

## 4TH CONTACT DAY JEWISH STUDIES ON THE LOW COUNTRIES

AN INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP

INSTITUTE OF JEWISH STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP  
TUESDAY 31 MAY 2011, CITY CAMPUS, PRINSSTRAAT 13 – 2000 ANTWERPEN

### PROGRAM

#### 10:00-12:00 SESSION 1

(CHAIR: PROF. DR. KARIN HOFMEESTER, UA / IISH)

**DR. JESSICA ROITMAN (BIRKBECK COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON)** – “WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE SEPHARDIM? ASHKENAZI-IZATION AND THE SEPHARDIM OF THE NETHERLANDS AND ENGLAND”

The Sephardic community of Amsterdam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was preeminent in the Western Diaspora. Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was the mother community for the rest of the Sephardic settlements in places like Hamburg, London, and Bordeaux. But by the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, the community had stagnated and declined – a stagnation that was, to greater or lesser extent mirrored by the other Western Sephardic communities. Scholars propose various reasons for this decline. Among the main causes put forward are the economic decline of the Netherlands in general and Sephardic migration to other, more economically viable places, including the New World. However, the Sephardic community stagnated and declined in England, as well, despite the fact that England was the emergent economic power by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. So, while there certainly could have been some economic factors at play, I will suggest another reason for the decline of the Sephardim in the Netherlands and England in my presentation at the 4<sup>th</sup> Contact Day in Antwerp. I will suggest that there was assimilation going on among the Sephardic community in the Netherlands and England from the 17<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was an assimilation into the Ashkenazi community, or a sort of “Ashkenazi-ization” of the Sephardim, especially among the lower and middle classes. My talk will draw on my empirical research in the Amsterdam and London Metropolitan archives to show that inter-marriages between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazi grew apace by the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the children of these unions were almost always raised as Ashkenazi Jews. Thus, the boundaries between the two communities began to blur into a sort of overarching Dutch and British Jewishness which drew upon the mystique of the Sephardim but was entrenched in Ashkenazi ritual and tradition.

**DRA. TSILA RÄDECKER (RIJKSUNIVERSITEIT GRONINGEN)** – “MEDICINE AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ASHKENAZI COMMUNITY IN AMSTERDAM”

One of the striking phenomena in the Enlightenment period was the restructuring and reclassification of the religious and scientific fields. Especially in the religious field many changes occurred because of the growing influence of physicians as ‘secular modernizers’ and the advancement of medical knowledge. A development analogue and intertwined with the medicalization of society was the civilization process that connected shame and exposure of bodily functions with etiquette. These developments transformed the religious practices in the nineteenth-century Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam. Practices that once belonged to the religious sphere were medicalized. One of the most famous examples was the burial controversy that started in 1772 in Germany with Jewish physicians and enlighteners such as Moses Mendelssohn. Within a few decades this controversy that centered on the new medical discovery of the apparent death reached the Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam. In light of this new discovery, the Jewish custom to bury within 24 hours after death was risky if not a-moral and therefore abandoned by the reformers. Circumcision, too, was now classified as medical procedure. In fact, referring to the number of accidents, the Dutch government in the 1820s eventually subjected the procedure to state control. Control was even more pronounced when Jewish practices could threaten public health. Thus, the clothing of the pallbearer was formalized, the cleanness of the ritual bath water was questioned and fear for toxic vapors from the Jewish cemetery led to government investigations. The discourse of an increasing uneasiness with bodily fluids and refinement of manners was interwoven in the medical discourse. The concept of hygiene bridged the discourse of health and manners. Unhygienic religious practices not only spread diseases, but also defined the Jew as someone without etiquette. It therefore legitimized state control and therewith criminalized certain aspects of religious practice. Moreover, Foucault showed in several studies how the increasing influence of medicine altered discourse on society and space. Thus, poverty was a disease and occupants’ living conditions were either healthy or unhealthy. The same medical discourse was also employed in descriptions of the Jew, who was depicted as sickly and physically underdeveloped. The Yeshiva scholar served particularly since he deprived his body of fresh air, sun light and physical strain. Ultimately, the medical description of the Jew developed into the perception of the Jew as a medical problem threatening society.

