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Antwerp Jewry Today

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ANTWERP JEWRY TODAY*

Jacques Gutwirth

1. *Introduction*

ANTWERP¹ is one of the largest ports in the world and a major centre of commerce and industry; it has 550,000² inhabitants, of whom some 10,500 are Jews. Unlike the case in many other cities, the large majority of these are, religiously, culturally, and socially, deeply aware of being Jewish. Religion influences the life of every Jew and the observant are many. About 11–12 per cent of the city's Jewish households are adherents of the ultra-Orthodox Hassidic movement. About 85 per cent of all the children attend Jewish schools full time. The Jews who are not observant, as well as those who are agnostics, actively take part in organizations and associations concerned with Jewish political, philanthropic, recreational, or cultural movements.

This intense Jewish identity has in some measure resulted from the events of the Second World War. A further factor is the concentration of the city's Jews in one particular occupation—the diamond trade and industry. This specialization is not accidental, nor is it of recent origin.

2. *Historical outline*

In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, a few dozen Marranos of Portuguese and Spanish origin³ lived in Antwerp, which even then was an important thoroughfare for international trade. During those centuries the Jews engaged in various forms of commerce, but appear to have been especially concerned with the diamond trade. This specialization may have saved them in 1692 from being expelled from the city.⁴ The Spanish and later the Austrian conquerors (who ruled the land until the end of the eighteenth century) were eager to expel the Jews, but local magistrates were reluctant to take such a step;⁵ this tolerance generally endured over the centuries and certainly contributed to the prosperity of the city.⁶

Nevertheless, Jews remained few in number until the end of the nineteenth century: in the whole province of Antwerp there were only 151

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in 1829, and 373 in 1846.⁷ Diamond cutting, which had been a craft practised in the area since the fifteenth century, also expanded little until the end of the nineteenth.

However, from 1900 onwards several thousand Jews were already residents of Antwerp,⁸ and their number steadily increased until the Second World War; the majority were immigrants from eastern and central Europe. They had arrived at the turn of the century with the large flow of immigrants who had stopped in Antwerp on their way to the United States.⁹ The settlement of these Jews in the Belgian port went hand in hand with the expansion of the diamond industry.¹⁰ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the raw materials had begun to be mined on a large scale in South Africa. However, until the 1920s, Holland—especially Amsterdam—was a much more important diamond trading centre than Antwerp.¹¹ Antwerp acquired diamonds of inferior quality which were cut (for low wages) by peasant-craftsmen of the Antwerp province, and which Jewish immigrants disposed of by trade.¹²

Before the First World War new supplies of raw materials were discovered: in West Africa in 1908 and in the Congo in 1912. The exploitation of these areas was intensified, especially after 1918, and brought on to the world market small diamonds of inferior quality. Because of their size and of their poor quality, they required some special skill in cutting; and the cost of labour was an important factor in the price. The lower Belgian wages, as well as the expertise of Antwerp workers, gave that city an appreciable advantage over Amsterdam. Moreover, in spite of the fact that the British company of De Beers¹³ had acquired a monopoly of the African raw materials, the Antwerp dealers enjoyed one advantage: they had preferential treatment in the buying of diamonds, a large proportion of which were mined in the Congo, a Belgian colony. Finally, Antwerp benefited from the fact that its Jewish dealers (poor immigrants from eastern Europe) were hard-working and had close links with clients throughout the world, the majority of whom were Jewish.¹⁴ These advantages together helped to make Antwerp, from 1918 onwards, the world centre for diamonds. The Belgian city, in spite of some setbacks, has retained this supremacy, while Amsterdam has been steadily losing ground.¹⁵

In the years preceding the Second World War the Jewish population of Antwerp grew steadily, and is estimated to have reached 55,000.¹⁶ However, the German occupation and the ensuing persecutions nearly wiped out the city's Jews. Some of them were able to survive in hiding in Antwerp itself, in the rest of Belgium, or in France; others, especially the rich diamond dealers, managed to escape to more distant lands, but thousands of Jews were deported and perished in Nazi concentration camps.¹⁷

After the War the Belgian authorities, impelled as much by material as by humanitarian considerations, took active steps to recall the industry's refugees from abroad. The Government also agreed that the port of Antwerp become once again a transit station for Jewish survivors from central and eastern Europe; and, further, several thousand refugees were allowed to settle in the city. In this way, in spite of considerably reduced numbers, a new Jewish community, more closely integrated than before the War, was reconstituted. As a parallel development, the diamond industry regained strength and importance but not the pre-eminent position of the pre-War years; other centres had been developed abroad, often as a result of the settlement of Antwerp Jews who had fled from the War.

During the decade 1957-1966, the number of Jews in the city has remained fairly constant: about 10,000.¹⁸ Twenty-one years after the War, Jewish life exhibits many of its pre-1940 characteristics, but some of these have become more sharply marked: thus, a greater proportion of Jews are now engaged in a shrunken socio-economic sector of the diamond industry and trade. In parallel fashion, daily life has become more turned in upon itself and more dependent upon religious tradition.

3. *Demographic data*

I estimate¹⁹ that in 1966 Antwerp had 10,500 Jews; there were 2,600 to 2,900 households with an average of 3.75 individuals per household. This comparatively large average appears to be due to a high birth rate, especially among observant families. Sixty to seventy per cent of the total population consists of persons who lived in Antwerp before 1940 or who are descended from such residents;²⁰ the remaining number are therefore recent immigrants or the children of these immigrants. Whatever the length of settlement of their parents, the majority of Jews who are less than twenty years old were born in Belgium; so were, of course, many adults. The Jews born abroad, and those who are Belgian-born, can nevertheless be differentiated according to their own country of birth or that of their parents. About 60 per cent are of Polish origin, mainly Galician.²¹ A smaller number (about 20 per cent) are of Hungarian, Rumanian (mainly Transylvanian), and Czech origin, and five to ten per cent are from the Netherlands. Finally, there are small numbers of other foreign descent (Russian, Lithuanian, etc.), as well as a small group of Belgians²² and of Sephardim originally from Greece, Turkey, and the Lebanon.

