

The Jewish Traveler:  
Antwerp  
By Esther Hecht

*Jews have long played a central role in the commerce of this Belgian city. The community today, one of Europe's most devout, still thrives.*

Except for hills, Antwerp has almost everything: the center of the world's diamond trade; the luminous paintings of Old Masters Peter Paul Rubens and Antony Van Dyck; the press where some of the earliest Hebrew books were printed; exquisite chocolate; a profusion of beers; and the River Scheldt, where sailboats skim and cruise ships deposit tourists in walking distance of the Old Town, the heart of the city.

Staid three-story Dutch houses topped by gables stand shoulder to shoulder on the broad streets of this compact Belgian city. Sandwiched between the gabled houses are architectural surprises: sleek Modernist buildings and whimsical Art Nouveau homes with colorful murals and intricate balcony grilles. And then there are the cobblestone squares with their many architectural caprices—a Hilton Hotel that looks like a palace, a commercial building that looks like a Baroque church.

So flat is Antwerp that bicycles are often the quickest way to travel. And the fellow whizzing by on the pink bicycle path is likely to be wearing a black coat, his sidelocks flapping in the wind. For Antwerp is home to an unusual Jewish community, considered one of the city's tourist attractions: a shtetl in a modern setting.

### History

Although Antwerp had a Jewish presence from as early as the 13th century, it would take 500 years before Jews could worship freely. When they were accused of causing the Black Plague of 1348 by poisoning the wells, the resulting persecutions destroyed the first community.

As the leading commercial center of Western Europe at the end of the 15th century, Antwerp began to grow in concentric circles around its port. Under Spanish rule (1506-1713), the city attracted Conversos from Portugal. They were key figures in opening up the precious-stones

industry (which included diamonds and pearls), developing the sugar trade and, in 1536, establishing the first international stock exchange in Europe.

Prominent among Antwerp's crypto-Jewish entrepreneurs was Diogo Mendes who, with his brother Francisco, parlayed businesses in precious stones and spices into an important banking establishment and became a major financier of the governments of the Low Countries, Portugal and England.

Toward the middle of the 16th century, Spanish sovereigns expelled Conversos who had arrived before 1543; by 1591, just 47 families remained. Only after the Peace of Westphalia (1648) were some allowed to return, but they continued to be targeted by the Inquisition. The Treaty of Utrecht (1713) brought Antwerp under Austrian rule, and Jews—including a few Ashkenazim—were allowed to reside in the city if they paid a special tax.

After the French occupied the Low Countries in 1794, Jews were allowed for the first time to settle freely in Antwerp, and Ashkenazim became dominant. In 1815, the city was incorporated into The Netherlands and Jews were granted equality. In 1816, when Antwerp had about 100 Jews, the first public prayers were held. A Jewish cemetery was opened in 1828.

Belgium gained independence in 1830, and over the next 30 years the Jewish community grew to almost 1,000. The discovery of diamonds in South Africa spurred Antwerp's diamond industry, and the city prospered. Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe were absorbed, and though many left for the United States, others stayed behind to become cutters, polishers or dealers, making Antwerp the diamond capital of Europe. Later, they were joined by Sefardim from the Ottoman Empire.

Antwerp's Jewish community swelled from 8,000 in 1880 to 50,000 in 1939 (about 20 percent of the total population). Synagogues, religious schools and Zionist organizations multiplied and thrived.

But in May 1940, the Nazis occupied Belgium. In April 1941, pro-Nazi groups attacked Jewish shops and synagogues, and in August of that year, the Gestapo started confiscations in the diamond exchange. Deportations to death camps started in 1942. Some Jews managed to escape to France and elsewhere, and with the help of the Jewish

Resistance some 800 hid in the city. More than half the community was murdered by the Nazis.

After the war, augmented by newcomers from Eastern Europe, the community grew rapidly, reaching 10,000 in the 1960's. Most of the new immigrants belonged to various Hasidic groups. In 2002, Belgium agreed to pay about \$55 million to the Jewish community for property lost during the Nazi occupation.