11:00 – 11:15 COFFEE BREAK

**DR. PETER TAMMES (UNIVERSITEIT LEIDEN) – “SABBATH OBSERVANCE AMONGST JEWISH FAMILIES IN AMSTERDAM IN 1900”**

Jewish families in Amsterdam maintained strong ties with Jewish tradition with regards to three pivotal lifecycle events: birth, marriage, and death. As for Sabbath observance, however – a fundamental part of Judaism and Jewish family life – we have no accurate documentation. We therefore address the following central question: what is the percentage of Jewish families in Amsterdam that observed Sabbatical rules? To answer this question we need to determine which families observed or broke the Sabbath. We obtain this information on Jewish families by using birth certificates in an innovative way. After the birth of a baby, the father registered his newborn child at the municipal office. The birth certificate lists: names of the newborn child and its parents, parental occupations, and the residential address. The birth certificate also notes whether the father signed the certificate. The civil servant always noted on the birth certificate the reason why the signature was missing; this could stem from illiteracy or from observation of the Sabbath, since Jewish tradition forbids writing on the Sabbath. As Sabbath-breaking was first seriously mentioned in the Jewish press in the second half of the 1890s, and also discussed in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I collected about hundred Jewish birth certificates drawn up on Saturdays in 1900. Names guided me in selecting the Jewish birth certificates, since the names of the newborn child and its parents most of the time give a strong indication whether the birth certificate concerns a Jewish family. Next, I checked the family cards noting their religious affiliation. Thereupon, the names of the newborn child and the parents, parental occupations and residential address, as well as whether the father had signed the birth certificate and information on the family card on places of birth, nationalities and date of marriage of the parents were entered into a database. First, we examine the signatures of the fathers, or rather the absence of a signature, to determine the proportion of Jewish families observing Sabbath. Second, we analyze our results by relating Sabbath observance to dates of marriage, birth place, occupation and neighborhood.

**DR. HUIBERT SCHIJF (UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM) – “A JEWISH PILLAR – A NETWORK APPROACH”**

Until the 1960s political and social life in The Netherlands were more or less organized within four ‘pillars’: the catholic, the protestant, the liberal and the socialist one. Although Jews formed a substantial minority they never created their own political pillar. Before 1940, politically active Jews were mostly member of the socialist or communist party. A Jewish large minority (ten per cent of the population) existed only in Amsterdam and the group was very diverse in religious terms. But even in the capital no local Jewish party was ever founded, as the party affiliation of Jewish Councilors testify. On the other hand there were many philanthropic and educational institutions, often already founded by individuals in the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century there were also institutions like hospitals, old people homes and orphanages for Jews. They were often located in Amsterdam. Looking at these institutions we might speak perhaps of a Jewish ‘pillar’. The Dutch pillars functioned excellently at the level of vertical integration, i.e. politicians represented a wide range of social groups. They were also well-organized by horizontal integration, i.e. there were many formal and informal contacts between administrators and managers of the several organizations within the pillar. However, for the many Jewish institutions this is unknown. As source I use *Jaarboek 5674* (1913-14). The institutions included are not only located in Amsterdam but everywhere in The Netherlands. From the alphabetical list of persons all persons with two or more functions in the institutions included in the *Jaarboek* are taken. These persons with more than one function created so-called interlocks by which institutions are interconnected and therefore generate a network of (partly) interconnected institutions. By using some simple concepts from formal network analysis, such as component and centrality, this approach will show how the structure of the network of Jewish institutions looked like in the 1914s. In the presentation I want to use tentatively results to show if and how the Jewish ‘pillar’ was eventually internally organized.

12:30-14:00 LUNCH BREAK

14:00-17:00 SESSION 2

(CHAIR: DR. VEERLE VANDEN DAELLEN, UA / CEGES-SOMA)

**DRS. DAVID DUINDAM (UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM) – “PERFORMING JEWISH IDENTITY AFTER THE WAR: COMMEMORATION AT THE HOLLANDSCHE SCHOUWBURG”**

The general perception of WWII in the Netherlands transformed dramatically since its first inception. In 1945, the war-ridden country reinvented itself as a nation of heroic resistance against the Nazis and their collaborators. The persecution of the Jews was inserted into the narrative of a unified nation as an example of the suffering of the entire population. There was no space for the public commemoration of any specific victim-group in this period (Van Vree 1995, Blom 2004, Hijink 2010). This paper will address the establishment of a memorial at the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* in Amsterdam in this postwar period. During the war this former theater was used as a deportation center for the Jews of Amsterdam: between 60.000 and 80.000 people passed this site of terror. After the war it was poised to be reopened as a place of amusement. A committee was formed in 1946 to prevent this. The *Comité de Hollandsche Schouwburg* was an interreligious group including rabbis and priests, headed by the Zionist Sam de Wolff. They purchased the former theater in order to create the first public memorial in Amsterdam at the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* in commemoration of the Shoah. This monument was not realized until 1962. I will examine the proceedings during the first postwar years of this committee. Organizations within the decimated Jewish community did not want to appropriate this site as a Jewish *lieu de mémoire* and a governmental policy favored national, non-specific monuments frustrated the proceedings of this committee. In spite of this politics of silencing, the committee was relatively successful in its initial period. A perspective solely based on identity-politics will not explain the dynamics of this case-study. Such a perspective would presume that social identities are explicit, legible

and formed prior to this event. In the first years after the war, however, the social identity of Dutch Jews was in disarray (Wallet, forthcoming). This enabled individuals to act without the consent of their church council, such as the rabbi Jaap Parsser and Justus Tal. Sam de Wolff was also reprimanded by the Zionist organization NZB of which he was a prominent member (Gans 1999). The establishment of this memorial should not be analyzed in terms of silencing explicit identities, but rather as a plenitude of individual voices that struggle to perform and give shape to a new, postwar Jewish identity. This plenitude of voices would eventually delay the realization of the monument because it impeded a consensus within the Jewish community.

