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Filling A Leadership Void

Salomon Ullmann's position during Nazi occupation

Laurien Vastenhout

« Chief Rabbi Ullmann was certainly not a traitor in my opinion. He was just ignorant. And he was not able to assume such an important role at such an important moment in Jewish history in general and the Jewish community in Belgium in particular. Chief Rabbi Wiener was gone. Ullmann had never been a Chief Rabbi before [...] And suddenly he held this responsibility [...] »¹.

During an interview in 1988, Fela Perelman-Liwer reflected on the appointment of Salomon Ullmann as Chief Rabbi of Belgium in September 1940². She also referred to his role as chairman of the *Association des*

¹ Fondation de la Mémoire contemporaine – Stichting voor de eigentijdse Herinnering (FMC-SEH), interview with Fela Perelman-Liwer, conducted by Jean-Philippe Schreiber, 14.4.1988, p. 80.

² Salomon's (sur)name is spelled inconsistently in scholarly publications as well as in official documents. Salomon Ullman, Salomon Ullmann, Solomon Ullmann and Saloman Ullman(n) have all been used. See, for example, J. Landau, *Jews in nineteenth-century Egypt*, London, 1969, p. 326 ; R. van Doorslaer – J.-Ph. Schreiber (Eds.), *De Curatoren van het getto : de Vereniging van de joden in België tijdens de nazi-bezetting*, Tiel, 2004 ; M. Steinberg, *La persécution des Juifs en Belgique, 1940-1945*, Bruxelles, 2004. In Jean-Philippe Schreiber's *Dictionnaire biographique des Juifs de Belgique*, Salomon's surname is written with double "n", while that of his father is written as « Ullman(n) », see : J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Dictionnaire*

Juifs en Belgique (Association of Jews in Belgium, AJB), the Jewish umbrella organisation the Germans forced upon the communities in Belgium in November 1941. Perelman-Liwer had been engaged in (illegal) social welfare activities to aid Jews, and Jewish children in particular, during the Second World War. Her husband, Chaim Perelman was a prominent member of the *Comité de Défense des Juifs* (Committee for the Defense of the Jews, CDJ), officially established in September 1942. The organisation provided hiding places for thousands of Jewish children and created false identification papers for those in hiding³. When the first plans for the establishment of this Committee were made, functionaries of the legal AJB were increasingly held responsible for facilitating the implementation of anti-Jewish legislations in Belgium. In summer 1942, for example, the AJB leadership was forced to distribute calls to Jews to report themselves for “work in the East” (*Arbeitseinsatz*) – a euphemism for deportation to concentration camps and killing centres in Eastern Europe⁴. In terms of its responsibilities, there are resemblances between the *Association des Juifs* and the Jewish Councils (*Judenräte*), and similar mandatory Jewish organisations, that German authorities imposed in territories under their control. These Jewish bodies were generally held responsible for maintaining order, for uniting their communities under the umbrella of their organisations, for announcing discriminating laws, and for aiding in carrying out an-

biographique des Juifs de Belgique : figures du judaïsme belge XIX^e-XX^e siècle, Brussels, 2002, pp. 343-44. In Salomon's registry with the Foreign Policy in Belgium in 1913, the name was first spelled as Ullman. Later, Ullmann and Ullman were used interchangeably. In the registry in the city of Amsterdam, his surname is spelled with double “n”. In the Population Registry and in the registry of the Jews in Belgium in 1940, Ullmann was again spelled with double “n”. In 1965, the *Daily News Bulletin of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency* in New York reported on the death of Salomon « Ullman ». Taken into consideration that in most official documentation, the name is written with double “n”, including documents signed by Salomon himself, I will use the double “n” throughout this article.

³ For the (illegal) activities of both Chaïm and Fela Perelman, see : L. Steinberg, *Le comité de défense des Juifs en Belgique, 1942-1944*, Bruxelles, 1973, pp. 89-106 ; A. Gross – R. Dearin, *Chaim Perelman*, New York, 2003 ; B. Dickschen, « De vJB en het onderwijs », in J.-Ph. Schreiber – R. Van Doorslaer, *De Curatoren van het getto...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-194 ; FMC-SEH, Archives privées Fela Perelman.

⁴ L. Schram, « De oproepen voor “tewerkstelling” in het Oosten », in *De Curatoren van het getto...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-259.

ti-Jewish measures⁵. Unlike many of their counterparts in Eastern Europe, however, the AJB leadership never listed names of Jews for deportation.

Salomon Ullmann was chairman of the AJB from its establishment in November 1941, until his resignation was formally approved in December 1942. Fela Perelman's claim that she did not consider him a "traitor" was a direct reference to the disputed nature of the *Association*. Throughout Europe, Jewish leaders who had worked for "Jewish Councils", or similar organisations, were severely criticised both during and after the war.



© Musée juif de Belgique

*Salomon Ullmann portrayed
as Military Chaplain of the
Belgian armed forces.*

Because of their cooperation with the German occupier, these Jewish leaders were perceived as traitors and collaborators⁶. For decades, prominent historians, including Hannah Arendt, Yehuda Bauer, Philip Friedman, Raul Hilberg, Dan Michman, Isaiah Trunk and Aharon Weiss, have addressed the issue of Jewish leaders' cooperation with the Germans. The emphasis of some of these scholars on the different local and regional contexts in which these leaders operated, combined with the notion that they often

⁵ There is an extensive body of literature on Jewish Councils, and similar representative organisations in occupied Europe, in which the responsibilities forced upon these bodies has been (thoroughly) examined. For Western and Central Europe, see, for example : D. Rabinovici, *Instanzen der Ohnmacht, Wien, 1938-1945 : der Weg zum Judenrat*, Frankfurt am Main, 2001 ; R. Van Doorslaer – J.-Ph. Schreiber (Eds.), *De Curatoren van het getto... , op. cit., passim* ; M. Laffitte, *Un engrenage fatal : l'UGIF face aux réalités de la Shoah 1941-1944*, Paris, 2003 ; B. Meyer, *A Fatal Balancing Act : The Dilemma of the Reich Association of the Jews in Germany, 1939-1945*, New York-Oxford, 2011 ; B. van der Boom, *De politiek van het kleinste kwaad. Een geschiedenis van de Joodse Raad voor Amsterdam, 1941-1943*, Amsterdam, 2022 ; L. Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration. "Jewish Councils" in Western Europe under Nazi Occupation*, Cambridge, 2022.

⁶ D. Michman, « Jewish Leadership in Extremis » in D. Stone (Ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, New York, 2004, p. 319.

faced impossible choices, has led to a more nuanced understanding of the responses of Jewish leaders during Nazi rule⁷. The attitude and choices of Jewish functionaries remain important topics of discussion to date.

