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Emancipation and Poverty

**The Ashkenazi Jews of Amsterdam
1796–1850**

Karina Sonnenberg-Stern

in association with
ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

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For André

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Abbreviations

ARA	Algemeen Rijksarchief, Den Haag
GAA	Gemeente Archief, Amsterdam
NINA	Nederlandsch Israelitisch Nieuws en Advertentieblad
GAGN	Gedenkstukken der Algemene Geschiedenis van Nederland van 1795–1840, H. T. Colenbrander (ed.)
JIN	Jaarboeken voor de Israelieten in Nederland
TvMNI	Tijdschrift van de Maatschappij tot Nut der Israelieten in Nederland
VNIA	Verslag uitgebragt in de openbare vergadering van het Nederlandsch Israelitisch Armbestuur te Amsterdam
SKN	Staatsbladen van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden over de jaren 1841–1850. Chronologische genummerde besluiten door Koning Willem II
VIKKN	Verordeningen voor het Israelitisch Kerkgenootschap binnen het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 1814–1821
IW	Israelitisch Weekblad

Preface

The particular case of Dutch Jewish emancipation demonstrates that legal change did not necessarily bring about Jewish equality and the Jews' assimilation to non-Jewish society, as the social and economic circumstances of Jews could only improve as a result of economic opportunities and general social change. As most researchers into Jewish emancipation have concentrated either on Germany, France, or Britain, they have created a model which suggests that emancipation led to social mobility, followed by the Jews' integration into the economic and institutional life of the respective countries.¹ For example, Monika Richarz believes that the process of emancipation in Germany made it possible for Jews 'to integrate in the general social structures of German society', enabling Jewish peddlers and petty traders to become shopkeepers and merchants by the second half of the nineteenth century.² Therefore, according to Richarz, the German Jews' economic and social position improved as a consequence of emancipation, as 'integration into modern economic life had given rise to a broad Jewish middle class'.³ Phyllis Cohen Albert affirms this theory, stating in *The Modernization of French Jewry: Consistory and Community in the Nineteenth Century* that, as a result of emancipation, French Jews were able to enter a wider range of occupations, which in turn led to the improvement of their socio-economic status.⁴ The examination of emancipation's effect on Anglo-Jewry provides Todd Endelman with similar observations, namely that 'emancipation enhanced their social status and confirmed their worth as productive and respectable members of society'.⁵

By assuming that the social and economic status of Jews changed in the wake of emancipation, these scholars have underestimated the extent to which emancipation was a political process which in itself was not enough to ameliorate the Jews' situation. Emancipation's success depended on the transformation of the political and social structures of society, as well as on a more accommodating attitude *vis-à-vis* the Jews. Moreover, integration was not exclusively linked to the Jews' social mobility and embourgeoisement; even though the social position of Jews dictated the speed and intensity of their integration,⁶ it was possible for poor Jews to achieve acculturation within their own class. The fact that most research into

Jewish emancipation has focused on Germany, where 60 per cent of the Jews had attained middle-class status by the time of emancipation, could explain why successful emancipation and acculturation are associated with the Jews acquiring the customs of the bourgeoisie. While it is true that the goal of emancipation was to improve the political and social conditions of the Jewish community by making them equal to all other citizens living in the state, it is wrong to assume that acculturation was exclusively linked to attaining bourgeois status. The fact that emancipation forced Jews to adapt to the standards of the larger society did not mean that these standards had to be bourgeois. Considering that the effect of emancipation did have an impact on the lives of the poor and lower-class Jews, it is a subject well worth examining, for it produces a different model of emancipation.

Research on Dutch Jewish history has predominantly focused on the period up to emancipation or the Holocaust. The research that has been carried out on the period of emancipation tends to focus primarily on the period following its proclamation between 1796 and 1800, or on its initial consequences, from 1800 until 1820.⁷ None of the studies dealing with Dutch Jewry's emancipation address its long-term effect on a community of nearly 40,000 Jews, neither do they explain why most of these Jews remained poor after the promulgation of emancipation. While most other European Jewish communities consisted of a substantial number of poor and were confronted with considerable hostility from the indigenous population, they were able to achieve economic mobility, enhance their social status and attain limited integration into non-Jewish society as a result of emancipation.