Nearly all the Dutch Jews had settled in Antwerp before 1940; after 1945, a larger proportion of Hungarians, Rumanians, and Czechs than of Poles arrived. Nowadays the large majority of Antwerp's Jews are Belgian citizens (either by birth or by naturalization);²³ only a small number of immigrants have retained the status of United Nations

Protected Refugees. There are also a few individuals of various other nationalities, including several hundred Israelis.

4. *Language*

Many Antwerp Jews speak the languages of their country of origin, a usual phenomenon among recent immigrants. Nevertheless, the Jews of the city use no fewer than four other languages: Hebrew and Yiddish, which are Jewish languages, and French and Flemish,²⁴ the national languages of Belgium. Hebrew is certainly the least used language colloquially, although it is most intensively taught in the Jewish schools of the city. In fact, the use of Hebrew varies among different groups: for Orthodox Jews and for Hassidim it is essentially a sacred and ancient tongue, that of the liturgy and of the great texts of Judaism, of the Torah in its widest meaning; they employ the Ashkenazi pronunciation. Among other groups, who are less orthodox or traditional, Hebrew is at the same time the language of religion and the living tongue of Israel; and they use the Sephardi pronunciation.²⁵

In the course of many centuries Yiddish has been closely linked with the religious and cultural life of the Jews of eastern and central Europe. In Antwerp it is used for Talmudic commentaries among orthodox and Hassidic Jews; moreover, for these Jews and for many others, Yiddish is also the language of daily life. There is a very lively wit expressed in this medium to underline major and minor events; this is especially so in the diamond world.²⁶ Indeed, Yiddish is pre-eminently the language in which business is transacted, both at the local and at the international levels. As a result, many Jews who were ignorant of the language (for example, the Dutch), as well as some non-Jewish Flemings, have learnt to speak Yiddish with some degree of fluency. The language, being closely linked with religious and economic activities, has remained a living tongue, even among young Belgian-born Jews—a truly remarkable phenomenon since, in sharp contrast to the other three languages, there is very little formal teaching of Yiddish.²⁷

Finally, we must consider the two official Belgian languages: in the Flemish regions, French has been the language of the dominant classes (including the trading and industrial middle class), and many Jews used to speak French rather than Flemish. However, in the last decade, Flemish has gained ground generally and among Jews.²⁸

The language pattern is obviously very intricate. The linguistic kaleidoscope reflects the intermingling at many levels of the different groupings. These groupings enclose one another and yet at the same time overlap. At the heart of the complex there is a mainly religious core whose language is Hebrew, linked through Yiddish into the economic community which itself is tied in with French in the upper social strata; finally, Flemish (the common language of the region)

serves to integrate the Jewish community within the larger national society.

5. *Economic activities*

Before 1940, Antwerp Jews were not exclusively engaged in the diamond industry. There was a large minority of artisans, small business men and employees in various fields. The artisans had their guild, *Jidische Handwerkerverein*; there were branches for bakers, butchers, hotel and restaurant workers, hairdressers, plumbers, carpenters, painters, etc. There was also another association for commercial travellers and itinerant salesmen.²⁹ The Jewish unions no longer exist, since the numbers still engaged in these occupations are negligible.

The proportion of Jews in the diamond industry has grown, and continues to grow, many changing their occupations to join the industry. According to my estimate, there is a minority of no more than 20 per cent which earns its living in other ways. Further, it is important to note that about half of this group (that is, 10 per cent of the Jewish population) are engaged in services to their coreligionists in the diamond industry; they are the rabbis, schoolteachers, and kashrut supervisors, and the shopkeepers who sell kasher foodstuffs and other commodities principally bought by Jews. They supply the traditional infrastructure of Jewish communities. Finally, there are Jews in the liberal professions and in businesses and trades not specifically linked to the Jewish community; this group does not exceed 10 per cent of gainfully occupied Jews.

Meanwhile, compared with 1940, there have also been occupational changes in the diamond industry. Before the War Jews were engaged in the four main occupations of cleavers, sawers, millers, and polishers.³⁰ (These crafts help to transform a rough diamond into a brilliant.) Nowadays, they are only cleavers; in fact this skill has become practically a Jewish monopoly. Cleaving is exclusively a craft, while the other three occupations are more mechanized. Cleavers, as wage earners, are paid twice the amount which the other workmen receive; they can, and do, easily move into the sphere of dealers and employers.

On the other hand, there have been no fundamental changes in trading and manufacture. In the field of the import of raw materials and the export of the finished product (gems for jewellery and industrial diamonds),³¹ Jews continue to be engaged mainly as traders and dealers. It is true that many of them, in addition to their commercial interests, are indirectly involved in manufacture, very often through the medium of entrepreneurs. The latter, as well as factory owners—mainly Flemish—run small workshops; fifty workmen are considered a large number for such workshops, and there are many scattered smaller units.

There are technical and economic reasons which account for this

situation. The four phases require specialist skills which have been mechanized only to a small extent, in spite of some technical advances.³² Consequently, there is no need for large capital investment in machinery, and independent workshops can therefore be established with comparative ease. Further, world-wide competition has led to a paradoxical situation: the Antwerp industry is driven to use to an exceptional extent the most manual technique—that of cleaving. For cleaving is a craft which requires the minimum of tools and which can be carried out in any ordinary room. Moreover, cleaving represents one of the principal factors in the costing of the finished article.

