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

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Aftermath

After the publication of the last issue of the Kurant, the Yiddish press in the Netherlands – as well as abroad – disappeared from the scene.¹ The only other Yiddish newspapers we know of date from the end of the eighteenth century.

11.1. Dirnfurter prifilegirte tsaytung

The first real Yiddish newspaper after the Kurant of which we have knowledge is the Dirnfurter prifilegirte tsaytung, published in Dyhernfurth near Breslau.² The two surviving issues are Number 2, dated Friday, December 13, 1771, and Number 9, dated Friday 5 Shevat 5532 / January 10, 1772.³ Like the Kurant, this newspaper primarily published international news.

11.2. Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn

Nine years later, the only other known Dutch Yiddish newspaper appeared, the Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn anlangende di yettsige umshtendig heytn (Weekly Reports Concerning the Current Situation). Only one issue is known, that of January 10, 1781. Published by the well-known printer, bookseller, and publisher Proops in Amsterdam, it consists of one folio sheet, of which three copies are known. One copy, currently in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, was discovered in a Hebrew book where it had been used to strengthen the book’s binding.⁴ Another copy is kept at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.⁵ Apparently this copy was also used to strengthen the binding of a book: it shows marks of the floral pattern of a book cover – marks that are missing, by the way, on the copy in New York. Of the third copy only a photocopy is left. According to Fuks,

¹ Although some titles of papers now lost have been suggested, it is unlikely that these were real newspapers. Shatzky, Zamlbukh shows in Baylage 3 the title page of the Naye Tsaytung from Prague, 1716.
² Now Brzeg Dolny near Wroclaw in Poland.
³ Both are kept in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York; a copy of number 2 is also kept in the Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek in Frankfurt am Main: see Rivkind, ‘Naye tsaytung’, c. 50-55.
⁴ Rivkind, ‘Naye tsaytung’, c. 55.
⁵ I was able to see the copy in Jerusalem in July 2005, and the New York copy in January 2007.
the original of the latter was held in the YIVO library in Vilna before World War II.\textsuperscript{6}

According to an announcement printed at the bottom of the \textit{Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn}, the paper was published twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, like the \textit{Kurant}. It is unclear why such a paper was called ‘Weekly Reports’ – or, for that matter, why it appeared on January 10, which was a Wednesday. Be that as it may, from the announcement we can conclude that the \textit{Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn} was a newspaper, rather than a once-only edition.

Although we do not know when the first issue of the \textit{Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn} was published, it was probably not much earlier than January 10, 1781. On December 20, 1780 Great Britain declared war upon the Republic of the United Netherlands, the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. Unfortunately, the Dutch Republic was no longer the superpower it had been in the Golden Age and by January 1781 England had already captured more than two-hundred Dutch merchant ships.\textsuperscript{7} As soon as the war erupted, many new newspapers and journals began publication in the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{8} It is quite possible that the \textit{Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn} was one of these.

In the interim, the Dutch Ashkenazi Jewish population had grown dramatically. In 1781, between 15,000 and 20,000 Ashkenazi Jews were living in Amsterdam.\textsuperscript{9} While a small elite of bankers and merchants spoke Dutch and French fluently,\textsuperscript{10} the majority of Ashkenazi Jews consisted of small tradesmen and peddlers who understood Dutch quite well and spoke a highly dutchified form of Yiddish, but had difficulties reading the Latin alphabet.\textsuperscript{11} Like their non-Jewish compatriots, these Jews were badly hit by the economic crises in the sixties and seventies. The uprising of the American colonists against England created new possibilities for overseas trade with the insurgents.\textsuperscript{12} Since this trade was one of the casuses of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, it is obvious that Jewish tradesmen were interested in news about this war.

\textsuperscript{6} Fuks, Joodse pers, 9, 43; I thank the late Prof. R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld for presenting me with this photocopy.
\textsuperscript{7} Schulte Nordholt, \textit{The Dutch Republic}, 144-157; Van Eyck van Heslinga, ‘De vlag’, 102-105.
\textsuperscript{8} Schneider & Hemels, \textit{De Nederlandse krant}, 85-104.
\textsuperscript{9} According to Israel, ‘De republiek’, 111, about 14,000 Ashkenazi Jews were living in Amsterdam around 1750, out of an entire population of 200,000. In 1795, the first official census counted 22,000 Ashkenazi Jews in Amsterdam, out of a total population of 221,000: see Fuks-Mansfeld, \textit{Aspects of Jewish Life}, 183.
\textsuperscript{10} Fuks-Mansfeld, \textit{Aspects of Jewish Life}, 181.
\textsuperscript{12} Fuks-Mansfeld, \textit{Aspects of Jewish Life}, 187.
Only some of the Yiddish reports in the *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn* can be traced back to the Dutch newspapers. Nonetheless, since all the reports are written in the same formal style, we can assume that the *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn* took all its coverage from Dutch publications. In some cases these might have been pamphlets or official announcements rather than newspapers.

Nearly all reports in the *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn* concern the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. Because it was a naval war, many reports deal with ships that were captured by or had escaped from the British. A lengthy appeal to buy shares in a ‘privateering company’ which would enable Dutch privateers (‘legal pirates’) to attack British ships is also inserted. It is interesting to note that Jews were considered sufficiently patriotic (or maybe simply sufficiently rich?) to take part in activities of this kind.

The large measure of local news we find in the *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn* is due to the fact that the important war news was local in this case. The *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn* scarcely mentions other local news, including the adventures of kings or noblemen.

How long the *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn* continued to be published is impossible to know. Many of the Dutch newspapers and journals that came into being in the first days of the war were short-lived.\(^{13}\) This, added to the fact that only one issue (in three copies) survived, indicates a short, rather than a long, existence for the *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn*.

### 11.3. Tsaytung

The *Vokhentlikhe Berikhtn* was the last Dutch Yiddish newspaper of which we know. The last of its kind in Western Europe was *Tsaytung*, a weekly, which was published in the French city of Metz in 1789 and 1790. It surfaced decades later in a booklet about the French Revolution. This weekly informed the Jews about the decisions of the newly-formed *Assemblée nationale*. It apparently did not succeed in raising a sufficient number of subscribers and probably ceased publication after April 1790.\(^ {14}\)

### 11.4. The end

Books and pamphlets, such as the famous *Diskursn*, a series of polemical pamphlets

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\(^{13}\) Schneider & Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant*, 85-104.

published in Amsterdam in 1798 and 1799, continued to be published in Yiddish in the Netherlands for some time. But from the beginning of the nineteenth century Yiddish began to decline in Western Europe. In the Netherlands, Jews were granted equal rights in 1796 and Willem I, who became the first Dutch King in 1813, held that all Dutch citizens should speak Dutch. His language policy was highly successful and within a few decades Yiddish virtually disappeared in the Netherlands. From then on the Jews could read the news in the Dutch papers. This, however, was not the end but rather the start of the real blossoming of the Jewish press in the Netherlands. Halfway through the nineteenth century, several Jewish weeklies started to appear, Jewish in content, and written in the new language of the Jews of the Netherlands – Dutch.

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15 Michman & Aptroot, *Storm in the Community.*