

# Abstracts 9th Contact Day Jewish Studies on the Low Countries

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## **Jens Bertels: Arnon Grunberg: perceptions of Jewish identity in historical perspective**

This presentation will focus on the findings of my ongoing research on Jewish self-representation in the works of the Dutch writer of Jewish descent Arnon Grunberg. My focus lies on his writing about Jewish identity and within this troublesome field on the continuities and discontinuities in the use of Jewish stereotypes, the place of Israel in this matter, and how humour and sarcasm are involved in all this. I will not only look at how he deals with Jewishness in his literary works, but will also make use of his work as a columnist, journalist and essayist. This diversity of sources will make it possible to look at the matter in both a theoretical and a practical sense. This will enable me to contribute to the heated debates about negative Jewish self-representation, and doing so, to pinpoint the necessity of methodological sensitivity towards literary sources.

## **Angela Boone: The deportation of German Jewish Holocaust survivors from the Netherlands to Germany in the period 1945-1950**

After the war the Dutch government decided to declare all inhabitants with German nationality to be enemies of the Netherlands. In doing so the Dutch government did not make a distinction between Jews and non-Jews. All German Jews in the Netherlands were thus suddenly labeled as an enemy of the Netherlands, they had to apply for a non-enemy declaration individually in order not to be deported to Germany and dispossessed of their property.

An unknown amount of German Jews was deported from the Netherlands after the war. Many German Jewish surnames can be found on deportation lists. Expropriation of inhabitants with German nationality started in October 1944 (and lasted until 1951), deportation started in 1945, from 11 September 1946 onwards this ethnic cleansing was called Operation Black Tulip. The term ethnic cleansing here refers to Germans who were cleansed based on their German nationality, following the Dutch government policy German Jews belonged to this group.

Investigation (by the Dutch Red Cross) of missing German Jews cases started after Operation Black Tulip came to an end. No distinction was made between missing German Jews who were deported from the Netherlands during and after the war. Many cases of missing German Jews remained unresolved.

In 2016 it is 70 years ago that Operation Black Tulip started, but up to now this history is not taught in history lessons (in for example primary or secondary school). No information about this postwar ethnic cleansing is provided to visitors of memorial sites (such as internment camps) in the Netherlands. As a

result many people remain ignorant of this extensive ethnic cleansing which took place in the Netherlands.

At present scientific research is conducted with regards to this topic. The (still ongoing) research is based on archival research, literature review, interviews with deportees and eyewitnesses.

## **Marc P. Lalonde: Sources of the Self and the Search for Authenticity: The Diary of Etty Hillesum**

The purpose of this presentation is to explore the moral and spiritual significance of the wartime diary of the Dutch-Jewish woman, Etty Hillesum (Middleburg 1914-Auschwitz 1943). Building on my article "The Meaning and Significance of the Holocaust Today: The Diary of Etty Hillesum" (Journal for Jewish Identities, forthcoming), I here apply the moral philosophy of the Canadian scholar, Charles Taylor. Utilizing facets of his monumental work, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), I intend to demonstrate that Hillesum's search for authenticity uniquely reflects Taylor's claim that "selfhood and morality turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes" (*Sources*, 3). More elaborately, the construction, expression and representation of a modern sense of self entails the creation of a moral framework of meaning that shapes personal identity. Such is the demanding mission one confronts in Hillesum's diary. Here she strives to recreate herself by molding a novel spirituality that provides meaning and purpose in the face of overwhelming historical circumstances. As Hillesum prays: "It is sometimes hard to take in and comprehend, oh God, what those created in Your likeness do to each other in these disjointed days. But I no longer shut myself away in my room, God, I try to look things straight in the face, even the worst crimes, and try to discover the small, naked human being amid the monstrous wreckage caused by man's senseless deeds" (*An Interrupted Life*, 134). Or to employ Taylor's terms of reference, we could say that Hillesum advances "a [moral] framework ... in virtue of which [she makes] sense of [her life] spiritually. Not to have [such] a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. [Her] quest is thus always a quest for sense" (*Sources*.18). The "sense" finally arrived at by Hillesum emerges in relation to a mystical, interior sense of self that is rooted in the transformative presence of "God" (Lalonde). Herein lies her vision of an authentic self for a turbulent age. And herein lies the value of Hilleum's diary not only as a text that mirrors Taylor's program of moral thought, but one that equally provides an essential source for the self and the search for authenticity today.

