De vervolging van joden en Sinti tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog in de Nederlandse provincie Limburg
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Summary

This thesis describes the history of the persecution of Jews and Sinti in the Dutch province of Limburg during the Second World War. Its first aim is to extend our knowledge of the local history of Limburg by providing new information, based in part on hitherto little explored local and regional archives. Its second aim is to contribute to the burgeoning literature, starting with J.C.H. Blom’s famous article ‘The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands in International Comparison’, trying to explain the high percentage of deportations in the occupied Netherlands.

In Chapter 1, we sketch a picture of the Jewish population of Limburg in the 1930s. This segment of the population was ageing and shrinking, having almost halved in size from 1870 to 1930 to about 800 people. Jews in Limburg were, as elsewhere in the Netherlands, generally well integrated in society. Their social-economic situation was closely linked to the trade in cattle, meat and textiles, and some of them had reached substantial affluence because of this. Also in this respect, Jews in Limburg resembled Jews in other parts of the Netherlands outside of the major cities in the West of the country. Most of Limburg’s Jews were members of the orthodox Dutch Israelite Church, although their integration in a Catholic environment had made their religious life and customs less important. However, they never broke completely with their cultural heritage. Many Jews self-identified as Jews and were viewed as such by their surroundings.

The refugees that arrived in Limburg between 1933 and 1940 from Germany brought about major changes. I describe the Dutch refugee policy in the 1930s, and how Jews entered Limburg both legally and illegally. The arrival of a large group of new Jews occurred in a climate of growing popularity of anti-democratic and fascist movements. Nevertheless, it did not result in growing anti-Semitism. Part of the reason is that, after the national-socialistic party (NSB) had scored well in the elections in 1935, the popular Catholic church was on the offensive against this movement. The new arrivals were incorporated relatively easily into the existing Jewish society in Limburg. They were assisted by various Jewish support groups. Their arrival doubled the number of Jews in the province and provided a stimulus for Limburg’s economy.

Following the German invasion in the Netherlands, Jews across the country became the victims of discrimination, stigmatization, isolation and expropriation. Chapter 2 describes the events that happened in Limburg in this context. I discuss the multitude of anti-Jewish measures and regulations. On May 20, 1942, a group of prominent men from Maastricht became victims of the Nazi occupiers’ revenge for the removal of ‘Prohibited for Jews’ signs. After being arrested and detained in Camp Amersfoort, they were of the first to be deported to Auschwitz. The measures against the Jews culminated in the final general registration of Jews in June 1942, for which mayors of all municipalities had to send in lists of their Jewish inhabitants. ‘Mayors in a time of war’, as described in the similarly entitled book by Peter Romijn, were so accidental actors in the drama that was about to play out. As would become clear later, their lists would function as the basis for the deportation of the Jews to Eastern Europe.

The mass arrests and subsequent deportations to the extermination camps are the topic of Chapters 3 and 4. Here, we find clear and significant differences between Limburg and other areas in the Netherlands.

The Jews were deported from Limburg after a limited number of large-scale arrests. On August 2, 1942, another group became victims of the occupiers’ payback: all Jews who were baptized as Catholics were collected in a round-up and deported. This was revenge for the reading of a Pastoral Letter on Sunday July 26, in which the bishops opposed the deportation of Jews to the East, which had started by then.
Few men in Limburg were summoned to the Jewish labor camps in the Netherlands, different from other areas in the country, particularly the three Northern provinces. However, the administrative preparation of this summons did take place and preceded only by days the first mass arrest. Moreover, both actions were subject to the same maximum age requirement of 60 years. We describe how this may have led to confusion, both among the victims and among the local civil servants involved.

The first mass arrest took place on August 25, 1942. The majority of the Limburg Jews under 60 years of age, had received a ‘summons’ (‘oproeping’) a day earlier to report for ‘employment expansion measures’ at a meeting point in Maastricht. These summons were delivered in person by members of the Dutch national police corps, local policemen and patrolmen, informing the Jews of their imminent departure a day beforehand. The misleading term ‘employment expansion’ was made credible by the fact that only people under 60 years old were summoned and by granting exemptions for medical or other circumstances at a large scale. Since Jews were given a day to prepare to go into hiding to avoid arrest and because many managed to obtain exemptions, of the 600 persons that were supposed to depart to Westerbork, less than 300 were actually taken there. Most of these were forced to take the first train to the East, which left the Netherlands on August 28. By coincidence, this was also the first train that made a stop at Kosel, at 80 kilometers West of Auschwitz. Here, all men between the ages of 16 and 50 years, among which 75 from Limburg, were removed from the train and taken to Jewish labor camps. The women, children and men between 50 and 60 years old were gassed in Auschwitz on August 31.