In the diamond industry, therefore, there are no large manufacturers monopolizing production and marketing. On the contrary, it is the merchants (mainly some dozen importers of rough diamonds) and, secondarily, the buyers and exporters of gems and of industrial diamonds, who rule the market. These merchants, most of whom are Jews, enjoy a position of great prestige and their social status reflects the superiority of commercial or merchant capital over industrial capital.³³ Thus, this traditional small-scale industry flourishes in the midst of a highly industrialized society.³⁴ Dealing also follows traditional methods; bargaining plays a very important part, buyers and sellers having constantly to negotiate closely. These methods remain adequate owing to factors closely linked to the nature of diamonds: unlike gold or silver, diamonds are not an immutable raw material, even when they are classified according to firm criteria. Many of the factors (colour, purity, quality, sparkle) require a subjective appreciation. Moreover, especially in the case of rough diamonds, their eventual optimal value largely depends on one or more of the different technical processes—for instance, sawing or cleaving. Other things being equal (for instance, outlets and capital), there is a further important factor—shrewdness and skill. The situation differs greatly from that found in mechanized factories with standardized methods of production. Thus, even in the case of industrial diamonds, the expertise and the personal judgement of buyers are qualities which derive nearly always from intuition and from empirical assessment. Under the circumstances, there is usually very close bargaining, with buyer and seller hoping to win a point or two by fault-finding. Finally, one must bear in mind that the price of diamonds is subject to speculation and to rapid market fluctuation.

6. *Occupational structure and the Jewish way of life*

A substantial proportion of all diamond transactions take place in the buildings of four diamond Exchanges which, together with commercial offices and some of the workshops, are concentrated within a small perimeter, known as the 'Pelikanstraat' district, in the heart of Antwerp and close to the headquarters of several Jewish businesses and Jewish communal associations. The three principal Exchanges have

respectively 1,500, 1,600, and 1,700 members—all men. (Often, one individual is a member of two, or even of three, Exchanges.) In these three Exchanges are concentrated the major part of business transactions; the Jewish membership varies from 70 to 83 per cent. The Flemish manufacturers and contractors do not attend regularly, while a small number of non-Jewish foreign buyers are seen only for short periods; thus it is mainly Jewish dealers and brokers who frequent the Exchanges. Diamond brokers, whose role as intermediaries should not be underestimated, are almost exclusively Jewish.

The large rectangular halls of the three main Exchanges have lofty ceilings, with a north wall entirely made of glass to provide a neutral light for the examination of diamonds. Although these Exchanges have points of similarity, there are variations in the membership and in the type of business transacted. We shall mention here only the two most active Exchanges—which are, moreover, those with the largest percentage of Jewish members: more than 80 per cent in each case. The *Beurs voor Diamanthatel* (Diamond Exchange) is the most lively and it is also the greatest international centre for dealings in cut diamonds. The *Diamantkring* (usually known as the *Kring*) deals almost exclusively in rough diamonds, both industrial diamonds and stones intended for gems. The *Beurs* is the main outlet for the export trade (the United States being the principal importer), whereas the *Kring*, although it has some export dealings (chiefly in industrial diamonds), serves mainly as a distribution channel to Antwerp's workshops of the raw product imported from the producing countries. It is not very easy to distinguish Jew from non-Jew in the *Beurs*; all members wear western-style clothes, usually with great elegance, and it is rare to see men with hats. In contrast, at the *Kring*, there are great numbers who wear beards, side-locks, and gaberdines. My statistical enquiry reveals that, although there is only a minority of recent immigrants in both Exchanges, the percentage of these is nevertheless higher in the *Kring*. The most orthodox Jews deal mainly in local markets. Moreover, the influence of orthodox Jewish life is much more noticeable in the *Kring* and in the rough diamond trade than it is in the *Beurs* and in dealings in cut diamonds. The hall of the *Kring* is deserted on Saturdays (and in the winter also on Friday afternoons); whereas at the *Beurs* on these days, while there is less activity, there are still appreciable numbers.³⁵ On the other hand, on Jewish high holidays both Exchanges are practically empty, while on Yom Kippur they are automatically closed.

The Exchanges are not simply trading centres; they are also forums of Jewish life, where members discuss and comment on the most diverse matters. So it comes about that in the course of informal conversation, decisions are reached and later formally approved by committees of various religious institutions as well as philanthropic, cultural, political, and recreational associations. These institutions and

associations constitute a vast network which, with various branches and off-shoots, catches up the overwhelming majority of Antwerp Jewry. There is a close interdependence between economic and social life; the prosperity of the former helps the latter to flourish, and those who have eminent positions in industry are often also the leaders of the various associations.

7. *Religious life*

Two religious communities, each with a membership of a little more than a thousand households, are in chief control of the religious life of Antwerp's Jewry. One, *Machsike Hadass* ('Defenders of the Faith'), is orthodox, while the other, *Shomer Hadass* ('Guardian of the Faith'), is conservative. However, it must be pointed out that these definitions (which approximate to American usage) are not as precise as might appear. The orthodoxy of the *Machsike Hadass* is much closer to the ultra-orthodoxy of the Hassidim who are members of, and who influence, the community; while the *Shomer Hadass* is so rigorously traditional that it is very similar to the orthodox community of Brussels or of other western cities.

