup>9</sup>

How does this book appear, therefore, to someone who brings to the issue a distanced, professional historical perspective and a comprehensive overview of the broad field of Holocaust research?

### "The Uniqueness of the Antwerp Case"

At the beginning of the book, the author presents his "research question" in a severely abbreviated form:

The central question concerns the attitude of the "autotochtonous" inhabitants toward the newly arrived. An attempt will be made to arrive at an insight on the attitude[s] of a segment of Belgian society (that of Antwerp) toward a specific group of "aliens" who had recently migrated to that location (the Jewish population) in the course of a carefully defined period (from the late nineteenth century up to World War II). In other words, the stance adopted by a majority group toward a minority group will be explored, a stance that has been interpreted as ranging from hospitality toward and honoring of "others" up to opposition to anything "foreign" (p. XVII).

---

<sup>9</sup> "Wij [houden] dit werkstuk voor een doctoraat dat de vakgroep Nieuwste Geschiedenis van de KUL onwaardig is"—Yvan Verbraeck, "Tot bewijs van het tegendeel blijft doctoraat van Lieven Saerens historisch onverantwoord," in *Belgisch Israëlitisch Weekblad*, 24–31 December 1999; "de doctoraatsstudie van Lieven Saerens kan zeker niet als een historisch document worden beschouwd," in L[ouis] D[avids], "Oorlogsburgemeester Delwaide valselyk beschuldigd van antisemitisme," in *Belgisch Israëlitisch Weekblad*, 17 December 1999.

Saerens's terminology is sociological. His approach is rooted – ostensibly - in our contemporary multicultural climate, and his initial attitude seems noncommittal (“An attempt will be made to arrive at an insight...”). The basic question seems to be simple; indeed, the author does not discuss it further, as if it were self-evident. He devotes the rest of the introduction to “models” of majority-minority relations that he wishes to use, the elaboration of profiles of “racism” and “antisemitism,” the terminology to be used in the study; his sources and research methodology, the structure of the book; and a comprehensive (twenty-page!) survey of the history of research on the attitude of Belgian society toward the Jews.

In fact, a thorough examination of the book shows that its focal point and the question that *really* perturbs the author are different. On both sides of the cover of the book (this is a large-format book - 17 x 24 cm.) are enlarged (and slightly blurred) pictures - in black and white - of two Jewish girls wearing yellow “Jewish stars” (which are printed in color). By inference, the emphasis is on the Holocaust. Indeed, the crux of the study is expressed in the following revealing paragraph, presented with no particular emphasis in the summary at the end of the book:

During the occupation, 42 percent of Jews in Belgium who were registered by order of the Germans were deported. Although this is not a comparative study, it would be correct to examine this number within a broad Western European context. In comparison with other countries, the Belgian figure lies in the middle—between that of France (roughly 25–30 percent deported) and that of the Netherlands (roughly 70–75 percent deported). [However,] if we examine matters at the level of regions of Belgium, we find a different picture. Of all Jews registered in Brussels, Luik/Liège, and Charleroi, 37 percent, 35 percent, and 42 percent, respectively, were taken away. In Antwerp, a different magnitude is observed. There, at least 65 percent [9,009 Jews out of 13,779] became victims of the Final Solution [to the Jewish problem] - a figure that places Antwerp on the verge of the extremely high Dutch figure (p. 745).

The contrast of the “Antwerp case” is even sharper when one translates the percentages for these Jewish centers into absolute figures. On the eve of the Holocaust, Antwerp was home to 53.8 percent of Belgian Jews, about 29,500 persons. Brussels, by comparison, had a Jewish population of 21,000, 38.5 percent of the total. Thus, Antwerp was the “capital” of Belgian Jewry. If so, the real question that prompts and drives this study - as the reader senses - is what happened in Antwerp that occasioned a much higher level of Jewish victimization there than anywhere else in Belgium? Was there something unique about Antwerp (*Antwerpse specificiteit*) (p. 557), and, if there was, what was it?

The author emphasizes that Antwerp had a large Jewish community that was concentrated in one location - around the main railroad station. Antwerp was also the first place in Belgium where round-ups of Jews were conducted; therefore, the Jews there were somewhat taken by surprise and were psychologically and practically unprepared. Furthermore, the Antwerp branch of the Comité de Défense des Juifs, the resistance organization, founded in the summer of 1942, in Brussels, which focused on concealing and rescuing Jews, was organized later. Therefore it could not respond to the first and decisive phases of the deportations in the second half of 1942.