### **Community**

Antwerp is often referred to as the only European city with a shtetl. Indeed, the Jewish community, concentrated geographically in Jootsewijk (the neighborhood around Pelikanstraat), is highly visible because of the large proportion of black-coated, bearded men and modestly dressed women pushing baby carriages.

A visitor can choose from dozens of synagogues, all of them Orthodox, including those of the Hasidic Belz, Vizhnitz and Lubavitch sects. Except for the Great Synagogue, all the prayer houses as well as schools and community services cluster around the triangular City Park, and on Saturday mornings streams of men in long satin coats and fur shtreimels hurry along Quinten Matsijslei Street to prayers. Later in the day, both secular and religious Jews come to the park to chat while their children play.

In this community of 18,000, nearly all the children attend Jewish day schools and nearly all marry within the faith. Until recently, the diamond industry provided a good living to many Orthodox families, but jobs are now going to countries with lower labor costs. Some families have opened shops catering to the Orthodox community, others are seeking higher education in law, computers and bookkeeping.

Although Antwerp's first Jews were Sefardim, today—apart from several hundred immigrants from Soviet Georgia—the vast majority is Ashkenazi, mainly of Polish origin. Their command of languages is phenomenal; in the day schools and yeshiva, every child learns at least five languages, including Hebrew.

Actually, three separate Jewish communities have existed since the early 20th century. The Ashkenazi Orthodox community is split between the ultra-Zionist, Modern Orthodox Shomre Hadas and the non-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox Machsike Hadas. The Sefardim are known as the Jewish Community of Portuguese Rite. A single office, the

Central Welfare Organization (011-32-3-201-5225), provides cradle-to-grave services to some 500 families of all denominations; most of its budget comes from the state.

Antwerp has an independent Jewish newspaper, Belgisch Israelitisch Weekblad; a culture center that has become a white elephant; a home for children with disabilities; housing for seniors; and an old age home.

But the pride of the community are its three major day schools: Tachkemoni (313 Lange Leemstraat) is a Zionist school with 700 pupils; Yavne (150 Lamorienerestraat) students continue their education in Israel after graduation; and Yesode Hatora is the ultra-Orthodox (and non-Zionist) school (18 Lange Van Ruusbroeckstraat), whose girls' school is called Beit Ya'acov. All operate from preschool through high school, teach a full secular curriculum and receive generous state support.

The Jewish community has close ties with Israel, and not just because of the diamond industry in both countries; many families have relatives and even a second home in Israel. A growing worry is the friction between Antwerp's burgeoning North African population and Jews that increases whenever the Israeli-Palestinian conflict flares up, says one active community member.

For information about synagogues and kosher food, contact Jacques Wenger, director of Shomre Hadas (35 Terliststraat; 3-232-0187; [www.shomre-hadas.be](http://www.shomre-hadas.be)).

### Sights

Pelikaanstraat, a main commercial street where Yiddish is still a living language, becomes Mercatorstraat when it crosses Belgielei, another shtetl shopping street. At that intersection, facing the elevated railroad tracks, stands a Holocaust memorial, a bronze sculpture by Willem Bierwerts dedicated to deported Jews and to those who risked their lives to save Jews. A man, a woman and a child stand behind barbed wire atop a shaft that might represent a crematorium chimney and on which a Torah scroll in flames bears the Hebrew word yizkor, remember.

Just across the railroad tracks, Belgielei becomes Van Den Nestlei, a boulevard that gives its name to the synagogue of Antwerp's Modern Orthodox congregation (officially the Romi Goldmuntz Synagogue; 1 Van Den Nestlei), built in 1927. Inside the clean-lined, white building's

sanctuary, a light-blue velvet cover with gold embroidery, topped by two lions, adorns the Ark. The cantor stands near the Ark, but the Torah is read on a central bima. A male choir adds a tuneful flourish to the service, attended by about 100 worshipers, mostly men, on a busy Sabbath.

