

A ghetto without walls

Between 1942 and 1944, some 25,000 Jewish men, women and children were sent from Belgium to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This deportation left barely 5% survivors. Half of the Jewish population was killed during the Judaeocide. This percentage of destruction is much lower than in Central and Eastern Europe and the Netherlands. However, it equally makes part of the Nazi genocidal policy. The historian may question the importance of this rate of extermination in a country where the occupier was faced with a complex situation.

WHEN CONCERNS CONVERGED

On 10 May 1940, the Nazis invaded Belgium, despite its political neutrality. Faced with the strategic and military superiority of the *Wehrmacht*, the Belgian army resists as much as it can. But the German advance was relentless, while the French and British allied headquarters lacked coordination. Belgian losses, both military and civilian, were numerous.

80 On 28 May, faced with a situation that he considered hopeless, King Leopold III decided to surrender unconditionally. Moreover, he chose to constitute himself a prisoner. These decisions were made against the advice of the Belgian ministers. The government, which was determined to continue the struggle alongside the Allies, went into exile. Hubert Pierlot, the Prime Minister has confirmed the King incapacitated to reign. The break between the monarchy and the government triggered a political crisis.

As a result of the defeat, Belgium has been thrown into deep chaos and was totally disorganized. More than 200,000 prisoners of war were sent to Reich camps. Some two million people took the road to exodus. Among them, a large number of civil servants and authority officials decided to leave and to abandon their duties. The Belgian population was still traumatized by the German occupation during the Great War and its trail of massacres, exactions, looting, deportation and other war crimes. The majority of citizens felt resentment, even hate, towards the Germans, whom they nicknamed 'the Krauts'.

In order to avoid a repetition of such a situation, the Belgian authorities gave instructions to fill any power vacuum with their own men.¹ This task was entrusted to the general secretaries of the Belgian ministries. Those civil servants are the highest state officials behind the ministers. Ensuring the continuity of the State in the absence of the government was their duty.

The general secretaries had to cope with urgent and essential challenges. They had to secure the supply of the population, to re-establish transport, fight inflation and unemployment, to solve the lack of public personnel and to manage the refugees' crisis.² But all Belgian political authorities agreed on the absolute priority of restoring the economy. This principle of presence and protection of the Belgian population's interests led to the development of a policy of the "lesser evil".³

1 Commission d'étude 2001, 37–38.

2 Van Doorslaer – Debruyne – Seberechts – Wouters 2007, 229–230.

3 Steinberg 1999, 46–47.

The “lesser evil” implies the “loyal collaboration”⁴ of the different levels of power with the occupier. The Belgian authorities accept making inevitable and increasing concessions to the enemy, even if this means violating the Belgian Constitution and its principles of equality and liberty. This was especially true in the implementation of the Nazi anti-Jewish policy.

On the occupier’s side, Hitler had no specific plans about Belgium’s status in the future Nazi Europe. No ideological mission had been outlined. The Nazis pursued the same main goals as the Belgian authorities, namely the maintenance of order and the reactivation of the economy – and its extreme exploitation for its own profit.⁵

Consequently, the occupier established a military administration under the command of General von Falkenhausen. This regime depended directly on the German army’s higher command, the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH), and neither on Hitler nor on Himmler. SS General Eggert Reeder headed the military administration. Reeder intended to conduct an extremely pragmatic policy, taking into account the delicate Belgian context as well as the lack of German manpower.

As a result, the military administration had to reluctantly accept the presence of the *Sicherheitdienst-Sicherheitspolizei* (Sipo-SD). This Security Police-Security Service depended directly on the Reich’s Central Security Office, the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA), headed by Heinrich Himmler. The Jewish Department of the Sipo-SD viewed the ‘Jewish question’ in a much more radical way than Reeder. This led to a power struggle between the military administration and the Sipo-SD, which pressed for more radical action. Reeder often came up against the pressures of Berlin, not in terms of the goals pursued but, on the way, to achieve them.⁶

The occupier could not do without Belgian relays. Reeder usually pointed out the need to avoid creating upheaval and to spare Belgian sensitivities in order to preserve the cooperation of the local structures and gain in efficiency. So, the German military administration’s goals and those of the General Secretaries were aligned. The ‘Jewish question’ was only subsidiary to them.