However, these explanations are incomplete and marginal, since in Brussels, too, Jews were concentrated (in two quarters), and the German authorities knew their addresses. Furthermore, those in charge of the deportations are not known to have had a grand plan that preferred Antwerp over any other locality. The veteran historian of the Holocaust in Belgium, Maxime Steinberg, has conjectured that the SS wished first to “cleanse” the “Germanic” part of Belgium - Flanders - of Jews, as had been the case in the Netherlands, because it believed that this area might soon be annexed to the Reich. This theory, however, is not supported by any German document, and Saerens rejects it (p. 746).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the salient difference between Antwerp and other localities must lie in the extent of local cooperation, not the Germans’ administrative practices. If so, the identity of those who helped the Germans implement their master plan

---

<sup>10</sup> Maxime Steinberg, *Un pays occupé et ses juifs. Belgique entre France et Pays-Bas* (Brussels: Quorum Eds, 1998).

in this specific locality, and the historical background of their willingness to help, should be examined. In fact, this is what the author attempts to do.

## Structure and Main Findings of the Book

Most of the book is devoted to the periods preceding the German occupation - about 180 pages to the years up to 1930, and approximately 300 (!) pages to the 1930s. Only after these 480 pages does the reader get to Part III, “The Occupied City (1940–1944),” about 250 pages long. Since the book focuses on the question of the Jews’ fate during the Nazi occupation, one may adduce from the book’s organization that the author considers the 1930s a formative and decisive period in understanding the population’s attitude toward the Jews. By offering this interpretation, the author subscribes to similar research trends that developed in neighboring countries in the 1970s and 1980s, but failed to penetrate into Belgian research at that time.<sup>11</sup>

In Part I, “A Cosmopolitan City? (from the Late Nineteenth Century to ca. 1930),” the author first describes the consolidation of the Jewish community in Antwerp, the waves of Jewish migration to Antwerp, and the uniqueness of this community relative to that of Brussels. Two additional chapters discuss attitudes toward the Jews up to World War I and in the course of the 1920s. These chapters examine the attitudes along three axes: the Catholic (“The Christian Gospel”), the economic, and the Flemish (i.e., Flemish ethnicity and nationalism). Chapter 2 takes up several issues and events: the anti-Jewish Catholic tradition, its roots and intensity (Belgium, although divided into linguistically distinct areas, was a pronouncedly Catholic state); the effects of modern German and French antisemitism; reverberations of the Dreyfus affair in its various stages; the local Jan van Rijswijck episode (concerning the establishment of a new liberal newspaper by Mayor van Rijswijck, a newspaper that conservatives called the “Jewspaper” - *De Jodengazet*); shock and sympathy for the Jews after the Kishinev pogrom (1903) and the Beilis trial (1913); questions of economic rivalry among the middle class and

---

<sup>11</sup> Michman, *Pour une historiographie de la Shoah*, p. 416.

the encounter within the proletariat; and various trends in the Flemish movement (pan-Germanism versus cosmopolitanism). The author sums up this section by stating that, notwithstanding Christian anti-Jewish traditions and the effects of modern antisemitism, the Jews faced neither sweeping stigmatization nor organized anti-Jewish activity. No movement in the country preoccupied itself with the “Jewish question” to the exclusion of everything else. What is more, Belgian society occasionally cooperated with the Jews and displayed sympathy toward them at various times. At that phase, then, Antwerp was a large, ordinary, and rather cosmopolitan city (with a population of some 300,000) with both the positive and dark sides of other large European cities at the time.

In the 1920s (Chapter 3), the Jewish population climbed to a new peak; in the late 1920s, half of the foreigners in the city were Jews. According to the author’s conclusions, the city maintained its open character at that time, and there was still no organized anti-Jewish activity. However, indications of surging Flemish nationalism, which was in part hostile toward the Jews (despite the existence of pro-Flemish Jewish circles), were already in evidence, and additional influences were at work as well. As, for example, the East European nature of the Jewish community was evident by this time, it pointed up the differences among the Jews and led to confrontations between them and the non-Jewish townspeople.