In light of the extensive historiography on Jewish leadership during Nazi rule, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to Salomon Ullmann, the first chairman of the *Association des Juifs* in Belgium. In other countries, the personal histories of Jewish leaders have been (thoroughly) investigated. In the Netherlands, for example, a biography of David Cohen, chairman of the Dutch Jewish Council, has been published as well as an annotated version of his postwar reflections on the Council⁸. In France, the diary of Raymond-Raoul Lambert, chairman of the UGIF-Sud (*Union Générale des Israélites de France*), the Jewish organisation that was forced upon the Jewish communities in the unoccupied zone in late 1941, has been published in an annotated edition⁹. In Eastern Europe, Isaiah Trunk, Evgeny Finkel, Aharon Weiss and others have carefully examined the composition of the Jewish Councils, the pre-war occupations of the Jewish leaders and their degree of representation¹⁰. Such investigations are lacking in Belgium.

⁷ See, for example, Y. Bauer, « The Judenräte : some conclusions », in Y. Gutman – C. Haft (Eds.), *Patterns of Jewish Leadership*, Jerusalem, 1980, pp. 393-405 ; Ph. Friedman, *Roads to Extinction : Essays on the Holocaust*, New York, Conference on Jewish Social Studies, 1980 ; Dan Michman has written numerous articles on Jewish Councils across Europe, including « Judenräte, Ghettos, Endlösung : Drei Komponenten einer antijüdischen Politik oder Separate Faktoren ? », in J.A. Mlynarczuk – J. Böhler (Eds.), *Der Judenmord in den eingegliederten polnischen Gebiete, 1939-1945*, Osnabrück, 2010, pp. 167-176 ; *Id.*, « Jewish Leadership in Extremis » ; *Id.*, « Jewish Headships under Nazi Rule : The Evolution and Implementation of an Administrative Concept », in *Id.* (Ed.), *Holocaust Historiography : A Jewish Perspective. Conceptualization, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues*, Portland-London, 2003, pp. 159-175 ; I. Trunk, *Judenrat...*, *op. cit.* ; A. Weiss, « Jewish leaders in occupied Poland : Postures and attitudes », *Yad Vashem Studies*, 12, 1977, pp. 335-365.

⁸ P. Schrijvers, *Rome, Athene, Jeruzalem : leven en werk van prof. dr. David Cohen*, Groningen, 2000 ; E. Somers, *Voorzitter van de Joodse Raad : de herinneringen van David Cohen, 1941-1943*, Zutphen, 2010.

⁹ R. R. Lambert (ed. by R. Cohen), *Diary of a Witness 1940-1943*, Chicago, 2007 (first ed. 1985).

¹⁰ I. Trunk, « The typology of the Judenräte in Eastern Europe », in Y. Gutman – C. Haft. (eds.), *Patterns of Jewish Leadership...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-21 ; I. Trunk, *Judenrat...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-35 ; A. Weiss, « Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland », *op. cit.*, pp. 335-365 ; E. Finkel, *Ordinary Jews...*, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

We will see that Fela Perelman's disdain for Salomon Ullman's leadership capabilities – « he was just ignorant » – is symbolic for the way in which he has been perceived in existing historiography. Ullmann's role in determining the policies of the organisation has been downplayed, and little is known about his personality and the precise nature of his leadership. As a result, his personal history, the nature of his appointment as Chief Rabbi of Belgium in September 1940, and the history of his appointment at the helm of the AJB in late 1941, have never been carefully examined. Taken into consideration that he served as the organisation's chairman in the first, and arguably the most formative, year of its existence, there is a need to address these issues.

This article, first, presents a thorough overview of Ullmann's (prewar) personal history. This information will be used to explore the nature of his wartime positions, and his level of representation in the Jewish communities in Belgium. A solid overview of his prewar life is important because Ullmann held two key representative positions simultaneously during the war, both as chairman of the *Association des Juifs* and as Chief Rabbi of Belgium. We will see that the lack of thorough investigations into Ullmann's personal life has resulted in erroneous biographical information in important publications on the Second World War in Belgium. Second, we will assess Ullmann's wartime appointments as Chief Rabbi and chairman of the *Association* in the context of Jewish communal structures on the eve of Nazi occupation. Scholars have argued that the German authorities' choice to appoint Ullmann as leader of the Jews in Belgium was logical for he was well-known among the Belgian establishment, and because he had fulfilled representative roles in the Jewish community before the war¹¹. Yet this perspective ignores the fact that officials in the German Military Administration as well as members of the Jewish community were sceptical. Taking a socio-historical perspective, we will see that Ullmann's position as leader of the Jews in Belgium during the war was more unique and unexpected than has hitherto been recognised.

¹¹ M. Steinberg, *La persécution des Juifs en Belgique, 1940-1945*, Bruxelles, 2004, p. 184 ; L. Steinberg, *Le comité de défense des Juifs...*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

Jewish leadership under Nazi rule : a unique Belgian historiography

In Belgian Holocaust historiography, the nature of the *Association des Juifs*' leadership has not been as thoroughly examined as that of the Jewish Council leaders in other European countries¹². In fact, it took almost two decades before scholars started paying attention to the *Association*, and these publications neither addressed the role and position of Salomon Ullmann, nor the socio-historical contexts from which wartime Jewish leaders in Belgium in general emerged. Moreover, little attention was paid to what had motivated Jewish leaders to work for the organisation. Instead, whether the AJB had been a resistance organisation or an organisation that was inherently collaborationist, was a central topic of discussion. In 1965, Betty Bieloguska-Garfinkels, wife of the former secretary of the *Association*'s Liège branch, Gregorius Garfinkels, venerated the *Association* and its leadership by pretending that the Comité de Défense des Juifs had been its clandestine extension¹³. Although some of its members were indeed involved in clandestine activities and worked for the CDJ, her portrayal of the AJB as a resistance organisation was severely criticised by others, including French historian Lucien Steinberg in his study on the Jewish Defense Committee : *Le Comité de défense des Juifs en Belgique, 1942-1944* (1973)¹⁴. Steinberg proposed a more balanced perspective on the AJB's functions. In his view, the organisation on the one hand had played a detrimental role as an intermediary in the depor-

¹² While this article focuses on Jewish Council leaders, we should bear in mind that there were other forms of Jewish leadership during Nazi rule as well. In Belgium, for example, there were various legal social welfare organisations that remained operative alongside the AJB. Moreover, clandestine organised resistance groups, including the Committee for the Defense of the Jews (CDJ), had their own Jewish leaders.

¹³ B. Garfinkels, *Les Belges face à la persécution raciale...*, 1940-1944, Brussels, 1965, pp. 88-92.