Each community has its own synagogues and *bate midrash*, but they share a common *mikva* (ritual bath); each has its own abattoir for the ritual slaughtering of cattle and poultry; each also has its own kashrut supervisors in shops and restaurants. The revenue of each community is derived in part from the taxes paid for kashrut supervision, from members' subscriptions, and from various donations collected at religious ceremonies. Other sources of revenue are the fees paid for marriages and burials,³⁶ rites to which the overwhelming majority of Antwerp's Jews adhere, whatever the intensity of their religious beliefs.

The Rabbis, assisted by a *Dayan* (assessor), in addition to their spiritual and religious functions, play a comparatively important juridical role. When they sit as a rabbinical tribunal (*Beth Din*), often with the assistance of arbitrators, they give judgement on suits some of which might be within the jurisdiction of the civil courts. Many Antwerp Jews, even those who are not observant, prefer to submit to this internal jurisdiction, founded on principles of traditional Jewish laws which do not always coincide with the civil law of the country. However, there are many conflicts which, for various reasons, cannot be settled by the civil courts; in such cases only traditional Jewish tribunals can arbitrate. In the rabbinical courts the procedure is essentially that of conciliation; it is understood that the litigants voluntarily submit their cases and that the rabbi and the community can enforce judgement only by means of religious, moral, and social coercion.

The active Hassidic movement stimulates traditionalism in the *Machsike Hadass* and the *Shomer Hadass*. There are, in fact, six small Hassidic communities, deriving from mystical, charismatic, and ultra-

orthodox Hassidism, to which 300-330 households belong—that is, about 11-12 per cent of the total number of Jewish households in the city.³⁷ These Hassidic households can be demographically differentiated from the rest. They are largely made up of post-war immigrants and their children; at least half of them are of Hungarian or Rumanian (mainly Transylvanian) origin. The Hassidim lead an intensely traditional religious life, and are easily distinguished by their appearance: the men often have long beards, sidelocks, and other peculiarities of Hassidic wear such as gaberdines and fur hats (*shtraïmel*). The women often wear a *shaitel* (wig) and dresses with long sleeves. The Hassidim constitute the vanguard of the orthodox community, to which they are mainly affiliated.

The various Hassidic communities differ somewhat in their traditions. Each has its own communal centre, or *Shtiebl*, where the members meet and pray. Five of them (the Hassidim of Belz, Ger, Satmare, Chortkow, and Wischnitz) consist each of the followers of a *rebbe*, a charismatic and thaumaturgic *tsadik*, descended from a more or less ancient dynasty. Not one of these *rebbe* lives in Antwerp. (The names of the dynasties are derived from the town where at least the first *rebbe* used to reside; today most of these leaders live in Israel or in the United States.) The sixth community is evidence of the strength of Jewish traditionalism in Antwerp; it has, in fact, been formed around the leadership of a new *rebbe*, Reb Ytsekl (a diminutive of 'Isaac').³⁸ This religious leader was born in eastern Galicia and emigrated to western Europe after the War; he lived in Paris for some years but later settled in Antwerp where his followers had offered him the opportunity of establishing his own *shtiebl*. His community is now flourishing, as are indeed the other Hassidic communities. The Hassidim not only have a polarizing spiritual influence, they also control several important aspects of religious life in Antwerp. It is from the ranks of the Hassidim (the majority of whom are also engaged in the diamond industry) that are recruited most of the kashrut supervisors and also a large number of shopkeepers who sell kasher foodstuffs and items necessary for prayer and ritual.

Finally, Hassidism exerts its influence within the orthodox community itself. Its most faithful adherents, including most of the members of the executive committee, are regular attendants at a *Beth ha-Midrash*, which is greatly influenced by Hassidism. Prayers in this *Beth ha-Midrash* follow the mystical liturgy of Luria; there is observance of the *yahrzeit* (anniversary of the death) of the *Tsadik* of Sanz,³⁹ and many of the faithful claim to be followers of one or other *rebbe*. It is noteworthy that in this *Beth ha-Midrash* which is on the threshold between orthodoxy and Hassidism, the adherents are nearly all pre-War immigrants, in contrast to the situation obtaining in the six Hassidic communities mentioned above.

The intensity of religious life in Antwerp is further accentuated by the fact that the various *bate midrash* and synagogues are nearly all situated within a limited area, close to one another. The followers of various persuasions constantly meet in the heart of a veritable religious microcosm. This religious microcosm, the delimited area of the diamond industry and trade, the location of kasher shops, and the streets where a large number of Jews reside, are entangled to form a geographical continuum, a kind of *shtetl* (a small Jewish town in central or eastern Europe). However, it must be pointed out that there are many Jews who live outside this geographical area; as a general rule they are the least orthodox and the least observant. Nevertheless, even these Jews tend to concentrate in some specific suburbs or clearly delimited localities, while there are many districts from which Jews are virtually absent. Finally, we must not omit to mention a small religious community of a few dozen families, principally of Sephardi origin, who follow the so-called Portuguese ritual.

The various religious communities just described account for at least 80 per cent of Jewish households, and although they do not all engage daily in intense religious activities, they nevertheless play a very important role in the Jewish life of Antwerp; the schools which they sponsor provide the most important evidence of this role.

8. *Jewish schools*

There are four private (fee-paying) day schools and a boarding school, a yeshiva, which together cater for 2,200 students.⁴⁰ The two largest schools are the Tachkemoni and the Jesodeh Hatorah; the former serves the conservative community, and the latter the orthodox. Together they have an enrolment of about 1,800 pupils. Both are recognized and subsidized by the State; their curriculum therefore includes tuition in Flemish in conformity with official requirements, and they both award diplomas equivalent to the diplomas of other schools. But, in addition, these Jewish schools provide tuition in Jewish studies for several hours a day—in fact, in some cases these studies account for more than half the total time spent in school.

