JEWS IN THE KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS

This is the first in a series of articles dealing with the history, life and problems of Jewish communities in various countries.

WHETHER there is any basis in fact for the tradition that there were individual Jews in the Netherlands in very early times we have no way of knowing. There were a few Ashkenazic Jews scattered sparsely throughout the Northern Netherlands in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Nijmegen had a ghetto and a Jewish cemetery before 1540.

Some refugees from England and France, after the expulsions of 1290 and 1306, came to Flanders and Brabant, where most of the commerce was in the hands of foreign merchants. Because of their importance as money-lenders, they were allowed to remain in the larger cities even after the decree of expulsion from Brabant in 1370. At any rate there must have been a considerable number of Jews in Brabant in 1495. The commercial cities of Zeeland and Flanders likewise attracted Jews who carried on a lively trade with the Jewish and Marrano merchants of Lisbon.

To Amsterdam, the "Venice of the North", certain individual Marranos had already come. Amsterdam welcomed the settlement of these merchant princes and proud hidalgos from the Iberian Peninsula. Free from the iron hand of the Inquisition, the Jews quickly declared openly their ancient faith, and although many of them had been brought up as Catholics, the foundations were soon laid for a Jewish community which was destined to acquire great prestige and learning as the years passed. Relations between Jew and Christian in the golden days of Amsterdam were cordial. The clerical group, it is true, occasionally objected to the privileged position attained by a people not numbered among "the faithful". Even they, however, newly interested in Hebrew after the Reformation, were wont to consult Jewish teachers on biblical problems and to employ them as instructors in Hebrew.

Through international trade, in which their relations with other Jewish communities throughout the world and their clandestine contacts with Marranos in Spain and in Portugal gave them considerable advantage, Amsterdam Jewry acquired great wealth. It was not long before they had time and money for literature, learning and the arts. The renowned Athias printing presses gave the world some of its most beautiful Hebrew books. Plays appeared in Hebrew, Ladino, and Portuguese; a history of the Jewish people was written; stately mansions like that of the wealthy De Pinto family adorned the city; villas in the suburbs in addition to townhouses were not unheard of. The costly synagogue in Amsterdam is a perpetual monument to the glory that was the New Jerusalem. Some of the Sephardim, particularly the Lopes Suasso family, were on friendly terms with the ruling house of Orange.

During the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), groups of German Jews suffering from persecution in their native country, fled to Amsterdam where they had heard a favorable place of refuge awaited them. In 1654, after the uprising of Chmielnicki, groups of Polish Jews came to Holland, and a short time later united with the German settlement to form the Ashkenazic community whose orthodoxy and Jewish learning surpassed that of their richer brethren. But compared to their Sephardic predecessors the Ashkenazim were for the most part poor and had to gain a livelihood by peddling and petty trade. Because of their lack of Western culture and their poverty, they were held in contempt by their Portuguese co-religionists.

The entire Jewish population progressed as the city itself rose to power. Smaller communities, outgrowths of the main group, established themselves to reflect further the glory of "Mokum" (Amsterdam). In the colonies, particularly in the West Indies and South America, the Jews attained prosperity. The wealth of the Sephardic group reached its height by the second half of the seventeenth century. Holland's glory as a world power then began to wane. With wealth came a desire for luxury and ease followed by political and economic

corruption. The rich of Holland turned to grandiose schemes of speculation, and the Jews, especially the Sephardim, plunged like their fellow countrymen headlong into wildcat schemes for quick millions. Crisis after crisis ensued and many a Jewish merchant prince was reduced to poverty. An effort was made to send these impoverished Jewish families to the colonies but the movement did not meet with great success; most Jews preferred to remain in Amsterdam. Toward the end of the eighteenth century the Sephardic community, weakened by the number of paupers in its midst, sank deeper and deeper into the slough of poverty from which it has never emerged. The Ashkenazic Jew, on the other hand, in the period of inflated speculation was on the whole unable, because of lack of means, to plunge in the stock market. He continued to ply his petty trade and was able to weather the financial crisis. Thus, as the eighteenth century drew to a close, the Ashkenazic community was definitely on the upgrade.