The rising tide of Zionism, as a movement that had managed to consolidate itself in Palestine, was anathema to the Vatican, and this also affected Catholics in Belgium. The missionary drive gathered strength in certain Catholic circles, which prompted Catholics to attempt to understand the Jews, on the one hand, and to clash with them on certain issues, on the other hand. The Jews’ perceptible inroads in the diamond industry (as dealers and polishers) also helped make the Jewish issue a conspicuous feature on the Antwerp scene.

A meaningful turn for the worse took place in the 1930s; this gives Part II of the book its theme: “The Intolerant City? (1930–1940).” First, the author presents a painstakingly detailed account of the ascent of “New Order” organizations, some pan-Belgian and others Flemish-nationalist. The author



defines 1929 as the watershed year, for it was then that pro-Nazi groups formed within the Flemish nationalist movement. In 1932, these groups participated in the elections (but did not obtain a seat in parliament), and after the Nazi accession in Germany they became stronger and more active. Antisemitism escalated in their midst but also penetrated middle-class Catholic groups.

Later in Part II, the author discusses the challenge that Nazi Germany presented to many in Belgian public life, especially in Antwerp, with regard to its actions to reorganize the state and its anti-Jewish policies. The refugee issue in Belgium, as in other West European countries, became an important impetus for the radicalization of views. Allegations about Jewish “foreignness” increased, and the perceived alliance between Jews and the political left gained strength because members of the liberal center and the left were the main supporters of Jews.

Physical attacks on Jews began in 1933 (pp. 338–349). Political polarization in Belgium (as in practically all European countries) worsened in the second half of the 1930s, and was followed by the formation of antisemitic hard cores from 1937. Anti-Jewish manifestations became increasingly frequent, and pro-German sympathies rose. The arrival of additional waves of refugees in 1938–1939, especially after the *Anschluss* and *Kristallnacht*, reinforced these trends. This escalation climaxed, among other things, in the eruption of anti-Jewish riots on August 25 and August 26, 1939. Although the riots were instigated by the “People’s Defense” movement (*Volksverwering*), before this was known Catholic newspapers expressed favorable opinions about the riots and described them as “spontaneous expressions” of the public’s feelings (p. 478). Indeed, other voices, including that of the Socialist leader and mayor Camille Huysmans, were also heard in regard to the riots and throughout the 1930s.

Thus, as the German invasion neared, a powerful process of radicalization was eroding the Jews’ image and, subsequently, their status as viewed by the public in Antwerp. According to Saerens, “The Jewish public underwent a ‘stigmatization’ in the eyes of much of the population of Antwerp,” and, in this regard, the public did not distinguish between Jews of long standing and

recently arrived refugees or immigrants. The infection was most severe, in the main, among Catholic political activists, middle-class circles, and “New Order” groups. Their zealotry also affected liberal circles, which now accepted anti-refugee measures with understanding and acknowledged the existence of an “aliens problem” in Belgium (an expression that pertained mainly to the Jews, even though their share among the eight million Belgians was negligible).<sup>12</sup> Thus, concentric circles of anti-Jewish views and feelings, in various degrees of intensity, evolved in Antwerp society. It is true, Saerens admits, that this stigmatization was not confined to Antwerp, but only there, it seems, did it have significant results: the ouster of Jewish lawyers from the Flemish Conference (Vlaamsche Conferentie) of the Antwerp Bar Association (Balie van Antwerpen) in May 1939, and the aforementioned riots in that town in August of that year.

During the German occupation (Part III), it was no longer a matter of the “attitudes” of the Antwerp population toward the Jews and of “eruptions” by relatively small groups. Now views were expressed and actions taken that had implications for the Jews’ very existence. For this reason, and because so much in it is new, Part III is the section of the book that is of the greatest interest and demands the greatest measure of confronting the past. It is not surprising that this section evoked the sharp reactions noted at the beginning of this review article.

