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Insights into the Situation of the Jews in the Netherlands

Henri Markens, November 15, 2009

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Interview with Henri Markens

- Demographic research by the Jewish social organization JMW shows that three-quarters of the Dutch Jewish community, which numbers about 30,000, is not organized in one of the three religious organizations—the Ashkenazi, Progressive, and Portuguese. Among other things, this means they do not send their children to a Jewish school and, if they are ill, do not go to the Jewish hospital. Close to half of the Jews live in Amsterdam and the adjacent southern suburb of Amstelveen.
- The immigration of Muslims and the rise of Islam in the Netherlands have created problems for the Jewish community and will continue to do so. There are about one million Muslims in the Netherlands. Their influence on the political system is increasing. This cannot be positive for the Jews. The more power the Muslim community gains, the more it will weaken the Jewish community's relations with a number of ministries.
- The Jewish community faces increasing anti-Semitism. This has led to enhanced security measures. It also threatens to intensify attitudes based on fear.
- An important element in Dutch Jewish history over the past decade was the restitution negotiations. As a result, the Dutch government made a payment of 400 million guilders (180 million Euros) to the Dutch community. Banks, insurance companies, and the stock exchange made additional payments that totaled 340 million guilders (155 million Euros).

Demographic research by the Jewish social organization JMW shows that three-quarters of the Dutch Jewish community, which numbers about 30,000, is not organized in one of the three religious organizations—the Ashkenazi, Progressive, and Portuguese. Among other things, this means they do not send their children to a Jewish school and, if they are ill, do not go to the Jewish hospital. Close to half of the Jews live in Amsterdam and the adjacent southern suburb of Amstelveen.

From 1986 to 2006, Henri Markens was principal of the Joods Lyceum Maimonides (Jewish Maimonides High School) in Amsterdam. Since then he serves as director-general of the Organization for Jewish Education (JBO). He is also a former chairman of the Organization of Jewish Communities in the Netherlands (NIK) and of the CJO, the umbrella organization of Dutch Jewry.

Markens illustrates the interaction between Jewish identity and Dutch society anecdotally by relating some of his experiences and attitudes. His words are a contemporary testimony to some important aspects of Dutch Jewry's present reality and uncertain future.

Prominent Guests at School

"Maimonides is a small school with 160 pupils. However, through contacts developed over the years we managed to bring a number of interesting guest speakers to the school. As principal I had many dealings with the Dutch authorities and the same was true when I was chairman of the CJO.

"We invited guests, both to speak to the pupils and to show them how this small Jewish school functions. During the time they were ministers, both Gerrit Zalm and Rita Verdonk visited the school. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a secular Muslim parliamentarian who has since emigrated to the United States, also came to speak. Others included the Jewish writers Leon de Winter and his wife Jessica Durlacher; former foreign minister and now mayor of The Hague, Joziias van Aartsen; and Jaap de Hoop Scheffer while he was chairman of the Christian Democrat faction in parliament. He later became foreign minister and secretary-general of NATO.

"These people are usually invited to speak on special occasions, such as Israel's Independence Day or Jerusalem Liberation Day. This also enables the students to ask them how they view the situation concerning Israel."

Keeping Our Own Identity

"I showed in particular to Verdonk, who was then integration minister, and Hirsi Ali that the Jewish community is fully integrated into Dutch society yet has still maintained its own identity. This contrasts with the integration problems of parts of the country's Muslim community.

"When Hirsi Ali visited the school, the main discussion took place with the students. She claimed that the school only has the right to exist if it accepts non-Jewish students as well. The pupils disagreed strongly with this. They criticized her approach and said that they have the right to their own school and to live in their own culture, as long as they do not offend anyone else.

"One of the reasons I invited Hirsi Ali to the school was to show her that the problems she knows from the Muslim world do not occur among Jews. The Muslim population in the Netherlands is only partly integrated into Dutch society. Muslim youth are a source of trouble in many cities, especially Amsterdam and Rotterdam.

