



A Jewish intellectual under the radar

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'I don't want to return to the countries where barbarity is so innate.'
H. Handovsky (letter to A. Vermeylen, 21 September 1944)¹

Abstract: It is commonly maintained that Belgium held less appeal for intellectuals in exile between the two wars than the Netherlands or France. This phenomenon has not been studied in Belgium extensively enough to fully verify or explain it. We do know, however, that a relatively smaller number of Jews were deported from Belgium during the occupation than from the Netherlands or France. Would it be fair to hypothesize, then, that Jewish intellectuals were safer there, or in any event had a better chance of surviving, than in neighbouring countries? Could more survival strategies be deployed in Belgium than elsewhere? My focus in this paper is on Hans Handovsky (1888-1959), a German chemist of Austrian Jewish origin, who emigrated to Ghent in 1934 and returned to Heidelberg in 1957. By examining his letters to the two Flemish writers August Vermeylen and Fernand Toussaint van Boelaere, we can shed light on how he managed to survive the German occupation. We show how the assistance of non-Jewish intellectuals could contribute to saving a Jewish intellectual.

Keywords: Exile / verbanning – Jewish intellectuals / joodse intellectuelen – August Vermeylen – Hans Handovsky

¹ All letters cited to August Vermeylen and Fernand Toussaint Van Boelaere are kept in the Antwerp Letterenhuis (Letterenhuis V4655 / B2 and T 394 / B2).

The myth of Belgium as a ‘host country’ for refugees has been suitably revised in recent times through the hard work of historians.² In the nineteenth century the country’s hospitality was hampered on the political front by various diplomatic interests – including a concern about maintaining neutrality – and on the economic front by a fear of rising unemployment among its population. Later, in the interbellum, Belgians feared that their national identity might be undermined.³ Between the wars Belgium was primarily a transit country for thousands of impoverished refugees from Eastern Europe, as well as political refugees and primarily Jewish intellectuals. I will focus here on the fate of this latter group, the intellectuals.

It is commonly maintained that Belgium held less appeal for intellectuals (writers and artists, journalists, scientists and other scholars etc.) than, say, the Netherlands or France. This phenomenon has not been studied in Belgium extensively enough to fully verify or explain it.⁴ We do know, however, that a relatively smaller number of Jews were deported from Belgium during the occupation than from the Netherlands or France.⁵ Would it be fair to hypothesize, then, that Jewish intellectuals were safer there, or in any event had a better chance of surviving, than in neighbouring countries? Could they deploy more survival strategies in Belgium than elsewhere? These survival strategies have been charted by the German-Belgian researcher Insa Meinen as far as they concern (poor) Jewish refugees who have not survived the camps.⁶ However, neither has systematic research been done on survival strategies of intellectuals, nor has it been investigated to what extent the elite settled down in Belgium or the newly arrived intelligentsia disposed of more possibilities to escape from the barbarism than the refugees without means. This paper wants to contribute to find answers to these questions.

My focus lies on Hans Handovsky (1888-1959), a German pharmacologist of Austrian Jewish origin, who emigrated to Ghent in 1934 and was even briefly suspected after the war of being a

² First by A. Morelli, ‘Belgique, terre d’accueil? Rejet et accueil des exilés politiques en Belgique de 1830 à nos jours’, in: *L’émigration politique en Europe aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1991), pp. 117-128.

³ F. Caestecker and A. Morelli, ‘Het bewogen ontstaan van een vluchtelingenbeleid in België (1918-1940)’, in *Activisten, vervolgd en slachtoffers kloppen aan. Het Belgische vluchtelingenbeleid in de 19de en 20ste eeuw*, ed. by F. Caestecker, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis / Revue belge d’histoire contemporaine* 40 (2010), pp. 383-385.

⁴ One of the common explanations is that life in Brussels was cheaper than such places as Paris or Amsterdam. Moreover, artists and writers were more readily recognized as refugees than their compatriots elsewhere (V.J. Schmidinger, *Transit Belgien. Deutsche und österreichische Künstler im Exil 1933-1945* (Munich: Allitera, 2017), p. 62). It is unlikely that it was the strict asylum policies that deterred people, since similar policies existed in the surrounding countries, even being further tightened starting in the mid-nineteen thirties. The Netherlands had the advantage of a Germanic language, whereas in Belgium much of the official bureaucracy was still conducted in French. Meanwhile, for writers, the lack of large publishing houses in Belgium was undoubtedly an issue. The recently published, though unfortunately not fully documented, book by Veit Johannes Schmidinger, *Transit Belgien* (2017), does not provide any new explanations for Belgium’s lesser appeal compared to other countries.

⁵ J.W. Griffioen and R. Zeller, *Vergelijking van Jodenvervolging in Frankrijk, België en Nederland, 1940-1945: overeenkomsten, verschillen, oorzaken*, unpublished PhD thesis (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam (2008)). About the deportation of the specific group of Jewish refugees, see I. Meinen, “‘Je devais quitter le pays dans les dix jours, sinon on m’aurait mis dans un camp de concentration’”. Réfugiés juifs d’Allemagne nazie en Belgique (1938-1944)’, in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine* 10 (2011), pp. 175-212.

