

## JEWS IN BELGIUM

By JOSEPH GLATT

**T**RAMPLED under the boots of a ruthless Nazi army, Belgium finds herself for the second time in a generation the victim of a German conqueror. Ever since the legions of Julius Caesar marched into Gaul, this strategic corner of Europe has felt the heavy yoke of one conqueror after another. From the fifteenth century onward, Spain, Austria, France and Holland successively held sway over it. And during the first World War, the embattled Allied Armies stubbornly fought for every foot of Flanders soil. Not without justification have historians termed it the battleground of Europe.

In this area, Jews have lived as far back as the fourth century, when history records Jewish settlements in Tongres and Tournai. During the feudal period, conditions were similar to those in other parts of the Continent. The populace was taught to hate Jews and to persecute them with increasing severity. A climax was reached in Brussels on May 20, 1370, when Jews, charged with alleged desecration of the host, were indiscriminately massacred. Those who escaped with their lives were expelled, and not until four centuries later were Jews officially permitted to live in Belgium.

The prohibition, however, was never really strictly enforced despite its reiteration in 1549 by Charles V of Spain. Some Belgian cities, particularly Antwerp, encouraged the settlement of Spanish and Portuguese Marranos in order to develop their trade and industry. These secret Jews introduced the diamond industry and greatly expanded the export trade of the country. Dutch and German Jews, who settled in Belgium during the eighteenth century, further stimulated the economic development of the country.

In 1792, when France occupied the country, full citizenship rights were granted to Jews. Under Dutch rule, which followed the fall of Napoleon, these rights were maintained. In 1831, however, Belgium won its independence and in its constitution stated unequivocally that "irrespective of race or religion, all Belgians are equal." Approximately 3,000 Jews, largely descendants of the Marranos, were living in the country at the time, for the most part in Brussels, Antwerp and Liège. Their number remained static until about fifty years later, when Russian Jews, following the wave of pogroms in their country, began to settle in ever-increasing numbers.

By 1910, the Jewish population of Belgium was estimated to be between 20,000 and 25,000. Immigration from Poland, Hungary and Rumania after the World War further added to the number of Jews in the country, until by 1939, it was believed that there were approximately 80,000 to 90,000 Jews in the total population of 8,346,000. Over half of them lived in the great port of Antwerp.

In spite of their relatively small number and brief period of residence, Jews made important contributions to the economy of the nation. Belgium is a poor country in natural resources, with coal the only raw material of importance. To support its population, therefore, the country must maintain a large export trade. The development of new industries to provide products for that export trade has largely been the work of Jews.

The cutting of diamonds, which was introduced by the Marranos and developed by the Russian and Polish Jews, was one of the chief industries of the country and a major factor in the maintenance of its prosperity. In 1938, it accounted for 13% of the country's exports and profited the State by \$30,000,000. The industry, which was almost wholly owned and operated by Jews, was located in Antwerp. Jews, particularly those from Poland, were responsible for the manufacture of traveling bags, pocket-books, and other leather products which, until the World War were usually imported from Germany. Almost 80% of the people engaged in this industry were Jews. Similar facts could be recorded for the fur, textile, and clothing industries, as well as for the manufacture of gabardine cloth, hosiery and fine knitted products.

Many Jews achieved positions of prominence in the political, cultural and scientific fields. The late Paul Errera, his son Jacques, his brother Leo Errera, and Maurice Philippon were among the outstanding members of the faculty of the University of Brussels. Other noted men at the University were Dr. Oscar Weill, Dr. O. Guensbourg, former Senator Herbert Speyer, president of the Administrative Council of the Jewish Agency, and Robert Goldschmit, a pioneer in wireless telegraphy. The Solvay Institute of Sociology at the university counted among its faculty Professor B. S. Chlepner and Max Gottschalk, who was also a member of the Belgian Social Security Board. The head of the university, Paul Heymans, a former minister of state, was of Jewish origin. At the University of Ghent, Professor Niko Gunsburg was dean of the faculty of jurisprudence. The Montefiore Electro-Technical Institute of the University of Liège was founded by Senator Montefiore.

