Arranging reality: The editing mechanisms of the world’s first Yiddish newspaper, the Kurant (Amsterdam, 1686-1687)
Pach, H.

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4. The readers

Who were the readers of the Kurant is impossible to determine with certainty. What we can do is taking a closer look at the group to which they belonged, the Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam, and possibly Ashkenazi Jews elsewhere in the Dutch Republic or even abroad. What was their socio-economic position and is it possible to find out how they viewed the world around them? What kind of books did they read? Do Yiddish publications from the second half of the seventeenth century show interest in the outside world? Did the Ashkenazi Jews get in touch with non-Jews and Sephardic Jews and were they influenced by them? And finally, is it possible to estimate the number of readers of the Kurant?

4.1. The Jews of Amsterdam

Before the end of the sixteenth century hardly any Jews lived in Amsterdam, or in other parts of the Dutch Republic. During the Spanish Inquisition at the end of the fifteenth century, Spanish Jews were expelled from Spain and many of them fled to Portugal, where they were forcibly converted to Catholicism. At the end of the sixteenth century many of these ‘New Christians’ faced new persecutions and fled to other regions, like Southern France, Turkey, North Africa or Antwerp. In the 1580s, the Dutch Republic, and especially Amsterdam, became an attractive alternative, because it had freed itself from the influence of the Spanish crown. It took some thirty years before the ‘New Christians’ lived openly as Jews again. Many of these Sephardim were wealthy merchants and contributed to the flourishing of the Dutch economy during the Golden Age. They were people of the world; they dressed like Dutchmen, spoke many languages and were interested in secular culture. Some of them were on friendly terms with prominent non-Jews. Yet, as Levie Bernfeld makes clear, among the new immigrants were quite a few paupers as well. The Portuguese community in Amsterdam organized a highly efficient centralized system of poor relief.

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2 Among them the second printer of the Kurant, David de Castro Tartas: see 6.2.
3 Levie Bernfeld, Poverty and Welfare, 2-3.
4 Swetschinski, ‘Tussen middeleeuwen en Gouden Eeuw’, 76.
6 Levie Bernfeld, Poverty and Welfare, Ch. 4.
4. The readers

In the beginning of the seventeenth century only a few individual Ashkenazi Jews lived in Amsterdam, like Uri Halevi, the grandfather of the first printer of the Kurant, who arrived from Emden in the first years of the seventeenth century. But after the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) broke out, more and more Ashkenazi Jews from Germany started to come to the city. In general they were poor, and as most jobs were prohibited to Jews, they tried to find work with the Sephardim. At first the Sephardim tried to encourage them to re-emigrate to Germany and Eastern Europe, but as the Thirty Years’ War became more violent, the number of Ashkenazi immigrants increased sharply. The end of the Thirty and Eighty Years’ Wars, in 1648, was the beginning of a new period of prosperity. At the same time, the pogroms by Chmielnicki’s Cossacks (1648-1650) caused a stream of Ashkenazi refugees from Poland, and in 1655 Polish and Lithuanian Jews escaped the war between Poland and Moscow (Russia) and between Poland and Sweden. The Sephardim were unhappy with the great number of Ashkenazi migrants, held them in low esteem, and refrained from intimate contact with them. For instance, both Ashkenazi men who married a Sephardic woman and Sephardic men who married an Ashkenazi woman were deprived of the rights of membership of the Sephardic Talmud Torah congregation. Nevertheless, the Sephardim felt responsible for their co-religionists and raised large sums of money for the refugees. From 1658 onward they once more encouraged them to return to Eastern Europe, even with financial incentives. Despite the attempts of the Sephardim to send the Ashkenazim back to where they came from, in the second half of the seventeenth century it became clear that the Ashkenazi Jews were here to stay. Some were employed by Sephardim, mainly in the tobacco and diamond trade, and as servants in the households of rich Sephardim. In an attempt to fight poverty and vagrancy among the Ashkenazim, the Sephardim even established an institution for their vocational and moral education.