¹⁴ In 1977, political scientist Marcel Liebman also proposed a different perspective. He emphasised the collaborationist attitude of the AJB leadership. In 1944, his complaint had even formed the foundation of the urged the start of a Belgian State trial against the AJB leadership. M. Liebman, *Né juif. Une enfance juive pendant la guerre*, Paris-Gembloux, 1977 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber – R. Van Doorslaer, *De curatoren van het getto...*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

tation of Belgian Jews to death camps in Eastern Europe¹⁵. On the other hand, he acknowledged that the AJB had become a cloak for clandestine activities at a later stage, impeding the very regime that had created the organisation. By doing this, Lucien Steinberg made an important step in acknowledging that the nature of the *Association* had changed over time and that it had assumed various – apparently contradictory – roles simultaneously.¹⁶

While Belgian historians in the 1960s and 1970s primarily focused their research on the nature of the AJB's activities, and whether these activities should be considered acts of collaboration or resistance, scholars outside Belgium who investigated "Jewish Councils" across Europe paid attention to the psychology of Jewish leaders by examining their choices, attitudes and motivations. In the 1960s, the publications of Hannah Arendt and Raul Hilberg had a major impact on later discussions dealing with Jewish leadership under Nazi rule. In different ways, both prominent scholars argued Jewish leaders had facilitated the destruction of European Jewry. Hilberg claimed that the compliance of Jewish leaders had been the result of two thousand years of persecution which the Jewish people, as a group, had managed to survive, even though individuals had perished, through acquiescence and negotiations with their oppressors. This experience could not be unlearned, and Jewish leaders had not been able to switch to resistance during Nazi rule¹⁷. Hannah Arendt was even more radical on the matter : « The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery, but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people. »¹⁸ These assertions reinforced the notion, both in the public and in academic discourses, that Jewish Council leaders had committed treason.

¹⁵ L. Steinberg, *Le comité de défense des Juifs en Belgique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

¹⁶ For further reading on the interconnections between the AJB and clandestine networks, see : L. Vastenhout, *Between Community and Collaboration...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-233.

¹⁷ R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*, Chicago, 1961, p. 17.

¹⁸ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

In the mid-1980s, Belgian historian Maxime Steinberg, in his analysis of the AJB, built on the perspectives of Hilberg and Arendt. Despite his attempt to provide a solid overview of the period of Nazi occupation, armed Jewish resistance and German perpetrators were the main subjects of his analysis. As a result, his approach to the war contained an inherent moral dichotomy. This becomes apparent in his largely negative and incriminating discussion of the AJB, which was focused on the correlation between the activities of this organisation and the implementation of “Final Solution” to the Jewish problem. Steinberg placed the actions of the *Association des Juifs* directly in opposition to the attitude of resistance organisations and argued that the AJB had remained in control of the “legal ghetto” during the first period of occupation, informing their fellow Jews that they should obey German demands up to the very limits of the politics of “the lesser evil”¹⁹. Refusing to perceive illegality as an alternative approach to Germany’s occupation of the country, Steinberg observed, the decisions of the AJB leaders were ill-considered : « Their responsibility lay in the fact that they bowed down before the Germans [...], they submitted to the orders of the occupier, and urged the Jewish population to follow this legal behaviour. »²⁰

In the meantime, international historiography on the subject had developed towards a more nuanced perspective on Jewish wartime leadership. In the 1950s, Polish Jewish historian Philip Friedman had already advocated in-depth inquiries into individual Jewish leaders, their aims and choices (and mistakes) rather than a collective condemnation of Jewish leadership²¹. Yet his research did not reach a wider, international audience. Twenty years later, Trunk’s study on *Judenräte* in Poland

¹⁹ M. Steinberg, *L'étoile et le fusil : La traque des Juifs 1942-1944*, 2, Bruxelles, 1986, p. 248.

²⁰ *Id.*, « The Trap of Legality : The Association of the Jews of Belgium », in M. Marrus (Ed.), *The Nazi Holocaust : The Victims of the Holocaust*, 2, Toronto, 1989, p. 820.

²¹ See : « Aspects of the Jewish communal crisis in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia during the Nazi period » ; « Pseudo-saviors in the Polish ghettos : Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski of Lodz » ; « The Messianic complex of a Nazi collaborator in a ghetto : Moses Merin of Sosnowiec » ; « Jacob Gens : “Commandant” of the Vilna Ghetto » ; « Preliminary and methodological aspects of research on the Judenrat », all published by Friedman and assembled in Ph. Friedman, *Roads to Extinction...*, *op. cit.*

and the Baltic States, in which he emphasised the enormous pressure the Nazis placed on Jewish leaders to cooperate with their demands, marked a turning point in international approaches towards Jewish Councils and their leaders²². Throughout the 1970s, prominent Holocaust historians such as Yehuda Bauer, Yitzak Arad, Israel Gutman, Aharon Weiss and Dan Michman fostered new insights into the broader theme of Jewish leadership during Nazi occupation. By underlining the particular circumstances (of the ghettos) in which the *Judenräte* were forced to operate, their analyses resulted in the gradual loosening of the more generalised, stigmatising approach to the study of Jewish organisations²³. In the case of Belgium, Michman proposed a more balanced perspective in the late 1990s. In 1998, he rejected the notion that the nature of the AJB should be exclusively regarded in the context of the “Final Solution”. A closer look at the emergence of the AJB, together with a comparative viewpoint, would, in his view, contribute to more « subtle conclusions »²⁴.

A new perspective on the AJB was provided in 2004 in the edited volume *De Curatoren van het Getto : de vereniging van de joden in België tijdens de nazi-bezetting*. The contributors covered various themes relating to the *Association's* establishment, activities and postwar reception. The focus on the German perspective, in particular the continuous struggles between the Military Administration and the *Sipo-SD*, contributed to a better understanding of the opportunities the AJB had to thwart German policies. However, this volume did not extensively reflect on the personal histories of those who worked for the organisation. The only exception in this regard is the analysis of Salomon van den Berg, who initially chaired the *Association's* Brussels branch, and from March 1944 became its vice-chairman. Rudi van Doorslaer used Van den Bergh's diary

²² I. Trunk, *Judenrat...*, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

²³ See, for example, the various articles in Y. Gutman and C. Haft (Eds.), *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe...*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ D. Michman, « Research on the Holocaust in Belgium and in General : History and Context » in D. Michman (Ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust : Jews, Belgians, Germans*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1998, p. 33.

as the basis of a thorough analysis of his daily life and occupations while he worked for the AJB²⁵.

Salomon Ullmann, 1882-1940 : journeys across Europe and Egypt

Salomon Ullmann, Chief Rabbi of Belgium during Nazi occupation and the first chairman of the *Association des Juifs*, was born in Budapest, Hungary, in September 1882. There are discrepancies in existing literature as to the identity of Salomon Ullmann's father. Jean-Philippe Schreiber, for example, has indicated that Salomon was the son of Adolf Ullmann, president of the orthodox *Machsike Hadass* community in Antwerp²⁶. By contrast, Ephraim Schmidt claimed that Salomon was the son of Noach Zvi Ullmann, also known as Herman Ullmann²⁷. Noach Zvi Ullman was Rabbi of the *Machsike Hadass* community. Maxime Steinberg, in turn, has indicated that Ullmann's father, « O. Ullmann », was « the founder » of the Orthodox Community in Antwerp²⁸. The *Vreemdelingendossiers* – reports of the Foreign Police – of Salomon Ullmann and his parents, as well as his entry of the Jewish register of 1940, show that Herman (Noch Zvi) Ullmann was Salomon's father. His mother who, like his father was born in Hungary, was Johanna Schreiber²⁹.

In 1884, Herman and Johanna Ullmann emigrated to Antwerp and came in contact with Yitzak Hersch Ratzersdorfer, who had founded the

²⁵ R. Van Doorslaer, « Salomon van den Berg of de ondraaglijke mislukking van een joodse politiek van het minste kwaad » in R. Van Doorslaer – J.-Ph. Schreiber (Eds.), *De curatoren van het getto...*, *op. cit.* pp. 111-145. For the diary of Van den Berg, see : Kazerne Dossin, Fonds Centre national des hautes Études Juives (CNHEJ), A006685, Salomon van den Berg, « Journal de guerre », p. 36.