Within the framework of the ‘lesser evil’ doctrine carried out by the Belgian authorities, the concept of “passive execution”⁷ emerges. The civil servants restricted themselves to implementing the occupier’s requests, without ever taking any initiative. This doctrine adopted by the General Secretaries applied in all areas, including the persecution of the Jews. Especially at this point, the conflict between loyalty to the Belgian Constitution and laws and the participation of civil servants in the anti-Jewish policy was the most obvious.⁸

4 CDJC LXXVIIa-29-30.

5 Steinberg 2004, 35.

6 Schram 2010.

7 Steinberg 1983, vol. 1, 111–113.

8 Schram 2000, 140.

LESSER EVIL AND PASSIVE EXECUTION

The complex political conditions prevented the occupier from locking the Jews into a geographical ghetto. However, the Nazis did not give up on attacking the Jews. It was through the economy, and not via Nazi racial ideology, that the antisemitic policy in Belgium was established. The occupier was indeed deeply convinced that Jews in Belgium were rich and held prominent economic positions. But this fantasy was very far from reality.

On the eve of the invasion, an estimated 70,000 Jews were living in Belgium, of whom only 6% had Belgian nationality.⁹ All others were recent immigrants who came to Belgium after 1918, fleeing from unfavorable political, social or economic climates. On the whole, this population was characterized by widespread poverty. The weight of Jews in the economy was modest, except in the diamond sector.

Even if this vision is extremely far from the reality, the German military administration pursued its objective: the de-Jewishisation of the economy. To achieve this, Reeder needed to promulgate measures against the Jews, to define who was a Jew, and to force those identified as such to declare their property, assets, businesses...

The General Secretaries considered three choices. The first one was to promulgate and execute themselves the anti-Jewish ordinances. The second was to refuse the whole thing and let the occupiers act as they pleased. And the last possibility was to let the German military administration legislate and limit themselves to applying the measures.¹⁰ The latter option was chosen.

In order to justify their choice, the Secretaries General requested the opinion of the Permanent Committee of the Council for Legislation. On 21 November 1940, the magistrates recommended the "passive execution", a juridical version of the policy of "lesser evil" in the "Jewish question".¹¹ In the context of the 'Jewish question', the Council should have underlined the illegality of this position, both under Belgian and international law.

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The high magistrates based their position on the metaphor of the hangman and his victim. To participate means to collaborate in the elaboration or implementation of the measures. The victim of the sanction, by undergoing it, does not execute it. The hangman fulfils a sentence, he executes the sentenced person. The latter is being punished and does not participate in the execution, even if he spontaneously places his head on the block.¹²

So, the General Secretaries refused to legislate or to take any initiative but agreed to carry out the "measures against the Jews".¹³ This was the starting point for the moral ghetto.

FROM THE FIRST REGISTRATION TO DE-JEWISHISATION

The occupier therefore issued the first ordinance against the Jews on 28 October 1940. Its content is dense. Its first paragraph defines the term "Jew" as anyone who has at least three grandparents of Jewish descent. If one has only two Jewish grandparents or if his case is doubtful, the determining factor is membership of the Jewish faith. People over 15 years old considered as Jews were forced to report to the Belgian local administrations to be recorded in a special register.

9 Van Doorslaer – Debruyne – Seberechts – Wouters 2007, 46.

10 Van Goethem 2006, 137.

11 Steinberg 2004, 59.

12 Steinberg 1983, vol. 1, 112.

13 Verordnung 28. Oktober 1940.

The argument of the executioner and his victim takes on its full meaning here. It was the Jewish population that must ask to be registered. The Belgian authorities listed the Jews at their own request. The good conscience was thus saved: the registry office did not take any initiative except to keep a Register of Jews. No objections were raised to this measure, although it was contrary to the Belgian Constitution.

The civil servants were even hiding behind falsely charitable arguments by avoiding imprisonment, financial penalties for the Jews and confiscation of their property by the Nazi forces.¹⁴ This ordinance also forbade Jews who had fled from Belgium since the invasion to come back.

The definition of who is a Jew was essential to identify those who would be targeted by the economic measures. The following paragraphs of this first ordinance have all an economic aspect. Jews were obliged to report their businesses, trades, associations and establishments with an economic aim, agricultural, forestry, horticultural and fish farming businesses... The *Gruppe XII's* Office for the Registration of Jewish Property, which depended on the German Military Administration, was in charge of this census.