In a building in the synagogue's courtyard, Kayle Aurbach runs an immaculate modern mikve with separate sections for men and women (3-281-2474). It is worth visiting, especially to meet Aurbach, who sees her job as a calling and offers a spirited explanation of the technical, religious and social aspects of the mikve.

From pelikaanstraat, it is just a few minutes' walk to Hoveniersstraat, the center of the diamond trade. On this drab side street with unremarkable modern buildings, the men who stand in small clusters speaking Yiddish, Hebrew, French, Flemish or English carry tiny packets of stones that will become sparkling jewels.

Until 30 years ago, the diamond business was mainly in Jewish hands, so Hebrew and Yiddish words have become standard terms. Every deal is concluded with a handshake and the word mazel.

Though Antwerp's role in the world diamond industry is shrinking, 85 percent of the world's rough diamonds still pass through the city. There is a synagogue and glatt kosher restaurant in the Diamantkring, the rough-diamond bourse (the restaurant is not open to the public). How the stones are cut and polished is the story told at the Diamond Museum (19-23 Koningin Astridplein; 3-202-4890).

The small but elegant Portuguese Synagogue, at 2 Hoveniersstraat, has a high arched ceiling, an all-white Ark and round metal chandeliers with floral designs. The benches are arrayed around a central bima. Its official name is the Sephardic Synagogue According to the Portuguese Rite, so called because it was built in 1910 by Jews of Portuguese origin who came from Turkey and Greece. Today, the congregation consists mainly of Sefardic Israelis and some Georgians.

After the synagogue was bombed by Arab terrorists in 1981, the damaged skylights and windows in the women's section were replaced with brightly colored stained-glass panels depicting the 12 tribes and the signs of the zodiac. In this, as in three other synagogues recognized by the government, the rabbis are civil servants paid by the state.

Within walking distance of Hoveniersstraat is the Old Town, where museums and Baroque churches are clustered. Rubens House (9-11 Wapper; 3-201-1555), where Peter Paul Rubens lived and worked from 1616 until his death in 1640, reflects his prosperity. Here one may see a Rubens painting of Adam and Eve as well as an ivory sculpture of them designed by the artist. Also on display is a painting by Jacob Jordaens of Moses and Zipporah.

Rubens's patron and friend, Nicolaas Rockox, also Antwerp's mayor, was married to Adriana Perez, the granddaughter of Conversos. A chest in the dining room of Rockox House (3-201-9250), not far from Rubens House, has a Garden of Eden motif in ivory inlay. Among the paintings is the "Allegory of Justice" by Maarten de Vos, in which Moses, holding the Tablets of the Law, appears in the lower left corner.

Antwerp was home to one of the greatest printing houses of Europe of the 16th century, that of Christopher Plantin, an important printer of Hebrew books. His splendid eight-volume Polyglot Bible (which in the Old Testament section has Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic versions, each with a Latin translation) was a masterpiece of scholarship, typography and illustration. The Plantin-Moretus Museum (2 Vrijdagmarkt; 3-221-1450) contains his home and press, complete with cases of Hebrew type. Note the chest ornamented with biblical scenes in Room 2 and the Adam and Eve on the fireplace in Rooms 2 and 21. Among the fascinating works in the library is a two-volume Hebrew grammar with someone's handwritten notes.

Closer to the port, where Jews once lived, the oldest extant synagogue in Antwerp is the Great Synagogue (built in 1893), a magnificent Moorish-style edifice with twin towers topped by spiked domes; an enormous round stained-glass window stands over the entrance portal. The house of worship was designed by Jewish architect Joseph Hertogs. Known popularly as the Bouwmeesterstraat Synagogue (it is located at 7 Bouwmeesterstraat), it is also called the Hollandse (Dutch) Shul because it was founded by the descendants of Ashkenazi Jews from Holland.

The first German V-bomb to hit the city in 1944 damaged the synagogue. After the war, Jews moved to the City Park area, and the synagogue was used mainly for weddings, but today it again has a minyan.