²⁶ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Dictionnaire biographique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

²⁷ E. Schmidt, *Geschiedenis van de Joden in Antwerpen*, Antwerp, 1963, p. 101.

²⁸ M. Steinberg, *L'étoile et le fusil. La question juive 1940-1942*, Bruxelles, 1983, p. 71 ; *Id.*, *L'étoile et le fusil : 1942, Les cent jours de la déportation des Juifs de Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1984, p. 31.

²⁹ Musée juif de Belgique (MJB), Register of Jews in 1940, Fiche « "Salaman" [*sic.*] Ullmann, born 19.9.1882 ».

first orthodox community in the city of Antwerp. In 1892, Herman Ullmann was nominated Rabbi of the orthodox *Ratzersdorfersche Gemeinde*, called after its founder. In 1905, the community took on the name *Machsike Hadass*. Herman Ullmann remained Rabbi of this community until 1916, when he died in Scheveningen, the Netherlands, at the age of 60³⁰. The orthodox *Machsike Hadass* found its origins at the end of the 1870s, in the areas of Galicia and Bucovina, located on the northern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, as a response to the increasing liberal spirit in these areas. It attempted to preserve traditional values, and branches of this organisation were established throughout eastern Galicia, Austria (Vienna), and in other European countries, including Belgium³¹. The main task of the community's leaders in Belgium was to inform their membership of the ritual prescriptions. *Machsike Hadass* was officially recognised by the Belgian State in 1910³².

Initially, *Machsike Hadass* in Belgium was a minor movement, with a largely immigrant congregation. At the end of the nineteenth century, there had been a large refugee stream into the city of Antwerp, and into Belgium in general. Eastern European Jews from Poland, Russia and Austrian Galicia (among other places) were fleeing antisemitism and poverty and sought refuge in the country. As a result, the Belgian Jewish community, which had been very small at the beginning of the nineteenth century, increased ten times in size and consisted of almost 50,000 on the eve of the First World War³³. These Jewish immigrants remained wedded to the

³⁰ Archives of the Consistoire Central Israélite de Belgique (CCIB), *Machsike Hadass*, Correspondance générale 1910-1937, Letter of the Machsike Hadass Community to the Central Consistory, 24 November 1916 ; E. Schmidt, *Geschiedenis van de Joden in Antwerpen...*, *op. cit.*, p. 101 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive en Belgique du moyen âge à la Première Guerre mondiale*, Bruxelles, 1996, p. 144 ; *Id.*, *Politique et religion : le Consistoire Central Israélite de Belgique au XIX^e siècle*, Bruxelles, 1995, pp. 369-372.

³¹ A. Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 2, Oxford, 2010, pp. 119-131.

³² J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Politique et religion...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 370-371.

³³ See J-Ph. Schreiber, *L'immigration juive en Belgique du Moyen âge à la Première Guerre mondiale*, Bruxelles, 1996, p. 208. For a discussion of the different demographic estimates of Jews in this period, see : J. Stamberger, *Jewish Migration and the Making of a Belgian Jewry : Immigration, Consolidation, and Transformation of Jewish Life in Belgium before 1940*, unpublished PhD thesis, Universiteit van Antwerpen, 2020, p. 45 n131.

political and social beliefs that had characterised the communities they had left behind. As a result, a mosaic of different communities came into existence, all with their own traditions and (religious) practices³⁴. *Machsike Hadass* was one of the organisations that united various smaller strands of orthodox Jews under its umbrella.

As a result of the continued influx of refugees in Belgium in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, *Machsike Hadass* grew in size and importance. While Hermann Ullmann was deeply involved in the community, Salomon Ullmann returned to Hungary in 1896, the year he turned fourteen, to attend a *yeshiva*, a small communal institution – usually only with a dozen students – which promoted both the mastery of Talmudic texts, and the study of the Jewish law (*halakhah*)³⁵. After three years, Salomon left Hungary and started a journey that would bring him to various European countries, and even to Egypt. He first continued his studies at the University of Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and then attended the University of Bern in Switzerland, where he defended his PhD thesis titled *Geschichte des Spanisch-Portugiesischen Juden in Amsterdam in XVII. Jahrhundert* in 1906³⁶. Between 1907 and 1910, he became deputy Rabbi in the city of Antwerp.

On 6 July 1910, he married Saina Haisu, a *jeune fille bourgeoise*, born in Romania in 1890³⁷. Shortly thereafter, the couple emigrated to Cairo, where Salomon became Rabbi of the Ashkenazi community. Ashkenazi Jews had not arrived in Egypt until the intensification of anti-Semitic persecution in Europe in the nineteenth century. Many had escaped pogroms and persecution in Russia, Romania and Poland. The Ashkenazi community was not as well-organised as the Sephardic community in

³⁴ L. Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad : een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking, 1880-1944*, Tiel, 2000, p. 27. See also : M. Steinberg, *L'étoile et le fusil. La question juive...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-78.

³⁵ A. H. Friedman, *Major Aspects of Yeshivah Education in Hungary, 1848-1948*, dissertation Yeshiva University, 1971.

³⁶ Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), Vreemdelingenpolitie, 1.042.122, « Salomon Ullmann ».

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Egypt³⁸. Ullmann was therefore charged with the reorganisation of the Ashkenazi community in Cairo. In addition, he was asked to establish a school in the city, a school that was « essentially German » (« *essentiellement allemande* »). The opening of this school was anticipated in October 1910³⁹. In Cairo, Salomon's first child, Maurice, was born⁴⁰.

In 1913, Ullmann returned to Europe with his family, and resided for two years in The Hague (the Netherlands). In 1914, he had wanted to become Rabbi of the Orthodox community in Brussels, but even though he was a suitable candidate, he was not elected⁴¹. In October 1915, the family moved to Rotterdam, where his daughters Erna (June 1916) and Anna Simone (December 1917) were born. Four years later, Salomon registered at the city of Amsterdam, where his professions were noted to be « merchant » and « Rabbi »⁴². From the Netherlands, Ullmann occasionally travelled to Romania⁴³. While he lived in the Netherlands, Salomon conducted scientific research on the history of the Jews in Belgium in the libraries of Amsterdam and The Hague, which would culminate into the publication *Une Histoire des Juifs en Belgique* in 1928. In 1921, he finally returned to Belgium, where, from 1922, he held the post of secretary of the *Machsike Hadass* community of Antwerp. He also became the community's Rabbi⁴⁴. In 1926, his daughter Lorie (or Laura) was born in Berchem,

³⁸ J. M. Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, London, 1969, pp. 3-9 ; J. Benin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry : Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1998, pp. 4-5.

³⁹ Letter from Somekh in Cairo to the President of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), 3 December 1909, in documents section of J. M. Landau, *Jews in nineteenth-century Egypt...*, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

⁴⁰ ARA, Vreemdelingenpolitie, 1.042.122, Salomon Ullmann.