The second large-scale arrest was an unannounced round-up on November 10 and 11, again executed by the Dutch local police. Jews were gathered during the hours they were not allowed to leave their houses, and had little chance to escape. This second wave of arrests again concerned only people under 60 years old and exemptions due to illness were given at large scale. Around 125 Limburgians were transferred by the local police to the German Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei).

After two waves of arrests mostly the old and the sick were left in Limburg. At the end of March 1943 these people received notice that from April 10 eight provinces, including Limburg, were prohibited for Jews. All remaining members of the Jewish community were forced to move to the Concentration Camp Vught. As opposed to Westerbork, Vught was considered by many as an emerging labor camp, where they could stay as long as the Occupation lasted without being deported to the East. Nevertheless, only 215 of the 500 persons that were supposed to go to Vught actually reported at the camp. A large number appeared to have decided to go into hiding between the dates of the notice and the move. The mostly elderly Limburgians who did move to Vught were all transferred to Westerbork on May 8, from where most ended up on the train to Sobibor of May 11. There, they died in the gas chambers on May 14.

The pattern of arrests and deportations in Limburg resulted in Jews of different ages and genders being killed in different places. The elderly died in Sobibor, men between 16 and 50 years of age in labor camps in the West of Poland and the women and children in Auschwitz.

The large majority of Jews in Limburg were arrested after having been given notice one or more days prior. Only the Catholic Jews and a group of 125 people in November 1942 were arrested in unannounced round-ups. Most Jews therefore had (some) time to consider and prepare to go into hiding. About half actually did go into hiding, a percentage that is relatively high compared to the rest of the Netherlands.

The choice whether to obey the German authorities or to go into hiding was a difficult one. The Jews knew, as did other people in Limburg, that a hard fate was awaiting them in the ‘East’. But ‘they were not aware of their fate’, as Bart van der Boom puts it, which implied death in the gas chamber for most victims. On the other hand the risks of going into hiding were often overrated: for many, the
overriding fear was deportation to Mauthausen and a certain death if found out at a hiding place. Faced with this difficult choice, many Jews who reported ‘voluntarily’ made a choice that was rational in their view. The same was true for the non-Jewish people of Limburg, who needed to decide whether or not to aid the threatened Jews. They too, understated the enormity of the danger that was threatening the Jews, and overstated the danger to themselves if they were to come to their rescue. Many people in Limburg were torn by this choice. In particular, I describe the dilemmas faced by officials and police officers.

Despite the perceived dangers, half of Limburg’s Jews opted to go into hiding or flee to Belgium or beyond. What happened to them, and to the more than 2000 Jews not from Limburg who fled to this most Southern province, is the topic of Chapter 5. I describe which support groups were active in Limburg to help the Jews go into hiding, with an emphasis on those that were active to help children. I also discuss the problems that had to be overcome by the refugees, those who went into hiding and their host families.

Of the Jews that went into hiding in Limburg, 270 were arrested by, or at the instigation of, the German Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei). I discuss several dramatic stories of such arrests, with striking differences between North and South Limburg. In the South, arrests started earlier than in the North. Here, the arrests were exclusively executed by the Maastricht Sicherheitspolizei or at their direct request. In the North, other actors were active as well. I address the question who were the persecutors of the Jews in Limburg: German police officers and Dutch collaborators and traitors. Also among those helping the Jews there were victims, although the majority of these lost their lives because of other resistance activities rather than because of support to the Jews.

Finally, I attempt to quantify the extent to which Jews went into hiding in Limburg. Around 650 Limburgian Jews attempted to save their lives by fleeing or hiding. Of those, 160 were arrested eventually, 40 while attempting to flee abroad, 70 within the borders of the province and 50 in other parts of the Netherlands. In total, 2400 Jews were in hiding in Limburg, 400 Limburgians and 2000 from elsewhere. Of those, 2100 lived to see the Liberation. The number of Jews in hiding per one thousand inhabitants in Limburg was higher than the average in the Netherlands, and the percentage of those who got arrested was lower. Within the province, we found large regional differences. This finding indicates that detailed studies of the persecution of the Jews make the historical picture more nuanced, a conclusion which may be drawn based on existing literature as well.