The Tachkemoni school (725 pupils) has mixed classes: boys and girls go to a kindergarten, and are later taught the complete official primary and secondary curricula. The Jewish studies include (apart from courses in Biblical and Talmudic commentary) modern Hebrew and the history of contemporary Jewry, especially of Israel. On the other hand, the Jesodeh Hatorah school (1,050 pupils) is much more traditionalist: boys and girls attend separate classes. The girls can have a full secondary education or qualify for a teaching diploma, but there is no provision for a lay secondary education for boys. Moreover, instruction in Jewish studies is almost exclusively limited to religious commentaries in classical Hebrew and in Yiddish. Boys who are over

14 years of age may go to a yeshiva situated in a quiet suburb in a building surrounded by pleasant grounds; the yeshiva has 70 boarders, most of whom come from Antwerp families. All the school buildings are modern and well equipped.

There are two Hassidic schools, with separate accommodation (of course) for boys and girls. About 400 pupils attend these schools. The tuition is markedly traditional in nature, especially for boys; the methods and objectives of the traditional *heder* of eastern Europe are faithfully reproduced. These schools teach only a minimum of lay subjects.

The various schools just described cater for the large majority of the Jewish children of Antwerp—about 85 per cent.⁴¹ These children are, therefore, brought up in an ambience impregnated by religious tradition (in varying degrees) and in isolation from non-Jewish children; but the resulting segregation is voluntary. This state of affairs clearly reflects the concentration and intensity of Jewish life in Antwerp.

9. *Associations*

There are various lay or semi-religious associations which bring together some observant Jews and most of those whose religious commitment is mild or undefined. Philanthropic societies are active in spite of the fact that poverty is practically absent among Antwerp Jews. These societies give assistance to immigrants from central Europe who continue to trickle into Antwerp as transients. Antwerp Jewry is also very proud of its fine old people's home. The community has an international (and well deserved) reputation for generosity; funds are solicited from all over the world for the most diverse causes. The people are faithful to the tradition of *tsedaka* (charity and solidarity), as it was practised in central and eastern Europe.⁴² The philanthropic societies also sponsor functions, including balls and meetings, which are highly valued in some circles.

Political activity lacks intensity, but Zionist feelings are widespread, especially among Jews who are not affiliated to the orthodox or Hassidic movements. (However, most of the orthodox and the Hassidim are not hostile to Israel.) Zionists, whether they be pious, or of the left or of the right, are not very militant; the Zionist movement is mainly a movement of persons merely sympathetic to the cause; Zionist associations do not attract large numbers.

It is not possible here to enumerate the cultural clubs which endure with some degree of success; but it is important to mention the Maccabi, a sports club with well equipped buildings and grounds, which boasts several hundred members. It serves as a centre not only for sports but also for social intercourse; its members are drawn from the least traditional Jews of the city.

10. *General characteristics*

The Maccabi (by drawing together a comparatively assimilated fringe of Jewry) functions as a centre of Jewish social life; but it also leads its members to come into direct, and usually friendly, contact with the Flemish inhabitants in the context of sport. Many Antwerp Jews take part (admittedly, often in the company of Jewish friends) in the various social activities of the city; they go to concerts, theatres, cinemas, and cafés frequented by the general public. The wider society certainly exhibits a number of antisemitic prejudices, but there is practically no organized segregation or discrimination. Nevertheless, the intensity of Jewish life (described in the earlier sections of this paper) leads Antwerp Jews to live in a world of their own, although this is a world without precise frontiers isolating them from the larger society. The community is distantly descended from those communities of central and eastern Europe which flourished from the thirteenth or fourteenth to the eighteenth century when they were organized into *kahalim* obligatorily segregated in a still feudal society.⁴³ Moreover, Antwerp Jews, not only because of their origin but especially because of their way of life, reflect much more faithfully the conditions obtaining in the European *shtetl* in the nineteenth century and to a certain degree in the years preceding the Second World War: the little towns where, in spite of the breaches in the walls which segregated the inhabitants, the atmosphere was impregnated by religious and cultural Jewish tradition.⁴⁴ They are the true heirs of the *shtetl*.

Many historians⁴⁵ have shown that in the late Middle Ages Jews of eastern and central Europe engaged in certain specified occupations as middlemen and also, later, in crafts linked with trade. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries some measure of social and economic stratification arose, especially in the larger cities. In countries where a capitalist economy was only beginning to emerge, the majority of Jews, however, continued both in the large cities and in the small towns or *shtetl* to engage in crafts and in trades and businesses often linked to semi-skilled industries.⁴⁶ As we have seen, the Jews of Antwerp are engaged economically in activities very similar to these; this is no doubt why the immigrants from the *shtetl* were, at the turn of the present century, able to become so easily integrated in the Antwerp diamond trade and industry. It seems, therefore, that the persistence of this community possessed of an intense Jewish identity (an archaic and rare survival in western countries) is related to the perpetuation of techno-economic activities rather similar to those which used to prevail in the *shtetl*.

