De kleine verschillen die het leven uitmaken. Een historische studie naar joodse sociaal-democraten en socialistisch-zionisten in Nederland

Gans, E.E.
Summary

De kleine verschillen die het leven uitmaken [The little differences that determine life] examines the measure and nature of ongoing identification among Dutch social-democratic Jews with the socialist movement, within which Jews were regarded as people – and as Dutch citizens – like all others. At the same time it considers whether the influence of major political shifts and calamities and their personal passions and preoccupations lead them to embrace new (and old) identifications through a rapprochement to Judaism and Zionism. This book focuses on the turbulent period from 1933 – the Machtübernahme in Germany – until 1949, when emigration from the Netherlands to Israel dwindled after a brief surge. The book’s scope, however, is by no means limited to this period, as coming full circle was essential: what happened with the Jewish social democrats who had had little or nothing to do with Judaism and Zionism before the war?

The central themes include the varied composition and the reciprocal shifting and influence of four elements in the identities of Dutch social-democratic and socialist-Zionist Jews, namely as Jews, socialists, Dutch citizens and Zionists. Identity is perceived here not as a stagnant pool but as a body of fluidity, like an interaction between an internal process of awareness and manifestation of individuals and groups on the one hand and their image (i.e. the way they are perceived by those surrounding them) on the other hand. Other factors in the process of identity formation are more general but not necessarily less dramatic external occurrences, as well as the ways people have interpreted and dealt with them. Those relating to this book are primarily the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, the Machtübernahme in Germany, the socialist-Zionist effort to build Palestine and subsequently World War II, the occupation and the Shoah, the establishment of Israel and the ongoing tensions in the Middle East.

This book is intended as a kaleidoscope. Focusing the research on shifts in the identity of Jewish socialists and socialist Zionists suggests constant changes and therefore reflects a gliding perspective. First the book depicts the way various well-known social-democratic and socialist-Zionist Dutch Jews (i.e. individuals) experienced and perceived this identity, culminating in ten biographical sketches. Second, the circles and organizations are portrayed within which Jews conceived their ideas and emotions, and conversely where they were influenced by situations within the party, trade union and Zionist or Jewish organization. This perspective is conveyed through a description of
the changing disposition and debates regarding the relationship between Judaism, socialism and Zionism in the Netherlands, especially within Poale Zion (the organization of socialist Zionists, also known as the Poale Zionists), the Nederlandse Zionistenbond (NZB) [Dutch league of Zionists], the Sociaal Democratische Arbeiderspartij (SDAP) [Social Democratic Workers’ Party] and its successor the Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA) [Labour party]. Third, the book returns to the individual perspective, based on interviews with Jewish former and current social democrats and socialist Zionists. These respondents, though from a different generation than the main characters, were all politically active during the 1930s. Their life histories shed additional light on the transitions. In some chapters the interviews illustrate and elaborate specific themes; in others they are the main focus.

The Introduction relates the origins of the clash and the synthesis between Zionism and socialism and deciphers concepts like assimilation. The first chapter is about the attitude of the SDAP toward Judaism and Zionism during the 1930s: sympathetic but reserved. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 feature successive biographical sketches of Henri Polak and Emanuel Boekman, a group portrait of the ‘assimilators’ Monne de Miranda, Ed. Polak, Alida de Jong and David Lopes Dias and the life history of Louis Fles, a freethinker and anti-Zionist.

The courses in Jewish politics of Henri Polak and Emanuel Boekman as Jews mirrored each other. Polak, facing the rise of National Socialism and anti-Semitism increasingly forsook his original dedication to realizing a national Jewish home in Palestine and channelled concern for his fellow Jews toward the tenacious struggle against antisemitism. Emanuel Boekman’s changing positions, however, reflected trends within the SDAP as well: from ‘class’ to ‘nation’. Boekman became increasingly committed to Zionism and joined Poale Zion. The ‘red assimilators’, such as Monne de Miranda, were not outspoken anti-Zionists. In fact, they were just as indifferent or defensive towards a national solution to the ‘Jewish Question’ as they were towards their own Jewish heritage. Assimilation, however, is not a straightforward process. These Jews switched course when faced with threatening situations or momentarily experienced emotion, pride, shame or irritation deriving directly from their Jewish heritage. Finally, Louis Fles was a principled, public and staunch advocate of assimilation. As a freethinker, he identified with the SDAP as the party of the impious and lashed out against both Judaism and Zionism in countless brochures. The chapter about Fles addresses the complicated phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred.

The seventh chapter makes the transition to Dutch Zionism and focuses
on the emergence of Poale Zion in 1933 and the tension between the Poale Zionists and the ‘bourgeois’ Zionists of the NZB. In chapters 7 and 8 the two driving forces behind Poale Zion are introduced: Sam de Wolff and Salomon Kleerekoper. Though they recur throughout the book, they appear here in terms of their basic personalities and ideas. These two giant and originally kindred spirits parted ways over time. De Wolff advocated ‘dual citizenship’ (Jewish and Dutch); Kleerekoper turned into a radical Zionist and came to believe that Jewish life in the Netherlands was a dead-end street.

The next three chapters cover the ideas that these two prominent Poale Zionists shared and disseminated. Chapter 9 deals with socialist Zionism as a political synthesis, touching on the Arab issue and Poale Zion’s struggle against the revisionists (Zionists of the far right). Chapters 10 and 11 discuss hot issues that nearly destroyed Poale Zion: the different interpretations of anti-Semitism, assimilation and Dutch citizenship. Here, radical Zionism is deciphered as an ideology, and the individual motives underlying Poale Zionism are presented.