**DRA. THALIA GUR-KLEIN (WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY) – “THE CABBALIST FROM CAMP WESTERBORK: RECLAIMING ETTY HILLESUM (1914-1943) TO JEWISH TRADITION AND MYSTICISM”**

My research on Etty Hillesum is part of work in progress on Spirituality of Jewish Women during the Holocaust and in the aftermath. Etty Hillesum has accumulated popularity among Christian circles, which has overshadowed her Jewish roots. The purpose of my present analysis is to construe the Judaic components in Etty Hillesum's writings and reclaim her to Jewish tradition and theosophy. Fields of influence traverse her development: biographical and personal, ethnical and psychological, theosophical and religious, social, cultural and historical. The questions I will ask are what roots nourish Etty Hillesum's writing and what concepts she promulgates. I will thus expound on her writings to magnify their intertextual connotations, meaning and relations to the Judaic framework, lifestyle and thought.

**DR. MARC P. LALONDE (CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY) – “FROM THE PRIVATE SELF TO THE INTERIOR SELF: THE POST-HOLOCAUST IMPORT OF THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF ETTY HILLESUM”**

This presentation will explore the post-Holocaust import of the life and writings of the Dutch-Jewish women, Etty Hillesum (d. in Auschwitz, November 30, 1943). Specifically, I want to examine the dialectical relation between her unique theology and her personalist ethic as documented in her war-time journals and letters. In view of the Nazi machine and menace bearing down upon the whole of Europe at the time, Hillesum outlines a peculiar understanding of a vulnerable yet compassionate “God” strangely immanent within the shattered lives of all those suffering under Nazi oppression. Yet despite such proximity, this “God” is decidedly unable to directly intervene. As Etty once meditated: “Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last” (488-489). Dialectically related to this theological vision of things, I believe, is Hillesum's personalist ethic of care and concern for the other human being in need. Thus while Etty refuses to go into hiding, she rather volunteers to assist the fragile creatures interned at Westerbork transit camp. Toward illuminating the post-Holocaust import of Hillesum's example, I want to unfold her personal development as a movement from a “private self” to an “interior self.” As detailed in the work of Charles Davis, the private self is the bourgeois self or “isolated ego” whose main concern is limited to the individual focused upon securing an asocial, apolitical, “peaceful” existence. I want to suggest that this “private self” describes Etty at the start of her diary: self-absorbed and obsessed with the psychochirologist, Julius Spier. In contrast, Davis outlines the notion of an “interior self” that denotes the deepest part of the self mystically rooted in a transcendent principle or God, constituting “the very source and ground of any mature social involvement and political participation because individual self-awareness releases the person into freedom and responsibility” (Davis). I want to suggest that this “interior self” describes Etty as she matures by simultaneously cultivating a mystical sensibility and a determined social praxis. The presentation will close by asking: does Hillesum's response to a particular historical and spiritual set of circumstances constitute a helpful post-Holocaust perspective?

15:00 – 15:15 COFFEE BREAK

**DRS. ARNAUD BOZZINI (UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES) – “JEWISH RECONSTRUCTION IN BRUSSELS AFTER WWII”**

