# DOSSIER

# THE LIBERATION

On the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the liberation of Belgium we are dedicating a theme issue of our magazine to the country's liberation.

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# 80 years since the liberation. A Belgian perspective on the liberation for Holocaust survivors

Getuigen/Témoigner wishes to mark the 80th anniversary of the liberation with a theme issue. Engaging with recent historical scholarship, it brings together historians who study specific aspects of liberation from a Belgian perspective. It pays attention to the period from September 1944 until the end of 1945 with contributions concerning the liberation of the camps in Belgium – the Dossin barracks (Laurence Schram) and Breendonk (Richard Menkis) – encounters between Jewish allies and local survivors in Antwerp (Veerle Vanden Daelen), and Jewish life after the liberation in Liège (Thierry Rozenblum). As such, it offers a broad and balanced overview of liberation in Belgium and allows the readers to see that the liberation of Breendonk received at the time of the liberation more attention than the liberation of Dossin and Auschwitz and the return of surviving Jews and Roma.

Which interactions do we encounter and what do they tell us to advance our nuanced understanding of liberation, (local) governments and justice, the Allied presence, and local Jewish communal life in postwar Belgium? Zooming in on specific cases in and connected to Belgium allows for a more nuanced understanding and detail than overview studies in which the Belgian case and its micro-studies and their insights are often less or not incorporated.[1] As such, it also brings in a different perspective than the general one. Also, these contributions shed light on which topics received attention at the time of the liberation itself. This can differ greatly with the topics of liberation which do so today.

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The Liberation or end of the German occupation in Belgium during the Second World War took mostly place from the beginning to the end of September 1944, with some extensions until the beginning of November and with a reconquest by the Germans of part of the Ardennes in December 1944 – January 1945. The country was liberated by the

British, American, Canadian, Polish armies, including Belgian troops of the Brigade Piron. The camps in Belgium (Breendonk and Dossin) were no longer under German occupation as of 4 September 1944. However, the places where detainees from these camps had been deported to would remain under Nazi rule for months to come. Only Majdanek had been liberated earlier, by Soviet troops, on 22-23 July 1944. The next camp liberation in the East, the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, also by Soviet troops, followed more than half a year later, on 27 January 1945. Over two months later, US forces liberated the camps Buchenwald and Dora-Mittelbau on 11 April, followed by Flossenbürg on 23 April, Dachau on 29 April, and Mauthausen on 5 May. British forces liberated camps in northern Germany, including Bergen-Belsen on 15 April and Neuengamme on 4 May. Shortly before Germany's surrender in May 1945, Soviet forces liberated the concentration camps of Stutthof, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück.[2] This time-line is very important to keep in mind, as it means that while most of Belgium was liberated in September 1944, the surviving deportees would only be liberated at the earliest more than four to nine months later.[3] The earliest repatriations took place at the very end of March – beginning of April 1945. There were in general three groups of local Jews "returning" to liberated Belgium: the first were those who had lived officially or in hiding in Belgium, the second were the survivors from the camps, returning as of the Spring of 1945, and the third were those who returned from safe havens of refuge abroad (mostly the US, Cuba, the UK and Switzerland).[4]

Both in Belgium and in the camps in the East, Jews had been endangered until the very last moment before or even still in the chaos of liberation, as evidenced in Thierry Rozenblum's contribution on Liège. In Antwerp, the day before the city's liberation an elderly Jewish couple that had been arrested by Flemish SS, a member of the Black Brigade (Zwarte Brigade) and a German on 31 August, after three days in custody and without food, was brought to a secluded area and shot, killing the man and severely wounding the woman.[5] Laurence Schram's article indicates how in June, July and August newly arrested Jews were still being brought into the Dossin barracks, with the last deportation train leaving on 31 July 1944 with 563 deportees on board of whom only 189 would survive.[6]

But then early in September 1944, Belgium's liberation started. On 3 September 1944, the Brigade Piron, the Belgian military which operated under the command of the British 6th Airborne Division, which was part of the First Canadian Army, participated in the liberation of Brussels. This division counted quite a few Belgian Jews, the most famous being baron Jean Bloch. Among these troops was Antwerp-born David Isboutsky, who had entered the Belgian army on 3 January 1939. He escaped during the war and made his way to Cuba, via Spain and Portugal, where he arrived on 17 December 1941. Together with nine other young Jewish men from Belgium, he had reported to the Belgian embassy in Cuba and was brought to a military training in Canada and subsequently put into action with the Allied armies. He belonged to the Antwerp Orthodoxy, and since 1933 had been a member of Bne Akiva. When he came back to Belgium, he was fortunate to hear that his parents had survived in a retirement home outside of Antwerp, a city which the Nazis had left as officially "judenrein". David had an emotional reunion with his parents.[7]

However, not all were as fortunate. The Dutch-language Antwerp Socialist newspaper *Volksgazet* reported in its issue of 7 September 1944 on the story of an anonymous soldier. The headline forebodes the tragic account in the article: "A Belgian Soldier is coming home – He doesn't find his Jewish parents." The soldier in question had immediately rushed to his parents' house: "For four years he had seen the living room, the kitchen, his bedroom in his imagination. When he appeared before the house, it was closed. No one came to answer his calls. Neighbours rushed outside and recognized him. Their greetings were warm, but their faces were serious: they had to inform him that his parents had been taken away, that the furniture

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had been taken away. A soldier came home. Will he see his parents again?"[8] Thanks to the research of Jan Ouvry, we now know that this soldier most likely was Herbert Stellman.[9] The encounters of Jews arriving with the Allied forces in liberated Europe, and most specifically Antwerp, and their encounters with local Jewish survivors is the focus of Veerle Vanden Daelen's contribution and sheds light on the mutual help they offered each other.

