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Antwerp Jews and the Diamond Trade:

Jews shaping diamonds or diamonds shaping Jews?

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In this paper I would like to scrutinize the impact of the diamond trade on the immigration or return of Jews to Antwerp (Belgium) before and after the persecution and attempted annihilation of the community during the Second World War. I will explore how the organization of the diamond trade respectively influenced and was influenced by the specific characteristics of the Antwerp Jewish community. For the post World War II-period I will focus my argumentation on the years 1944-1960. To what extent did the diamond trade form an economic basis or niche of the Jewish community in Antwerp?

Where is the link between the Jewish population in Antwerp and the diamond trade? Both diamonds and Jews 'shared' a long tradition in Antwerp before the war. Already in the 16th century a Sephardic community had settled in the port city and became active in the diamond trade. The trade more or less relocated towards Amsterdam, just like the Jewish community. But at the end of the 19th century, together with a wave of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to Antwerp, began the revival of the diamond sector in Antwerp. Around the turn of the century and during the early years of the 20th century the most important diamond exchanges were founded: in 1898 the 'Diamantcasino' which became in 1904 the 'Beurs voor Diamantheandel' (Diamantbeurs); also in 1898 the 'Diamantclub'; in 1910 'Fortunia'; in 1911 the 'Vereniging voor Vrije Diamantheandel'; and in 1929 the 'Antwerpse Diamantkring'. The four most important ones (all except for Fortunia) united in 1936 in a federation, the 'Federatie der Belgische Diamantbeurzen'. Parallel with the expansion of the diamond trade, the influx of new Jewish immigrants continued during the first half of the 20th century and peaked with the arrival of a great number of German and Austrian Jewish refugees in the 1930s. Antwerp's Jewish population rose from approximately 1.200 around 1880 to 29.435 at the end of 1940, and a flourishing Jewish community came into being. The majority of this

population settled in the neighbourhood adjacent to the Antwerp Central Station, the so-called 'diamond district' and its surroundings.

A considerable number of the Jewish inhabitants of Antwerp were active in the diamond trade. A part of them worked as diamond traders or as owners/supervisors of their own diamond workshops. Estimations say that in 1940 approximately 80 to 90 % of the members of the diamond federation, the management, were Jewish. Most Jews however were labourers. According to historian Rudi Van Doorslaer about 25 % of the diamond workers were Jewish.¹ Jews would have constituted 90 % of the cleavers, 80 % of the cutters, 40 % of the sawyers and 20 % of the polishers.² However, we do not possess complete information to give exact proportions for Jews in each branch of the Antwerp diamond industry, so we do not know the exact proportions of Jewish employment within the sector. The fact that nowhere in Belgium one is officially obliged to declare being Jewish explains this gap. Indeed, one can only look at the names and guess which ones are Jewish and which ones are not. Such a classification would never be 100 % correct and it would be very time and labour intensive. What interests me here is the question: why was such a high percentage of the Jewish community involved in one and the same economical sector? Even though we do not possess complete information about the exact percentage of Jews who became active within the diamond sector and those who pursued other professions, it is clear that this was a considerable number and that it characterised to a large extent the local Jewish population. What attracted Jews to this specific economic sector? Is there a relationship between minority groups and their concentration in a specific economic sector?

As immigrants, Jews very often chose a profession which did not need a long training or schooling, very often in sectors which did not fall under too much state control (because of their temporary work and residence permits or even lack thereof, and work on the black market). Indeed, the Belgian government showed a very liberal attitude towards the diamond sector. A job here did not involve as many formal rules as in other trades. Moreover, for Jewish refugees who were planning on continuing their journey (towards the United States,

¹ Rudi Van Doorslaer, 'Joodse arbeiders in de Antwerpse diamant in de dertiger jaren. Tussen revolutie en antisemitisme', *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine/Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse Herinnering*, 2002, nr. 4, p. 15-16. The 25 % figure includes only official workers and does not take into account unofficial or illegal workers. According to the German occupier 15 to 20 % of the diamond workers were Jews. Camille Huysmans on the other hand speaks of 35 % (Eric Laureys, *Meesters van het diamant. De Belgische diamantsector tijdens het nazibewind*. Tiel, Uitgeverij Lannoo, 2005, p. 132).