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7 Israel, ‘De republiek’, 100.
9 Israel, ‘De republiek’, 102.
10 Israel, ‘De republiek’, 103.
11 Kaplan, ‘Amsterdam and Ashkenazic Migration’, 40, 44.
4. The readers

The Ashkenazim spoke and read Yiddish, and some were able to read Hebrew. They did not have to create a new Jewish tradition, like the Sephardim, because they brought their own Ashkenazi tradition with them. They did not have an intellectual elite, though. This changed somewhat after the arrival of the better educated Lithuanian Jews in 1655.

According to Fuks-Mansfeld, the new Ashkenazi immigrants soon spoke Dutch fluently, albeit with an unmistakable accent, and many educated Jews were also able to read it. In her view this explains the large number of translations from Dutch into Yiddish. As I will show below, however, the number of translations from Dutch into Yiddish was still very limited in the seventeenth century, and in any case it is unclear how Fuks-Mansfeld reached the conclusion that Dutch Jews could speak and read Dutch. Aptroot is correct that the very need for these translations indicates that many Jews could read only Yiddish.

In Amsterdam, Jews had limited access to only three of the fifty guilds. The Guild of Booksellers, Bookprinters and Bookbinders was the only one where Jews were fully accepted. Until their emancipation in 1796 Jews were considered a special minority group, referred to as ‘de Joodse natie’ – ‘the Jewish nation’. The municipal authorities placed them under the jurisdiction of their own leaders, except for criminal affairs.

Yet, slowly but surely the Jews began to feel at home in Amsterdam and a few other cities. They were accepted by their non-Jewish neighbors and could openly practice their religion, as was shown, for instance, by the building of the impressive Great Synagogue, inaugurated in 1671, four years prior to the even more magnificent Portuguese Synagogue of the Sephardim.

The number of Ashkenazi Jews in the Netherlands at the end of the seventeenth century has long been overestimated. Around 1690 an estimated eight thousand Jews lived in the

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15 Kaplan, ‘De joden in de Republiek’, 162.
16 Kaplan, ‘De joden in de Republiek’, 149.
18 Aptroot, Bible Translation, 80.
19 Van Eeghen, Gilden 31, 111. The other two guilds were those of the chirurgeons and the brokers.
21 In the beginning of the seventeenth century Jewish communities existed in the eastern part of Groningen and Gelderland, later also in Nijmegen, Zaltbommel and Friesland (horse trading): Israel, ‘De republiek’, 108-109.
22 E.g. by Bloom, The Economic Activities.
4. The readers

Netherlands, about six thousand of them in Amsterdam, three thousand of whom were Ashkenazim. The Sephardim were still more prosperous than the Ashkenazim, but there were some reasonably wealthy merchants among the Ashkenazim as well. The Amsterdam tax register, established in 1674, mentions 246 Portuguese Jews with fortunes of over a thousand guilders, and a dozen Ashkenazi Jews. The Ashkenazi Gomperts family played an important role. They traded in jewels and army supplies, and had ties with German Court Jews and the Elector of Brandenburg. Both the Elector of Brandenburg and the Court Jews were influential in the war between the Habsburgs and the Turks described in the Kurant.

So it was among the three to four thousand Ashkenazim who lived in the Netherlands that the readers of the Kurant were to be found. Possibly the Kurant was also read by Jews from outside the Dutch Republic. The Dutch Ashkenazi communities maintained relations with communities in Germany and Poland. They exchanged rabbis and arranged marriages. Jewish boys from Amsterdam often went to yeshivot (Talmud schools) in Germany.

4.2. What did the Ashkenazi Jews read?

Seventeenth-century Amsterdam was the center of Yiddish (and Hebrew) book printing. But what the Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam read we cannot know with certainty. It was long thought that Amsterdam printers mainly produced new editions of older books and worked mainly for the export. However, although it is true that many books were printed for the international market, epilogues in several books testify that they were also meant to be sold in Amsterdam.

The majority of Jewish publications in the seventeenth century were in Hebrew. Among them were religious and ethical works, history and grammar books, meant for the elite – inside and outside the Dutch Republic – that could read Hebrew. Most Ashkenazi Jews, though, were probably unable to read Hebrew, except for the daily prayers. They read Yiddish books.