Also for Jews who had survived the war in Belgium, the liberation was not joyful or heroic. Léon Gronowski, who was without news about his wife and daughter, wrote in his diary:

> Sunday 3 September 1944 [...] The country has been liberated. People flock into the streets wild with joy. They are crying, laughing, singing, embracing each other, really celebrating [...] For me, the liberation has not yet come. I am unhappy and depressed [...] My loved ones are still in the camps [...] I'm wandering through the streets, don't know where to go; my heart is bleeding; the liberation is not meant for me.[10]

While multiple newspapers in Belgium reported about the liberation of the Breendonk concentration camp in September 1944 (*Volksgazet*, *Le Peuple*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *La Dernière Heure*, *La Libre Belgique*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, and *Drapeau Rouge*), the liberation of the Dossin barracks was only reported in *La Libre Belgique*.[11] The liberation of the camp was also far from heroic or glorious: the occupier left the barracks, where arrested Jews and Roma had awaited their deportation, left behind unattended in the night of 3 to 4 September. At least 549 remaining Jews and three non-Jews detained in the barracks were left unattended.[12] There was no witnessing of Allies marching in, but it did mean refound freedom, even if there were in most cases no "homes" to return to, nor family members to be reunited with, as would become painfully clear quite quickly. "Where to go?" was a very relevant but difficult to answer question for Jewish survivors.

## JEWS (RE-)SETTLING IN LIBERATED BELGIUM

As before the war, a large group chose to settle in Brussels, joining the about 4,000 Jews who were still legally residing in the city at its liberation and where the synagogue and Jewish organisations, including the *Association des Juifs de Belgique* (the so-called Jewish Council) were still operating. Brussels was also the point of arrival for repatriates and the place where the *Œuvre Centrale Israélite de Secours* (OCIS) and international Jewish aid organisations operated.[13] The capital of the country was and would remain for the remainder of the twentieth century the city with the highest number of Jewish inhabitants in Belgium. However, with an estimated 12,000 Jews in Brussels in 1945, this was only a fraction of the pre-war number. Antwerp, which held this position at the eve of the Second World War, would not soon regain its position as the largest Jewish community in the country. With the city under V-bomb attacks from 13 October 1944 until 29 March 1945, the several hun-

dred Jews who had survived the war in hiding in the city would only be slowly joined by returning survivors and newcomers from abroad.[14] With only 1,200 Jews living in Antwerp a few months after the liberation, and this number only rising to about 2,000 in 1945, Antwerp counted a dramatically low number of Jews, especially considering that an estimated 35,500 Jews had lived in the city at the eve of the war.[15]

Other cities with Jewish communities in Belgium were Ghent, Charleroi, Ostend and Liège, the latter also having to deal with the consequences of V-bombs in 1944, as is evidenced in Thierry Rozenblum's contribution. In total, approximately 30,000 Jews lived in Belgium by the end of 1945, of which about 18,000 survived the war in Belgium, 8,000 had returned from safe havens abroad, about 1,500 survived various camps in the East and the others were so-called "Displaced Persons" or DPs, Jews who could not return to their pre-war homes and who had not lived in Belgium before the war. Only about ten percent of Jews living in Belgium held Belgian nationality, even though many of the others had legally resided in Belgium before the war. The majority held Polish nationality, followed by German and Austrian Jews.[16]

The needs of the surviving Jews were high, as we read in both Vanden Daelen and Rozenblum's contributions. The witness account of Romi Goldmuntz, one of Antwerp's most important diamond dealers, who survived the war in London and who visited Antwerp by the end of 1944, was reported by the *Belgian Jewish Committee* in the UK to the *Belgian Jewish Representative Committee* in the US and includes the following: "On [his] arrival he immediately got in touch with the Jewish Defense Committee there; the Antwerp Committee address is: 313, Lange Leemstraat, where the Jewish School [Tachkemoni] used to be, and a large number of Jews are glad to sleep on the straw provided for that purpose there. [...] The members of the Antwerp Committee are not known to him personally. They are working hard and well and he is very satisfied with this organization. It is heartbreaking to see our friends there and one can still see the fear in their faces after years of hiding and hardship. They all look old and decrepit and are completely demoralized; middle-aged women look like old women of 80; in fact they are 'levende leiken' [sic]".[17]

And all this time, there was no news yet of those who had been deported. The liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau on 27 January 1945, followed by other camps in April and early May 1945, was yet to come. The first repatriated survivors arrived in Belgium by the end of March and at the beginning of April 1945. There were very few of them and their condition and stories were horrifying. This diminished the hopes of the return of the others tremendously. On 31 May 1945 a report of the Belgian mission of the *Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces* (SHAEF) read: "Of [the] Jews deported from Belgium, only 540 have returned. The whereabouts of the others is not known."[18] Only by the end of 1945, would the awful fact that only five percent of those deported from the Dossin barracks survived the war sink in.