Using as starting point several articles, entitled *How we can and have to resolve the « Jewish Question »*, written by the Jewish Communist fighter and activist Pierre Broder, our presentation intends to investigate the Brussels Jewish community reconstruction process. Broder was an important figure within Jewish communist activists who occupied a significant place within the Jewish community and who took an active role in the reconstruction of the Brussels Jewish community. These articles published between December 1944 and January 1945 serve as a useful introduction to the political and social context for the reconstruction question. We seek to apprehend the ways through which political activism serves as a concrete means in the general process of a traumatized community's return to normalcy. What is at stake in the reconstruction process? What does the confrontation of ideology and pragmatism bring to the way this process plays out? Drawing from Pierre Broder's politically charged discourse, we wish to assess the choices and challenges faced by the post-war Jewish community as they engage in their reconstruction, through a focus on the Brussels situation. Confronted to a community devastated by the Nazi destruction enterprise, Pierre Broder's work offers an interesting perspective of the “Jewish question” as it was experienced and grappled with in the war's immediate aftermath. While Broder's voice and outlook is distinctively communist, his writings provide a rich overview of the different political factions, active and competing in the “yiddische gas”. An analysis of the lively and permanent debate between « Israélites », Zionists and Marxists, who occupy among them almost the whole political space, makes clear the importance and recurrence of at least four issues at the forefront of their concerns, thoughts and actions. First, a constant call for unity within the Jewish community, bringing tensions related to questions of leadership. Second, everyone shared a sincere concern for the situation and future of Jewish youth, even if not everyone agreed on the most appropriate ways to organize Youth movements or to outline the pedagogic orientation of complementary Jewish schools. Third, the fight against anti-Semitism is crucial for a population still mostly made up of immigrants and is a pervasive topic of discussion. Fourth, there is a widespread aspiration to revive various aspects of Jewish culture, its roots and traditions; this cultural dimension of reconstruction, often overlooked, will actually develop into a central dynamic in the rebuilding of the post-war community. Because these four issues structure so pervasively the Jewish political behavior and discourse, they illustrate – and enrich our understanding of – post-war Belgium's complex process of reconstruction.

**DRA. EFRAT TZADIK-FALLIK (KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN) – "A STUDY OF THE INTERNATIONAL IDENTITIES OF JEWISH WOMEN IN THE BELGIAN DIASPORA"**

This research, as a PhD project, invites the reader to an open discussion on migration, gender, and identity in times of changing migration patterns. The subject of mobility has been well documented in recent social sciences' literature. Mobility is in fact seen as a process; a progression leading us to see cultures as hybrid and dynamic phenomena (Cresswell, 2006). This research shows the changes, mobility, and dynamism in the Israeli and Jewish cultures in the Diaspora that is Belgium. The following research will look at how identities change in times of migration. It will also highlight the integration of different cultural groups within other subcultural groups. For example, the integration of the Israeli migrate women in the local Jewish community on the one hand and the integration of the Jewish women in the general community on the other. The research will also pose the question of assimilation in terms of identity. If assimilation or integration to the general society occur, to what extent? It will underline gender and identities as factors that influence integration both in the local Jewish community, and in society at large. The core of the dissertation is a field study of the Israeli-Jewish community in Belgium and more specifically in Brussels. In-depth interviews were carried out. However, the actual research was completed through participant observation and is based on life stories. As this is anthropological research, these stories explain in detail the dynamism in life that women are exposed to and underline the process of coping with questions of identity. As a Jewish Israeli woman the researcher is part of these two communities. Researching one's own community highlights questions she would not cope with in a classic participatory observation.

**DRA. IRIS VANDEVELDE (UNIVERSITEIT ANTWERPEN) – "FILM CULTURE IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ANTWERP: FROM NATIONAL MEMORY TO RELIGIOUS TABOO"**

While the literature on diasporic media and film cultures worldwide has proliferated the last few decades, ranging from studies amongst Indian, Turkish, Chinese and other communities, film cultures of Jewish groups have received little attention. Studies on the relation between Jews and film have rather concentrated on the Jewish roots of Hollywood production, the analysis of Jew-related film narratives (especially the Holocaust), historical reception, and so on. This is not that surprising, as it is very difficult to define what makes a film 'Jewish' (the theme, the director, ...), what is to be understood as 'Jewish' 'homeland cinema' or how Israeli cinema fits in. Opposite this conceptual vagueness stands everyday life and its realities. Myriads of Jewish film festivals are organised and Jewish people often are well informed about the Jewishness - be it the director, actor or theme - of the films they watch. Although this cinema is virtually invisible in the city of Antwerp, interviews revealed that (mostly liberal) Antwerp Jews do have an interest in the Jewish character of cinema, at an individual as well as an organisational level. The present study seeks to explore film reception in everyday life within the Jewish communities in Antwerp, taking into account their multilayered identities with specific attention for the role of national background and religious affiliation. Film culture here includes public spaces such as the cinema theatre as well as more privately consumed DVDs, TV or the Internet. The data collection for this paper is based mainly on both exploratory and in-depth interviews with people who provide Jewish film audiences in Antwerp with particular films, Jewish citizens of Antwerp and experts on local Jewish culture. We use a bottom-up approach, starting from the lived discourses, self-defining discursive practices and every day life experiences of the respondents. Our preliminary findings suggest that a gap exists between the ultra-orthodox (hardly watching film) and other Jewish groups in Antwerp (some of them real film fans). Moreover, the variety of national roots - Jews in Antwerp have backgrounds in Poland, Russia, France, Belgium, etcetera - translates in different patterns of film consumption. This throws a new light on the study of religious and national identities in relation to diasporic film cultures.

*CLOSING REMARKS*