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25 See 9.3.2.2.
26 Wallet, Nieuwe Nederlanders, 17.
27 Fuks & Fuks-Mansfeld, Hebrew Typography.
28 Berger, ‘Yiddish Book Production’, 211.
4. The readers

The Inventory of Yiddish Publications from the Netherlands c. 1650-c. 1950\textsuperscript{29} shows that the Dutch Yiddish book production from the second half of the seventeenth century consists mainly of prayer books, ethical and didactical literature. Among them are also two Bible translations, one by Yekusiel Blitz, printed by Uri Faybesh Halevi (1678), and one by Joseph Witzenhausen, printed by Joseph Athias (1679).\textsuperscript{30} There are also books on history and geography, fiction books and works on popular medicine. In 1696 a pamphlet was published, translated from Dutch by Joseph Maarssen. It is an anonymous account of the ‘Aansprekersoproer’ (‘Undertakers Revolt’) in Amsterdam in 1696, which took place after city authorities tried to impose funeral reforms. Although Jews were not involved in the revolt, it struck the Jewish quarter, as one of the looted houses belonged to the De Pinto family.\textsuperscript{31}

The majority of these books are translations, mainly from Hebrew. Fiction books are mostly reprints of well known Yiddish chivalric literature, like King Arthur legends and the famous sixteenth-century Bovo-Bukh, an epic poem by Elia Levita (1507-1508; first printed edition 1541), based on the Italian chivalric romance Buovo d’Antona, which was, in turn, an adaptation of the English romance Sir Bevis of Hampton (1324).\textsuperscript{32}

History and geography books were often translated from Hebrew: Yeven Metsula, a report of the Chmielnicki massacres in Poland, the tenth-century Sefer Yosipon (Jewish history) or Masaot Binyamin (The Voyages of Benjamin of Tudela).

Several authors see this Yiddish book production as a sign that Ashkenazi Jews wished to widen their horizons.\textsuperscript{33} Jean Baumgarten sees the Yiddish publications of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century as ‘both witnesses and agents of cultural change.’ This reveals itself, according to Baumgarten, in the interest in the history of the Jewish people and in current events. The publication of the first Yiddish newspaper, the Kurant, in his view corresponds with the emergence of a middle-class readership, especially merchants,

\textsuperscript{29} Gutschow, YidNed. Of course it is possible that Dutch Jews also read books that were published outside of Amsterdam or books that were printed earlier. Yet as Amsterdam was the center of book printing, the inventory probably gives a rather reliable indication.

\textsuperscript{30} Aptroot, Bible Translation.


\textsuperscript{32} Turniansky, ‘Yiddish and the Transmission’, 15-16; Sifrut Yidish, 32-43.

\textsuperscript{33} Fuks and Fuks-Mansfeld were the first to do so. See Fuks-Mansfeld, ‘Yiddish Historiography’, 9-11; Bar-Levav, ‘Amsterdam and the Inception’; Berger, ‘Functioning’.

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who wanted to stay informed about international news and politics. Baumgarten links this to the publication of didactic literature, for immigrants still trying to find their way and their identity, and of travel literature, which, despite its folkloristic background, testifies to the wish to escape the limited space of the Jewish community and meet people in far-away places.  

Berger and Wallet, following Fuks-Mansfeld, state that the publication of Yiddish history books was not only part of the Hebrew historiographical tradition, but was also influenced by the Dutch occupation with history. Like Dutch historiography, they suggest, Yiddish historiography was used to understand the contemporary world.

It is true that Yiddish-speaking Jews at the end of the seventeenth century could – and probably did – read many more books than before. And this might well have widened their horizon. However, it was still a definitely Jewish horizon. Even the pamphlet mentioning the Undertakers’ Rebellion was probably published because it took place in the Jewish quarter. In fact the Kurant was the only publication that was not rooted in Jewish tradition. Thus, the Kurant was a Fremdkörper amidst the Yiddish publications in the Netherlands from the second half of the seventeenth century.

4.3. Jewish-Christian contacts

As Jews in the Dutch Republic did not live in ghettos, they encountered non-Jews in daily life. They lived in their own quarters, yet were surrounded by non-Jewish neighbors. The most famous neighbor was no doubt the painter Rembrandt, who pictured Jews as human beings without any demonizing characteristics, and used them as models for his Biblical scenes. Jan Luyken portrayed the baker of matzos and the circumciser just as he pictured the potter and the farmer in his collection of trades. The magnificent High German (Ashkenazi) and Portuguese synagogues of 1671 and 1675 were tourist attractions for Jewish and non-Jewish travelers from all over Europe.