In the meantime, those who survived the war and had already returned to Belgium went to the shelters, organised by the Jewish community, where they could register, receive information, food, clothes, a place for the night, etc. An American GI, David Stein, 29 years old at that moment (extensively quoted in Vanden Daelen's contribution), described the return of survivors from the camps. It is not clear whether his description relates to Antwerp or Brussels:

> "The returnees arrive barely dressed, some only with German military overcoats thrown over their bare backs. Some are still wearing the striped pyjamas which they wore in the concentration camps. Nothing is being done towards giving them a special diet or any kind of individual care which they most urgently need. They are just being put into makeshift rooms provided by the Jewish community in their building. They originally slept on burlap beds of straw. Now they sleep on wooden beds with no springs or mattresses.

> There is only one doctor to give them medical care. Some of them have been subjected to Nazi experimentation and have only a few months to live. Young people are thrust together with men and women and they hear all kinds of sadistic tales. Many of those who returned remained alive because of their collaboration with the Nazis. They told details of the burning of thousands of their fellow Jews. One even boasted that he burned his own father."[19]

Chil Elberg and Nathan Stern were among the few surviving deportees repatriated to Belgium. Chil survived no fewer than twelve camps and a death march. At a certain moment he had been able to hide in a farm, and as such escaped the rest of the death march he was on. On 25 April 1945 he met his American liberators. He first had to recover in hospital before being able to be repatriated to Belgium on 22 May 1945. Almost all his friends had been deported and would not return. He later described being deposited in front of his home in Brussels: "I could barely walk, and had to use crutches. I only weighed 35 kilograms. I looked at the door and did not see my own doorbell. I chose another bell. Nobody opened. There is not a single Elberg who still lives here... I still dream of my mother."[20] Later that year, in November, Chil's sister, Perla, returned from Switzerland: "I cannot describe what the reunion meant to me and to her. I suddenly did not feel so alone in the world anymore."[21] When Nathan Stern returned from Dachau and arrived in the Belgian capital on 26 June 1945, he only found his mother. Decades later, he remembered his return to Brussels, still celebrating the liberation and the armistice, as follows: "I went to my room, climbed into my bed and slept. Outside, the streets of Brussels were packed with people."[22]

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE GENOCIDE SINKING IN

Even though there was information on the Holocaust (albeit not under that name yet) during the war and after the liberation of Belgium – see for example the series of the Flemish *Vooruit* newspaper published between 29 October and 9 November entitled "The bestial persecution of the Jews"[23] – the understanding of the genocide only came with the first and few surviving deportees returned home. Until then, the victims seemed not to be identified as possibly being deported from Belgium.[24]

On 3 June 1945 a Jewish man, who had been protected from persecution due to marriage with a non-Jewish woman, went to the Antwerp police to denounce a person who had denounced Jews to the occupier. He motivated the moment of his declaration as follows: "I did not make this declaration earlier because I thought that from the Jews deported on 5 September 1943, there would still be returnees, though I now have the assurance that this will no longer be the case."[25] We see that about a year after the liberation, the terminology changed from "not yet returned" to "not returned", which meant that the person in question had not survived the camps.[26]

From the Dossin barracks, 25,843 persons were deported: 25,490 Jews and 353 Roma. Of them 25,625, including all Roma, were deported to Auschwitz and 218 to other camps (Ravensbrück, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen and Vittel). Only 1,756 survived: 326 by escaping successfully from the deportation trains, 21 by not being redeported after being rearrested and 1,409 of those who arrived at a camp (1,261 of those deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau). These numbers include Jews and Roma arrested in Northern France (as part of the territory under von Falkenhausen's direction), and Jews from other countries (mostly the Netherlands) arrested in Belgium while trying to flee to unoccupied territory. However, from the Jews living in Belgium around May 1940, at least 5,970 were deported from France (mostly Drancy), of which only one successfully escaped the deportation train and 297 survived the camps.[27] But, during the occupation, not only Jews and Roma were deported. About 43,000 political prisoners were incarcerated in camps and prisons. From this group, at least 13,958 perished during the war.[28]

What is very interesting is that the liberation of Breendonk or concentration camps such as Buchenwald could count on much attention in the media, much more than the liberation of the Dossin barracks – which went almost unnoticed – and the liberation of and repatriation from camps where racially deported were sent to. Even the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau passed unmentioned in most Belgian newspapers. In Richard Menkis' article we read about Canadian reporting on the liberation of Breendonk. In the Western press, Buchenwald, together with Belsen and Dachau, were described "as the worst of the Nazi camps", even though these were not extermination centres.[29] And, as Smets notes, when reporting on Auschwitz and the genocide and massacres that took place there, the Jewish identity of the victims more often than not remained unmentioned or received very little attention.[30] This recognition would only follow much later.

