

J. C. H. Blom SchÖffler, R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld, eds. I. *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*. Portland, Ore.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002. xvii + 508 pp. \$69.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874774-51-8.



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In this age of specialization, it is increasingly difficult for a single historian to tackle large topics. In almost every field of historical scholarship, there are few who can master and synthesize all relevant literature. This volume is a good example of the virtues of the division of labor. The editors have divided the history of the Jews in the Netherlands into nine chapters, each written by an authority, in which the story chronologically unfolds from the Middle Ages to the present. This approach works well. While the book does justice to the various periods under consideration, it also reveals some long-term trends and profound transformations.

The medieval presence of Jews in the Low Countries was small, and by the late sixteenth century, very few remained in the Northern Netherlands. Conditions were different in the south, in particular in the port city of Antwerp. In the 1540s, when the papal decision to establish a Portuguese Inquisition was implemented, a large group of New Christians took up residence in Antwerp, where they tried to keep their place in international trade. By the end of the decade, however, Charles V exiled all New Christians who had arrived in the port city in recent years.

Half a century later, New Christians started moving from Portugal to Amsterdam, Antwerp's northern counterpart. Although it may be hard to characterize

them as Jews, several factors enabled these *marranos* to fully embrace their ancestral faith, as Daniel Swetschinski points out in his essay. The consciousness of their Jewish origins was first of all strengthened by the persecution suffered in their native country at the hands of the Portuguese Inquisition. Besides, once in Amsterdam, their (Old) Christian neighbors tended to view all New Christians as Jews. And finally, in the war-torn United Provinces, it was easier than elsewhere for Portuguese immigrants to present themselves as Jews and shed their Catholic identity, because of the prevailing distrust of Roman Catholics.

The next two centuries were the heyday of Dutch Jewry. As Jonathan Israel writes: "Judged by demographic standards, the Republic was never one of the great centres of Jewish life, but judged by the importance of Dutch Jews in international trade, finance, culture, and politics, Dutch Jews from the early seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth centuries constituted one of the most influential Jewish communities in the world" (pp. 85-86). Dutch Jewry started shedding its exclusively Sephardic character during this period. By the 1620s, growing numbers of Ashkenazim started joining the Sephardic pioneers, and by the last quarter of the seventeenth century outnumbered their co-religionists. The Ashkenazim were initially very dependent on the

Sephardim, who felt culturally superior and shunned intermarriage. In 1697, a regulation was introduced stating that “any Sephardi man who married a woman from another Jewish ethnic group” would be expelled from the community (p. 126). But the number of mixed marriages between Sephardim and Ashkenazim gradually increased in the second half of the eighteenth century, leading to the eventual fusion of the two groups into a united Dutch Jewry.

As both groups fell on hard times in the 1760s and 1770s, R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld writes, “Amsterdam failed to maintain its cultural predominance in the Jewish diaspora, although the city still had by far the largest concentration of Jews in western and central Europe” (p. 166). Poverty also prevented the Jews from taking full advantage of the civil rights which they had received in 1796, for a good part of the nineteenth century.

The decades after emancipation saw continuous government intervention in the internal affairs of the Jewish community. That came to an end only after Dutch parliament adopted a constitution in 1848 that introduced the separation of church and state. Soon, the first Jewish weekly magazine publicly aired internal disputes. Large groups of the Jewish population, however, were hardly affected by emancipation until the appointment in 1874 of Joseph Hirsch D=nnner as chief rabbi of North Holland. D=nnner left his mark on Jewish religious life, as J. C. H. Blom and J. J. Cahen argue in their sociologically strong chapter, by combining Orthodox religious services with “the acceptance of a rather lax observance of the Jewish commandments” (p. 231).

This opened the door to new forms of assimilation and acculturation. By the late eighteenth century, the Sephardi and Ashkenazi elites had already adopted the Dutch language in their writings and speech. The growing participation of Jews in the gentile world during the nineteenth century led to the disappearance of Yiddish, the decline in Hebrew and classical Jewish studies, and the non-observance of the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. None of this seems remarkable in comparison with other European countries, but the authors suggest that Dutch Jewry might have embarked on a unique path in this period. Dutch society began to rest on an organizational

principle that political scientists call “pillarization”: the segmentation of social and political life into distinct milieux. Whereas Roman Catholics, Protestants, Liberals, and Socialists each formed their own churches, schools, and social circles, Blom and Cahen stress that shared history and customs were not enough for a separate Jewish pillar to be erected. The Jewish religion failed to provide an ideological or philosophical foundation for such a pillar. No Jewish trade unions were set up, and outside of Amsterdam, no Jewish schools survived. There was, nevertheless, a distinctive Jewish subculture, exemplified by a Jewish press that reached many Jews, and aid organizations for foreign refugees fleeing Nazi anti-Semitism. The refugees from the Third Reich were numerous, numbering perhaps as many as 35,000, half of whom eventually stayed. In the prevailing economic climate, the Dutch government did not accommodate them, but rather let the Jewish community look after its new members.

The loss of life among Dutch Jews in the Holocaust was significantly larger than in Belgium or France. While in 1940, about one in every sixty-four Dutchmen was Jewish, Jews accounted for approximately half of the Dutch war victims. The consequent absence of a middle generation, combined with an increase of mixed marriages and the growing number of people who remained single, resulted in a marked postwar demographic decline. Another contributing factor was the tendency for Jews to emigrate to Israel, more so than in Belgium and France, even though Zionism was strong in those countries as well.

There is no similar comprehensive work dealing with the history of Dutch Jewry. All previous attempts neglected, or gave short shrift to, the Middle Ages or the seemingly uneventful nineteenth century. The balanced judgments, the seamless transitions between individual essays, and the exemplary translation make it a joy to read this book. My only criticism is that the English edition should have been more than just a translation of the Dutch original. It would not have been a luxury to add to the bibliography titles that have appeared since 1996 and, more importantly, to provide notes about concepts (such as “pillarization”) and events that are familiar to a Dutch audience, but not necessarily to outsiders.

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