⁴¹ J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Dictionnaire Biographique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

⁴² Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Vreemdelingenregister, Archief 5225, Inv. Nr. 945, Salomon Ullmann, 11.8.1919.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Archives of the Consistoire Central Israélite de Belgique (CCIB), Bruxelles, Dossier S. Ullmann (Aumônerie militaire), Dossier *Machsike Hadass* (Correspondance générale 1910-1937) ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Tussen traditionele en verplichte gemeenschap », in R. Van Doorslaer – J.-Ph. Schreiber (Eds), *De curatoren van het getto...*, *op. cit.*, p. 80 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Dictionnaire biographique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

Antwerp⁴⁵. In 1932, Salomon and his wife Seina were naturalised as Belgian citizens⁴⁶. Their journeys across Europe and North-Africa had come to an end, and they settled in the city where Salomon had spent his youth, and where his father had gained a solid reputation as Jewish representative in the orthodox community.

By the time Salomon became actively involved in the *Machsike Hadass*, it had become one of the two major orthodox Jewish communities in the city. The influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe, which had begun at the end of the nineteenth century, but continued well into the 1930s, had increased the presence of orthodox Jews in Antwerp. In the late 1930s, the membership of the community had doubled compared to 1910. The official membership numbered 2,800 on the eve of the war, and *Machsike Hadass* leaders increasingly began to fulfil major functions within the religious representation of the Jewish communities in Antwerp⁴⁷. *Shomre Hadass* was the other orthodox community that was well-established in Antwerp. The two Jewish communities had a similar following, and often clashed with each other in the years preceding the Second World War. In 1933, for example, they disagreed on who was in charge of the *shechita*, the control over whether animals were slaughtered and treated according to the Jewish food laws (*kashrut*). In one instance, Chief Rabbi Joseph Wiener even had to intervene : he urged Rabbi Rottenberg of *Machsike Hadass* and Rabbi Amiel of *Shomre Hadass* to put their opposition towards each other aside, and to improve their relationship for the sake of the thousands of Jewish refugees who needed their help⁴⁸.

Apart from the religious duties Salomon Ullmann assumed for the orthodox Antwerp community, he also engaged in non-religious social welfare activities in the city. In 1933, the year Hitler came into power in Germany, he became active in the newly established Antwerp Committee

⁴⁵ ARA, Vreemdelingenpolitie, Salomon Ullmann, 1.042.122.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ V. Vanden Daelen, *Laten we hun lied verder zingen : de heropbouw van de joodse gemeenschap in Antwerpen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1944-1960*, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 160, p. 166.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

for the Defense of the Rights of Jews (*Comité tot verdediging der rechten der Joden*), which consisted of a mixture of Jews from various backgrounds, including Zionists and religious Jews. The aim of this social welfare organisation was to aid Jews financially, and to inform them of the measures that were taken against Jews in Germany⁴⁹. Four years later, Salomon Ullmann was appointed Military Chaplain of the Belgian armed forces⁵⁰. This was a position he considered honourable and important, and he took great effort in carrying it out diligently. As Chief Rabbi Joseph Wiener noted, Ullmann took his tasks very seriously, and he was successful in satisfying the religious needs in the army⁵¹. In November 1939, Ullmann wrote that he used his position to aid (illegal) Jewish refugees, « *ces malheureux* », for example by providing them with food that was in accordance with the Jewish food laws⁵².

Unexpected ascension to power : Chief Rabbi in 1940

Despite the various representative functions Ullmann fulfilled in the 1930s, he was not among the most prominent leaders of the Jews in Belgium at the time. After the German invasion in May 1940, most prominent Jewish functionaries, including Chief Rabbi Joseph Wiener and Ernest Edouard Wiener, chairman of the Central Consistory in Belgium, as well as the majority of the Board of Directors of the Israelite Community of Brussels, had fled abroad. While the Jewish communities in Belgium, as Schreiber has argued, managed to reorganise and maintain themselves after the occupation, there also existed a leadership vacuum that needed to be filled⁵³. With the absence of Chief Rabbi

⁴⁹ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Belgian Jewry », in D. Michman (Ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-102.

⁵⁰ Communauté Israélite de Bruxelles (CIB), Musée Juif de Belgique (MJB), Box. 66, Report on the financial year 1937 ; J.-Ph. Schreiber, *Dictionnaire Biographique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

⁵¹ CCB, Dossier S. Ullmann (Aumônerie militaire), Letter of Chief Rabbi Wiener, 12.2.1940.

⁵² CCB, Dossier S. Ullmann (Aumônerie militaire), Letter of Salomon Ullmann to Ernest Edouard Wiener, 17.11.1939.

⁵³ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Tussen traditionele en verplichte gemeenschap », pp. 71-110.

Wiener, the Central Consistory recognised the necessity of appointing a new Chief Rabbi, although it was clear that this would be a « limited representation »⁵⁴. The urge that was felt to establish a new leadership was strengthened by the fear that German Jews, who had immigrated to Belgium primarily during the late 1930s, would gain a stronger influence over the community because of their “privileged” relationship with the occupier⁵⁵. In order to maintain control over the Jewish communities, a new Chief Rabbi had to be appointed. The choice eventually fell on Salomon Ullmann. It has been argued that, as a Rabbi from Antwerp, an important centre for Jewish activities in Belgium, this can be considered a logical choice⁵⁶. Yet we should emphasise that he was only appointed because those who had taken a leadership role on a national level before the war, were absent.

Wartime and postwar testimonies show that Ullmann was not considered the undisputed leader by members of the Jewish community. Some, as we have seen, believed he lacked the experience and expertise to become a leader during the difficult period of the German occupation. Moreover, he was not the unquestionable successor of Chief Rabbi Wiener. For example, Yitzak Kubowitzki, one of the leaders of the Brussels Jewish Community and of the Zionist movement, had first approached two other Antwerp Rabbis, including Rabbi Samuel Halevi Brot (*Shomre Hadass*), and had urged them to accept the position of Chief Rabbi ; they declined this proposition⁵⁷. Only thereafter, Kubowitzki approached Ullmann and asked him whether he wanted to take up this position.

Ullmann himself was not convinced of his own capacities to serve as Chief Rabbi of the Jews in Belgium, and claimed on several occasions

⁵⁴ M. Steinberg, « The Jews in the years 1940-1944 : Three strategies for coping with a tragedy », in D. Michman (Ed.), *Belgium and the Holocaust...*, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

⁵⁵ R. Van Doorslaer -J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Besluit », in *Id.*, *De curatoren van het getto...* *op. cit.*, p. 336. See also : Salomon Ullmann's discussion of these events in « L'activité de l'Association des Juifs en Belgique », Cegesoma, AA MIC/41.