² Eric Laureys, *Meesters van het diamant...*, p. 132.

for example) a job in the diamond sector provided them in a short time with an income. A job in this sector did not require special diplomas, and so one could learn it in a short time, and it paid well. Furthermore, very little equipment was necessary, especially for cleaving. The only negative aspect was that getting started in the diamond sector required a significant amount of capital. But here the solidarity within the Jewish community often provided a helping hand.³

Jews seemed to try to choose a sector in which other Jews were already established. Religious orthodox Jews tried to find jobs in which they could adapt their working rhythms to their religious life. Orthodoxy can indeed be one explanatory factor, as most Jewish families were members of one of the two orthodox Jewish communities in Antwerp. They chose professions that they could easily do at home or in small work units, and that gave them the flexibility to adapt their work to the observing of Jewish religious customs, especially the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.⁴ This explains why we find a much larger Jewish presence in professions like cleaving (either alone, at home, or elsewhere) and cutting (in small workshops). A cleaver could work almost anywhere, for he needed very little equipment and he could take that with him whenever necessary, for example when the family would spend holidays at the seaside.⁵ This very flexible work schedule and environment attracted a large number of orthodox Jews. Less orthodox Jews, often Dutch Jews, also became active in the grinding/polishing business. Sawing, another trade in the diamond industry was a profession of large workshops and an almost industrial collective activity. The combination of diamond industry and religious Jewish life made for the typical characteristics of the area around the Antwerp Central Railway station. As a result, all Jewish activities, including the diamond branch, the prayer houses and synagogues, the Jewish schools, the Jewish social welfare organization and the offices of Jewish social and political institutions, were almost exclusively centralized within the neighbourhood.⁶

³ Veerle Vanden Daelen, *De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap in Antwerpen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog (1944-1960)*. *Lomir vayter zingen zeyer lid*. Antwerp, University of Antwerp unpublished PhD-thesis Department of History, 2006, p. 128-130; Telephone interviews P. Kornfeld (with V. Vanden Daelen), 07/03/2005, 21/09/2005 and 26/01/2006.

⁴ We also see these aspects in London, Geoffrey Alderman, 'Jews in the Economy of London (1850-1940)', in Erik Aerts and Francis M.L. Thompson (ed.), *Ethnic Minority Groups in Town and Countryside and Their Effects on Economic Development (1850-1940)*. Session B-5. *Proceedings Tenth International Economic History Congress*. Leuven, Leuven University Press, 1990, p. 63.

⁵ Telephone interviews P. Kornfeld (with V. Vanden Daelen), 07/03/2005, 21/09/2005 and 26/01/2006.

⁶ Veerle Vanden Daelen, *De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap...*, p. 99-101, 128.

During the Second World War this remarkable Jewish life in Antwerp was completely destroyed: 65 % of the registered Antwerp Jewish population was deported, all their institutions and organizations were officially forbidden and dissolved by the German occupier, and their properties were seized. When the Nazis left Antwerp in September 1944, the city was officially *Judenrein*. Soon after the liberation however, a Jewish community (re-)constructed itself in Antwerp. The new Jewish community was again situated in the "diamond district / quarter". It profiled itself economically even more in the diamond trade and it had an even stronger orthodox and "closed" character than before the war. The mutually influential relationship and changing interaction between the diamond trade and the reconstruction of the Jewish community in the post-war period will be the focus of what follows.

First of all, why did Jews return to Antwerp, to a city where the persecution of Jews had been so extreme? In fact, wealthy diamond dealers from Antwerp had been preparing for the return of Jews and their trade to the Belgian port-city in detail during the war together with the Antwerp mayor Camille Huysmans. It is especially thanks to the efforts of two Jewish diamond dealers, Herman Schamisso and Romi Goldmuntz, and their friend, the Antwerp socialist mayor Camille Huysmans, that all these efforts took shape. In exile in London, they founded the Correspondence Office for Diamond Industry (COFDI). In London, they tried to relocate Jewish diamond workers who had fled the German occupier and to keep their factories and industry alive by transplanting them for a certain time to Great Britain's capital. In the meantime they negotiated with the large providers of rough diamonds to ensure the supply of diamonds to Antwerp from the moment the city was liberated.⁷