Chapters 12, 13 and 14 deal with the Nazi occupation. Chapter 12 addresses the debates and transitions occurring within the Dutch Zionist and socialist Zionist movements during the war. The chapter’s themes include Jewish culture, which, pressured by the circumstances, became more significant. This chapter also reviews the relationship between the Zionists and the Jewish Council. Chapter 13 offers a critique of the attitude of Dutch social democracy towards the Jews, including the tension between solidarity in theory and practice in severe crises. The subjects interviewed reflect on this period as well. This chapter gradually recalls the fates of ‘ordinary’ Jewish union members. An entire chapter is devoted to De Wolff and Kleerekoper, who both survived the Shoah: two socialist Zionists during the occupation.

The last eight chapters address the post-war period. Chapter 15 considers the fundamental problems facing the Jewish survivors and the imprints that the Zionists left in the fresh cement of the Jewish restoration following the massive annihilation. Led by the socialist and radical Zionist Kleerekoper, they embarked on a ‘march through Jewish institutions.’ The common theme is the confrontation between the Joodse Coördinatie Commissie (JCC) run by Zionist innovators and the Jewish establishment, represented especially by the Jewish religious congregations. The struggle between ‘radicals,’ ‘moderates’ and ‘restorers’ also penetrated the Jewish purge (the initiative to judge the wartime conduct of fellow Jews, carried out by the a High Commission of Jews [Joodse Ereraad]), which is the sub-
ject of the seventeenth chapter. De Wolff and Kleerekoper were at odds once again. Only later did they reconcile their differences.

Chapters 17, 18, 19 and 20 highlight the post-war shifts within the socialist-Zionist movement and identity. While socialism was secondary in the Jewish reconstruction, its significance within the Zionist movement was undeniable. Chapter 17 addresses both the role of the NZB in campaigning for the incipient Jewish state and the breakthrough of Poale Zionism and Sam de Wolff's spirited Zionist outlook. The theme of Chapter 18 concerns a crucial parting of minds: a majority among the SDAP/PvdA party leaders proved to have significantly different priorities with respect to Israel than the socialist Zionists and even than the party's base support. Chapter 19 is devoted to the pressing issue of 'going' (to Palestine and later Israel) or 'staying.' The subjects interviewed describe the motives and circumstances of their decisions. Those opting for the most far-reaching application of Zionism became residents of the new Jewish state. In most cases they remained socialists. Once again, they had to deal with 'others': the Palestinian Arabs – with all the ensuing dilemmas. The overwhelming majority of Jews remained in the Netherlands – to the intense annoyance of NZB Chairman Kleerekoper, who pleaded in vain for terminating the galut (liquidatie van het galoot). Chapter 20 analyses several fundamental debates within Zionism, such as the question as to whether the Zionist organization should continue to exist after the establishment of Israel.

In chapters 21 and 22 the focus shifts to the occasionally complex but clearly identifiable strength of secular Jewry after the war – first through a portrait of Meijer Sluyser and in the next chapter based on the interviews about the political and emotional transitions of other Jewish social democrats. An increasing need to reverse and scrutinize the tide that had brought isolation and persecution led people to read Jewish literature, to cherish friendships with other Jews and to take a growing interest in Judaism. Meijer Sluyser wrote a series of books about Amsterdam's Jewish quarter conveying nostalgia about a vanished Jewish universe and an effort to reconstruct a culture that had been wiped out. Israel also served as a juncture for feelings of anger about the wrong done to the Jews combined with pride and comfort, motivated by the accomplishments of Jews in their own country. Conversely, the awareness of being deeply involved in Israel's survival led to a growing interest in one's Jewish heritage.

Loyalty to Israel became a new fact of life – at least for those who did not radically discard their Jewish heritage. The impact of the Israeli social demo-
cracy, the experience of being persecuted for being Jewish, the loss of dearly loved family members, along with many small daily rituals, words and gestures (the habits of the heart), gave rise to a growing identification with Israel. Sluyser, who had taken very little interest in Zionism before the war, progressively adopted an attitude of ‘Israel, my country, right or wrong.’ While Sluyser refrained from criticizing Israel, the subjects interviewed two decades later during the Intifadah (the Palestinian uprising) were more outspoken. While 1967, the year of the Six Day War in the Middle East, was decisive in cultivating pro-Israel sentiment, it also sowed the seeds of discomfort about the rising influence of the Orthodox Jews in Israel and about Israeli government policy toward the Palestinians. In some respects the Jewish state gradually became a member of the family that Jews defended against attacks but sometimes condemned with equal vehemence among their own.

These reflections culminate in Chapter 22 in an observation about the interaction between ideology, reason and emotion that both conflict with and complement and nurture each other. The same holds true for different elements of identity. People’s self-images are far from unchanging and straightforward but feature a variety of complementary and competing identifications. In some cases socialist Zionists saw themselves as Jews first of all and at other times as socialists, Zionists or Dutch citizens. They were like the diamond workers whose self-images resembled the diamonds they cut and polished: each stroke revealed a different shining surface. Understandably from this perspective many Dutch Jewish social democrats became a bit less socialist and more Jewish after the war and socialist Zionists somewhat less Zionist after the establishment of Israel.

The concluding observations rapidly guide readers through the labyrinth of the shifting identity of Dutch Jewish socialists and socialist Zionists. From Russia to Amsterdam, from Fles to Kleerekoper, from ‘class’ to ‘nation’, from Jewish Council to the High Commission of Jews, from Zionism to friendship with Israel and from assimilation to pro-Israel sentiment. So the book reaches its conclusion, but ‘the endless transition’ continues.

Lee Mitzman