Afterwards, all acts of disposal relating to the targeted businesses were forbidden. The catering sector was particularly affected by the obligation to display a trilingual poster on its shop windows: "*Jüdisches Unternehmen – Joodsche Onderneming – Entreprise juive*" ["Jewish Business"]. Once again, it was up to the Jewish owners to ask the municipality to put up posters. Later, on 31 May 1941, a new measure extended this obligation to all Jewish businesses and shops.¹⁵

In addition, another part of the first ordinance of 28 October 1940 excluded Jews from the civil service.¹⁶ Jews were to be excluded from the civil service, from the judiciary, from non-specifically Jewish education and from the newspapers and radio. These must be dismissed or retired on 31 December 1940. The occupier banned them from practicing these professions.

This professional ban was imposed on Jews of Belgian nationality, fewer than 4,000 individuals. Although the impact of the ban was extremely limited – it affected about 100 Belgian citizens of Jewish origin – it shocked Belgian officials. The Brussels judiciary as well as the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* protested to the German military administration. Nevertheless, the occupier continued its policy, with the loyal collaboration of the Belgian authorities.

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On 31 May 1941, the third ordinance concerning economic measures against Jews set in motion the spoliation of property and the liquidation or Aryanization of businesses.¹⁷ According to this decree, the military commander had the power to forbid Jews from pursuing their business. He was also empowered to force Jews to cease their business or to alienate it as well as other valuables.

Other decisions were added to this measure in the spring of 1942. The occupier froze the assets of the Jews and seized their enterprises and businesses.¹⁸ He soon realized that the level of wealth of this Jewish population was far from his expectations. Jewish businesses or shops were mostly small and family-run, or even itinerant. Profitable Jewish businesses of interest to the war effort represented only 3% of some 8,000 businesses and industries.¹⁹

On the threshold of the war, Belgium had more or less 8,000 Jewish businesses. In December 1940, 7,729 Jewish-owned businesses had been registered. After the Liberation, fewer than 1,300 businesses were still operating. Half of them were close to bankruptcy.²⁰ The few viable businesses were "Aryanized", i.e. they passed into the hands of non-Jewish, "Aryan" entrepreneurs. The others, more than 83% of the family, industrial and craft companies, were simply liquidated, depriving a third of the Jewish families of any professional activity.

14 Steinberg 1996, 62.

15 *Verordnung 31. Mei 1941.*

16 *Verordnung 28. Oktober 1940.*

17 *Verordnung 31. Mei 1941.*

18 *Verordnung 11. März 1942.*

19 Commission d'étude 2001, 82 and 93.

20 Commission d'étude 2001, 93.

On 22 April 1942, the military administration ratified the confiscation of the goods of Jews who had lost their German nationality to the profit of the third Reich.²¹ On the 1st of August, the management of these assets was entrusted to the *Brüsseler Treuhandgesellschaft* (BTG). This trust company was created on 12 October 1940 in order to identify Jewish and enemy property. This task was later expanded to manage those goods and to liquidate them.²² The BTG appointed provisional administrators to manage the businesses, industries and movable or immovable property of the Jews.

But here again, the mechanism of spoliation did not achieve the result expected by the military administration. The Nazis could only rely on their own services for this purpose. As the BTG was created under Belgian law, its actions had to respect this same law. The consequence was that while the occupier could control and manage the property looted from the Jewish victims, he could neither have it at his disposal nor for its own profit, constrained by the obligations imposed by Belgian law.

Even if the de-jewishisation of the economy was a failure for the occupier, it was nevertheless an essential step in the “final solution”. It contributed breaking the Jews’ professional and economic ties with the country from which they later had to be expelled.

In addition to these measures aimed at de-jewishisation, other anti-Jewish laws aimed at the total physical exclusion of Jews from civil society. They could be mentioned in a chronological approach, as we have done for the economic measures. However, considering that they contribute to the social and physical isolation of Jews, they deserve a more thematic focus.

A MORAL GHETTO

84 The starting point remains the definition of a Jew and the keeping of a register of Jews enacted on 28 October. This first census of the Jews was classified by municipality and then alphabetically according to the last names of individuals. The places and dates of birth, address, professions, nationality and religion must appear in the form. The same information is recorded for the spouse, children, parents and grandparents. Married women are listed under their maiden name.