⁵⁶ M. Steinberg, *La persécution des Juifs en Belgique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 184 ; L. Steinberg, *Le comité de défense des Juifs en Belgique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ Cegesoma, AA 1196, Interview with Yitzak Kubowitzki, 12.11.1964.

that he had been pressured to accept this position. For example, in his postwar report on the activities of the *Association des Juifs*, he indicated that members of the Consistory, as well as Antwerp Rabbis Brot and Rottenberg, had proposed that he – Ullmann – should become Chief Rabbi because it was necessary to have an « official representation » that would unite the Jews in Belgium⁵⁸. Ullmann testified that both Rabbis claimed that a refusal on his part would be « detrimental » to the Jews in Belgium, a reference to the fear that German Jews would otherwise take over at the expense of Belgian Jews⁵⁹. Ullmann asserted he had not been inclined to accept the offer. In an undated postwar oral history interview, he even claimed that he had taken all preparations to flee abroad with his family in case of a German occupation of country⁶⁰. Yet a sense of duty vis-à-vis the Jews who resided in Belgium, he testified, encouraged him to take up the position after all⁶¹. As a result, in December 1940, Ullmann moved with his wife and their children from Antwerp to Brussels, where the seat of Chief Rabbi was (and still is) located.

From Chief Rabbi to Chairman of the Jewish Association

Less than six months after the German occupation of Belgium, Nazi officials voiced the need to establish a Jewish body that would serve as an umbrella organisation to the Jews in the country⁶². A meeting with Chief Rabbi Ullmann was scheduled on 27 November 1940 in order to discuss this plan. Five months later, the *Comité de Coordination* (Coordinating Committee, cc) was established at the initiative of the ss and Ullmann

⁵⁸ Cegesoma, AA MIC/41, Salomon Ullmann, « L'activité de l'Association des Juifs en Belgique », p. 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* See also : M. Steinberg, *La Persécution des Juifs en Belgique...*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁶⁰ Kazerne Dossin, Fonds Centre national des hautes Études Juives (CNHEJ), Oral History interview Salomon Ullmann.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² D. Michman, « De oprichting van de vjb in internationaal perspectief », in R. Van Doorslaer – J.-Ph. Schreiber (Eds.), *De curatoren van het getto...*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

was appointed as the organisation's chairman⁶³. Various social welfare institutions, including the *Hilfswerk für die Juden aus Deutschland* (Aid Organisation for Jews from Germany), were included in the organisation⁶⁴. The supposed failures of this committee to unite Jews in Belgium under its umbrella, and the fact that *Zwangsgesellschaften* modelled after the Eastern European *Judenräte*, such as the *Reichsvereinigung der Juden* and the *Joodsche Raad voor Amsterdam*, had been imposed on the Jewish communities in the neighbouring Germany and the Netherlands respectively, encouraged ss-*Obersturmführer* Kurt Asche to establish a similar organisation in Belgium. After a period of heated discussions between the *Sipo-SD* and the Military Administration, *Militärverwaltungschef* Eggert Reeder acceded and, in November 1941, the *Association des Juifs* was established⁶⁵.

We have seen that historians have alluded to Ullmann's appointment at the helm of this organisation as a logical appointment, yet documentation shows that the Nazis were in fact not at all looking for a chairman with a religious background. In a report written by the Military Administration prior to the establishment of the *Association*, German officials seemed convinced that only a « small portion » of the Jews in Belgium belonged to a Jewish religious community. Thus, there was a need for a non-religious leader⁶⁶. The report reads : « Bringing these Jews under a religiously oriented leadership not only appears politically questionable but will also considerably reduce the willingness [of Jews in Belgium] to be included in the organisation. »⁶⁷ As such, it was considered « absolutely necessary »

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁶⁴ Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), Documentatie Oorlogsslachtoffers (DOS), Documentation Marburg, Film XIV, R.184/Tr50.077, Verwaltungsabteilung / Gruppe VII : Fürsorge – Juden. SVG, « Betrifft : Organisation der Juden in Belgien », 23.4.1941.

⁶⁵ For an overview of the institutional rivalry between the Military Administration and the *Sipo-SD* in the period leading up to the establishment of the AJB, see : D. Michman, « De oprichting van de VJB in internationaal perspectief », *op. cit.*, pp. 33-40 ; L. Vastenhou, *Between Community and Collaboration...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-62 and pp. 69-73.

⁶⁶ ARA, DOS, Documentation Marburg, XIV, Administration Department, Group 7 : Care, SVG-R.184/Tr 50 077, Report of the Military Administration, « Entwurf », 30.9.1941.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

to appoint a chairman who was not religiously oriented, and who was well known among Belgian Jewry⁶⁸. The idea that a non-religious leader should chair this Jewish organisation was not unique. That is, in Eastern Europe, the majority of the first *Judenräte* chairmen had primarily been involved in political, rather than religious, representative functions before the war ; only less than 1% of the first *Judenräte* chairmen that Aharon Weiss examined, were Rabbis⁶⁹. Despite German reservations, orthodox Rabbi Salomon Ullmann was appointed, most likely as a result of the lack of a suitable alternative.

Ullmann himself also seemed reluctant to become chairman of the *Association*. The treasurer of the local Brussels AJB board, Alfred Blum, indicated in a postwar interview that Ullmann regretted he had been appointed as chairman : « *il était fort ennuyé* »⁷⁰. Ullmann never clearly discussed why he was reluctant to serve in this capacity, yet his background as an Antwerp Rabbi who had little leadership experience on the national level, and who had never been engaged in any political activities before the war undoubtedly played a role. Ullmann defended his acceptance of his nomination after the war by indicating that the Military Administration had threatened him that a refusal on his part would lead to severe sanctions⁷¹. Moreover, prominent non-Jewish Belgian individuals – « *autorités ecclésiastiques et laïques* » – had advised him to accept his appointment, so he could, as much as possible, relieve the plight of the Jewish population and « inform the Ministry of Justice of all measures taken »⁷². Other sources corroborate these statements⁷³. Therefore, Salomon Ullmann seems to have

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ A. Weiss, « Jewish Leadership in Occupied Poland », p. 356.

⁷⁰ Kazerne Dossin, Fonds Centre national des hautes Études Juives (CNHEJ), Farde Histoire Orale III, Interview Alfred Blum, 5.12.1972, p. 4.

⁷¹ Cegesoma, AA MIC/41, Salomon Ullmann, L'activité de l'Association des Juifs en Belgique, p. 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ See, for example, Palais de Justice (Brussels), Krijgsauditoraat, penal files of the AJB leadership 8036/44 ; E. Debruyne, « Un service secret en exil. L'administration de la Sécurité de l'État en exil à Londres, novembre 1940-septembre 1944 » in : *Les Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, 15, 2005, pp. 335-355.

been caught up in the situation, feeling unable and eventually unwilling to decline his nomination as AJB chairman.

Salomon Ullmann's apparent reluctance to serve as chairman of the *Association* was visible in the way he chaired the organisation ; he was a weak leader. There are various accounts that show he was overpowered by members of the organisation's central board, and that he was not in charge when major decisions had to be taken. For example, Ullmann could not decide whether he would allow employees of the *Association* to be deployed for the distribution of the yellow star, a measure that was imposed on the Jews in Belgium in June 1942⁷⁴. After mayors in Brussels had refused to take care of the distribution of these distinctive signs, the Jewish leadership was summoned by Arnold Gentzke to the *Oberfeldkommandatur* (ofk). Gentzke proposed that thirty-eight of the *Association's* employees would have to aid in the distribution process. Ullmann declared that he did not have a clear opinion on the matter, and that he first wanted to consult with Maurice Benedictus, secretary of the *Association's* central board and chairman of the AJB Antwerp branch⁷⁵. Overall, Ullmann's role in the AJB was secondary. Maurice Benedictus occupied the central position instead, first as secretary and later as head of the administration of the organisation's central board, which presided over the local branches and various commissions⁷⁶.