## **Huibert Schijf: Russian Jewish immigrants in two Amsterdam streets, 1850 -1914**

Between 1850 and 1914, 338 registered Russian-jewish immigrants arrived in Amsterdam. The first addresses where they settled down were spread all over the city, with usually no more than one or two Russians in the same street. However, two streets stand out: Manegestraat, a short and narrow street at the outskirts of the traditional Jewish Quarter with 23 immigrants and the newer and longer Blasiusstraat which is located further away from the Jewish Quarter, with 40 immigrants. In the 1930s

the Manegestraat was sometimes called 'het Russenstraatje' (the little street of the Russians). A well-known concept used in migration studies is chain migration: after the arrival of a pioneer, other members of the family, neighbourhood or town follow. A micro-study of the relatively high concentration of Russian-jewish immigrants in these two streets offers a possibility to test how chain migration, if any, worked in the past and how family connections helped sometimes. Apart from statistical information, at least one complete family story will be presented. As starting-point I use data which are collected and processed by Karin Hofmeester from the registration of these immigrants in the Amsterdamse Vreemdelingenregister (Amsterdam Registration of Foreigners). The Russian inhabitants of the two street are then followed in other public records to see what happened to them after their arrival in Amsterdam.

## **Vincent Scheltiens: Brussels, a Safe Haven? A History of the Jews in the Capital, 1930-1950**

On the 75th anniversary of the raids of the summer of 1942, CegeSoma (the Brussels based Center for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society) and the Musée juif de Belgique will co-organise an exhibition, dedicated to history of the Jews in Brussels during the period between 1930 and 1950. The exhibition will open in the autumn of 2017.

Today, Europe is faced with the highest influx of refugees since the end of the Second World War. In the light of this major challenge, it is essential look back and remember the trajectories of the emigrants during the interbellum, their arrival in the capital and their integration in its economic and social fabric.

The purpose is to convey the remarkable history of the Jewish minority, of the authorities, and of the civil society of Brussels before, during and after the Second World War. Life stories will form the basis of this history. Who were these Jews living mostly in the poor districts of the city? How did the citizens of Brussels treat them? How did the local authorities behave towards the Jews? What happened to them during the Second World War?

This exhibition will not only deal with persecutions and deportations, but also with the reintegration of the survivors after the war. How did the victims and Brussels in general remember these events? Which difficulties did the survivors encounter and how did they overcome them?

This project departs from a comparative hypothesis. In spite of the zealous collaboration of certain individuals (including Jews), the number of deported persons from Brussels is proportionally lower than in Antwerp. The numbers are telling: 37% of the Jews of Greater Brussels were deported, compared to 34% in the Liège region, 38% in the Charleroi region and 68% in Antwerp. The case of Antwerp is comparable to the Netherlands, where the number of victims amounted to more than 70%. How can this particular situation in Brussels be explained? And what does it tell us about the city and its inhabitants?

This exhibition is, par excellence, intended for a wide public. Brussels, actually 'capital of Europe' is at the heart of it. It will be presented in three languages (French, Dutch and English) and targets a Belgian as well as international audience.

### **Laurence Schram: A history of the Belgian assembly camp: The Dossin barracks in Mechelen, 1942-1944.**

On 27 July 1942, the Nazis opened an assembly camp in the Dossin barracks in Mechelen. The sole function of the camp was as a collection area for Jews and gypsies in Belgium, in view of their deportation from Belgium to Auschwitz-Birkenau. 25.273 Jews and 354 Gypsies had been deported via the camp to Auschwitz-Birkenau, 218 Jews to other concentration internment camps. By 1945 only 5% of these racial deportees had survived. Even though the Dossin Barracks was the antechamber of death, its history has remained largely unwritten. My PhD research was the first study to focus on the history of Belgium's assembly camp in its entirety.