Notable also are the Lambert, Philippon and Cassel banks, which occupied an important position in the economic life of the country. Of particular prominence was the Weiner family. One of its members engraved the first Belgian postage stamp, another cut the first coin die, and a third was a

prominent sculptor. Senator Weiner was a legal luminary, and General Ernest Weiner was in charge of the military academy. Others of distinction include General Bernheim, who was commander of one of the six army divisions in 1914; Paul May, who served as ambassador to Washington; and a number of Jews who won reputations in the fields of medicine, commerce, industry, law and journalism.

## II

WHEN Belgium won its independence in 1831, it officially recognized the Jewish religion and the Consistoire Israelite as the representative of the Jewish community. This body, located in Brussels, was a religious council in which the officially recognized communities of Antwerp, Brussels, Arlon, Charleroi, Ghent, Liège and Ostend were each represented by delegates. In these cities, the government provided the salaries of the religious leaders and at the same time controlled their administration. Thus, the government maintained the Chief Rabbi of Belgium, Dr. Joseph Wiener; two rabbis in Brussels, two rabbis in Antwerp as well as minor religious functionaries in each of the other officially recognized communities. The Consistoire Israelite, however, because of its conservative leadership and confinement to purely religious matters, exerted limited influence on Jewish life.

Far more influential was the Zionist Organization, headed by Jean Fischer during its first twenty-five years. A Federative Committee, composed of representatives of such groups as the Mizrachi, General Zionists, and Right Poale Zionists, guided the organization. The central offices of the Zionist Organization were located in Antwerp.

Both Zionist and religious groups established schools to supplement the secular education of Jewish children. While Jewish students were freely admitted to Belgian schools and universities, provision had to be made for their instruction in the religion and traditions of their people. In Antwerp, two parochial schools were established. The first, called "Yesode Hatorah," was formed by the Agudath Israel in 1905, and used Flemish as the language of instruction; the other, called "Tahkemoni," was organized in 1920 by the Mizrachi. Both were recognized by the government and the municipal administration, and were subsidized by them. Besides the regular elementary school curriculum, they provided instruction in Hebrew, Bible, Talmud, Jewish history, and other related subjects. In 1937, two branches were added to these schools for the instruction of girls. Their attendance list averaged about 1,500.

Supplementary schools of various political shades, sponsored by Zionists, Poale Zionists, Bundists, and including Talmud Torahs, provided for the education of another 1,200 children on Thursdays and Sundays—days

on which the public schools were closed. Each one had its own administration and taught Judaism according to its own point of view. Among the most important of these schools were the ones established by the Poale-Zion, the Left Poale-Zion, and the Bund. The fact that they were under the direction of political groups, however, aggravated the problem of providing a satisfactory religious educational system. Many parents refused to send their children to these schools, and the Jewish community also refused to subsidize them. Nevertheless, despite financial difficulties, the directors of these schools steadily endeavored to raise their standards.

Philanthropic activities were directed by central organizations set up in each city containing a sizable Jewish population. In Antwerp, this central body absorbed the Bikur Holim (Sick Fund), Hahnasath Orhim (Public Lodging for the Poor), Hahnasath Kala (Endowment Fund for Poor Brides), the Loan Office, the Orphan Asylum, "Villa Altol," a sanitarium for poor children in the outskirts of the city, and other charitable institutions. It also took over the task of supporting indigent Jews—begging was forbidden by law. In addition, emigrants were frequently provided with railroad tickets. Similar activities, although on a smaller scale, were carried on in Brussels by the Ezra.

The trend toward centralization of communal activities was further indicated by the formation in 1933 of the Council of Jewish Organizations. Its functions were to defend the Jews against anti-Semitic attacks, to organize Jewish life internally and externally. Both religious and secular organizations were represented in the Council.

The Foyer Israelite, or "Jewish Home," endeavored to acquaint Jewish immigrants with the language and customs of their new country. The Foyer also set up an information bureau, an employment agency and a Jewish forum, where lectures on Jewish and non-Jewish topics were given. A mixed commission to solve problems of collaboration with the Council was formed shortly before the German invasion.