⁶ I. Meinen, ‘Les stratégies de subsistance des réfugiés juifs en Belgique occupée (1940-1945)’, in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine* 12 (2016), pp. 119-190. This concerns especially actions like not wearing the Jewish badge (Judenstern), forging passports, trading on the black market, going underground or crossing the border. See I. Meinen, *Die Shoah in Belgien* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009), p. 184.

collaborator because he had come through it unscathed.⁷ That was the fate he shared with other Jewish citizens from Germany (or Austria).⁸ By examining his letters to the two Flemish writers August Vermeylen and Fernand Toussaint van Boelaere, we can shed light on how he managed to survive the German occupation. These letters, written in French and Dutch, illustrate what Meinen has already demonstrated: that knowledge of the national language(s) was vital to survive.⁹

Intellectuals

The admissions policy for refugees in Belgium in the nineteen twenties was ‘protectionist’,¹⁰ even at the universities; in the thirties, ‘only refugees with ample financial means (...) were welcomed’.¹¹ The vast majority were victims of a repressive regime. Between January of 1933 and February 1938, seven per cent of all refugees from Germany landed in Belgium¹² – mostly Jews (in two waves: the first in 1933, with a second wave in 1935). After the *Anschluss* a great many Austrian Jews joined the throngs, and after *Kristallnacht* growing numbers of Jewish refugees chose Belgium as a destination for the simple fact that by 1939 it was the only neighbouring country to Germany where they could still enjoy temporary protection.¹³ Consequently, by the time the war broke out, there were 65,000 to 70,000 Jews in Belgium – six times as many as at the start of the twentieth century.¹⁴

Belgium was not the first choice in the ‘exodus of intellectuals of 1933’: ‘Intellectuals rarely settled in Belgium; Paris held a much greater attraction for them’.¹⁵ The country was, rather, a transit country for people hoping to cross the sea to England, the United States, Palestine or South America. However, some groups of privileged individuals did establish themselves there, such as ‘business people with international commercial and industrial contacts’ and wealthy

⁷ B. Dickschen, *L'école en sursis. La scolarisation des Juifs pendant la guerre* (Bruxelles: Didier Devillez, 2006), p. 74. Dicksen spent three pages on the case, mainly based on his dossier in the archive of Ghent University. The letters from Vermeylen and Toussaint confirm and complete her information.

⁸ C. Massange, ‘L'internement des Juifs allemands à la Libération en Belgique’, in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine* 12 (2016), pp. 191-221.

⁹ Meinen, ‘Stratégies’, pp. 146-147.

¹⁰ Caestecker and Morelli, ‘Het bewogen bestaan’, p. 388.

¹¹ Caestecker and Morelli, ‘Het bewogen bestaan’, p. 393.

¹² F. Caestecker, *Ongewenste gasten. Joodse vluchtelingen en migranten in de dertiger jaren* (Brussels: VUBPress, 1993), pp. 279-280; see also L. Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880-1944)* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000), p. 190 and 194: 12,000 to 20,000, – 5,000 of whom immediately after 1933 (Caestecker, *Ongewenste gasten*, p. 26).

¹³ Caestecker and Morelli, ‘Het bewogen bestaan’, p. 398.

¹⁴ T. Delplanq, ‘Des paroles et des actes: l’administration bruxelloise et le registre des Juifs, 1940-1941’, in ‘Bruxelles et la question juive / Brussel en de joodse kwestie’, special issue, *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis / Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps présent* 12 (2003), p. 142.

¹⁵ Caestecker, *Ongewenste gasten*, p. 26. Saerens confirms this: immediately after 1933 ‘the majority of cases were intellectuals and political persecutees, the so-called exodus of the intellect’ (Saerens, *Vreemdelingen*, p. 190), but ‘very few artists, scientists or writers chose Belgium as a place of residence. They preferred to head to a city like Paris’ (Saerens, *Vreemdelingen*, p. 191).

'tradesmen'.¹⁶ Literary authors tended to remain only temporarily in Belgium. Famous examples include Irmgard Keun, Ego Erwin Kisch, Klaus Mann, Joseph Roth, Stefan Zweig and others involved in the writers colonies in Ostend and Brussels,¹⁷ as well as the sojourn of Jean Améry (after the *Anschluss* in March 1938).¹⁸ Yet there were more authors in addition to these most frequently cited cases: Hans Henner stayed for a while in Antwerp, for instance; Salomon Dembitzer and Carl Sternheim lived in Belgium before the First World War and returned to it between the wars;¹⁹ Max Reinhardt and Erika Mann visited Belgium with their theatre ensemble;²⁰ and Dutch Jewish writers such as Siegfried and André van Praag chose Brussels as their domicile.²¹