Although the nature of the diamond industry was favourable to such a survival, nevertheless diamonds played no part in the economy of the *shtetl*, whose inhabitants certainly did not enjoy the prosperity which

today characterizes Antwerp Jewry. As was stated earlier, however, Jews dealt in diamonds in Antwerp and in Amsterdam well before 1900. Diamonds require little space for storage, can be easily hidden or traded, and even in the eleventh century Jews were said to have been engaged in the international trade in diamonds.⁴⁷ Finally, the commerce in cut diamonds was one of several luxury trades in which Jews have played a role throughout the centuries;⁴⁸ at certain periods it was linked to pawnbroking.⁴⁹ The diamond industry nowadays is usually no longer allied to other trades, but diamonds have remained safe assets, easily realizable, and in some respects very similar to gold and hard currency. Because of these advantages, the trade in diamonds is subject to innumerable restrictions and controls both at the local and at the international levels; these restrictions, although they have hindered free circulation, nevertheless have not succeeded in eliminating it (official statistics on the diamond industry far from coincide with the actual facts of the import and export trades).⁵⁰ In such conditions, diamond transactions require a great deal of trust on the part of dealers;⁵¹ trading, moreover, takes place within a comparatively close and limited group: the participants (often linked by friendship) are formed into a loose type of association with its own codes and sets of rules to which they adhere, notwithstanding conflicting economic interests. Yiddish, a true lingua franca of the diamond community, emphasizes the confidential nature of the economic arrangements. Thus the industry, which is associated with ancient traditions and is in some measure a world in itself, exhibits further points of similarity with an intense Jewish life.⁵²

It is, moreover, worth noting that although diamond dealers are not subject to rabbinical courts, they have, in their Exchanges, a special procedure for resolving their conflicts. These are largely settled by conciliation or arbitration⁵³—as is the case in rabbinical courts. Admittedly, the final judgements of the arbiters could be flouted by an appeal to the national courts, but it is practically unknown for Exchange members to have recourse to civil law. As is the case with litigants appearing before a rabbinical tribunal, the Exchange members prefer to make use of the national courts of justice only in cases which call for the exercise of coercion (police, prison, etc.), and even then they do so generally after obtaining the consent of the Exchange executive. Again, as with other disputes brought before a rabbinical tribunal, many of the conflicts which arise in the industry could not, in any case, be brought before the national courts; moreover, those that could be brought before these courts might be dealt with according to a procedure and a code (and subject to sanctions) which are quite different from those obtaining in the Exchanges. The latter's methods of coercion—moral, social, and economic—are (as in the case of sanctions imposed by a rabbinical court) dependent upon the voluntary

submission of the members. Even if they are expelled or suspended from the Exchange, the members can, in several cases, continue to engage in their trade or occupation. In this they differ from other professions such as medicine or law where a doctor or lawyer who is struck off the register is barred from practising.

It is interesting to speculate whether the points of similarity between the juridical roles of the Exchanges and of religious tribunals are due to mere coincidence, or whether the Exchanges have deliberately evolved an enforcement machinery based on the procedure in rabbinical courts. It must be remembered that the Exchanges since their foundation at the turn of the present century have been managed largely by Jews; and the second alternative is therefore more probable. Of course, the two alternatives are not mutually exclusive,⁵⁴ since both systems of justice have similar functions and operate in somewhat similar social contexts; moreover, these contexts interlink at many points.

We have seen that the prosperity of Antwerp Jewry, which contrasts so sharply with the poverty of the *shtetl*, is linked to the paradoxical survival of archaic techno-economic conditions and also, of course, to the generally more widespread economic prosperity of the larger society. It is well known that the poverty of the Jews of central and eastern Europe had, since the turn of the present century, led to the disintegration of traditional Jewish life as a result of proletarianization and emigration.

Nevertheless, the diamond trade and industry are neither merely nor wholly archaic; the existing techno-economic conditions may alter and become more susceptible to the prevailing trends of western industrial societies. Similarly, the Jewish marginal groups who are more assimilated might, for various reasons, increase in number. Therefore, it would appear that the strength of Jewish life among Antwerp Jews (a strength which is linked to a complex of factors with a long historical tradition, but which is so oddly conspicuous in the larger western society) is nevertheless vulnerable.⁵⁵

NOTES

¹ The research on which this article is based was carried out mainly in 1966. The methods employed were participant observation, unstructured and open-ended interviews, and the gathering of statistical data, records, etc.

² There are 250,000 inhabitants in the city of Antwerp and a further 300,000 in all its immediate suburbs.

³ See E. Schmidt, *Geschiedenis van de Joden in Antwerpen* (History of the Jews of

Antwerp), Antwerp, 1963, pp. 12–45. See also the article entitled 'Antwerp' in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, New York and London, 1924.

⁴ See K. Liberman, 'La découverte d'une synagogue secrète à Anvers à la fin du XVII^e siècle', *Revue des Études Juives*, 1935, Vol. C, p. 39.

⁵ Cf. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–32; W. Sombart, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, trans. M. Epstein, with an introduction

by Bert Hoselitz, New York, 1962, pp. 40-1; and I. S. Revah, 'Pour l'Histoire des Marranes à Anvers', *R.E.J.*, 1963, Vol. II, pp. 124 and 127.

⁶ This liberalism towards the Jews seems to have been a particular manifestation of a general tradition of tolerance in Antwerp: 'nécessité née du port'. Cf. A. Vigaré, 'Les organes de gestion du port d'Anvers', *Cahiers de Sociologie économique*, Le Havre, Feb. 1960, No. 2, p. 176.

⁷ Cf. W. Bok, 'Considérations sur les estimations quantitatives de la population juive en Belgique', in Centre National des Hautes Études Juives—Bruxelles; Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University—Jerusalem, *La vie juive dans l'Europe contemporaine*, Brussels, 1965, p. 102.

⁸ There were 8,000 according to Schmidt, op. cit., p. 226. According to A. Ruppin (*Les Juifs dans le monde moderne*, Paris, 1934, p. 67), there were 10,000 in the whole of Belgium; this figure is quoted by Bok, *ibid.*, Table 2.