The obligation was imposed on all Jews over 15 years of age.²³ Usually, children under 15 years of age had to be registered on the head of the family’s document, in most cases their father. Some local administrations have been overzealous by inviting children who had just reached the age of 15 to register in their offices. It has even happened that Belgian civil servants have drawn up forms for children who have not yet reached that age.²⁴

Upon completion of the enrolment in the Register of Jews, the public servants applied a stamp “has requested his enrolment in the Register of Jews” in both national languages, French and Dutch.²⁵ The consultation of the Jewish register was open to any person who requested it, without having to show his or her identity papers to the local administration.²⁶

From February 1941 onwards, Eggert Reeder ordered putting copies of the registers at disposal of the German services for their own use. He was very satisfied when he noticed the rigorous work carried out by the Belgian administrations.²⁷ From a Nazi point of view, the test of loyal collaboration was successful. It should also be noted that the occupier did not refrain from replacing senior state officials deemed uncooperative.

21 *Verordnung 22. April 1942.*

22 Commission d’étude 2001, 40–41.

23 *Verordnung 28. Oktober 1940.*

24 Kazerne Dossin 2020, 137–139.

25 Kazerne Dossin, 142–143.

26 KD, *KD_00011_A004699.*

27 De Jonghe 1978, 139–140.

For example, Gerard Romsée, was appointed Secretary General of the Interior and Health in March 1941. On 29 July 1941, this Flemish collaborator issued a circular, at the Nazis' simple request: the Belgian municipalities had to affix a "*Jood-Juij*" stamp in red ink on the Jews' identity cards.²⁸ Moreover, Romsée pushed the local authorities to denounce Jews who did not show up to have their identity cards stamped. This double marking of identity cards proved to be very dangerous for the Jews. They risked being arrested at any time during ordinary identity checks or when collecting their ration coupons.

On 29 August 1941, the occupier restricted the free movement of Jews. It placed them under curfew from 8 p.m. to 7 a.m. This curfew was stricter than the one imposed on non-Jewish people. Jews must stay at their official residence at these times. This restriction obviously has an impact on Jews who sometimes have to travel far from home to work. The occupier also stipulated that Jews could not settle in any city other than Antwerp, Brussels, Liège or Charleroi.²⁹

By the end of 1941, new orders excluded Jews physically from the non-Jewish people. On 25 November 1941, the Military Administration established the Association of Jews in Belgium (Association des Juifs en Belgique, AJB)³⁰ at the initiative of the Sipo-SD. The chosen title is revealing. It is about all Jews in Belgium and not only about Belgian Jews. The Nazi lawmakers had taken into account that the majority of the Jewish population was made up of foreigners or stateless people.

The AJB was a kind of Jewish self-administration, comparable to other "*Judenräte*", the Jewish councils which the Nazis set up in the conquered territories. The AJB operated under the supervision of the Nazis, especially the Sipo-SD. They allocated the charges into the Association's Steering Committee to seven well known respected Jewish personalities as it follows³¹:

- President: Salomon Ullmann, the military chaplain and Chief Rabbi, residing in Brussels;
- Vice-President: Nico Workum, an engineer from Antwerp;
- Members:
 - Maurice Benedictus, a cigar manufacturer from Antwerp;
 - Salomon Vanden Berg, a furniture manufacturer from Brussels;
 - Judas Mehlwurm, a merchant tailor, domiciled in Charleroi;
 - Noé Nozyce, a furrier, from Liège;
 - Joseph Teichmann, a managing director of a shipping company, from Antwerp.

The Jewish notables did not accept these charges without scruples. In a post-war testimony, Salomon Ullmann states that he sought advice from "the highest ecclesiastical and secular authorities. Their advice was to accept the measure – above all, not to adopt a heroic attitude; to remain on the spot, to alleviate as much as possible the fate of the Jewish population and to inform the Ministry of Justice of the measures taken".³²

Maurice Benedictus and Salomon Vanden Berg also consulted Belgian official personalities, among whom was undoubtedly the Secretary General Gérard Romsée. These men had bowed to the Nazis in the name of the lesser evil and ironclad legalism. In their eyes, the Secretaries General embodied the Belgian state, even if some of them were pro-Nazi. With the exception of one of them: Joseph Teichmann never fulfilled his obligations within the AJB and never at-

28 FelixArchief, 678# 144, 29/07/1941.

29 *Verordnung 29. August 1941.*

30 *Verordnung 25. November 1941.*

31 *Moniteur belge, Statuts de l'AJB.*

32 AGR-SAVG, Papiers Ullmann, 3.

tended any meetings.³³ This devoted patriot refused to compromise with the occupiers, in any form whatsoever.