"I do not exclude the possibility that in the future there will be political attempts to abolish religious schools, or at least put major limitations on them. I wanted to preempt that by showing politicians how our school functions within the Jewish community and Dutch society."

Visitors with and without Security Guards

"Both the guest speakers and the students enjoy the discussions. All the pupils participate, including the lowest grades. The visitors have the opportunity to see that these children are part of Dutch society, yet do not conceal their Jewish identity.

"Zalm visited the school at the end of 2004 when he was finance minister. We had known each other from the negotiations on the Holocaust-assets restitution, which began in 1999. The minister came with his information officer but without security guards. He explained the economic situation in the Netherlands and why it was necessary to cut the state budget. Pupils who were studying economics asked especially difficult questions. Zalm wrote about the visit on his blog, where he published a daily report on what he had done in his capacity as minister. He mentioned that the pupils had asked good questions.

"The current Muslim mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmad Aboutaleb, visited the school when he was an alderman on behalf of the Labor Party in Amsterdam. He came a few months after the murder of the Dutch media person Theo van Gogh by a radical Muslim in 2004. He was accompanied by six security guards, of whom four came into the school. Aboutaleb spoke about the situation in Amsterdam and explained how pupils of diverse origin and religion should interact. He said that we are all standing in a circle, have to hold each other, and shouldn't go outside the circle. Otherwise the situation would deteriorate.

"It was a nice story about integration and how we all have to contribute to it. He also underlined the difference between fundamentalists, who are very strict in their observance of Islam, and radicals like Van Gogh's murderer and his milieu. The only thing he forgot to mention as far as integration in Amsterdam is concerned is that the situation has already been ruined for a long time.

"Sometimes I also invite people to my home. The Christian Democrat Maria van der Hoeven once had a Friday-night meal with us when she was education minister. As usual my wife lit Shabbat candles and showed her what Shabbat means for Orthodox Jews. Zalm and his wife also had a Friday-night meal with us. We hope that these people thus gain better insight into what it means to be a Jew in the Netherlands.

"Verdonk also spent a Friday night at our home. At a certain moment I said: 'We Jews are well integrated into Dutch society, but we still keep our own identity. I wear a kippa in those neighborhoods of Amsterdam where it is possible, go to synagogue, and eat only kosher food. At the same time I also live within the larger Dutch society. These go together very well.' Verdonk had great difficulty understanding this."

Not Optimistic about the Future

Markens remarks: "I am not optimistic about the future of Dutch society. In 2003 we had visits at our school by Rob Oudkerk, then alderman of education from the Labor Party, and Lodewijk Asscher, who is now deputy mayor of Amsterdam representing the same party but at that time was the party's faction chairman.

"We told them how our pupils experience the increasing anti-Semitism in Amsterdam. This trend still continues. In 2005, near the metro station in Amstelveen where many middle-class Jews live, one of our pupils was beaten up by three or four non-Western immigrants. He was wearing a Star of David. An incident of this kind at that place was unusual. It is much more common that such things happen in Amsterdam proper. The closer one comes to the center of the city, the more dangerous the situation becomes.

"The phenomenon is more severe than the beating itself. I consider mental abuse to be more serious than physical harm. The consequences of the beating can be healed in an hour or at most a few months. The emotional abuse is frightening and one starts to behave accordingly. In the past a number of students wore kippot when traveling from school to the Amsterdam central station. Today this is no longer possible."

Provocations?

"For a number of years already we have been telling our students to 'put a cap over your kippa.' In principle one shouldn't have to do this, but the circumstances in Amsterdam leave you no choice. One must draw logical conclusions from one's experience. In recent years perceptions in the Netherlands have changed and some people now regard the kippa as a provocation. If one holds such views, a woman wearing a burka is far more provoking. She doesn't allow any social contact. If I wear a kippa you can look me in the eye and talk to me. This is a major difference.