The crucial question thus raised is why the proclamation of emancipation in the Dutch Republic did not provide the Jews with similar opportunities. Was Dutch Jewry's poverty an impediment to the elimination of legal and social disabilities? As emancipation was meant to transform Amsterdam's Jewish community from a group of miserable paupers to one of cultured, secular individuals, the examination of the reason for the existence of such a large group of Jewish poor until the end of the nineteenth century needs to be at the centre of any argument concerning Dutch Jewish emancipation.

During the first half of the nineteenth century Amsterdam contained one of the largest Jewish communities of Western Europe: from 1796 until 1850 between 22,000 and 25,000 Jews made up 10

per cent of Amsterdam's total population,⁸ which in itself warrants an examination of the condition of this community. Despite legal and economic restrictions as well as social disabilities, Amsterdam was an appealing haven to poor, displaced Jews, as it was the only city in the Dutch Republic which did not restrict Jewish settlement and its local regulations were not as stringent as those in most other European cities. As a result of the authorities' tolerance in Amsterdam for the influx of poor Ashkenazim, by 1810 14,300 of Amsterdam's 22,000 Jews received poor relief on a regular basis.⁹ The existence of such a sizable number of Jewish poor further separates the Netherlands' emancipation process from those of other countries, offering an example which suggests that there is an alternative pattern to the emancipation model historians have created on the basis of Germany, France and Britain.

By examining the minute books of the weekly meetings of Amsterdam's Jewish community, the records of the Jewish Consistory and the Commission for the Affairs of the Israelites, governmental reports, and periodicals, it is possible to learn what the Dutch authorities' attitude was towards the Jewish community during the first half of the nineteenth century, whether the legal and social restrictions which existed before 1796 were dissolved as a result of emancipation, to what extent the emancipation decree of 1796 changed the public position of Dutch Jewry, whether secular education promoted Dutch Jewry's cultural and social adaptation to non-Jewish society, and whether such a large group of poor Jews was willing to relinquish its religious customs and traditions and formulate a new identity. As the Dutch Jews' poverty was more pervasive than among any of the other Western European communities, it produces a distinctive pattern of Jewish emancipation, because poverty determined the nature of the emancipation process in the Netherlands. While in Germany, France, and Britain a significant number of Jews appeared in the important ranks of the professional world and were able to achieve social mobility as a result of emancipation, Dutch Jews remained predominantly peddlers and hawkers. Why did emancipation not provide Dutch Jewry with similar social and professional opportunities? Was Jewish emancipation little more than a legal measure in the Netherlands? Why did it not create significant social mobility and economic prosperity, but instead leave nearly 80 per cent of the Jews poor during the nineteenth century? Moreover, can the continued existence of

such a large group of poor Jews after the promulgation of emancipation be taken as an indication of the Dutch authorities' refusal to remove all economic restrictions?

After discussing the general nature of emancipation in Germany, France and Britain, the particular case of Dutch Jewry's emancipation – including a survey of its historiography – is examined in the introduction. The focus in Chapter 2 is on the ambiguities and limits of establishing a Jewish community in the Netherlands before 1796, which denoted the impending uncertainty of the Jews' position in nineteenth-century Dutch society. The admission of a group of Sephardi merchants at the end of the sixteenth century was largely motivated by their ties with other trading nations, and their contribution to the Dutch economy facilitated the admission of the indigent Ashkenazim during the first few decades of the seventeenth century. Although the Jews were regarded as royal subjects who enjoyed undisputed religious liberty, they were not permitted to settle wherever they wished in the Dutch Republic, and many regulations impeded them from leading a life similar to that of the other Dutch inhabitants. The surge of destitute Jewish immigrants triggered the fear, especially amongst Christian retail-traders, shopkeepers, and peddlers, that Jews would take away their business. In 1632, the Jews were therefore barred from guilds, retail-trades and crafts: a resolution which proved ultimately to be detrimental to the development of the Jewish community, for their exclusion from most trades and professions perpetuated the problem of the large number of Jewish poor.