In this context, it is also important to note that the camps liberated by the Western Allies were not Holocaust annihilation centres. As Dan Stone notes: "The key annihilation centres (Chełmno and the 'Operation Reinhard' camps of Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka) had been dismantled long before the end of the war, and the other major sites, Majdanek and Auschwitz, were liberated by the Red Army who found them almost empty of people."[31] Stone argues that if the Western Allies had little to say about the Holocaust in the immediate postwar period, that is not only because the term 'Holocaust' did not yet exist, but also "because the camps they liberated were not 'Holocaust' camps and because Jews constituted fewer than one-third of the survivors, who also included very large numbers of non-Jewish Poles and Soviet POWs. Millions of forced labourers were also liberated and for the Allies it was not always easy in the pandemonium of the end of the war to understand the difference between different categories of deportees."[32]

Immediately after the liberation, the Jewish victims blended in with countless other victims. No distinction was made yet between concentration camps and annihilation centres. The context of Majdanek and Auschwitz was also very complicated, as they were both concentration camps and annihilation centres, and because they both held racially persecuted and other prisoners. The fact that there were hardly any Jewish survivors further contributed to the fact that they received little immediate interest. Moreover, the resistance and the political world wished to emphasise the common suffering of the Belgian people, a concept in which there was no room for emphasising specific groups. The Jews and Roma formed a minority group, were relatively isolated and usually did not have Belgian nationality, hence there was no influential pressure group to point public attention to their specific and tragic fate.[33]

## EMERGENCY AID, JUSTICE AND RECOGNITION

The Jewish resistance organisations from during the war were the first to organise emergency aid

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for the survivors. Already on 12 September 1944, the Antwerp Committee published the following message in the newspaper *Volksgazet*: "To the Jewish population! After many months of the most brutal persecutions, in which the black and brown riffraff did everything in their power to destroy us both morally and physically, we can finally 'betray' our existence ourselves. The committee that until now has been in touch with you in secret, will continue to exist for the time being. The social relief that has been distributed to you to date, will continue to be distributed."[34] Out of the Jewish Defence Committee (CDJ) the *Aide aux Israélites Victimes de la Guerre* (AIVG) was founded in Brussels on 11 October 1944.[35] It was set up as a national structure with local departments, such as in Brussels, Liège and Antwerp. However, even with overseas Jewish welfare and support from Jews who came in with the Allied forces, the setting up of a welfare and social aid system was not easy. The Belgian Jewish Committee and the Belgian Jewish Representative Committee in respectively London and New York could offer assistance from abroad as well, but the circumstances and cooperation were complicated. While Queen Elisabeth supported financially with 50,000 Belgian francs and offered her support to fundraisers, the Belgian government's support was very limited to non-existent.[36] Refugee aid consisted only of the most basic needs: food, clothes, a place to sleep. Homes for children and for repatriates were opened.[37]

The first priority of the returned Jews was to retrieve information on the fate and whereabouts of their dear ones. To this end, registrations were opened and all available information was gathered. Ofipresse reported on 4 May 1945 how the Minister of the Interior, Van Glabbeke, had transferred the Jewish Registers made in all communes following the occupier's decree of 28 October 1940, to the AIVG.[38] On 15 June 1945, Ofipresse reported on the situation of the deportees returning to Belgium: "A little less than a thousand Jewish deportees from Belgium have returned until today. It is feared that the number of survivors of the extermination camps does not exceed five percent. Their situation is all the more tragic as most of them find no family to welcome them, nor a home to shelter them."[39] By the end of 1945, the AIVG's Research and Repatriation Service (*Service Recherches et Rapatriement*) had information on only 1,196 repatriated Jews of the 25,441 they knew at that time to have been deported from the Dossin barracks during the war. The first 19 convoys had repatriation numbers below one percent.[40]

Apart from finding information on family and friends, another urgent priority was to report to the police or to the resistance cases of extortion and betrayal by informers during the occupation.[41] The recovery of property and the return to their homes also posed enormous problems. In most cases, as also referred to by Rozenblum in his Liège article, returning Jews found their houses emptied of their belongings as a consequence of both the *Möbelaktion* (the "Furniture Action," a Nazi looting organisation which seized furniture

from Jewish homes, see also in Rozenberg's article) and robbery by neighbours. Moreover, in most cases, especially as the majority of Jews rented their houses, these were also occupied by new inhabitants. Searches for hidden belongings were often hindered by the new inhabitants of the places. And those who had entrusted personal goods and valuables to neighbours and friends for safekeeping, were often confronted with a total denial of these parties ever having received these goods. Restitution and compensation would be very incomplete and late, if at all.[42] Practically everyone had legal challenges in one way or the other. In these most difficult circumstances, confronted with unprecedented material, legal, physical and psychological challenges, most surviving Jews were literally "surviving", their nights being haunted by nightmares full of anxiety. Chil Elberg describes them: "The camps, the deaths, the corpses, my parents, the friends gone forever"...[43] Some saw no other way out than suicide.