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37 Kaplan, ‘De joden in de Republiek’, 139.
4. The readers

As many Ashkenazi Jews were involved in the trading business, they met non-Jews as customers and business relations. An indication for that can be found in the Yiddish luhot, Jewish almanacs, which started to be published at the end of the seventeenth century and became popular in the eighteenth century. Apart from the Jewish calendar, they offered additional features, like sunrise, sunset, weather reports, scientific and medical knowledge, folk remedies, schedules of mail pickup, coach or ship departure and arrival, etcetera, partly borrowed from non-Jewish calendars, but appropriated for Jewish usage. Virtually every European Jewish calendar carried a full Christian calendar in its core section. According to Carlebach the reason for this was that ‘the rhythms of economic activity in European culture were tied to its calendar [...] As a religious minority, Jews conducted business and pledged to honor tacit or explicit agreements on Christian holidays.’ In order to be at an equal level with their non-Jewish business relations, the Ashkenazi Jews may have felt the need of keeping themselves informed of the latest news, and have welcomed a Yiddish newspaper bringing international news reports borrowed from Dutch newspapers.

4.4. Cultural transfer between Ashkenazim and Sephardim

As mentioned above, the Sephardim in Amsterdam did not hold the Ashkenazim in high esteem. The Ashkenazim in turn, were influenced by Sephardic culture in several ways. Aptroot notes that a considerable number of Sephardim had been born Christians, had lived in gentile surroundings and were brought up according to gentile concepts and ideas. This narrowed the gap between Jewish and Christian culture, also for the Ashkenazi Jews. Especially in the printing business Sephardim and Ashkenazim met and exchanged ideas. The publication of religious and secular texts in Yiddish translation was probably inspired by Sephardic practice. Aptroot mentions the Sephardic influence on the two Yiddish Bible translations.

4.5. How many readers?

From the data mentioned above we may conclude that a good number of Amsterdam

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38 Carlebach, Palaces of Time, 68.
39 Carlebach, Palaces of Time, 116.
40 Aptroot, Bible Translation, 356.
41 See Ch. 6.
4. The readers

Ashkenazim and perhaps others elsewhere probably read the Kurant. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, twenty to forty percent of the adult population of Amsterdam may have read Dutch newspapers, and one issue might have been read by five to ten people. If the same goes for the Ashkenazi Jews and the Kurant, this would mean that the Kurant had between three hundred and eight hundred readers (twenty to forty percent of around 1500 adult Amsterdam Ashkenazim, or 2000 if we include the Ashkenazim from other places in the Dutch Republic), and a circulation of between thirty and one hundred and sixty. We do not know whether they were able to buy the newspaper. Keblusek thinks that Dutch newspapers in the middle of the century were affordable to a fairly large readership. However, Ashkenazi Jews were among the poorest inhabitants of Amsterdam. They may have read the Kurant in the synagogue, as seems to have been the practice in the eighteenth century. In this case, the circulation was probably on the low side and the average number of readers would have been rather ten than five. It is true that the Sephardic community in Amsterdam was the same size as the Ashkenazi community, yet their newspaper, the Gazeta de Amsterdam, existed for at least thirty years. However the Sephardim were wealthier than the Ashkenazim and it is plausible that the Gazeta was distributed outside of the Dutch Republic on a much larger scale than the Kurant, so possibly the Ashkenazi readership was indeed too small to turn the publication of the Kurant into a successful enterprise.

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42 See Ch. 3.
43 Lucassen & Lucassen, Winnaars en verliezers, 215.
44 According to Shatzky, ‘Di letste shprotsungen’, nays fartseyler (news distributors) were distributed in the synagogue in Amsterdam in 1776: Shatzky, ‘Di letste shprotsungen’, 253-254. While Fuks, Joodse pers, 8, assumes that Shatzky is referring to newspapers, according to Shatzky the nays fartseyler were a kind of advertising leaflets distributed by publishers.
45 See 3.9.