Chapter 3 deals with the uncertain terms of the emancipation declaration in the Netherlands, which tainted the ensuing emancipation process. After the National Assembly of the Batavian Republic had come to accept that the separation of church and state rendered it impossible for the Jews to be refused citizenship on the basis of their religion, it passed the Jewish emancipation bill on 2 September 1796. However, despite the fact that Dutch Jewry had formally received the same civil rights as the country's other inhabitants, the majority of Amsterdam's inhabitants continued to treat its Jews with considerable prejudice: Christian traders did not want them to attain equal rights, as they feared that their competition would threaten their livelihood, and the authorities did not wish to adopt a community of predominantly poor Jews. While in theory the French administration promised to realise the Jews' political equality, only some measures were taken from which the

Jews could realistically benefit. In reality Louis Napoleon and his brother were unable effectively to eradicate acts which served no other purpose but to segregate Jews from non-Jews.

In Chapter 4 an attempt is made to show how the Amsterdam authorities remained largely indifferent to the Jews' countless requests to revoke discriminatory measures which remained in place until the second half of the nineteenth century, and which were most of all detrimental to Amsterdam's Jewish poor. The most consistent discriminatory practice was the Amsterdam authorities' refusal to accord the Jewish community an equal share of subsidy. The significant difference in subsidy between the Jewish community and that of other comparable denominations was both financially disadvantageous and morally detrimental to Amsterdam's Jewish community. The Dutch authorities' prejudice encompassed most areas of Jewish life: Jews were excluded from noteworthy administrative positions, were deprived of many advantages relating to religious education, and were accountable to a government which was unwilling to take on the social and political commitments which went with this. With so much hardship on their minds, the Jews failed to produce a defined and united ideology which expressed their disappointment with the pace of political and social change. As poverty was the common denominator between these Jews, a strong sense of solidarity dominated their community; they continued to live in a realm of their own, without much understanding of the non-Jewish world surrounding them.

The reasons for the failure of the attempt to reform and acculturate the Jewish poor through the means of education constitute the main argument of Chapter 5. Jewish reformers and government officials were convinced that by teaching the indigent Jews the language and habits of the larger society, as well as useful skills, they could become part of the fabric of non-Jewish culture. They believed that an improvement of the Jewish educational system would abate the Jews' predicament and put an end to their inferior position within Dutch society. Despite Louis Napoleon's claim that he wished to eliminate the factors which impeded the civilisation of Dutch Jewry and William I's assertion that he intended to make a fundamental improvement in the social and cultural status of his Jewish subjects, they failed to remove the social and economic barriers which impeded the Jews from participating fully in Dutch society. While most Jews objected to making any changes to their educational system, they were only able to conform to secular society if

the authorities created an accommodating atmosphere. Dutch society's maintenance of prejudice meant that Jews were unable to establish contact with non-Jewish society, an act which was essential to acculturation. While the upper crust of Jewish society took on some of the characteristics of the non-Jewish environment, acculturation was not a common trend amongst the majority of Dutch Jews. Besides the unwillingness of Dutch society to cease treating the Jews with contempt, the living conditions of Amsterdam's Jewish poor during the first half of the nineteenth century were certainly not conducive to the adaptation of secular culture; because of their isolation from non-Jewish society they were unable to develop a relationship with their fellow-citizens.

The success of Jewish emancipation hinged on the combination of the Jews' social and cultural adaptation to non-Jewish society, the abolition of discriminatory impediments, and the provision of social, political, and economic opportunities. Jewish emancipation was little more than a legal measure in the Netherlands, because Jews were unable to take full advantage of economic, social, and educational changes for two reasons: the government retained their perception of the Jews as a separate and different group of predominantly uncultured paupers and never made it their priority to remove all restrictive measures and push for reform, while most Jews were unwilling to discard traditions which kept them segregated from non-Jewish society, and embrace new ideologies. The declaration of emancipation in the Netherlands should have provided the Jews with genuine legal and social equality, abolished prejudice and restrictive resolutions, and enabled them to take advantage of those economic and social trends which ultimately led to the modernization of European Jewry.

This book is based on my D. Phil. thesis submitted to the Faculty of Modern History at Oxford University in 1996. Special thanks are due to my thesis supervisors, Professor David Sorkin and Professor David Eastwood, for their advice, comments, and encouragement. I would also like to thank my parents for their boundless love and generous support.

I dedicate this book to André: without his unwavering encouragement and support I would never have had the courage to embark upon this journey through time, nor the necessary drive to succeed.

Karina Sonnenberg-Stern