⁹ According to Schmidt (op. cit., p. 266), 2,360 Jewish emigrants used Antwerp as a transit port in 1897; 7,748 in 1900, 19,488 in 1903, and 24,479 in 1905. Schmidt does not cite his sources.

¹⁰ The industry employed 4,000 men at the turn of the century (Schmidt, op. cit., p. 106). For a perceptive analysis of the development of the diamond industry in Antwerp, and the role of the Jews in this development, see K. Liberman, *L'industrie et le commerce diamantaires belges*, Brussels, 1935.

¹¹ Cf. K. Liberman, *L'industrie . . .*, p. 29. Jews also played an important part in Amsterdam's diamond industry. In 1808, 600 households (Sephardim and Ashkenazim) had members who were gainfully occupied in the industry. Cf. N. W. Goldstein, 'Die Juden in der Amsterdamer Diamanten-Industrie', *Zeitschrift für Demographie und Statistik der Juden*, 1907, Vol. III, p. 180.

¹² Cf. H. Polak, *De Invloed van de Oorlog op de Diamantindustrie*, (The influence of the War on the Diamond Industry) Puurwerend (Netherlands), 1917, pp. 18-19. The author lays stress on the dynamic business enterprise of the newcomers.

¹³ The world's diamond production (for the most part extracted from Africa) is still nowadays largely controlled by De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd. The

Company's central sales agency in London distributes the diamonds to the various manufacturing and trading centres.

¹⁴ Cf. Polak, op. cit., p. 19, and Liberman, *L'industrie . . .*, p. 42. It is relevant to point out that the chief directors of De Beers are also of Jewish origin.

¹⁵ In 1920 Belgium had 14,000-15,000 craftsmen in the diamond industry and the Netherlands 11,000. In 1928 the number in Belgium rose to 23,000-25,000 while in the Netherlands it declined to 6,275. (See 'L'industrie diamantaire', *Bulletin mensuel de la Société belge de Banque*, Brussels, 1932, pp. 252-260.) Admittedly, by 1959 the number had fallen in Belgium, but it still accounted for more than half of the total of craftsmen employed in the world—14,000 out of 25,000; in 1959 there were only 700 diamond craftsmen in the Netherlands. See A. Moyer, *L'industrie du diamant en 1958-1959*, Brussels, 1960, p. 88.

¹⁶ Cf. Bok, op. cit., Table 2.

¹⁷ There are no precise figures for the number of missing and deported persons from Antwerp. It is said that on the eve of the War there were a total of 85,000 Jews in Belgium, of whom 30,000 were deported. About five per cent of the deportees were repatriated after the War. Cf. Bok, *ibid.*, p. 95; and Schmidt, op. cit., p. 276.

¹⁸ Cf. Bok, op. cit., Table 2.

¹⁹ The estimate has been arrived at from various sources. 'Jews' are those who identify themselves as being Jewish, or whose parents are Jewish. In the case of mixed marriages, households where the husband is Jewish and the wife non-Jewish have been classified as Jewish households; this is justifiable in Antwerp where such marriages usually result in the households' association with the Jewish community. On the other hand, in the case of mixed marriages where the husband is non-Jewish, it is less frequent for the household to be associated.

²⁰ These percentages have been arrived at by statistical sampling. Therefore, although the influence of the immigrants is far from negligible, it cannot be said that the intensity of Jewish life in Antwerp results from the fact that the more recent eastern European arrivals have transplanted their native traditional Jewish organization.

²¹ In the sample, the criterion used was

the birthplace of the respondent or of the respondent's father.

²² Frequently, these have grandparents of foreign origin.

²³ The qualifications for naturalization have been markedly relaxed in recent years. Before 1940, less than 10 per cent of the Jewish population of Belgium had Belgian nationality. See Bok, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

²⁴ It must be noted that the Flemish spoken in Belgium and the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands are, in fact, one and the same language; there are variations in vocabulary and in pronunciation.

²⁵ In the schools sponsored by conservatives, the Sephardi pronunciation is taught.

²⁶ The sense of humour of the Jews of Antwerp seems to be the outcome of a somewhat critical appreciation due to the ambiguous position of many of the city's Jews. Since these are economically privileged, they constitute an in-group; at the same time they are also an out-group, being aliens oppressed from time immemorial, for whom the possibility of further persecution is ever present.

²⁷ For commentaries on the Talmud, Yiddish is used colloquially in the orthodox school; this is also the case in the Hassidic schools where, moreover, the rudiments of the language are taught for the necessities of everyday use.

²⁸ The two large Jewish schools use only Flemish for the teaching of lay subjects.

²⁹ Cf. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

³⁰ Cleavers and sawers use very different techniques: the former divide the rough diamond with the grain, while the latter do so against the grain. The miller rounds off the stone and, finally, the polisher sets and polishes the facets.

³¹ Diamonds are being increasingly used for tools. Although in Belgium the manufacture of such tools is not as developed as that of gems, nevertheless the trade in industrial diamonds accounted in 1958 for 26 per cent of all diamond exports from the country. Cf. Moyar, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-2.

³² In the case of small diamonds of sixteen facets (in contrast to the larger stones of fifty-eight facets), the polishing process is semi-mechanized, but the polisher nevertheless has a very important part to play. On the whole, however, extreme division of labour,

automation, and *a fortiori* assembly lines are unknown in the diamond industry.

³³ 'Je unentwickelter die Produktion, um so mehr wird sich daher das Geldvermögen konzentrieren in den Händen der Kaufleute, oder als spezifische Form des Kaufmannsvermögens erscheinen'. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, drittes Buch, Kapitel 20, in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Werke*, Berlin, 1964, Vol. 25, p. 338.