On top of that, and like unfortunately everywhere, surviving Jews were confronted with incomprehension to their situation and even open antisemitism.[44] This often happened in parallel with bureaucratic systems in democracies who did not wish to make distinctions within their population, while the racially persecuted obviously had been confronted during the war with a whole range of specific problems the larger population had not been confronted with. In addition, what we see after the liberation in Belgium is that the racially persecuted group of Jews and Roma was discriminated against because of their lacking Belgian citizenship. Even though initially promised by the Minister of War Victims, M. Henri Pauwels, they were excluded in most cases from receiving the recognition of "political prisoner" and the indemnifications and payments that went with this statute (see also the contribution of Thierry Rosenblum).[45] Jews from Belgium without Belgian citizenship in Buchenwald were not repatriated together with the Belgians. A group within the non-Belgian-citizen Jews who had a particularly hard time after the liberation were those Jews which held so-called "enemy nationalities", such as German and Austrian Jews. Indeed, all German nationals and all citizens of former German allies were labelled "enemies" after the liberation, and the tragedy of this was that this also included many Jews. This measure caused a range of problems for those Jews, from the sequestration of their possessions and a variety of other social restrictions, to even imprisonment.[46] We also notice how German and Austrian Jews had a very difficult time receiving temporary or permanent residence permits, even to the degree that a German-Austrian couple described by Thierry Rozenblum in his article, decided to leave the country altogether.

Between September 1944 and the end of 1949, 405,076 collaboration files were registered. While 86 percent were filed without further action or ultimately led to a dismissal of prosecution, the Military Court sentenced about 50,000 collaborators to prison, and pronounced 2,940 death sentences, of which 242 were executed, among them the "Torturers of Breendonk". The Jew hunters, however, escaped the execution squad and, there were few prosecutions in Belgium for complicity in the genocide on Jews and Roma. Only in the trial of Beeckmans and Lambrichts did the persecution of Jews play a central role. For the others this was more of a side aspect. General von Falkenhausen spent four years in prison, while Belgian SS men were jailed until the 1950s. Ten camp guards from Breendonk, having been sentenced to death, were executed opposite the Dossin barracks on 12 April 1947. No Belgian civil servants were prosecuted for their part in the persecution of the Jews. The matter was barely investigated. Only in 1980, Kurt Asche, leader of the war-time *Judenabteilung* in Brussels and organiser of the deportations of Jews from Belgium, stood trial in Germany on evidence provided by the Belgian historian Maxime Steinberg and was convicted for complicity to the murder of Jews from Belgium.[47] That so many perpetrators in the racial persecution and genocidal process in Belgium were never persecuted and tried after the war played a key role in the fact that the persecution of Jews did not appear in collective memory for decades after the war. The victims of the "Final Solution" could not count on

great interest in the immediate post-war years, including in court. While today Auschwitz is the symbol of the horrors of the Nazi camp system, in the years after the war it was Buchenwald.[48] It is also interesting to note that the case against the leaders of the Association of Jews in Belgium, the so-called "Jewish Council", submitted by Jewish representatives to the Military Court who opened a case on 17 October 1944, was also classified without further consequence.[49]

## JEWISH LIFE

Just like before the war, Jewish life in Belgium did not form a homogeneous entity. As everywhere and always, different ways of being Jewish existed next to each other, with (partial) overlaps and oppositions each other. Religious versus non- and a-religious, Zionist versus anti- and a-Zionist, every position on the political spectrum, and all of this in a wide variety of languages including Yiddish and Hebrew, local languages and languages from places of (family) origin(s). In the immediate post-war period, Yiddish was still the common language of many Eastern and Central European immigrants as well as of Orthodox Jews.[50] This was less the case for the families who had lived multiple generations in Belgium or for the Jews entering Belgium with the Allied forces or overseas welfare organisations. In very many cases, the wartime persecution strengthened Jews in their convictions on their way of being Jewish. Ardent Communist, Zionist and religious life emerged while some most explicitly did not wish to associate with Judaism or Jewish life altogether. Interestingly enough, this strengthening of convictions coincided with a time of such dire circumstances and challenges in Jewish life which gave way to many attempts to unify and centralise Jewish life. On the one hand, there was the need to centralise Jewish aid to those who needed it – the local survivors, the repatriates, the search for and care of the many children hidden in non-Jewish environments or surviving the war in Jewish homes – and, on the other hand, the strong desire to stand up for one's convictions and way of being Jewish.