However, in their attempts to establish Antwerp again as the leading city in the international diamond sector they had to compete with new diamond centres that had grown and developed enormously during the war when they were able to take advantage of the absence of Antwerp, their largest competitor. A considerable number of Antwerp diamond dealers and workers had settled in Palestine and especially in New York. They needed a lot of persuasion to come back, especially those who had emigrated to Palestine. Their move also had a political, Zionist aspect. Before the Second World War the diamond industry in Palestine had been fairly non-

⁷ Véronique Laureys, 'The Attitude of the Belgian Government-in-Exile in London Toward the Jews and the Jewish Question During World War II', in Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust. Jews, Belgians,*

existent but after the war it employed already 4.000 workers.⁸ Because of the persecution and genocide of Jews in Europe and because of the fact that the diamond sector did fairly well in Palestine at the time, in combination with the already mentioned political motivations, those immigrants seemed to be willing to stay in Palestine. An Antwerp tailor who made it to Tel-Aviv tried to convince his brother, a diamond worker who stayed in Antwerp, to come over and settle there as well: “I suggest you to do everything you can to come over here. You can see as well that there is no other option for our people then Erets Israel [...] the diamond workers make a very good living here”.⁹ After this letter from February 1945 more encouragements to come over followed. In June, the tailor wrote: “Concerning the diamond industry, life is very good here at the moment. Sawyers make good money and the others start to do so as well, especially the cleavers. And when it comes to living, I am convinced that in this bloodthirsty world there is no other place for our people of Israel than here. And no other illusions will help for those who try to convince us about here or there or any other place, no, no, no...”.¹⁰

Before the war the diamond sector in New York employed about 300 workers. By the time of the liberation in Europe this number had risen to 6.000 people!¹¹ 70 to 80 % of the world production of diamond was now situated in the United States. The Antwerp immigrants had not only transplanted their Antwerp economic life but also their Jewish life. They had set up their own Jewish undertaker organisation (a chevra kadisha) and founded an Antwerp Jewish community, named ‘Kehillat Morya’.¹² Such evidence shows very clearly the tight relationship between this economic sector and a specific minority group. Considering the huge interest of the Belgian state in the diamond sector, which before the Second World War accounted for 6 % of the Belgian export and therefore was of highest importance for the Belgian economy, the government helped out with some exceptions to the rules as to convince the diamond traders to come back to Antwerp. It tried to make the return of the

Germans. Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1998, p. 303-305; Eric Laureys, *Meesters van het diamant...*, p. 164-167, 285-308.

⁸ Eric Laureys, *Meesters van het diamant...*, p. 175-177; S.n., ‘Anvers et l’industrie diamantaire’, *Courrier de la Bourse (Bruxelles)*, 04/10/1945; S.n., ‘De Antwerpsche diamantnijverheid in gevaar’, *De Roode Vaan (Brussel)*, 05/10/1945. In 1952 the Israeli diamond sector employed about 2.000 people (*La Tribune Sioniste*, nr. 9, 20/06/1952, p. 8).

⁹ Private archives of S. Perl, letter D. Perl (Tel-Aviv) to S. Perl (Antwerp), 21/02/1945, original in Dutch.

¹⁰ Private archives of S. Perl, letter D. Perl (Tel-Aviv) to S. Perl (Antwerp), 12/06/1945, original in Dutch.

¹¹ S.n., ‘Anvers et l’industrie diamantaire’, *Courrier de la Bourse (Bruxelles)*, 04/10/1945; S.n., ‘De Antwerpsche diamantnijverheid in gevaar’, *De Roode Vaan (Brussel)*, 05/10/1945.

diamond Diaspora as easy and comfortable as possible by for example granting visa, assisting with the return journey, according exceptions to the tax-rules for import of values to the country, and assuring sufficient supply of rough diamonds.¹³ The government, and especially the Antwerp city council, reacted to all negative rumours about Antwerp being a bad city for Jews. So we read in November 1945 a reaction of the acting mayor of Antwerp, W. Eeckealers, on information published by the New York Jewish Telegraph Agency (JTA): “Sir, with the biggest surprise and indignation we read in your newspaper that the Jewish diamond merchants who previously lived in Antwerp, are now refused here and that their place has been taken over by non-Jewish people. So many words. So much lies. All ‘bonafide’ diamond merchants are welcome in Antwerp. There is more. In the Executive Committee of the Diamond Club, Diamond Exchange and SBD (Manufacturers, Merchants and Diamond brokers) Jews are represented. The Chairman of this organization and Technical Advisor and man of confidence of the Government, of the Municipality of Antwerp and of the Diamond Industry, as a whole, is Mr. Romi Goldmuntz. The ‘Jewish News Agency’ should know that the Jewish people suffered enough during this war without finding it necessary to accuse falsely the City of Antwerp, which always fulfilled her duty against the tortured Jewish people, of anti-semitism”.¹⁴