With attention for victims, persecutors and bystanders, I focus on human actors and their behaviours. The SS, the absolute masters of the camp, ruled by terror which was felt in every aspect of an internee's life in the camp. The arbitrariness led to numerous maltreatments, atrocities and abuses. Confronted with all this violence, the internees adapted their behaviour according to the circumstances: from collaboration to resistance. This resistance developed inside the camp but never led to an organised resistance network. Since the camp had a relatively small SS staff, the SS used Jewish workers to keep the camp running. The history of each of transport enables us to relate to the way in which the transports were actually assembled, and to follow the fate of the deportees, not just those who escaped but also those who were murdered upon leaving the trains, the forced labourers and the few survivors.

During the night of 3-4 September 1944, the SS abandoned the SS-Sammellager. Some 550 Jews remained in the camp. Their "liberation" did not give rise to any particular interest. The internees' jubilation quickly dissipated with the realisation of the devastation the Shoah has wrought upon their lives. Almost no family was left untouched by the two years of deportation. The history of the Dossin barracks will be placed in its European context. Likewise, this presentation will focus on the genocidal mission of the camp and its function as a link in the chain between the RSHA in Berlin and the extermination centre of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

### **Maria Ch. Sidiropoulou: The Transformation of Jewish Identity: Comparing Greece and Netherland**

The fact that the Jews in Greece and Netherland today live in a secularized society, combined with their strong tendency toward assimilation over the last decades, has brought the relationship between modern "Jews" and "Sephardic Judaism" into the spotlight of academic research. In this paper, I will present a brief comparative analysis of the Sephardic Jewish presence between Thessaloniki and Amsterdam.

Jewish presence in both Thessaloniki and Amsterdam can be traced back since the 15th and 16th century. With the passage of time, and particularly during modern times, immediately after the creation of the modern states, Jewish identity has been transformed, as its communal presence becomes enshrined institutionally in the public space.

With the socio-political developments and changes in the second half of the 20th century and the postwar years after the Holocaust (World War II), the Sephardic Jewish presence in both cities has shrunk and is trying to recompose itself. In the modern era, the Jewish presence still exists in the local community of Thessaloniki and Amsterdam, but is few in number.

This presentation attempts to examine the role of religion in the personal and communal life of the members of the Sephardic Jews in Thessaloniki and Amsterdam, that is to say, the meaning of religiosity, how the social subjects in both places perceive their religious identity and how they exercise their religious practices. And if people are religious, which is the significance of their participation in the religious ceremonies, in the synagogue? What religious trends can be observed? Is it a religious, secular or cultural Jew?

This paper is based on an academic work in progress and on a qualitative methodological approach, which includes participant observation and interviews with Jewish people in Thessaloniki.

## **Yaniv Stamberger: Yiddish culture and Yiddishist ideology in interwar Belgium.**

In the course of the nineteen twenties and thirties a small circle of Jewish intellectuals, writers, poets and cultural activists settled in Belgium and sought to disseminate a specific Yiddish orientated 'high culture' among the recently arrived Jewish immigrants. These cultural activists brought with them distinctive East European Jewish cultural and political ideologies which they sought to implant in, and adapt to, the specific conditions which governed Jewish immigrant society living in a Western European liberal democracy.

The study of this small but vocal group of Jewish intellectuals and the cultural institutions and organisations they established will allow us to explore the close link between culture and political activism during this time period and will help us put into perspective the various ways in which these ideological groups sought to instil new forms of national consciousness in the Jewish immigrant community through the creation and proliferation of a modern Jewish culture. By examining the life of some of the protagonists on the Belgian Yiddish cultural scene I hope to highlight some of the fears, hopes, and ambitions which dominated the thoughts of these Jewish activists in their struggle to secure their vision of the Jewish people's future in Belgium and the wider world.