³⁴ 'Capitalism is often regarded as passing through three successive stages, beginning with commercial capitalism, under which large scale operators come to dominate the processes of exchange, running . . . into the stage of industrial capitalism . . . and then to the stage . . . of finance, or financial, capitalism . . . These stages are not, of course, mutually exclusive: *the earlier do not cease to exist when the later are superimposed on them*'. (My own italics.) G. D. H. Cole, 'Capitalism', C. 3, in *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, J. Gould and W. L. Kolb, eds., London, 1964, p. 71.

³⁵ The Exchanges are closed on Saturday afternoons.

³⁶ When a death occurs, each community imposes a burial fee according to the presumed wealth of the bereaved family. Usually this assessment is not made rashly. The method is very effective, for the families who refuse payment and forgo a religious burial in favour of a civil ceremony are very few and far between. Only the Jews of Dutch origin are exempt, for they have their own mutual aid burial society. However, as their number is small, they have had to establish a link with the orthodox community whose *hevra kadisha* performs the burial rites for them. In exchange the Dutch Jews have undertaken not to admit to their organization any more Jews of central or eastern European origin.

The orthodoxy of Antwerp Jews moreover leads to complex situations. The cemeteries of the two religious communities, as well as that of the Dutch association, are held by them as unrestricted freeholds; they are situated in Dutch territory 21 kilometres from Antwerp, because Belgian law, although it recognizes the grant of perpetual leases, makes them subject to revision; and it is well known that the exhumation and transfer of mortal remains is contrary to Jewish tradition. In the municipal cemetery of

Antwerp there is a Jewish section; it is a plot reserved for civil burials, or for 'special' cases (mixed marriages, etc.).

³⁷ On Antwerp Hassidim, see J. Gutwirth, 'Hassidim de notre temps' *Les nouveaux Cahiers*, Paris, 1966, No. 7, pp. 56-62.

³⁸ However, he is descended from an illustrious Hassidic figure, the *Rebbe* Elimelech of Lizensk.

³⁹ He was the last of a Hassidic dynasty which became extinct before 1914.

⁴⁰ These are approximate numbers. In 1964-5, the total was 2,137; cf. S. S. Brachfeld, *Het Joods Onderwijs in België* (Jewish education in Belgium), Antwerp, 1966, p. 106, Table 11.

⁴¹ The pupils in these four schools represent 91 per cent of Jewish children following a Jewish curriculum (percentages drawn from figures supplied by Brachfeld, op. cit., p. 106). The remaining 9 per cent attend religious classes in non-Jewish schools. A small number of children have no Jewish tuition whatever.

⁴² See, for instance, M. Zborowski and E. Herzog, *Life is with People*, New York, 1962, pp. 191-213.

⁴³ 'The legal segregation of the Jews and their religious and cultural isolation meant that Jewish individual or communal needs could be supplied internally through Jewish co-operation and mutual assistance. Jewish institutions that banded individuals together in competent associations covering the various spheres of social activities were thus essential. The basis . . . was the local *kehilla*, which bound together all Jews who were permanent local residents' (J. Katz, *Tradition and Crisis, Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, New York 1961, p. 79). Cf. also H. M. Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History*, New York, 1963, pp. 31-2.

⁴⁴ 'The small town, the *shtetl*, was the stronghold of this [Jewish] culture . . . Whether among Poles or Russians, Lithuanians or Hungarians, the Jews retained their ways and their language—responding to the environment, assimilating much of it, integrating it into their way of life, yet keeping the core

of their own tradition intact' (Zborowski and Herzog, op. cit., p. 34). Cf. also Sachar, op. cit., pp. 192-3.

⁴⁵ Cf. also Katz, op. cit., chaps. VI and VII.

⁴⁶ Cf. Ruppin, op. cit., pp. 200-2, 214; S. Bronshtejn, 'Polish Jewry in 1931', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 1964, Vol. VI, No. 1, pp. 24-7; Zborowski and Herzog, op. cit., pp. 242-3.

⁴⁷ According to a *responsum* discussed by I. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe*, New York, 1965, p. 71.

⁴⁸ Cf. Sombart, op. cit., pp. 46-7; W. J. Cahnman, 'Role and Significance of the Jewish Artisan Class', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 1965, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 214.

⁴⁹ Liberman, *L'industrie . . .*, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Cf. Moyar, op. cit., p. 97.

⁵¹ Thefts and frauds can easily occur with this type of article.

⁵² In connexion with a *responsum* of R. Meshullam (910-85), and other *responsa*, Agus, op. cit., p. 65, notes: 'Thus, again, it was the brotherly co-operation of the Jews, their readiness to help and to protect one another, their confidence and trust in each other's honesty that made it possible for them to do business and to gain profit even in the completely lawless circumstances of this period.' Thus the tradition of a closed society converging with Jewry, or at least with some element of it, goes back at least 1,000 years.

⁵³ Except in the cases of minor disciplinary infringements, although even then there are attempts at conciliation. The procedure in the *Beurs* is more legalistic than it is in the *Kring*: the *Beurs* allows lawyers to be present and to advise the litigants and the arbitrators; the *Kring*, on the other hand, follows more traditional methods.

⁵⁴ Cf. A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Milieux et techniques*, Paris, 1945, pp. 426-427.

⁵⁵ After the French version of this paper was printed, it was brought to my notice that D. Wachsstock had also published an article on Antwerp Jewry: 'Jewish Antwerp—A shtetl in Transition', in *In the Dispersion*, Vol. 5/6, Jerusalem, 1966, pp. 68-76.

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