The revival of the diamond sector in Antwerp was, as we have seen, mostly due to the efforts of Jewish diamond dealers in exile. In terms of percentage even more Jews became active in the diamond industry after the war. According to rough estimations about 80 % of the Jews in Antwerp were in one way or the other involved in the diamond trade as either workers, traders, bankers, jewellers, etc.¹⁵ This does not mean that 80 % of people involved in diamond

¹² Judith Tydor Baumel, ‘Kehillath Morya: Portrait of a Refugee Community in New York City, 1943-1987’, in: Dan Michman (ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust...*, p. 499-521; Veerle Vanden Daelen, *De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap...*, p. 254-255.

¹³ Eric Laureys, *Meesters van het diamant...*, p. 365-374.

¹⁴ American Jewish Archives (Cincinnati), World Jewish Congress-files (collection 361), H58/9 Belgium, Belgian Jewish Committee, 1945–1947, W. Eeckealers to the editor of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (London) 27/09/1945, sent by O. Stransberg (Belgian Jewish Committee, London) to Kubowitzki (World Jewish Congress, New York) on 08/10/1945.

¹⁵ The percentage of 80 % is a large number, so all more or less (diamond) related professions are included in it. Other Jews were either active in typical Jewish professions, such as personnel in the synagogues or merchants in kosher food or Jewish books, or worked in other (not specifically Jewish) professions. These givens show clearly from the list of professions of the parents of children in the Jewish day school Tachkemoni in Antwerp during the second half of the 1950s (Private archives Tachkemoni school, register second half of the 1950s). For the total percentages, see also: Leon Shapiro, ‘5710 (1949-1950): Belgium’, *American Jewish Year Book (further abbreviated as AJYB)*, vol. 52, 1951, p. 286, Régine Orfinger-Karlin, ‘5711 (1950-1951): Belgium’, *AJYB*, vol. 53, 1952, p. 289; Gavin Gordon, ‘5712 (juli 1951 - juni 1952): Belgium’, *AJYB*, vol. 54, 1953, p. 265; Abraham Karlikow, ‘5715 (1954-1955): Belgium’, *AJYB*, vol. 57, 1956, p. 330-331; Abraham Karlikow, ‘5716 (1 juli

trade were Jewish. There were still many non-Jewish people involved in the trade. The pull-factors from before the Second World War for Jews to enter the sector were still present, and it remained a profession that one could learn in a relatively short time period without much equipment. Furthermore, it was still a sector with few formalities: “That Antwerp became the pre-eminent international trade centre for diamonds can be attributed to the liberal policy traditionally followed by the Belgian governments. Thus, both rough and cut diamonds can be imported and exported with a minimum of formalities. Consequently not only national production but also a good deal of the foreign production is being traded in our country”.¹⁶

Antwerp, which since the end of the 19th century had received a considerable number of orthodox Jewish immigrants, had been going through an evolution towards more orthodoxy during the 20th century, especially after the Second World War. The rise in orthodoxy resulted in even more Jews choosing work in the diamond trade since this employment could be matched with their religious lifestyle. This strong orthodox character shows clearly in Jewish initiatives in Antwerp, for example the organization of professional training by the ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training). The ORT adapted its offering of courses to the specific orthodox character of the Antwerp Jewish community. In a memorandum from 1947 we see these observations clearly: “For the large number of assistees in Antwerp the only solution is to train them in the needle trades or weaving, so that they can work alone at home. Because they are orthodox and refuse to work the Sabbath, independent artisanry seems the only solution for them”.¹⁷ The Antwerp representatives of the Jewish social welfare organization suggested that the ORT offer especially “Jewish metiers” because of “the extremely orthodox nature of the Antwerp Jewish relief load”.¹⁸ The textile industry was a typical Jewish sector and was well known to the ORT. The most frequently attended ORT classes were in dressmaking, which taught cutting, sewing, and stitching, for example to make shirts, raincoats, children’s clothes etc. These techniques required relatively little material and equipment and could easily be practised at home. For women, especially widows, this was a perfect way to work at home for an income. And indeed, most of the students were women.