While in other parts of Western Europe the Jews clamored for emancipation, in Holland the majority looked askance at the new order. They feared the withdrawal of the old corporate privileges, foresaw the decline of religion and tradition, and, therefore, saw in emancipation more loss than gain. The Jew did not crave military honors or government positions; he had commercial freedom. However, when the French army came to Amsterdam in 1795, a small group of Jews under the leadership of Asser welcomed them as heralds of Jewish emancipation. This group formed a pro-French society, "Felix Libertate", but comparatively few Jews affiliated themselves with it; one-third of its membership, in fact, was Christian. Nevertheless, in spite of Jewish indifference, in 1796 the Jews were granted emancipation as part of the French program of liberty, equality and fraternity. A certain small group, proud of their newly acquired status, made an effort to become more like the Dutch. Many Jews, formerly freed from military service, marched under Napoleonic colors. Interest in Jewish study diminished. Much of their power was taken away from the Parnassim, and the French

type of Jewish consistory was introduced, gradually to give place to a modified form of synagogal autonomy which exists to the present day.

Although many Jews today continue to be occupied with petty trade (most of the Sephardim who survive are thus engaged), they are predominant in the diamond industry to the extent that the diamond exchange is closed on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. Some of Holland's largest commercial enterprises are headed by Jews, for the most part Ashkenazim, though very few Sephardic families have managed to retain wealth and influence. Many are in the various professions, as they have been from the earliest days of Jewish settlement in Holland. Vocational statistics yield the following for 1930: 37% of the Jews are occupied in industry, 45% in commerce, 6.9% in the professions and 0.1% in agriculture.

The Jews in Holland suffered much from the spiritual and moral upheaval of the great war. Hundreds of the younger generation became assimilated, although in 1936 the Zionist Federation had 3,487 members and there were additional Dutch Jews outside the Organization who sympathized with the national ideal and the cultural renaissance. Since that time the Organization has grown by leaps and bounds. Zionist activities in fund-raising projects and the development of Halutz training is widely fostered. The workers' village at Wieringen provides a two-year training course in handicraft or agriculture especially designed for those wishing to go to Palestine. Zionists are learning to speak Hebrew within their own circles and insist upon modern textbooks and pedagogical methods. A Jewish high school has been opened in Amsterdam where Jewish and secular subjects are taught. All educational and religious training is controlled by an Orthodox rabbinate. 1,700 Ashkenazic and 200 Sephardic children attend religious school after secular school hours and on Sundays. On the other hand, many of the younger generation, untutored in the culture of the fathers, urban, and educated in the culture and idiom of the West, have decided, in view of the formalism of local orthodoxy, that they no longer wish to partake of the religious heritage

of Israel. But this is not an indication of group inferiority; indifference to the faith of the sons of Jacob exists. Besides this group of assimilationists there are quite a number of Jews in Holland who designate themselves as "liberals". The term liberal Jew to them means no more than one who is negative about his Jewishness, *i.e.,* one who still attends synagogue on Yom Kippur, still remains a member of the Jewish community, but who cares little for religious observance and cultural aspirations. Some of the German refugees have established a "Liberal" congregation. It is of little importance, however, because its services are attended mainly by German refugees.

The following figures gleaned from the census of 1930 illustrate the distribution of Jews in the Netherlands. Its Jewish population is 111,917 in a total population of 7,935,-565; Jews therefore comprise 1.4% of the population. There are 53,685 Jewish men and 58,232 Jewish women. The Jewish population is divided into 106,723 Ashkenazim and 5,194 Sephardim. The Jewish population in the rural districts is constantly on the decline. Many once flourishing communities have been compelled to close their synagogues because of the tendency of the Jewish population to migrate to larger cities. Thus, 90,525 Jews are distributed among cities having more than 100,000 inhabitants. In Amsterdam alone there are 65,523 Jews constituting 8.65% of the total population. The birth rate among the Jews is lower than among the Christians.