The composition of the AJB's Steering Committee turned out to be very unrepresentative of the Jewish population in Belgium. Its members all came from a prosperous background and were assimilated. Five of them were Belgian citizens. From the very beginning, this fracture caused great distrust among the Jews in the country.

Unconsciously, the leaders of the Jewish Association had become more or less zealous tools in the hands of the Nazis. The first and main mission of the AJB was to "activate the emigration of Jews" while the occupier had already forbidden Jews to leave Belgium.³⁴

On 23 October 1941, Heinrich Müller, one of the highest officials of the "final solution" in Berlin, communicated to the Sipo-SD in Brussels Heinrich Himmler's decision to prevent any migration of Jews, while pointing out that 'evacuation actions remain unchanged'.³⁵ "Evacuation" was the codename to refer to the genocidal deportation to the "East", where the mass extermination was already carried out a few months earlier.

All Jews living in the territory were obliged to become members of the AJB. This third census campaign started at the beginning of March 1942. Maurice Benedictus, the administrator of the AJB, specified that "[...] each form had to be drawn up in triplicate, one for the Gestapo, one for the Local Committee and one for the central archives of the AJB".³⁶

The registration form contained information useful to the occupier: the names of the members of the household and their degree of relationship, their nationalities, dates and places of birth, their address, the identity of the possible owner of the home and the number of rooms occupied. The documents were ordered by city, street and number, which was very helpful when it comes to gathering Jews for deportation.

Besides, the statutes of the AJB stipulated that the Jewish Association were responsible for other secondary social, charitable and teaching functions. For "all fundamental decisions relating to its activity", the AJB was entirely under the control of the Sipo-SD. This service also reserved the right to impose on the AJB any additional tasks it deemed necessary, without further details. The reader will later discover the full tragic significance of this paragraph.

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As in other occupied or conquered countries, the financial burden of the "final solution" was to be borne by the Jewish population itself. So, in order to finance the activities of the AJB, a compulsory membership fee for all members is introduced. The basic amount of this contribution was set at 10 francs per adult. Meanwhile, the professional and economic prohibitions greatly impoverished the Jewish population. In May 1942, the A.J.B. reported the difficulties it was encountering in collecting dues, and therefore the difficulty members were having in paying them.³⁷

On the 1st of December 1941, the military commander targeted Jewish children by excluding them from non-Jewish schools. The organization of Jewish schools was added to the tasks of the AJB. The occupier deprived them of an inherent right in Belgium. He knew that he could count on the obedience of the Belgian relays, who were indifferent to the fate of these pupils³⁸...

Shocking as it is, this exclusion does not provoke great indignation from the authorities. When it does, "It is not so much the discriminatory nature of the order that is questioned as the practical difficulties encountered in carrying it out."³⁹ In any case, Jewish pupils or students left their classes to attend Jewish schools or to abandon their studies.

33 Steinberg 1983, vol. 2, 112.

34 *Moniteur belge, Statuts de l'AJB.*

35 MdIS, XXVb-7, Heinrich Müller, 23/10/1941.

36 Kazerne Dossin, *La question juive en Belgique*, 8.

37 KD, A007404, *Compte-rendu du 28 mai 1942.*

38 Schram 2019.³⁵

39 Dickschen 2004, 182.

After the removal of Jewish children, Jewish workers had to be banned from the Belgian society. The liquidation and Aryanization of Jewish firms deprived one third of the Jews in Belgium of their job and income. On 11 March and 8 May 1942, special labour conditions for Jews were decreed⁴⁰. They had to work in groups and be housed separately. Forced labour camps reserved for them were set up, notably within the framework of the Todt Organisation. From 13 June to 12 September 1942, more than 2,250 men were deported to those *Judenlagern*.⁴¹ There they were used as slaves on the Atlantic Wall.