Ullmann clearly did not feel comfortable as chairman of the *Association*. He testified after the war that he had the feeling that the other board members had completely different views on the orientation and tasks of the *Association*⁷⁷. He indicated that his religious background, which the other central board members lacked, might explain this difference, although he

⁷⁴ For the imposition of this measure, see : *Verordnungsblatt des Militärbefehlshabers in Belgien und Nordfrankreich*, 1.6.1942.

⁷⁵ Kazerne Dossin, Fonds Centre national des hautes Études juives (CNHEJ). A007409, Report of meeting between S. Ullmann, M. Benedictus and Gentzke, 6.6.1942.

⁷⁶ M. Steinberg, « The Trap of Legality », p. 801.

⁷⁷ Oral History Division of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (OHD/HUJ), Interview with Salomon Ullmann by S. Esh and R. Bannitt, October 1962, p. 14.

did not further elaborate on this matter⁷⁸. While we cannot take postwar attempts to explain and excuse wartime behaviour at face value, there is clear evidence that Ullmann indeed resented his role as chairman. He wanted to focus primarily on the provision of social welfare to Jews, activities in which he had already engaged in before the war. He found the politics of negotiation with German authorities difficult, and did not wish to give in to increasing German pressure. For example, in August 1942, Ullmann refused the German order to sign a letter that was aimed to encourage Jews to report themselves once they had received a summons for “work in the East” (*Arbeitseinsatz*). The *Sipo-SD* dictated the Jewish leaders to write this letter because many Jews had failed to respond to their *Arbeitseinsatzbefehl*. Ullmann voiced his concerns about the impact of such a letter, and did not want to bear the responsibility of these Jews being deported. Despite his objections, other board members forced him to sign the document ; Ullmann deliberately signed only with his name, without adding his religious designation of Chief Rabbi⁷⁹.

Ullmann was neither able, nor willing, to overpower the other board members for he lacked the necessary leadership experience. He cannot be considered a trained leader, and he was not familiar with the politics of negotiation. As appointed representative of all Jews in Belgium, he had a difficult task considering the splintered nature of the Jewish communities in the country at this point. Ullmann’s lack of (political) experience further prevented him from taking a clear direction over the *Association des Juifs*. In line with the religious charitable tradition, he primarily focused on providing social welfare to the (increasingly) impoverished Jewish communities in Belgium. Between January and June 1942, the AJB dedicated much of its efforts and time to this, and, as we will see, Ullmann continued to engage in social welfare activities after he resigned from his position as the *Association’s* chairman at the end of 1942.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Cegesoma, AA MIC/41, Salomon Ullmann, « L’activité de l’Association des Juifs en Belgique », p. 3 ; Centre national des hautes Études juives (CNHEJ), Interview Alfred Rosenzweig, 3.2.1972, p. 26. For further reading on this episode, see : M. Steinberg, *La persécution des Juifs en Belgique,...* op. cit. pp. 233-251.

Resignation and continued engagement with the AJB

In September 1942, Salomon Ullmann wished to resign from his position as chairman of the *Association*. In his letter of resignation, sent to the *Militärbefehlshaber* of Belgium and Northern France, Alexander von Falkenhausen, he indicated that the « recent events », referring to the mass arrests of Jews in Antwerp and Brussels in the preceding weeks, had encouraged him to make this decision⁸⁰. He did not disappear from public life, however. In fact, he maintained his position as Chief Rabbi of Belgium. This was a unique situation. In none of the neighbouring countries did any of the “Jewish Council” chairmen maintain a central position in the Jewish community after they had resigned. In fact, only Albert Lévy, chairman of the French alternative to the *Judenräte*, the *Union Générale des Israélites de France* (UGIF), resigned voluntarily, yet he fled to Switzerland in December 1942 to avoid persecution. While Ullmann continued to fulfil a public function, he arranged a safe hiding place for his two daughters Erna and Anna Simone with baroness Marie-Thérèse Van der Elst⁸¹. Van der Elst headed the *Entraide des Travailleuses* (Mutual aid for Female Workers) which provided welfare to those in need, and she illegally hid Jewish children⁸². The fact that Salomon Ullmann did not go into hiding himself, shows that he continued to see the importance of his public function as Chief Rabbi.

As the central *religious* representative of Jews in Belgium, he apparently felt more confident and, in this role as Chief Rabbi, he engaged in various social welfare activities that were primarily focused on the provision of religious support. Jewish religious life in Brussels prevailed in this period. As Ullmann claimed after the war : « The Synagogue was still operative and people continued to come both in the morning and in

⁸⁰ Cegesoma, AA MIC/41, Archives de guerre de Salomon Ullmann, Letter of resignation, 8.9.1942.

⁸¹ J. Loncin, *Geheime routes en netwerken : Joodse kinderen op de vlucht voor de Holocaust*, Leuven, 2003, p. 99.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 93-100.

the evening »⁸³. Indeed, the synagogue was an important space for Jews to socialise, and it remained the centre of Jewish life in Belgium⁸⁴. Salomon van den Berg, member of the *Association des Juifs* Brussels branch, and later chairman of the organisation, wrote in his diary that, even amidst the major raids that were carried out across Belgium, important Jewish holidays were celebrated in the Synagogue of Brussels⁸⁵. Ullmann took great effort in safeguarding the religious continuation of Jewish life, which is demonstrated by the fact that he personally secured the distribution of unleavened bread to cities with a major Jewish presence, and to interned Jewish prisoners of war⁸⁶.

While Ullmann was clearly more comfortable in his role as religious leader, he continued to be engaged with the AJB on the sidelines. There are several examples that show he used his connections with this organisation to secure aid to certain individuals⁸⁷. Vice-versa, the *Association's* officials asked him to visit the sick internees of the assembly camp Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen and urged him to seek contact with aid organisations to safeguard basic needs for Jews⁸⁸. Moreover, the *Association's* Antwerp branch on many occasions asked Ullmann whether he could use his connections to intervene in favour of Jews who were arrested by the Nazis,

⁸³ OHD/HUJ, Interview with Salomon Ullmann by S. Esh and R. Bannitt, October 1962, p. 5.

⁸⁴ J.-Ph. Schreiber, « Tussen traditionele en verplichte gemeenschap », pp. 92-93.

⁸⁵ Kazerne Dossin, Fonds Centre national des hautes Études juives (CNHEJ), A006685, Salomon van den Berg, « Journal de guerre », p. 55.

⁸⁶ See, for example, MJB-CIB, box 86, Letter of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supply to Salomon Ullmann, 31.12.1942 ; MJB-CIB, box 86, Letter of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supply to Salomon Ullmann, 27.01.1943 ; MJB-CIB, box 92, Letter of Salomon Ullmann to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supply, 5.1.1943 ; MJB-CIB, box 92, Letter of Salomon Ullmann to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supply, 12.1.1944 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003896, Letter of Salomon Ullmann to Nico Workum, 23.12.1943.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003931, Letter of Ullmann to the AJB Antwerp branch, 6.5.1943.