Dutch Jewry is especially proficient in the care of its aged. There are eight old people's homes in Amsterdam, one in each of the following cities: The Hague, Rotterdam, Gouda, Arnhem and Groningen. In five of these homes there are less than twenty occupants, in four about fifty, in one seventy-five, and one accommodates between 150 and 200 people.

The Jewish community runs a "Central Jewish Insane Asylum" with a women's department, a department for dangerous inmates and a sanatorium for non-violent patients. There is also a home for male defectives in Amsterdam. Mentally defective children up to eighteen years of age are cared

for in the "Paedagogium Archisomog" which cooperates with the "Jewish Invalid", a philanthropic society. There is a similar home in Hilversum. A startling fact is that there are proportionately 2½ times as many weak-minded Jews in institutions as there are Christians. Among the reasons given for this are: (1) Inbreeding, and (2) concentration in large cities where an immediate check-up and commitment is possible. The most modern technic of occupational therapy is utilized in the treatment of patients. There are four closely correlated institutions for the care of children and young girls. These are run on a business basis and are in close touch with the general non-Jewish agencies of this type. There are a number of Jewish orphan asylums which are more or less dependent upon their respective communities. There are three country institutions for the care of under-privileged, ailing children. All these homes are strictly orthodox. The Jewish poor have the same right to public aid as other elements of the population. Jewish philanthropy merely furnishes supplementary aid. Several Jewish agencies have been developed in recent years, especially designed to aid the Jewish immigrant. Credit associations have also been formed, which make loans to the extent of 500 guilders. One such association has existed in Amsterdam since 1840.

Young folks' clubs of various types are active in every city. One for the Jewish unemployed was founded in 1932 under city subvention. It may be mentioned here that through these clubs Youth Zionist activities have been very much extended in the last few years.

Various vocational schools, formerly concerned only with training for intellectual pursuits, have now been turned into practical trade schools which provide for both native and newly arrived German groups. The chief example of this is the workers' village at Wieringen.

In the intellectual realm, both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic groups have valuable Jewish libraries in Amsterdam: the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana (part of the Library of the University of Amsterdam) and the Livraria de Montesinos. The Society for the furtherance of Jewish studies (*De Vereeniging*

voor de Joodsche Wetenschap in Nederland) has made important contributions to Jewish learning. The Jews occupied also a high place in the general intellectual life of the country. There are several Jewish professors at the various universities. Some of the most important representatives of the country in the various branches of the arts are Jews.

In the political realm, the Jews of Holland are in every party save those distinctly designated as Christian and Fascist. They are active in political life. Three Jews hold seats in the Senate and seven in the Lower House. Although on the whole clearly identified as Jews, they consider themselves Hollanders and are found in liberal and leftist political groups.

The anti-Semitic forces are attempting to gain a hold in Holland. They find their expression mainly in the Dutch National Socialist Party which has a definite anti-Semitic program and bases much of its propaganda on the issue of refugees supposedly overflooding the country. Notwithstanding the support which this party receives from Germany and its vigorous election campaign, it suffered a pronounced defeat during the election of Parliament in the spring of 1937.

The Government, of course, is distinctly opposed to anti-Semitism. It is aided by public opinion. Recently in the Second Chamber there has been vigorous opposition to Nazi principles by a number of representatives of varied political parties. The press as a whole sharply condemns anti-Semitic excesses. The recent pogroms in Germany following the assassination of vom Rath have made the problem of refugees much more acute. The response of the non-Jewish public was a splendid vindication of its faith in democracy and tolerance. Homes were provided for many children, in some cases by municipal institutions. Within the past few weeks hundreds of thousands of guilders have been collected for the aid of German refugees. Characteristically, 90% of the contributors to this fund are non-Jews.

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