Not far from the synagogue is the Royal Museum of Fine Arts (on Leopold De Waelplaats; 3-238-7809), boasting a painting of Judith and Holofernes by Rubens as well as one of the same theme by Jan Matsijs, side by side with a painting of Eve by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

### Side Trip

Between 1942 and 1944, the Nazis herded more than 25,000 Belgian Jews, including 5,430 children, into the General Dossin de Saint Georges Barracks at Mechelen, halfway between Brussels and Antwerp, from where they were deported to Auschwitz. Only 1,207 survived.

The Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance (153 Goswin de Stassartstraat; 1-529-0660; [www.cicb.be](http://www.cicb.be)) is in the former barracks, where most of the Jews stayed just a few days. Several artists—some of them, like Felix Nussbaum, internationally known—were kept on as painters of signs, inmates' identification numbers and portraits of the Nazis. Surreptitiously, the artists depicted scenes of the camp; their works are among the museum's exhibits.

### Personalities

Portuguese-born Doña Gracia Mendes Nasi (c. 1510-1569) lived in Antwerp from 1536 until 1549. The outstanding Jewish woman of her day, she used her wealth and influence to help Conversos escape from Portugal. She also built synagogues and supported academies of learning in Constantinople. In the Holy Land, after obtaining a grant from the sultan for the ruined city of Tiberias, she established a yeshiva there.

Ludovicus Nonnius (1553-1645), a Converso physician in Antwerp who is considered the founder of medical dietetics, wrote the *Diaeteticon*, said to be the first treatise on the health implications of diet. His friend Rubens painted his portrait, now in The National Gallery in London.

Chess champion George Koltanowski (1903-2000), named Dean of American Chess by the United States Chess Federation, was born in Antwerp to a family of diamond cutters. In 1937, he set a still unbroken world record by playing 34 simultaneous games while blindfolded. Koltanowski was en route to the chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1939 when war broke out in Europe. He settled in San Francisco and devoted his life to improving chess in the United States.

### Reading, Film

Originally published in Yiddish in 1943, *Diamonds* (David Paul Books) by Esther Kreitman (sister of Isaac Bashevis Singer) is set in Antwerp and London around World War I. It explores the mysterious diamond trade.

*The Shovel and the Loom* by Carl Friedman (Persea Books) follows Chaja, a free-spirited philosophy student and daughter of survivors who is a nanny for an ultra-Orthodox Antwerp family in 1972. The novel was made into the movie *Left Luggage*.

### Recommendations

SN Brussels Airlines flies to Zaventem Airport, which serves both Brussels and Antwerp.

The Golden Tulip Hotel Carlton, facing City Park (25 Quinten Matsijslei; [www.carltonhotel-antwerp.com](http://www.carltonhotel-antwerp.com)), is in easy walking distance of many synagogues and sights. A block away is the Radisson SAS Park Lane Hotel (34 Van Eycklei; [www.radisson.com](http://www.radisson.com)). Both can provide a packaged kosher breakfast with advance notice.

A kosher diner has many options, from East European to Middle Eastern. Hoffy's Take Away (52 Lange Kievitstraat; 3-234-3535) offers traditional Central European Jewish cooking, including vegetarian dishes.

Many nonkosher restaurants serve vegetarian cuisine and fish. One of these, De Broers Van Julienne (45-47 Kasteelpleinstraat; 3-232-0203), uses only organic ingredients.

For luscious kosher cheesecake, blueberry danish, apple strudel and hand-dipped chocolates, try Patisserie Kleinblatt (206 Provinciestraat; 3-233-7513; [www.kleinblatt.be](http://www.kleinblatt.be)). Two stores away, Herczl & Gold sells kosher dairy and grocery items (216 Provinciestraat; 3-232-2365).

After tasting Antwerp's treats, relax at an outdoor café with one of Belgium's famous beers and enjoy this gem of a city on the River Scheldt.