Saerens stresses at the beginning of Part III that one should clearly distinguish between “main perpetrators” (*hoofddaders*) and “accomplices” (*mededaders*), yet he focuses (in the line of his overall study) on the latter. Foremost among the accomplices was an entire spectrum of right-wing individuals and rightist Flemish-nationalist, Nazi, or pro-Nazi groups that offered the Germans their services. They included Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV), Rex, Verdinaso (Vereniging van Dietsche Nationaal-Solidaristen), De Algemeene SS-Vlaanderen, Volksverwering, De Dietsche Opvoedkundige

---

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of similar developments in the Netherlands and France, see Dan Michman, “Changes in the Attitude of the Dutch toward the Jews on the Eve of the Holocaust,” in Joseph Michman, ed., *Studies in the History of Dutch Jewry* (Hebrew), 3 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The Institute for Research on Dutch Jewry, 1981), pp. 247–262; Vicki Caron, “The Antisemitic Revival in France in the 1930s: The Socioeconomic Dimension Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 70 (March 1998), pp. 24–73.

Beweging (DOB), Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (in) Vlaanderen (NSB(I)V), and Deutsch-Vlamsche Gesellschaft (DeVlag). Their attitudes toward the Jews were not identical (the Rexist organization, for example, was rather moderate in its approach<sup>13</sup>), but none viewed them kindly. Moreover, of the six newspapers that continued to appear during the occupation in Antwerp (under supervision, of course), only one eschewed antisemitic propaganda.

In fact, the occupation regime was not enamored of all of these groups and personalities - some of them were eccentric, adventurous, or problematic in some sense - but it allowed them to operate. This in itself abetted the continued evolution and escalation of the anti-Jewish trends clearly evident before the occupation. Among the aforementioned groups, the Germans preferred the antisemitic Volksverwering movement, which originated in Antwerp (p. 555).

In a detailed account based on a wide variety of sources, most of which have not been researched before, Saerens explores a series of events and episodes in the history of anti-Jewish activity in Antwerp and elucidates several issues that had been known in general contours only and had been described in research on the basis of incomplete information or mere impression:

- the way the Jews in Antwerp were registered under the central German authorities' directive of October 28, 1940;
- the deportation of approximately 3,000 nonresident Jews (nonresidents being the large majority of the Jews, as noted above) from Antwerp to a rural area in Limburg province between December 1940 and February 1941, by order of the local Feldkommandantur in Antwerp;
- the April 14, 1941, "pogrom," instigated by local antisemitic elements with the tacit consent of the local German authorities, and the response of City Hall thereto;
- the responses of the Antwerp Bar Association to the Germans' demands to expel Jewish members (June–July 1941);

---

<sup>13</sup> On this see also, Martin Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium. Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

- the attitudes and actions of the Municipality of Antwerp and its offices in regard to the distribution of “Jewish stars” (June 1942) - the municipality distributed the stars, and the officials marked an asterisk in the register alongside the name of every Jew who came to receive them (making it easier to single out Jews in the register later);
- the way the Germans managed to take over the Jewish diamond trade by employing local collaborators.

Saerens shows convincingly that Antwerp had a “distinct profile” throughout this time. The Jews’ plight was worse there in every possible respect than in Brussels (where the picture was much different), Liège, and Charleroi (where the situation was somewhere between the extremes). In Antwerp, the Germans felt free to embark on anti-Jewish activity at an early phase of the occupation as they had broader local support there than elsewhere in Belgium. The representatives of the central government there, as well as the municipal authorities, the police, and the lawyers - not to mention active pro-German elements - engaged in far-reaching cooperation and collaboration.

Even if they did not instigate anti-Jewish activity, the Belgian authorities in Antwerp carried out all the Germans’ orders with neither resistance nor protest. This became especially conspicuous when arrests for deportation began in August 1942. None of the above groups protested to the Germans. The municipal leaders, led by Mayor Leon Delwaide, did not apprise the lower echelons of the illegality of the actions being taken. The Antwerp police did the bidding of the German security police in disciplined fashion (p. 607).

Saerens also examines the question of assistance to Jews in a seventy-page chapter. Although he does not overlook those who assisted Jews, he stresses the relatively belated awakening, the severely limited extent of assistance in Antwerp relative to all other areas and localities in Belgium, and the individualized nature of most of this activity. Antwerp did the least to help and conceal Jews by any measure - including the paucity of assistance by the priesthood, the lack of initiative by the Church, no assistance from any organized political forces, no help from non-Jewish workers in the diamond industry, and so on.