The largest overseas Jewish welfare organisation, the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), wished to centralise all finances and help with the AIVG in Brussels, the capital and where most surviving Jews lived. Other Jewish communities in Belgium would be local departments of this centralised organisation. However, the differences in view, which came most prominently and painfully to the fore in the discussions on the children, made this set-up extremely difficult, even leading to the Antwerp office in the end falling directly under JDC and no longer working with JDC via the Brussels AIVG. Antwerp managed to receive this exemption partly because of the relatively quick reconstruction of pre-war social welfare infrastructure. Whereas in Antwerp even Jewish day schools reopened within weeks after the liberation, all other places in Belgium struggled much harder (see Vanden Daelen and Rozenblum).[51] Moreover, in Brussels, some structures, including the synagogue, had still been officially active by the time of

the liberation, the only Jewish organisations in other places that were still active at the time were the Jewish resistance organisations. Transitioning from resistance to post-war governance of Jewish life was not obvious or easy, and the view of wartime resistance groups did not necessarily merge well with that of other pre-war organisations. This setting did not always make for a smooth transition from pre- to wartime and post-war structures and management. The strongest clashes in social help and the so-called "children's question" were those between Communists and Zionists, and between religious and non-religious. Especially the education (in a Jewish environment or not, and, if within a Jewish environment, what type of Jewish environment) led to the most bitter and ardent debates, often leaving the most vulnerable party involved, the children themselves, without a voice.[52]

At the moment of the liberation and in months to come, it often was not a question of which type of religious service one wished to attend, but rather of finding any gathering of local survivors and Allied Jews coming together to celebrate Shabbat or Jewish holidays. These gatherings were very meaningful, both for the local survivors and for the allied Jews. In Antwerp, which had had three official Jewish religious communities with state recognition before the war, a sense of unity in the decimated religious communities led to the idea of having "unified Jewish communities". The "unified Jewish communities" led to an unofficial merging of the two Ashkenazi communities (until 1958), but it was not joined by the Sephardi community. The presence of religious infrastructures such as a Jewish religious burial society, ritual baths, study and prayer houses, schools and the provision of kosher food, was of key importance for religious and especially Orthodox Jews. But the variations within the various kinds of Jewishness would reemerge and make for further divisions and splits to an at first and at first sight post-liberation unity.[53]

Even though, economically speaking, Jews were never a separate group, the revival and organisation of Jewish life also had a strong component of ensuring economic reintegration into society. An economically very important category of returnees was the diamond business people who had found refuge in London, New York, Havana, Brazil and Palestine, to name the most important centres. Their return not only impacted Jewish life in Belgium, mostly in Antwerp, but also the economy of Antwerp and broad surroundings and the Belgian economy as a whole. Whether helping fellow Jews find a profession or a job to support themselves or providing social welfare, social services were somthing in which Jewish organisations invested highly.[54]

## REMEMBERING AND HONOURING THE VICTIMS

After the liberation of Belgium, life gradually restarted. However, what has become one of the most known aspects of the Second World War, namely the Holocaust, did not receive much attention in the months or years after the liberation. The small number of survivors who had been racially persecuted during the war and their needs received little attention and were not a priority. Unlike the Breendonk or Buchenwald victims, the racial deportees did not fit into a narrative of "national martyrdom".[55] While there was already a Jewish commemorative event already on 29 October 1944 at the *Tir National*, organised by the CDJ and with an estimated 2,500 participants, this falls within what Smet calls "the Belgian paradigm of the horror", in which places of execution and the Breendonk fortress were points of reference to demonstrate the occupier's cruelty.[56]

For recognition of their victimhood, the racially persecuted would have to wait much longer. Even within the commemorations organised by Jewish groups, the core of the attention immediately after the liberation went to resistance heroes (such as Mala Zimetbaum, the executed Jews at the *Tir National*, the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto and the recognition of non-Jews who helped Jews).

PRESENTATION

An annual commemoration for the victims at the Dossin barracks only started in 1956.[57] Dossin as a place of commemoration with historical meaning in the racial persecution would come very late. The first commemorative plaque – for the Jewish victims – was installed at the Dossin barracks on 30 May 1948, a second plaque for the Roma victims would only follow in 1995. It was only in the latter year that a small part of the former camp would become a museum. At the time of the liberation, the murdered Jews, Roma and Sinti had no voice and remembrance. Belgian general society had little to no attention or awareness about them, and the survivors (who were not a homogeneous group) were literally "surviving". Other pressing material, physical and psychological challenges, such as the ones mentioned in this article, had priority over commemorative initiatives. At the same time, one should not dismiss the attention that was given to commemoration, even if the form and place was different than what it would evolve into later.[58]

The Jewish life that emerged after the liberation restarted with the help of Jews arriving in the liberated areas with the Allied forces and overseas Jewish welfare organisations, such as the Joint Distribution Committee. While certain structures of Jewish life had survived the war or would be restored shortly thereafter, some would not reappear or would only briefly restart and others were totally new. Jewish life after the war was only a decimated fraction of the pre-war and would never fully reconstruct itself. Many aspects of the immediate liberation period already gave an idea of the direction in which Jewish life would evolve, such as the Orthodox Jewish life in Antwerp. Jewish survivors were confronted with a wide range of practical and emotional challenges and dealt with them as best as possible in dire circumstances, with limited to no government support or support from the broader society. This combined with the devastation on so many innocent lives lost and ruined, leads us to agree with the title – "The Sorrows of Liberation" – of the concluding section of Dan Stone's *The Liberation of the camps. The end of the Holocaust and its aftermath*.[59] We hope with this theme issue to raise awareness of various aspects of liberation for the victims, which indeed are in many ways a story of reorganisation amidst a backdrop of death and destruction, one that was generally unnoticed by the larger society.