"Our pupils come from all over Amsterdam, though mainly from the southern parts and Amstelveen. The neighborhood around the Lekstraat synagogue where many Jews used to live has now become a problem area for Jews. Children there are often called offensive names or knocked off their bicycles. The situation particularly for observant Jews in the Netherlands is getting worse.

"Pupils who moved to Maimonides from other schools would tell us about the anti-Semitism they had experienced. Every

year we had a few children who transferred to us. This was usually because students in their previous school had made anti-Semitic remarks and the school had not done enough-or anything-about it. Other parents and children apparently considered the anti-Semitism normal.

"Often the pupils themselves informed the defense organization CIDI that they had had anti-Semitic experiences. This organization also asked me from time to time whether I had heard stories from our pupils that were of interest to them."

Assimilated Dutch Jews

"We had to cope with the fact that after the Jewish elementary school, Rosh Pina, a significant number of Dutch Jewish parents did not send their children to Maimonides. Secularization is on the increase, not only among Jews but in all Dutch religious communities. I often had the feeling that parents wanted their younger children to live in a more protected environment. We had a beautiful new building, the school had good educational results, and the children also got some Jewish inspiration. Parents saw this as positive.

"However, many parents said, once their children had reached high school age: 'It has been enough as far as Jewish education is concerned. Go into the larger world. Then when you are twenty you can make your own way.' Such parents no longer made a clear choice for their children. Furthermore, in a small group like the Jewish one there is much social control. No one is anonymous. If one's position is not good in such a group, then the end of elementary school is the time to leave.

"More than half of our pupils had at least one Israeli parent. Some of these came to the Netherlands for a relatively short time. Others returned to Israel when the economic situation improved there. Some emigrated, for instance, to the United States. Jewish immigration to the Netherlands, such as from Russia and Iran, has stopped completely."

The Visit of Mayor Cohen

"In 2003 our school celebrated its seventy-fifth year. The mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, gave the opening speech at the festive ceremony. Although he is halachically Jewish, it was clear that he doesn't identify in any way with the Jewish community. He did not say 'we as Jews' but 'you, as a Jewish community.'

"In that he differs greatly from one of his Jewish predecessors, Eduard van Thijn, who was mayor of Amsterdam from 1983 to 1994. On the occasion of a lecture on National Memorial Day on 4 May, he told of his experiences during World War II and in his school years. He mentioned that he had had little connection with Judaism, his parents having abandoned any Jewish practice and even concealed their identity as Jews. When he became mayor, however, he realized his true identity and started to take lessons in Judaism.

"When Cohen visited our school we spoke about the problem of anti-Semitism, which preoccupies us. He knew that our pupils were beaten occasionally. I let pupils who had experienced this tell him about it. He gave the impression that he was not at all shocked. In this context he presents himself as a man with no emotions who says he is trying to keep a society together, when in reality it already has not been together for a long time.

"This makes me think about the late Schelto Patijn, Cohen's predecessor, who was Amsterdam's mayor from 1994 to 2000. He was not only very pleasant but also showed a genuine interest in the Jewish community. As far as security was concerned he was always open to the specific needs of Jews as he knew that these were real. I once said to him-the only non-Jewish mayor Amsterdam has had for a long time-'it almost seems that you are Jewish.'

"His approach was totally different from Cohen's. In recent years there has been much more need for the security of Jewish buildings than in Patijn's time. As the mayor is head of the police, one must address him for extra protection. Cohen referred us to the education and interior ministries. They referred us back to the Amsterdam municipality. Ultimately both the municipality and the ministries helped us, but it took a very long time."

The Impact of Islam

Markens says that the immigration of Muslims and the rise of Islam in the Netherlands have created problems for the Jews and will continue to do so. "Every few years there are problems concerning *shechita* [kosher slaughter]. The organizations for the protection of animals focus on Islamic slaughter. However, the Jewish method of slaughter is drawn into these attacks.