The last professional prohibitions, promulgated on 1 June 1942, stipulated that “Jews are forbidden [...] to practice the profession [...] of healing or caring for the sick”.⁴² The counterpart of this prohibition is the creation of an Israelite hospital in Brussels, where staff and patients are exclusively Jewish. The Nazis exceptionally allowed Jewish doctors, nurses and dentists to practice their art in order to provide the necessary care to their community.

THE YELLOW STAR

This was the most brutal measure that the entire Jewish population had to endure before its deportation. On 27 May 1942, the yellow star completed the social and physical isolation of the Jews⁴³. From the age of six, every Jew had to wear this sign of infamy publicly. The compulsory badge was a palm-sized star of David printed in black on a yellow cloth. The occupier took into account the Belgian language split. He opted for a “J.” – imitating the Hebrew script –, which stood for “Juif” in French or “Jood” in Dutch.

The Jews had to obtain these yellow stars by their own means. The price of a strip of cloth with three stars was set at seventy-five cents. The Jews were now stigmatized, identifiable by all. For some weeks, the children concerned went to school marked with this sign of infamy. The appearance of the “starred Jews” caused a real shock in Belgian opinion, which had been largely indifferent to their fate until this moment.

This passivity can be explained by the absence of objections, or even by a mute approval, of the anti-Jewish laws adopted by the occupier. The mayor Jules Coelst, who headed the Brussels mayor’s conference, provides a meaningful example of this state of mind:

“I do not like the Israelites as a community with immoderate love. [...] We are not so naïve as to ignore the fact that if Jews are required to wear the Star of David, it is in order to seize them at the first turn and without exception. As long as their children were kept in separate schools, I had no major problem with it.”⁴⁴

Eggert Reeder had always been careful not to arouse the attention of the Belgian population and authorities and especially not to provoke any reaction from them. The compulsory wearing of the star forced him to come out of his silence. He noticed that many Belgians, who had previously been unconcerned to his antisemitic policy, took pity on the Jews and showed them empathy.

The occupiers relied on the goodwill of the municipal administrations to deliver the badges. In Charleroi and Antwerp, and perhaps also in Liège, they distributed the yellow stars without a second thought. The Antwerp civil servants were even so zealous as to stamp a star of David on the identity cards of Jews. Only the Brussels mayors refused in the name of human dignity.⁴⁵ Therefore, in the capital, the Nazis transferred this ungrateful task to the AJB.

40 *Verordnung*, 11. März 1942 and 8. Mai 1942.

41 <https://kazernedossin.eu/onderzoeksproject/left-behind2/>.

42 *Verordnung* 27. Mai 1942.

43 *Verordnung* 1. Juni 1942.

44 Coelst 1942.

45 CEGESOMA, *Lettre de Jules Coelst* 05/06/1942.

This order put an end to the status of the Jews. On 15 June 1942, Reeder “can consider the legislation concerning the Jews in Belgium as completed”.⁴⁶ He also notes that “Jews have only very limited possibilities of existence left. The next step would be their evacuation from Belgium”.

NEXT STEP: ‘EVACUATION TO THE EAST

Men, women and children were identified, herded into a moral and compulsory ghetto, stripped of their possessions, deprived of their livelihoods, excluded from the economy and removed from civil society. They were so deeply vulnerable that the Sipo-SD could start the genocidal deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Sipo-SD imposed the most critical mission on the AJB: the so-called putting to work of the Jewish population within the borders of the Reich. The Sipo-SD planned to discreetly bring 10,000 Jews fit to “work” to the Dossin barracks for an allegedly work assignment.

On 15 July 1942, Maurice Benedictus was summoned to the Sipo-SD headquarters in Brussels. Anton Burger, Eichmann’s representative and “evacuation” specialist, informed him that the AJB was entrusted with this task. Burger asserts that

“it would be done in a calm and humane way and [...] that Jews should understand that if thousands of German heroes [...] sacrificed themselves for Europe, it was elementary that Jews should work and replace part of the German labour force.”⁴⁷

Then he threatened: “In case the AJB should refuse, he would use methods that had proved their efficiency in other countries”. Burger adds that if Benedictus tried to involve any German or Belgian authorities, “Jewish population [...] would have to suffer the consequences”.

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Benedictus certainly did not have much room for manoeuvre against Obersturmführer Anton Burger. The latter left a very unpleasant and worrying impression on him. Burger greeted the AJB administrator very rudely, forcing him to stand at attention in front of him.