⁸⁸ Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003087, Letter of Marcel Laufer and Nico Workum to Salomon Ullmann, 26 January 1943 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003907, Letter of Salomon Ullmann to the AJB Antwerp branch, 27.1.1943 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003899, Letter of Marcel Laufer and Nico Workum to Salomon Ullmann, 30.12.1942.

and were now interned in Dossin⁸⁹. Ullmann confirmed these activities after the war, when he claimed that, after he resigned from the *Association des Juifs*, he had tried to set free Jewish prisoners. He also said that he sent packages with food and other basic necessities to Jews who were interned, sometimes in cooperation with social welfare organisations⁹⁰. In accordance with the charitable Jewish tradition, Ullmann continued his activities until after the Germans announced in 1943 that Jews with Belgian citizenship, who constituted a minority of the Jews in Belgium (around 6%), were now also subject to arrest and deportation. He was thus no longer protected by his Belgian citizenship. At the end of August 1944, when the Allied liberation of Belgium was imminent, Salomon Ullmann and his family were arrested and interned until the liberation of the county in early September⁹¹.

After the war, the activities of Jewish functionaries who had worked for the *Association des Juifs* were investigated by a Military Tribunal. Such inquiries were not uncommon ; similar state-led investigations into the wartime choices of Jewish leaders were conducted in, for example, Greece, the Netherlands, Austria and Hungary⁹². In Belgium, the Military prosecutor dropped all charges, in part because it had many other cases on trial. In January 1947, the cases against the central AJB leaders were

⁸⁹ See, for example, Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003750, Letter of the local Antwerp branch to Salomon Ullmann, 13.10.1942 and 16.10.1942 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003885, Letter of the local Antwerp branch to Salomon Ullmann, 13.11.1942 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003886 and A003987, Two letters of the local Antwerp branch to Salomon Ullmann, 16.11.1942 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003888, Letter of the local Antwerp branch to Salomon Ullmann, 17.11.1942 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003902, Letter of the local Antwerp branch to Salomon Ullmann, 12.01.1943 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003904, Letter of the local Antwerp branch to Salomon Ullmann, 14.01.1943 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003934, Letter of Nico Workum to Salomon Ullmann, 13.5.1943 ; Kazerne Dossin, MNR, A003944, Letter of Nico Workum to Salomon Ullmann, 3.8.1943.

⁹⁰ For an insight into the social welfare in which Ullmann was engaged, see the personal archives of Salomon Ullmann at Cegesoma and the archives of the Israelite Community of Brussels.

⁹¹ Cegesoma, AA MIC/41, Salomon Ullmann, « L'activité de l'Association des Juifs en Belgique », p. 5.

⁹² L. Jockusch and G. N. Finder, « Introduction », in *Id.* (Eds.), *Jewish Honor Courts : revenge, retribution and reconciliation in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust*, Detroit, 2015, p. 4.

closed⁹³. Ullmann remained Chief Rabbi of Belgium throughout this period, until he resigned in 1957. In his resignation letter to the Consistory, he wrote that he had had the joy of seeing the dispersed members of the Jewish community return after the Second World War. He was furthermore grateful to have witnessed the rebirth of the institutions necessary for the continuation of religious life, including synagogues and Jewish schools⁹⁴. After this accomplishment, he felt confident to resign from his position : « I leave my place with the feeling that everything is prepared for the religious and moral development of Judaism in Belgium. »⁹⁵ The confidence that resonated through this letter marks a great contrast with the lack of confidence he had felt, and exhibited, as chairman of the AJB. Even though his appointment as Chief Rabbi came earlier, and emerged under different circumstances than anyone could have anticipated, it was still, unlike the chairmanship of the *Association des Juifs*, a position he had prepared for his entire prewar life. It enabled him to carry out charitable work without being forced to engage in complicated politics of cooperation with the German occupier.

Conclusion

The appointment of Salomon Ullmann as chairman of the *Association des Juifs* was both remarkable and unsurprising. With the absence of the majority of the prewar Jewish leadership, the German occupation of Belgium catapulted him into a role as representative for all Jews in Belgium. Never before had he occupied a position that combined social, political

⁹³ For an overview of the proceedings of this court and the precise explanations as to why they dropped charges, see : A. Donnet, « Le procès de l'AJB n'aura pas lieu : Analyse du dossier 8036/44 de l'Auditorat Militaire de Bruxelles », doctoral thesis Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1992-1993 ; *Id.*, « Het onderzoek door het militaire gerecht : het geheugen buitenspel gbezet », in R. Van Doorslaer and J.-Ph. Schreiber (Eds.), *De curatoren van het getto...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-211.

⁹⁴ CCIB, Dossier S. Ullmann (Aumônerie militaire), Letter of Salomon Ullmann to the Central Consistory, 6.01.1957.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

and religious interests. His position as AJB chairman was questioned by three sides: German authorities, members of the Jewish communities in Belgium and even by Ullmann himself. The Military Administration preferred someone who was not immersed in any specific religious occupation at the helm of the AJB ; Jews in Belgium did not consider him fit for the job, an idea that was shared by Ullmann, who was reluctant to occupy this burdensome position. Ullmann's uncertainty and reluctance is not only corroborated by the testimonies of others, who worked with him during the war, but also by the way in which the first AJB chairman executed his power, and the relative weak nature of his position.

The lack of a thorough investigation into Ullmann's personal history, and the nature of his position, has obscured a thorough understanding of the *Association's* first chairmanship. From his personal biography, we can see that Ullmann's prewar life was dedicated to studying Jewish religion and gaining experience as an orthodox religious leader. Before the war, his leadership experience had been limited to that of a local Rabbi in the *Machsike Hadass* community. The majority of his prewar engagements were furthermore centred around the notion of the provision of (religious) care. Therefore, it is not surprising that he could not cope with a representative role on the national level that extended these responsibilities to a wide range of activities, including non-religious matters. This might not only explain why he was a weak leader, but also why he chose to resign. His dedication to matters of social welfare in a religious spirit, as Chief Rabbi of Belgium, was more comfortable to him than his chairmanship of the AJB was. This insight in the personal background, choices and reflections of Salomon Ullmann allows us to understand what motivated him to take on the leadership, and, in turn, the choices he made during the course of the war.

Much has been written on Jewish wartime leaders, but a solid investigation into their daily lives and prewar personal histories is sometimes absent. The ways in which the "Jewish Councils" were governed, depended in part on whether or not an individual had (extensive) prewar leadership

experience. Ullmann's case shows that Jewish wartime leaders did not always constitute a continuation of prewar social structures. It also highlights that there was uncertainty about the appointment of Jewish leaders, not only among the Jews, but among German authorities involved in the establishment of such organisations. Above all, understanding the personal biographies of Jewish wartime leaders in the wider context of their (prewar and wartime) communities allows for a much better understanding of their position, motivations and choices during the war.