In Chapter 6, I study the persecution of a group of people usually indicated as ‘Gypsies’. We find large differences between the persecution of the Gypsies and of the Jews. Anti-Gypsy measures came about primarily as a result of pressure from society and were initially framed as measures against vagrancy and crime. Only in the later stages were Gypsies incorporated in the racist world view of the Nazis. On May 16, 1944, a national round-up was directed at them. In the course of this round-up, in Limburg 23 Sinti were arrested. In other parts of the Netherlands and in Belgium, a few dozen more people who had spent most of their lives in Limburg were arrested as well. These people were deported via Westerbork to the East (Auschwitz). Most of them succumbed to the harsh conditions in the German camps.

Right after the liberation, its geographic location gave Limburg an important role as a first place of shelter for Jews who reappeared out of their hiding places or returned from the camps. In Chapter 7, we try to correct the common view that this was on the whole an unloving enterprise. I describe how the first care in Limburg was organized and in particular the exceptionally important role played by its small Jewish community.

The final chapter takes stock. The overall picture is and remains, in the words of Abel J. Herzberg, ‘sad’. Of the Jews in Limburg, because of a relatively high percentage of people going into hiding, 44% managed to survive the war. Chances of survival were better for children than for the elderly.
Chances were better for Jews with Polish nationality than for Jews with Dutch citizenship, but Jews who had (or had had) German citizenship were worse off. Regarding nationality, these findings confirm those of M. Croes and P. Tammes; regarding age they are consistent with their findings for the province of Utrecht, but different from their figures for the Netherlands as a whole.

I try to provide an international perspective on the chances of survival for Jews in Limburg. International comparisons are risky, because political, geographical, social and historical conditions varied widely across countries under the Nazi’s reign of power. The only pattern that is visible throughout Europe, is that satellite governments of the Third Reich could protect their Jews to a certain extent. Comparisons between the Netherlands and neighboring countries France and Belgium are often misleading as well. In France, much more than in the Netherlands, there was room to maneuver for the autochthonous bureaucracy, which protected the French but extradited the foreign Jews, see the dissertation of P. Griffioen and R. Zeller. For Belgium, the most important difference with the Netherlands was in the population’s attitude. Both the Jewish and the non-Jewish inhabitants of our Southern neighbor were more resilient against German policy, and more willing to oppose it.

I then compare Limburg to the rest of the Netherlands, in particular with other peripheral parts of the country. At the provincial level, chances to survive were lower than in Amsterdam for Jews in the Northern provinces, but higher for Jews in Utrecht and the Southern provinces. It seems likely that at least two factors are important to explain these differences: the effectiveness of the various Aussenstellen of the Sicherheitspolizei in tracing Jews that went into hiding, and the pattern of execution of the arrests and the deportations. Croes and Tammes pay too little attention especially to the second factor. In the provinces of Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe, Overijssel and Gelderland, most Jews were arrested in unannounced round-ups. In Limburg, as in North-Brabant and Utrecht, most arrests were announced in advance, so that Jews could at least consider whether or not to go into hiding, which about half in fact did. This finding casts doubt on the traditional view that Jews that did not go into hiding did not do so out of fear to be deported in punishment. When Jews were given the opportunity to consider going into hiding, as well as had sufficiently many contacts in their non-Jewish environment, many overcame this fear and managed to arrange to go into hiding. In the major cities in the West of the Netherlands many Jews were aware of their impending arrest, but they did not know when exactly it would take place. It seems that the announcement of the arrest had a special effect on the victims-to-be, giving the last push to those who were in doubt and encouraging them to take the brave step to go into hiding.

Even within the small province of Limburg we found large differences, both in the percentage of Jews that survived the war and in the number of Jews from outside of the province that went into hiding here. Since the entire province resorted under the same Aussenstelle, and the arrests and deportation in the province were all executed in the same pattern, I propose other, local, factors to explain the differences. Following Ervin Staub, we postulate a ‘society of enablement’. Depending on coincidental factors, a society could (and can) develop a collective norm, which makes people inclined to either ignore the problem or to provide help. The individual’s behavior is rooted fundamentally and deep in the norms and values of the group. The group provides basic safety. Inside his or her group, the individual hopes for approval and positive reinforcement of his or her actions. In the development of the group’s norms, an important role is played by the attitude and the example of a few moral leaders. Supporting the Jews, just like apathy, was ‘contagious’ in Limburg during the war. A ‘society of enablement’, providing support to the victims of persecution, seems to have flourished primarily in small, safe communities, in which the members and their leaders knew and trusted each other.

In Limburg, I found several small-scale communities that were, more than others, inclined to provide support to the Jews. I found these communities in the secluded societies of the Calvinist minority in Heerlen and surroundings. The moral leaders in this case, were a few respected and strong-willed
preachers. In villages in North-Limburg, west of the river Maas, I encountered a similar situation in the equally secluded farmer communities, powerfully encouraged by a group of young priests.