1955 – 30 november 1956): Belgium’, *AJYB*, vol. 58, 1957, p. 254-255; Abraham Karlikow, ‘5717 (1 november 1956 – 30 oktober 1957): Belgium’, *AJYB*, vol. 59, 1958, p. 259-260.

¹⁶ S.n., *Antwerpen: kunststad en wereldcentrum voor diamant*. Brussels, Belgische Dienst voor de Buitenlandse Handel, 1969, s.p. (bijlage (supplement): België economie en techniek), translation from Dutch.

¹⁷ Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Jerusalem), box 154B, folder 44, Education and social service – Belgium O.R.T., 1947-1954, ‘JDC-ORT Agreement. European Executive Council Memo March 21, 1947’, JDC Belgium to JDC European Headquarters, 03/05/1947, p. 3.

¹⁸ Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Jerusalem), box 178B179A, folder 25, Belgium organizations HISO Office de Placement 1947-48, ‘Antwerp reconstruction program’, 10/07/1947, p. 1.

Outwork was also easy to combine with an orthodox lifestyle. However the ORT did not have any experience with the diamond sector. The Antwerp ORT courses offer proof of the ORT adapting its work to the needs of the local communities: for example, it began to organize diamond related classes in the city. The first class was definitely already available in 1958 and in 1959 a new specialisation class for diamond workers was set up.¹⁹ Also the ORT secretary formation in Antwerp was related to the diamond sector, according to the semi-annual report of the organization in 1956: “As a matter of fact there is a demand for Jewish employees in the diamond industry, which currently employs girls with inadequate training and experience”.²⁰ At the same time, the ORT also wanted to offer classes which would help diminish the community’s over-concentration in the diamond sector and increase the number of technical schooled manual labourers in other sectors: “ORT’s work in Antwerp constitutes an important undertaking among the local orthodox Jews who have hardly been touched by technical culture”.²¹ To do so, the ORT organized technical classes such as woodwork and electricity in the large Jewish day schools in Antwerp.²² Whether these attempts had any influence is hard to say, as the dominance of the diamond sector remained very strong.

Next to the compatibility of a job in the sector with a Jewish religious life and the practical advantages for an immigrant community, family and communal tradition also played a major role in Jews’ choice for this sector. Very often children of diamond traders or workers also entered the sector. The diamond sector is pre-eminently a sector where intercession plays a big role. It was a very ‘closed’ profession and most people entered via parents or other family members.²³ The solidarity within the Jewish community made for an extension of family ties towards religious ties. I quote Jacques Gutwirth: “An unknown will difficultly find a ‘patron’ who will entrust him blindly with diamonds. Personal relationships, family ties, a solid introduction by friends, are precious references [...] a boss would never accept just anyone as

¹⁹ YIVO-Archives (New York), ORT (Record Group 380), printed material, *World ORT Union 1958*. Geneva, Bureau Central, s.d. [1959], p. 14-15; *World ORT Union 1959*. Geneva, Bureau Central, s.d. [1960], p. 10.

²⁰ YIVO-Archives (New York), ORT (Record Group 380), printed material, *ORT Union. Semi-annual report. January-June 1956*. Geneva, Central Office of the ORT Union, July 1956, p. 89.

²¹ YIVO-Archives (New York), ORT (Record Group 380), printed material, *ORT Union Report. June 1950-June 1952*. Geneva, Central Office of the ORT Union, July 1952, p. 20.

²² YIVO-Archives (New York), ORT (Record Group 380), printed material, *ORT Union activities in 1951*. Geneva, Central Office of the ORT Union, February 1952, p. 24; *ORT Work at the beginning of the school year 1952-1953*. Geneva, Central Office of the ORT Union, November 1952, p. 16.