### III

**I**N ADDITION to difficulties created by the huge influx of German refugees, the Belgian Government had to cope with an alien problem that was largely of its own making. Aliens could become citizens only after residing in the country for ten years, payment of a fee of 5,000 francs, and parliamentary approval. On the other hand, children born of foreign parents acquired full citizenship by a simple declaration made when they became sixteen years of age.

For these reasons, Belgium had an alien population of 339,799 in June, 1938, of whom roughly 50,000 were Jews. Most of them were from East

and Central European countries whose governments had revoked their citizenship because of their residence abroad. Stateless, and hampered by laws restricting their right to work, the position of many of these Jews was particularly difficult. Special licenses for tradesmen and peddlers were required after March 31, 1936, and work certificates, which frequently took six months to be issued, were a necessary requisite for employment by the end of the year. Moreover, these certificates could be obtained only on application by a prospective employer. Further difficulties in obtaining licenses were created by a law of November 16, 1939. These laws, of course, were not directed against Jews, but, nevertheless, they gravely affected their economic position.

The flight of German-Jewish refugees into Belgium assumed considerable proportions after the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws and particularly after the invasions of Austria and Czechoslovakia. As many as 700 refugees entered the country each week during these periods. Altogether, about 40,000 were admitted between 1933 and 1939. Only a few had the financial means to support themselves, while the number that left for North and South America remained small. Since the law forbade them to take employment, most of them had to be supported. To cope with this problem, therefore, Jews established a refugee committee with its main offices in Brussels and Antwerp. Refugees were aided in solving their emigration difficulties, and measures were taken to feed them and care for their health. In 1937, vocational training schools were set up to help refugees become locksmiths, tinsmiths, carpenters, mechanics and electricians.

During 1939, the refugee committees spent 20,000,000 francs for the support and care of about 12,000 refugees. While a good share of this money was provided by the Joint Distribution Committee, HICEM and ICA, the Belgian Government also contributed a considerable sum. Furthermore, on January 25, 1940, it allocated 8,000,000 francs for refugee relief. Its attitude in every respect was sympathetic and helpful. Proportionally, Belgium did far more than other and richer countries in alleviating the plight of the refugee.

#### IV

**A**NTI-SEMITISM was a very rare phenomenon in Belgium before 1933, but, parallel with the development of the Nazi movement in Germany, various extremist and nationalist groups, which were more or less anti-Semitic, made their appearance in the country. The extreme nationalist movements found particularly fertile ground in the Flemish districts and the former German territories of Eupen and Malmedy. Flemish extremists were encouraged by Hitler's agents, and at one time their separatist movement

had as many as sixteen deputies in Parliament. A Nazi party was also formed in Flanders and Eupen-Malmedy. The most vociferous anti-Semitic group, however, was the Rexist Party under the leadership of Leon Degrelle, which in 1936 obtained twenty-one seats in Parliament. Its influence, however, decreased as the threat of a German invasion became more and more imminent, with the result that at the last elections, the party won only four seats.

In an effort to preserve its neutrality after the outbreak of war between Germany and the Allies, the Belgian Government prohibited the publication of the Communist, National Socialist, Flemish Nationalist and Rexist newspapers. All political propaganda for one or the other of the warring countries was also forbidden. Anti-Semitic agitation, however, increased despite these measures. Jews were accused of trying to involve Belgium in the war and were held responsible for the economic difficulties of the country. Furthermore, despite the fact that 8,321 foreign born Jews—at least one-quarter of whom were German refugees—volunteered for army service, anti-Semites made much of the fact that foreign born Jews were exempt from military service.

As the war progressed, the situation of the Jews generally became worse. Many lost their sources of income and had to apply for relief. Refugees were interned, and the expulsion of all aliens who had entered the country since March, 1940, was ordered. The attitude of the government, however, remained friendly, and sincere efforts were made to stop anti-Semitic agitation. During the first World War, Belgian Jews fought loyally in the army, and since then many young Belgian Jews had served as soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers of the highest ranks. When the dreaded German invasion finally took place on May 10, several thousand Jewish soldiers were serving in the Belgian Army. Their fate and the fate of the interned refugees after the Germans overran the country is still unknown. Thousands were reported to have fled into France, but the largest number probably were overtaken by the swiftly moving German Army. Under Nazi control, they can expect only the fate of the Jews of Poland.