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(1) Wasserstein, Bernard, *Vanishing Diaspora: The Jews in Europe since 1945,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996; Weinberg, David, *Recovering a voice. West European Jewish Communities after the Holocaust*, Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015.

(2) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (ed.), "Liberation of Nazi camps," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/liberation-of-nazi-camps (accessed on 5 April 2024).

(3) Stone, Dan, *The liberation of the camps. The end of the Holocaust and its aftermath,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015.

(4) Vanden Daelen, Veerle, "Returning: Jewish life in Antwerp in the aftermath of the Second World War (1944-1945)," *European Judaism*, 38(2), issue 75, 2005, p. 29; Saerens, Lieven, *Onwillig Brussel. Een verhaal over Jodenvervolging en verzet,* Leuven: Davidsfonds Uitgeverij, 2014, p. 183.

(5) Felixarchief (City Archives Antwerp), Police archives, Processen-verbaal 6e wijk, MA 28 156/2669.

(6) Kazerne Dossin, "Transporten", https://kazernedossin.eu/onderzoeksproject/transporten/ (accessed on 5 April 2024).

(7) See: Brachfeld, Sylvain, "David Istoubsky, http://www.brigade-piron.be/temoignages_fichiers/tem_Isboutsky.David.html (consulted on 2 June 2024). David Isboutsky further participated in the Allied liberation in the Netherlands and in Germany. In August 1945, he was demobilised and returned to Antwerp. He made aliyah in 1946.

(8) S.n., "Een Belgisch Soldaat komt thuis – Hij vindt zijne joodsche ouders niet", *Volksgazet*, 7 September 1944, 2.

(9) Vanden Daelen, Veerle, "75 jaar geleden: een lichtje in de duisternis, de heropleving van het Joods leven in Antwerpen", https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/06/01/75-jaar-geleden-het-joodse-leven-herneemt/ (consulted on 5 April 2024).

(10) Kazerne Dossin, KD_00846 - Simon Gronowski. Collection, Notebook of Léon Gronowski (Kazerne Dossin, Mechelen).

(11) Smets, Eva, *De collectieve herinnering aan nazi-genocide in het joods en Belgisch-nationaal discours, 1944-1951*, Brussel, VUB, unpublished dissertation, 2001, p. 56-57 (on the liberation of Dossin: 'Cinq cent vingt-sept Juifs internés à Malines ont échappé à la déportation', *La Libre Belgique*, 8 September 1944).

(12) Schram, Laurence, De 'bevrijding' van de Dossinkazerne, this issue, p. 45.]

(13) Vanden Daelen, Veerle, "Het leven moet doorgaan. De joden in Antwerpen na de bevrijding (1944-1945)," *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis/Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent (Brussel/Bruxelles)*, 13-14, 2004, 145 (zie: https://www.journalbelgianhistory.be/nl/system/files/article_pdf/chtp13_14_008_Dossier2_VandenDaelen.pdf)

(14) On the V-bombs, see Palinckx, Koen, "België onder de V-bommen: Antwerpen-1944-1945," in: Wannes Devos en Kevin Gony (eds.), *Oorlog. Bezetting. Bevrijding. België 1940-1945,* Tielt: Lannoo, 2019, p. 261-269.

(15) Vanden Daelen, Veerle, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen. De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap in Antwerpen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog (1944-1960),* Amsterdam: Aksant, 2008, p. 29-31.

(16) *Ibid*., p. 31-32; American Jewish Archives, World Jewish Congress-files (further abbreviated as AJA, WJC-files), C19/12, Belgium, 1945-1946, note sur la situation de la population juive en Belgique; United States National Archives (Washington DC), Record Group 331, SHAEF-files Belgium, Memorandum: Situation of Jews in Belgium, 10 November 1944.

(17) AJA, WJC-files (coll. 361), H59/18, Belgian Jewish Committee (Londen) to Belgian Jewish Representative Committee (New York), 20 December 1944.

(18) United States National Archives, RG 331 (SHAEF-files Belgium), report 31 May 1945 'Repatriation of Belgians from Germany'.

(19) AJA, WJC-files (coll. 361), H61/8, Miss Hilb citeert aan Dr. Tartakower, 12 July 1945.

(20) Saerens, *Onwillig Brussel*, 168.

(21) *Ibid*.

(22) *Ibid*.

(23) Smets, *De collectieve herinnering*, 52.

(24) *Ibid*., p. 53-54.

(25) Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen*, 50, based on City archives Antwerp, Modern Archief, Politiearchief, Processen-verbaal 7e wijk, MA 29.934/2150.

(26) Vanden Daelen, "Het leven moet doorgaan," 152-156.

(27) Kazerne Dossin, research databases on deportees from the Dossin barracks and deportees living in Belgium deported from Drancy (France).

(28) Saerens, *Onwillig Brusssel*, 169.

(29) Stone, *The liberation of the camps*, 69 (specifically on Buchenwald, see pp. 71-76).

(30) Smets, *De collectieve herinnering*, 61.

(31) Stone, *The liberation of the camps*, 18.

(32) *Ibid*.