²³ Information guided tour in the Diamantmuseum (Diamond Museum) of Antwerp, 27/04/2005.

an apprentice: social and family relations played a considerable role in the selection. It is really a sort of co-option, where the profession of cleaver stayed a Jewish monopoly”.²⁴

The increasing percentage of Jews in the diamond industry was also a consequence of the war. Jews who before the war had worked in other professions, such as the dairy trade or as greengrocers, started to work in the diamond sector. The number of Jewish customers for specific Jewish products and customers who preferred to buy their food exclusively in Jewish groceries decreased so drastically that the need for these and other such Jewish facilities diminished as well. Also, Jewish youngsters who under normal circumstances would have gone to university were now out of necessity forced to already find employment and often ended up in the diamond industry. Indeed, the need for an income for the families was often very urgent and the diamond sector provided this income in a fairly quick way. As the following testimony shows, these facts often hide a tragic reality. This respondent told me about him and his father being deported. His father died in the camps, and he returned to Antwerp where he found his mother and sister: “The week of my return a school-friend of mine submitted an application for a grant to go study at the ULB (Université Libre de Belgique, Free University of Belgium, Brussels). But that was 21.500 Belgian Francs per year at that time and the rent of my mother’s place was about 900. I always kept on doubting – maybe still go and continue my studies – but it was simply impossible: I had to earn money. So I learned how to cleave diamonds and after a couple of weeks I already started to make money, no huge sums, but still. To get started, I was able to borrow money from a Dutch Jew who was very nice to me. Because I was a camp survivor, he only asked me half of the sum and I could pay him back in ten months. I worked very hard to be able to pay him back and to support my mother. It was difficult...”.²⁵

Because of the very large engagement in the diamond sector, Jewish life in Antwerp, including the religious communities, the organisations, the Jewish schools, and the social life, followed the cyclical movement or economic trend of the diamond sector. When the sector boomed, all these institutions flourished. In times of recession in the diamond trade financial and social problems within the Jewish community accumulated. Motivations in applications

²⁴ Jacques Gutwirth, *Vie juive traditionnelle: ethnologie d’une communauté hassidique*. Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1970, p. 86 and 95, translation from French.

²⁵ Interview with N. Ramet (with V. Vanden Daelen), 16/02/2004 Antwerp, translated from Dutch. Mister Ramet is the founder and president of the Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance in Mechelen (Belgium). In

for overseas help illustrate this. I quote from a request from the Jewish school Jesode Hatora in Antwerp at the Claims Conference in 1958: “As almost all Jews in Antwerp live on the Diamond branch, and as we are going through a severe crisis in this branch these few months, our school has to struggle hard for its existence and to cover the ordinary running budget”.²⁶ The other large Jewish day school in Antwerp submitted similar requests with the same sort of motivation. Likewise the Jewish social welfare organization saw its number of needy persons growing sharply during that second half of the 1950s: “As long as the business is flourishing, these families are able to earn a living; but in moments of a persistent crisis this group is not able to take care of its own needs, especially in families with several children”.²⁷ Even today Jewish life - schools, social welfare organizations, synagogues and other religious related infrastructure, Jewish grocery stores, bakeries, bookshops - is still situated around the diamond district. We saw the same situation with the exiled Antwerp Jewish diamond community in New York during the Second World War. Indeed, in many respects the sector was more than the economic centre of Jewish life. For example, the policies of the Jewish communities and organizations immediately after the war were semi-officially discussed within the exchange offices and meeting halls. Today, in 2006, this aspect has disappeared as business discussions take place in private offices rather than in conference halls.²⁸

In fact there was a mutual influence from the diamond trade on the Jewish community and vice versa. As more religious Jews became involved in the trade, adapting their working rhythm to the *luach* (the Jewish calendar), the less religious or non-religious Jews and even not-Jewish diamond traders and workers started to adapt their working rhythms to the Jewish calendar as well, such as by closing Friday afternoon and Saturdays. Everyone in the Antwerp diamond industry shows respect for Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Yiddish, the language the Jewish migrants took with them from Eastern Europe, even became *the* language in the diamond trade, where deals are still closed with the words *mazl un brokhe* (good luck and blessing). This symbiosis is one of the most remarkable aspects of the Antwerp diamond trade, and it partly explains as well why outsiders easily suppose that all

November 2005 he was awarded an honorary doctorate at the Free University of Brussels (the Flemish part, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, VUB).