The history of this cultural movement from the early 1920's until the eve of the Second World War will also allow us to highlight some general aspects and tendencies which characterised Jewish life during this period and which form some of the basic themes in my PhD research on Jewish life in Belgium

during the interwar period. Such as: the interplay between the national, transnational and international Jewish spheres on Jewish political and institutional and social life, the tension between Jewish particularism and integration into wider Belgian and European society, the tension between East European Jewish thought and views (both modern and traditional) on ways of organising Jewish society and the reality of Jewish life far from the big Jewish concentrations of Eastern Europe with its rapid inroads into acculturation and assimilation.

## **Laurien Vastenhout: The Jewish Councils of Western Europe under Nazi Occupation: A Comparative Analysis**

Despite recent attempts to take a more objective view on the functioning of individual Jewish Councils of Western Europe during the Second World War (Schreiber and Van Doorslaer, 2003; Houwink ten Cate 1995; Laffitte, 2006), the analysis has neither yet been extended beyond the small circle of Council leaders nor beyond the national framework to a more overtly comparative perspective. A comparative framework, however, enables a better understanding of the Councils' relevance to the wider history of the Holocaust in each country. Understanding the nature of their leadership and the complex nature of the societies from which they emerged, helps to create a critical reappraisal of the debates on the deportations and fate of the Jews in all three countries' national historiographies. The intention of my PhD project is to look at the three major Jewish Councils in Western Europe (the Joodsche Raad in the Netherlands, the Association des Juifs en Belgique in Belgium and the Union Générale des Israélites de France in France) from an overtly comparative standpoint. The study will analyse the Councils through four specific thematic topics.

The first research question concerns the antecedents and leaderships of the Councils. Who were the leaders and why did they do it? Can the same processes in terms of leadership be identified in each of the three countries? What are the common or unique characteristics of each of the Council leaders (in terms of welfare, secularity, pre-war position in the Jewish community). In the Netherlands, there were German Jews who were well integrated, despite the fact they were a minority group. In Belgium and France, there were many more Eastern European immigrant Jews whom had sought refugee in these countries in the 1920s and 1930s. What impact did this have on the leaderships as such and their influence on the larger Jewish community? And, what impact did this have on the social composition of each of the Councils, both the central and the local councils? During the "Joodse Studies van de Lage Landen" conference, I would like to elaborate on, and discuss, my research findings on this first question, focussing on the impact of these research findings in particular and on the use and implications of a comparative approach more generally.

## **Anick Vollebergh: Negotiating 'living together' and 'integration': the tenuous position of Antwerp's Jews in the Flemish politics of autochthony**

I present the main findings of my dissertation, entitled: 'Strange Neighbors. Politics of 'living together' in Antwerp'. In the dissertation, I trace the nascence in Flemish politics and public discourse of the notion that there is a problematic deficit of 'living together' [samenleven] between what are seen as culturally different groups of urban denizens. I also investigate ethnographically how denizens of two Antwerpean neighborhoods - the mythical Borgerhout/'Borgerokko' and the so-called 'Jewish neighborhood' - seek to define and negotiate what 'living together' should or could be, and how the politics of 'living together' shapes how they come to view and understand themselves as well as their 'Other' neighbors. In this presentation I focus on the ambiguous and fragmented way in which discourses and policies of 'integration' and 'living together' have been applied to the 'Jewish neighborhood' and the Antwerp Jewish community. I argue that Antwerp's Jews have been ascribed a very ambiguous position within the political frame of multiculturalism and integration as 'autochthons of a special kind'. Recently, however, due to an increased policy emphasis on liberal-secularist 'values' as well as a decline of the Jewish role in Antwerp's diamond sector, the ambiguity of this position has become heightened and politicized. As a result, the position of pious Antwerp Jews especially seems to be starting to shift to one more akin to that of 'allochtonen'. Within this context and in the context of the political celebration of neighborliness and neighborhood life by the City of Antwerp, complaints of non-Jewish denizens in the Jewish neighborhood of 'orthodox Jews' not being 'willing to live together' take on a new political salience. Pious Jews, however, resist and try to argue against this reading of themselves by critically de-naturalizing the assumed importance of 'the neighborhood' as some kind of primordial sociable domain and by putting forward an alternative meaning of 'living together' and of 'the street'.