(33) Saerens, *Onwillig Brussel*, 185-186.

(34) S.n., "Mededeelingen - Aan de Joodsche Bevolking!", *Volksgazet*, 12 September 1944, p. 2.

(35) For a history of the AIVG, see Massange, Catherine, *Bâtir le lendemain: L'Aide aux Israélites victimes de la guerre et le Service Social Juif de 1944 à nos jours.* Brussels: Didier Devillez, 2002.

(36) Hobson Faure, Laura en Vanden Daelen, Veerle, "Imported from the United States? The Centralization of Private Jewish Welfare after the Holocaust: The Cases of Belgium and France," in: Avinoam Patt, Atina Grossmann, Lindag G. Levi and Maud S. Mandel (eds)., *The JDC at 100: A century of humanitarianism*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019, p. 279-313; Saerens, *Onwillig Brusssel*, 178-179.

(37) See, for example: s.n., "Inauguration d'un home pour rapatriés," *Ofipresse*, 28 September 1945, 21, p. 5 (the inauguration of a home for young abandoned girls). S.n., 'Un Home Yvonne Nevejan', *Ofipresse,* 16 November 1945, 26, p. 9.

(38) S.n., "Le registre des Juifs," *Ofipresse*, 4 May 1945, 2, p. 3.

(39) S.n., "La situation des déportés rentrant en Belgique," *Ofipresse*, 15 June 1945, 7, p. 6.

(40) S.n., "Déportés et rapatriés de Malines," *Ofipresse*, 14 December 1945, 28, p. 5-7.

(41) Vanden Daelen, "Het leven moet doorgaan," 151-152.

(42) Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen*, 51-60.

(43) Saerens, *Onwillig Brusssel*, 180.

(44) See for example for the Netherlands, Hondius, Dienke, *Terugkeer. Antisemitisme in Nederland rond de bevrijding*, Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers, 1998 and Citroen, Michal, *U wordt door niemand verwacht. Nederlandse joden na kampen en onderduik*, Utrecht: Uitgeverij Het Spectrum, 1999.

(45) "M. Pauwels, ministre des Victimes de la guerre, a décidé d'octroyer le bénéfice des avantages accordés aux prisonniers politiques aux Juifs rentrant des camps allemands. Cette disposition s'applique aux Juifs belges et aux Juifs étrangers, domiciliés en Belgique au 10 mai 1940" (S.n., "La situation des déportés rentrant en Belgique," *Ofipresse*, 15 June 1945, 7, p. 6).

(46) Vanden Daelen, 'Het leven moet doorgaan', 170-176.

(47) Kazerne Dossin (ed.), *Kazerne Dossin: Holocaust en Mensenrechten,* Gent: Tijdsbeeld en Pièce Montée, 2019, p. 460-461.

(48) Saerens, *Onwillig Brusssel*, 169-179, 185-186, 194-195.

(49) Vanden Daelen, Veerle and Wouters, Nico, "'The Lesser Evil' of Jewish Collaboration? The Absence of a Jewish Honor Court in Postwar Belgium," in: Laura Jockusch and Gabriel N. Finder (eds.), *Jewish Honor Courts. Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust,* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015, p. 197-224.

(50) Vanden Daelen, "Returning," 27.

(51) Hobson Faure, Laura and Vanden Daelen, Veerle, "Imported from the United States? The centralization of private Jewish welfare after the Holocaust: the cases of Belgium and France," in: Atina Grossmann, Linda Levi, Maud Mandel and Avinoam Patt (eds.), *The Joint Distribution Committee: 100 Years of Jewish History*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019, p. 279-313.

(52) Hellemans, Hanne, *Schimmen met een ster, Het bewogen verhaal van joodse ondergedoken kinderen tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog in België,* Antwerpen: Manteau, 2007; Vanden Daelen, "Returning," 36-37. See on Jewish children survivors, their life out of the ruins of conflict and through their adulthood: Clifford, Rebecca, *Survivors. Children's Lives After the Holocaust*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020.

(53) Vanden Daelen, "Returning," p. 35-36.

(54) Jewish life, in all its flavours, as well as the provision of vocational training was also organised in the Displaced Persons camps (Stone, *The liberation of the camps*, 147-175).

(55) Smets, *De collectieve herinnering*, 56.

(56) *Ibid*., 148.

(57) *Ibid*., 148 ff., multiple articles in *Ofipresse*. There was, however a tribute to the "former ones from the Dossin barracks" ('les anciens de la Caserne Dossin'), with a procession parade in the streets of Brussels, flowers at the unknown soldier, receiving a medal from Brussels mayor Van de Meulenbroeck, reported in S.n., "Un hommage des 'anciens de la Caserne Dossin'," *Ofipresse*, 15 June 1945, 7, p. 6.

(58) The study of Simon Perego on the commemoration of the Shoah by Jews in Paris gives evidence to the fact that one cannot consider the immediate post-war period as a period of non-commemoration. See: Perego, Simon, *Pleurons-les. Les Juifs de Paris et la commémoration de la Shoah (1944-1967),* Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2020.

(59) Stone, *The liberation of the camps*, 216.