## A Breakthrough in Holocaust Research in Belgium

The twenty-five page general summary at the end of the book (only some 3 percent of the book, although each chapter has its own, partial, conclusions) is somewhat disappointing since grand analysis is not Saerens's forte. He devotes too little attention to broad contexts in precisely the places where they are needed. For example, neither the section on the occupation nor the summary describes the context of the history of the Nazis' anti-Jewish policy and the phase at which Belgium became subject to it.<sup>14</sup> The main principles of the anti-Jewish policy in Belgium itself are described very briefly (in contrast to the section on the 1930s, which includes a useful background chapter).

Saerens's basic perception of Nazi policy is predicated on Hilberg's schematic approach - a phased escalation, including singling out and registering the Jews; economic deprivation, isolation, and marking; and, finally, deportation to death camps - an approach that research has already effectively rejected (p. 499). Apart from the author's point of departure - characterizing the "uniqueness of the Antwerp case" - there is no probing comparison of developments in Antwerp with events elsewhere in Europe. Precisely in view of Saerens's findings, one may cope more authoritatively with questions that this reviewer has raised in the past. These include such as issues of emancipation, naturalization, and adjustment, and their significance in respect to possibilities of rescue - since most Belgian Jews on the eve of the occupation (about 95 percent) did not hold Belgian citizenship.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the author's methodological approach to the definition and "measurement" of antisemitism, based on the model proposed by the Dutch sociologist Dick van Arkel, is problematic in my view and disregards the ramified and multidisciplinary literature on antisemitism. Furthermore, Saerens does not consistently apply this model throughout the book. He emphasizes it strongly at first, relegates it to the background later on, resurrects it at the end of Part II, and totally disregards it afterward.

---

<sup>14</sup> The book's bibliography indicates that the author did read extensively on this topic and others. However, he uses this bibliography to extract certain details, such as the background of the April 1941 pogrom in Antwerp (p. 568), but not to paint a comprehensive contextual picture.

<sup>15</sup> Michman, "Research on the Holocaust in Belgium," pp. 30–31.

Saerens is basically a descriptive historian and a very orderly and systematic scholar whose strength lies in details. The profusion of details sometimes burdens the reader, who cannot see the forest for the trees. The study would be equally valid had its first two parts been half as long. Elsewhere, however - especially in Part III, on the occupation period - the details invest the account with power and persuasiveness. Saerens's tendency to present data in tabular form, to explain developments on the ground by providing clear street maps, and to embellish the text with photos wherever possible (especially in Parts II and III) adds to the lucidity of his arguments and insights. The details show how effectively the local system in Antwerp facilitated the Germans' work and explain the local players' motives in this matter. In particular, they underscore the indispensable role of the local police in the great matrix of extermination. In this respect, Saerens's study dovetails with similar studies in other countries, such as Guus Meershoek's research on the police in Amsterdam.<sup>16</sup>

Saerens's detailed account does not overlook actions of relief and assistance for Jews. The very act of revealing the details also disproves various assumptions - some wild, others less so - that have worked their way into research, and the author does not flinch from disputing the existing literature. What is more, Saerens's copious documentation, by including much material pertaining not only to Antwerp but also to additional Jewish centers in Belgium, creates an infrastructure for many additional studies.

From the standpoint of a historian who views things from the perspective of Jewish history, it is a pity that Saerens makes scanty use of Jewish documentary material and says nothing about how the Jews themselves perceived the attitude toward them in Antwerp (either as an issue in itself or in comparison with other locations).

Generally speaking, Saerens's study belongs to the genre of professional local scholarly studies on the Holocaust, a genre that has been gathering momentum in recent years but is still limited to several countries (foremost Germany, the Netherlands, and France). These studies indicate that by focusing on the local level one may refute generalizations that have become

---

<sup>16</sup> Guus Meershoek, *Dienaren van het gezag. De Amsterdamse politie tijdens de bezetting* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1999).

entrenched in the sort of research literature that adheres to national boundaries and seeks “national conclusions.” By clearing away the generalizations, this manner of research allows new questions to surface. Saerens has made an important contribution in this context but has done so especially in regard to research on the Holocaust in Belgium, since in the Belgian context his study is an absolute novelty.

The question of relations between the population at large and the Jews is another topic that has not been discussed properly in Belgium, thus far, on the basis of a thorough, critical research inquiry. Therefore, notwithstanding the criticisms expressed in this review - mainly in respect to methodology and editing - Saerens’s study is an important breakthrough.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood*

**Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, XXX, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 465-482.**