Benedictus, once exiled to Portugal, later describes the horrific tragedy playing out in his conscience. He is not allowed to consult his colleagues. He is alone to carry the burden of a decision on which the fate of many Jewish families would depend.⁴⁸ Surrendering to pressure, Benedictus agreed to become the one responsible for the alleged putting to work of his co-religionists.

Benedictus’ case of conscience arose:

“In this regard, some of my colleagues considered me a traitor while others approved of me, understanding that by accepting, there was a way to soften fairly the fate of those who had to leave.”⁴⁹

In the name of the lesser evil, the administrator of the AJB kept his good conscience, despite what he revealed further on:

“He had been brought to our attention that in Holland, the Joodsche Raad was in the same situation and had to bow down, without being able to save anyone, the Germans making raids from the very beginning of the work assignment.”⁵⁰

Salomon Vanden Berg is clear about what lies behind the word putting to work. In his diary he notes: “I fear that this is the mass deportation of the Jewish population to Poland. I

46 CEGESOMA, *Tätigkeitsbericht Nr. 20*, A 50.

47 Kazerne Dossin: *La question juive en Belgique*, 13.

48 Kazerne Dossin: *Historique du Problème juif*, 13–14.

49 Kazerne Dossin: *Historique du Problème juif*, 14.

50 Kazerne Dossin: *Historique du Problème*, 14.

hope I'm wrong, but I'm so afraid." The next day, this fear remains nagging: "It is becoming increasingly clear that mass deportations of Jews are to be feared."⁵¹

At that time, the AJB leadership was unaware of the decisions taken in Berlin that organized the genocidal deportation from Belgium. On 11 June 1942, Himmler and Eichmann informed Kurt Asche, the responsible for Jewish Affairs in Belgium, that 10,000 Jews must be evacuated to "the East" in the first stage. They planned that the first deportations of Jews should start from the mid of July, or at the latest by mid-August. On 15 July 1942, the Military Administration charged SS Major Philipp Schmitt, Nazi party member since 1925 and head of the nearby Breendonk terror camp, to establish the *SS-Sammellager für Juden Mecheln*, the SS assembly camp for Jews.⁵²

The employees of the AJB started to draw up lists of "workers", i.e. deportees on 17 July under the management of Alfred Blum, son of Marcel Blum, the president of the Jewish community in Brussels. Appointed head of the local committee's offices, Alfred Blum worked with zeal and did everything possible to deliver the lists within the established deadlines of 10 days.⁵³

On July 25, Blum delivered 12,000 names, 2,000 more than what the occupier had requested... The distribution of convocations to go to the "*SS-Sammellager für Juden*", the assembly camp in Mechelen, began the same day. The AJB especially hired young Jewish employees to deliver the documents personally to the interested parties.

These summonses instructed recipients to report to the Dossin barracks on a specific date. They described what one had to bring: nonperishable supplies for 15 days, clothes and shoes, a bowl, a cup, a spoon and identity cards, supply cards and other useful documents, including the summons. The supply card was not to be forgotten, as the Sipo-SD used them to supply the assembly camp.⁵⁴

From the very first days, the Sipo-SD noticed the disobedience of those summoned. More than 12,000 *Arbeitseinsatzbefehlen* were released, but only one third of the people came "voluntarily" to the SS-Assembly camp. Facing this failure, the Sipo-SD commanded the AJB to recall the Jewish population to obey.

As of August 1, 1942, the "AJB Call" was attached to the work orders. This text intends to be comforting: "According to the assurances given by the Occupying Authority, this is indeed a labour service, and not a deportation measure."⁵⁵ But the end of the text clearly threatens that "non-observance of the summons to work could have unfortunate consequences, both for the members of your family and for the entire Jewish population of the country".

The call of the AJB was perceived by Jewish people as one "Cain's sign"⁵⁶ The accusation is terrible: in the name of the lesser evil, the AJB sacrificed its brothers. If then nobody suspected that systematic and industrial extermination was carried out, everyone felt that the issue was dangerous, perhaps even fatal.

The "collaboration" period of the AJB lasted some four months when the association served as a Jewish dreadfully docile weapon manipulated by Sipo-SD. After October 1942, the tasks of the AJB, which has become useless for the Sipo-SD, were restricted to its social role, within the limits of the margins defined by the nazis.