²⁶ Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (Jerusalem), Collection Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference), 1958: Jesode Hatora-Beth Jacob (Antwerp) to the Claims Conference, 02/01/1958.

²⁷ Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Jerusalem), box 154B, folder 60, Education and social service – Belgium “Centrale” Antwerp 1955-1957, S. Ratzersdorfer (Centrale Antwerp) to JDC Paris, 26/12/1957.

²⁸ Veerle Vanden Daelen, *De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap...*, p. 131.

Antwerp Jews are orthodox diamond traders. The considerable orthodox presence in the diamond sector resulted in the industry as a whole following a pattern of Jewish religious life, though not necessarily out of religious persuasion.²⁹

It also does not have to surprise us that a minority group in a country should center around one economic sector. Penslar sees this phenomenon already even earlier for Jewish groups and for other minority groups: “Like many ethnic minorities, throughout their long history Jews have often occupied specific economic niches in the lands in which they have dwelled. Therefore, their economic distinctiveness has been completely normal, that is, typical of an ethnic minority. Jews are the archetypal representatives of what social scientists call a ‘middleman minority’, concentrated in commercial occupations considered by the dominant elites to be low status or overly risky”.³⁰ Penslar continues and specifies: “In modern history, middlemen minorities (e.g., ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, Indians in southern Africa, Greeks in the eastern Mediterranean) have concentrated in small, family-run enterprises, made use of extensive family and ethnic links to markets and supply sources abroad, and had low status, stimulating the minorities to perform Sisyphean labor to win social approval through ever-higher levels of commercial success”.³¹ I would like to add to this point that the concentration in one sector also helps a minority group to maintain its cohesion, and to keep alive their traditions, and religious and cultural values. It can be partly considered as a form of self-segregation to preserve the traditions of a specific minority group. Other researchers have studied this as a motivation for spatial cohesion of minority groups.³² Furthermore, it not only keeps the group’s cohesion but also influences Jews in their behavior. Less religious Jews had less possibility to become alienated from their Jewishness when they were active in diamond trade in Antwerp.

Jews in Antwerp are a mostly orthodox minority group living to a considerable degree in self-chosen and/or self-imposed isolation, sharing a distinct economic, religious and social profile. The revival of Antwerp’s Jewish life and the revival of the city’s diamond industry developed in symbiosis: “It is [...] well known that the economic and social position of the members of

²⁹ Veerle Vanden Daelen, *De heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap...*, p. 128-129, 131.

³⁰ ‘Abnormality and Distinctiveness’, in: Derek J. PENSLAR, *Shylock’s Children. Economics and Jewish Identity in Modern Europe*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 2001, p. 134.

³¹ IBIDEM.

³² See for example: Philip Sarre, Deborah Phillips and Richard Skellington, *Ethnic minority housing: explanations and policies*. Aldershot, Avebury, 1989, p. 16, 19 (Research in Ethnic Relations Series); Ceri

the Antwerp community is based on the fact that they are involved almost exclusively in some branch of a single industry – the diamond industry. Acting either as diamond merchants or in such technical branches as cutting, sawing and polishing, the members of the industry are concentrated within a few streets and within a few buildings so that all that touches Antwerp Jewish life in the fields of active committees, fundraising, Zionist activities, etc., crosses paths on an almost daily basis”.³³ I would dare to say that the revival of the Antwerp diamond trade after the Second World War was a ‘Jewish affair’. First of all because the revival of the sector was mainly owed to the work and preparation of Jewish merchants like Romi Goldmuntz, to name the most important one. Second, because the diamond trade continued to provide a good ‘reception sector’ for new Jewish immigrants and easily accommodated a Jewish lifestyle, especially orthodox ones. And third, because thanks to the diamond sector Jewish institutions and organizations re-established themselves and flourished in Antwerp, even after the persecution during the Second World War. Thus Jews made for the revival of the diamond trade and diamond trade made for the revival of Jewish life in Antwerp.

Peach, ‘The consequences of segregation’, in: Frederick W. Boal (ed.), *Ethnicity and Housing. Accommodating Differences*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, p. 18.

³³ Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Jerusalem), box 53B54, folder 29.010, Annual Report of the year 1959, Benelux [Leonard Seidenman, JDC Brussels], p. 8.