

A Brief History of the Jews in the Netherlands

BY KIMBERLY BROWN



JEWISH ROOTS RESEARCH

The first Jews in the Netherlands began coming to the Amsterdam in the late 1500s; they were Portuguese merchants who were *conversos*, Jews who had been forcibly converted to Catholicism. Because they were a boon to commerce, Dutch authorities welcomed these Jewish merchants. In the atmosphere of tolerance that they enjoyed in Amsterdam, many *conversos* reverted to their Jewish faith. Thus beginning in the sixteenth century there was a strong presence of Sephardic Jews (Jews from the Iberian Peninsula) in Amsterdam. Later there was an influx of Ashkenazi Jews, driven out of other European nations by persecution. Sephardim and Ashkenazim intermingled freely in Jewish communities in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and other mercantile cities of Holland.

From 1795 to 1813, Holland was under French rule. In 1796 Jews were granted civil rights per French law. Once freed from the French, Holland became a constitutional monarchy that was a great deal more progressive and more tolerant than many other European nations. In 1917 all adult males were enfranchised with voting rights and citizenship. Jews in Holland owned thriving businesses and some had prestigious posts and leadership positions in the political arena. Today many Americans of Jewish descent can trace

their ancestry to these affluent Dutch Jewish families.

To research your Jewish ancestors in the Netherlands, one of the most valuable resources is civil registration. Civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths was instituted in 1811 under Napoleon's rule. With the advent of civil registration, Jews were required to adopt fixed surnames instead of using the patronymic surname system; they had to appear before a civil register and designate which surname they would adopt. Thus the interested family historian can search surname registry books to learn more about his or her ancestors.

Another resource for family researchers is the *Bevolkingsregister*, a population register that was, essentially, a census. It recorded the name, date and place of birth, religion, marital status, and occupation of every individual living within each household in Holland. The *Bevolkingsregister* also recorded the movements of individuals and families: when they moved into a particular house and when they moved out. The value of these records to family historians is incalculable.

At the turn of the 20th century, the *Bevolkingsregister* system was tightened up: instead of enumerating each citizen in the record books, each individual was required to file a registration card.

Each time a resident moved, a new card was generated for them and kept in a central registry.

The year 1940 marked the beginning of Germany's occupation of the Netherlands. Since part of Hitler's agenda was the apprehension of the Jews, the Nazis used Holland's card registration system to locate Jewish families and to deport them to death camps in Poland. In response, members of Dutch resistance began to destroy registration cards in Amsterdam and the Hague; because of this, a few Jewish families were able to slip through the cracks, go into hiding, and survive the German occupation. Of Holland's Jewish population of 140,000, only 40,000 survived the Holocaust.

Although the majority of Holland's Jews perished in the 1940s, their records survived. Large Jewish communities in Holland kept their own censuses and some vital records; these records have been preserved in the municipal archives of Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, and Rotterdam. They include records of membership, marriage, and burial (but not circumcision registers, since the *mohel*, or ritual circumciser, typically kept his own records). Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews appear equally in these valuable records, as well as in civil registration, surname registry books, and population registers.