51 KD, *Vanden Berg*, 17 juillet 1942, 47.

52 AGR-AM, Harry von Craushaar, 15 July 1942.

53 Schram 2004, 254–255.

54 Schram 2004, 256.

55 KD, Appel de l'AJB.

56 Struye 2002, May 1944.

THERE IS “GHETTO” AND “GHETTO”.

The Nazis did not have a free hand in Belgium. They had to take into account the country's political and religious authorities as well as public opinion. They could not draw attention to the *Judenpolitik*, in order to avoid potential protests in favour of the Jews. Too few in number, they had to ensure the participation of local administrations and institutions, of the Belgians people, of pro-Nazi movements ... and even of the Jews themselves.

The chosen policy was therefore coldly administrative, calm, tempered but also frighteningly effective: no ghettos, as little violence as possible, as much organization as possible. Given the complexity of the occupation, it was inconceivable to develop the “final solution” with the same unconditional violence and cruelty as in the East.

It resulted in the murder of half the Jewish population. Jews in Belgium and Northern France were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, an extermination centre which was especially open to carry out the genocide of the Jews from the West. A place designed to bring victims to their killers and carry out the mass murder 1,200 km away.

The occupier's fears about the attitude of the Belgian State and the clergy proved unfounded. Almost none of these institutions protested against the measures taken against the Jewish population. They were generally indifferent to their fate. Sometimes they even approved of this exclusionary policy. The same applies to the non-Jewish population, which was too preoccupied with its own problems.

In his wartime diary, Paul Struye, a Catholic politician and former municipal councilor of the commune of Ixelles, also adds the factor of a latent antisemitism well anchored in Belgian society:

“The multiple measures of exclusion and constraint to which they [the Jews] had already been subjected had hardly stirred up opinion. Certainly, they were considered unjust. But, on the whole, people remained rather indifferent. The average Belgian certainly does not accept the persecution of a category of citizens for racial or religious reasons. But there is no doubt that he ‘does not like Jews’ and that there is, at least in Brussels and even more so in Antwerp, what could be called a moderate antisemitism.”⁵⁷

Antisemitism, indifference or complicit passivity was the mainstream. Add to this cowardice and even fear. Sacrificing the unloved to supposedly save everything that can be saved is the essence of the politics of the lesser evil. Belgian officials were able to use the room for manoeuvre left by the weaknesses of the occupier in various matters, but hardly ever in the “Jewish question”.

Lesser evil was imposed even within the Association of Jews in Belgium. During the few months of its “collaboration” period, the AJB counted the Jews, drew up lists with zeal, distributed the summonses for the Mechelen camp... In Brussels, it even sold the yellow stars. Obviously, the room for manoeuvre left to the AJB was very limited, but it did exist. Some Jewish men and women spoke out against the Nazis. They took advantage of their relatively protected status as members of the AJB committees to act in the shadows.

Jewish leaders in Belgium were faced with the same cases of conscience as their homologues in the eastern ghettos. What was to be done? Obey and satisfy the Nazis in all circumstances and hope to escape the worst? Flee, go into exile, hide, resist? These questions are complicated when you are left to your own and are sometimes met with hatred, sometimes with indifference. Far be it from us to judge the choices that the Jewish leaders had to make, without knowing the end of the story.

In spite of itself, the AJB turned out to be a Jewish weapon, fearfully docile, wielded by German hands in order to eliminate all Jewish existence on Belgian soil. After October 1942, the occupier lost interest in the AJB, which was now useless for catching Jews who had gone mas-

sively into hiding. From that moment on, the AJB only carried out a social and charitable role, within the limits granted by the German authorities.

The Jews in Belgium were counted, listed, dispossessed of their property, excluded from the professional and economic world, relegated to the fringes of society, humiliated by the distinctive signs, put to work, deprived of all their fundamental rights, dehumanised, deported. As were the Jews in the ghettos of Central and Eastern Europe... Even if there, the isolation of the Jewish populations was much more severe and the measures were unleashed with so much violence, cruelty, barbarity for an even more radical human toll. Even if the method of accomplishing the annihilation of the Jews differed, the macabre objectives were the same, as was the arsenal of legal measures deployed to achieve it.

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