"The animal protection organizations address their criticism to the Agriculture Ministry. The ministry then issues stricter regulations for slaughter. Life is made increasingly difficult for Jews in the slaughterhouses. The animal protectors are no friends of the Jews and that is also true for many people working in the slaughterhouses. Several ritual slaughterers have told us that a number of employees of the slaughterhouses are rabid anti-Semites.

"There are about one million Muslims in the Netherlands. Their influence on the political system is increasing; they may even establish a national party. This cannot be positive for the Jews. The more power the Muslim community gains, the more it will weaken the Jewish community's relations with a number of ministries.

"In the most recent elections a large part of Dutch Muslims voted for the Labor Party. This party has for decades allowed unlimited Muslim immigration and has done nothing about hateful sermons in mosques. Labor is to a large extent guilty for the present political climate in the Netherlands. It was obvious that parts of the Muslim community would create problems. These have been 'solved' in the usual Dutch way, which means they have been neglected. At present Labor is changing its policy in this respect, having seen that a velvet-gloves approach did not work."

Contacts with Muslim Schools

Markens says Jewish students should meet more often with Muslim students. "If we promote this, there is some hope. It cannot be done only on an incidental basis. It has to be repeated with other groups. One must hope that the pupils will tell about these meetings to other members of their communities. Children tend to discuss only minute issues with each

other. This is not the solution for the bigger problems, but it could be the beginning of future developments. I proposed to the highest levels of the Amsterdam municipality to facilitate meetings of this kind, but they did not react. Finally I established contact myself with a Muslim school.

"The problems with the Muslims also affect Dutch society as a whole, which is becoming increasingly anti-Israel. Jews are more and more being identified with Israel, and the difference between anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism is marginal. The former-for instance, in politicians' statements-is generally a tacit way to express the latter. Non-Jewish teachers who applied to join our staff made similar observations. I would also provoke these statements by saying to them: 'If you think the establishment of the state of Israel was a historical mistake, then you shouldn't come to work here.' Their standard reply was 'I wouldn't have reacted to the advertisement if I thought that way.'

"Children are usually more radical in their attitudes than their parents. When there had been another terror attack in Israel, the school in particular would react with a depressed mood. Very often a family who had a child at our school was related to or knew someone related to a victim of such an attack. Many families had lost family members or friends in this way."

The Restitution Negotiations

When asked about the restitution negotiations in which Markens played a major role, he says: "We had created the CJO in 1997 because several Jewish organizations often approached ministries individually on various issues and each of them had a somewhat different story. We realized that our position would be stronger if we were united. The reemergence of the postwar restitution issue suddenly gave the CJO a very important role, the most important it has had so far.

"There were great differences in the attitudes of the Dutch politicians involved in the matter. Former minister Jos van Kemenade, who presided over the main commission that investigated the issue, dealt with it as a real politician. He tried to treat the issue without emotion, to the extent possible. In Jewish circles involved in the restitution negotiations, he has the reputation of not understanding much about how badly the Jewish community had been treated after the war.

"Minister Zalm saw it very differently. At one point one of his ministry's officials tried to reduce the proposed payment to the Jewish community. Zalm reacted: 'It seems that you are the finance minister. Just keep your mouth shut.' In 2005 the CJO organized a farewell dinner when he left the Finance Ministry. Zalm spoke there and said: 'The officials of the ministry have learned through the restitution affair to cope with emotions. Before this they were only able to deal with figures.'"

Incidents during the Negotiations

"During the negotiations there were a number of incidents. In the draft document of the Van Kemenade Commission, it was proposed that a payment of 150 million guilders [70 million Euros] would be made to the Jewish community. A few weeks later, when it became clear that the Jewish community would not accept this, the official report contained a proposal of 250 million guilders [115 million Euros]. There was no calculation to back up either of the figures. All that had changed was that the commission understood that the former figure would cause problems with the Jewish community. Its members probably thought: 'If we add another 100 million guilders, maybe we will solve the issue.'

"The Van Kemenade Commission had three Jewish members who did not sufficiently influence the outcome of the investigations. This led to the strange situation where, within a few weeks, the money offered was raised by only 100 million guilders, which was still far less than adequate. Had the commission consulted better with the Jewish representatives, this bizarre development could have been prevented. Instead the community only received occasional leaks of information.

"A delegation of the CJO then met with Prime Minister Wim Kok and the ministers involved in the matter- Gerrit Zalm and Els Borst. A number of government officials were also present. We were received nicely with coffee and tea. Kok, in his introduction, said that the Van Kemenade Commission had been composed of very prominent Dutchmen who had made a major contribution with their report. These prominent people had concluded that the payment should be 250 million guilders and the Jewish community had to accept that.

"There were two points in his statement that were unacceptable to us: the amount was too low, and it was presented as a gesture of the Dutch government to the Jewish community. We wanted a payment based on a realistic calculation of what had not been paid back to the Jewish community after the war and what it was thus entitled to receive. The character of the payment as a 'gesture' would also thereby be eliminated.

"As chairman of the CJO delegation, I then said to Kok that if the cabinet did not meet the justified desires of the Dutch Jewish community, apparently nothing in the cabinet's mentality had changed since 1945. Kok again said he could not deviate from the opinion of the prominent people in the Van Kemenade Commission. I then repeated that apparently the mentality of the Dutch government had not changed since 1945.

"The conversation lasted two hours and did not develop well. After five minutes I was already inclined to leave. I thought, 'What am I doing here? We are dealing with an emotionless man who is intractable.' I saw that Zalm and Borst found the conversation very distasteful. I then turned to Zalm and said: 'You realize that you are holding Jewish money in the coffers of the ministry. You cannot find this very pleasant.'

"Kok left without shaking hands. This is in line with his style, but it was also very clear that he was angry. The next day I called the deputy secretary-general of his ministry and told him his boss had left without shaking hands. He told me 'that is usual.' I said, 'It is strange. In the Netherlands accepted behavior is such that even if people don't agree, they still shake hands.' The next conversation about six weeks later was excellent: Kok shook hands when he arrived and again when he left.

"We came to the conclusion that Zalm and Borst were looking for a solution but that Kok had little empathy for the matter. I had the feeling that he wasn't a bad man, but that he couldn't cope emotionally with the issue. He once told us that his parents had also had a difficult time during the war, and he thus knew what the issue was about.

"Thereupon, one of us said: 'Mr. Kok, you know that of the 140,000 Jews in the Netherlands at the beginning of the war, more than 100,000 were murdered. That didn't happen to your parents. However difficult it was, they survived the war. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. Can you compare that to what happened to our community?'

"We had already had problems earlier with the chairman of the commission of investigation into the banks and insurance companies, the since-deceased Willem Scholten. He was the vice-president of the Council of State, an advisory body to the government of which the Queen is the president. He executed his job as a cold bureaucrat and treated us very arrogantly."

Reaching an Agreement

"After lengthy negotiations with the government, an agreement was reached on a payment of 400 million guilders [180 million Euros], of which 50 million guilders would be disbursed to a newly created foundation for Jewish and non-Jewish humanitarian projects abroad, mainly in Central and Eastern Europe. I realized during these negotiations that we might perhaps obtain more money but that doing so would be very difficult and protracted. I even once said jocularly to Zalm: 'We have calculated that we should receive 2.2 billion guilders, and we have received 400 million. You earned 1.8 billion from us, so you should be very nice to me.'

"Toward the end of the negotiations we were often told-for instance, by JMW: 'Try to conclude now. Many people are already old. It may take a year till you reach an agreement. Each year so many elderly Jews die. They will not be able to do anything with the money to be received.'

"Finally we were all called to Zalm for a concluding discussion. He asked me to come in before the others. The CJO delegation had agreed among itself that our minimum was 420 million guilders. In the preliminary conversation, however, I accepted Zalm's offer of 400 million guilders in order to put an end to the matter. With that, the restitution negotiations with the government were over. Banks, insurance companies, and the stock exchange made additional payments that totaled 340 million guilders [155 million Euros]."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

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