As for artists, Felix Nussbaum is certainly the most famous nowadays, along with his wife Felka Platek, but Karl Schwesig, Carl Rabus, Lotte Prechner, the gentile Leo Breuer and others also settled in Belgium and attempted to earn their living through art.²² In 1938 the so-called *Rundfunk-Caruso*, Joseph Schmidt, arrived in Brussels and then fled to Switzerland via France after the German invasion.²³ There is a lack of hard facts and figures on journalists (Kurt Grünebaum,²⁴ Max Hochdorf, Gustav Mayer²⁵), politicians (Carl Landauer) and scholars who visited, or wanted to visit, Belgium.²⁶ But the passage of Albert Einstein through parts of Europe

¹⁶ Saerens, *Vreemdelingen*, p. 191.

¹⁷ Also Ernst Toller, Arthur Koestler and Willy Münzenberg.

¹⁸ For Améry, see R. Müller, 'Jean Améry in Belgien', in *Germanistische Mitteilungen*, 31 (1990), pp. 37-48 and a lecture by T. Franck from 2015: <http://www.auschwitz.be/index.php/fr/activites/colloques-et-journees-detude/2015-jean-amery-choisir-son-destin-1912-1978>.

¹⁹ On Henner, see J. Duytschaever, 'Zur Asylpraxis in Holland und Belgien: Der Fall Hans Bendgens-Henner (1892-1942)', in *Zur deutschen Exilliteratur in den Niederlanden*, ed. by H. Würzner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1977), pp. 69-117 (*Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Neueren Germanistik*, vol. 6); on Dembitzer, see S. Bolbecher, *Lexikon der österreichischen Exilliteratur* (Vienna/Munich: Deuticke, 2000) and Schmidinger, *Transit Belgien*, pp. 241-249.

²⁰ C. Tindemans, 'Max Reinhardt in Flandern', in *Max Reinhardt in Europa*, ed. by E. Leisler and G. Prossnitz (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1973), pp. 187-200 and C. Tindemans, 'Exiltheater und Rezeption in Antwerpen 1933-1940', in *Zur deutschen Exilliteratur in den Niederlanden*, ed. by H. Würzner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1977), pp. 175-186 (*Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Neueren Germanistik*, vol. 6).

²¹ Siegfried van Praag from 1935. See letter to Vermeylen dated 25 July 1935 (Letterenhuis, P8124/B).

²² On Nussbaum, see M. Schaevers, *Orgelman. Felix Nussbaum. Een schrijversleven* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2014); on Leo Breuer, see Schmidinger, *Transit Belgien*, pp. 143-149, who also devotes a chapter to the exhibition creator and pacifist Ernst Friedrich (pp. 150-163).

²³ Schmidinger, *Transit Belgien*, pp. 133-142.

²⁴ On Grünebaum, see R. Baumann, 'Kurt Grünebaum, entre l'Allemagne et la Belgique', in *Carl-Einstein-Kolloquium 1998. Carl Einstein à Bruxelles: Dialogues par-dessus les frontières / Carl Einstein in Brüssel: Dialoge über Grenzen*, ed. by R. Baumann and H. Roland (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 169-197.

²⁵ See letter from Hendrik de Man to Alfred Hegenscheidt, 18 November 1933 (Letterenhuis).

²⁶ The research pioneers were Joris Duytschaever ('Zur Asylpraxis') and later Hubert Roland (H. Roland, 'Hertha Ligeti's Roman *Die Sterne verlöschen nicht* (1959): Ein vergessenes Werk der Exilliteratur in Belgien', in *Langues à niveaux multiples. Hommage au Professeur Jacques Lerot*, ed. by H. Bouillon (Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, 2004), pp. 217-227 (Bibliothèque des Cahiers de l'Institut de Linguistique de Louvain 112); H. Roland, 'German and Austrian Exile Literature in Belgium 1933-1945. Topography and Perspectives', in *Exiles Travelling, Exploring Displacement, Crossing Boundaries in German Exile Arts and Writings 1933-1945*, ed. by J. Evelein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 73-98.

in 1933, received as he was by governments and wealthy families, certainly speaks to the imagination.²⁷ Other Jewish scientists were helped by colleagues such as Jacques Errera.²⁸

Poor refugees had to generally rely on relief organizations which were defined by their social or ideological preferences: the Socialist Matteotti Fund, the Catholic Caritas and the Communist International Red Aid (MOPR) were mainstays.²⁹ Two organizations specifically set up for Jewish refugees were the Aid and Assistance Committee for Victims of Antisemitism in Germany (CAAVAA) and the Assistance Committee for Jewish Refugee Children.³⁰ Those émigrés with greater financial means or who were more responsible also looked elsewhere for support, including political help. There were, of course, certain politicians who were prepared to advocate for the refugees.

Vermeylen and Handovsky

One of them was August Vermeylen, a writer and Socialist senator and the first chancellor of the Dutchified Ghent University (1930-33).³¹ The general impression exists that he was not necessarily very proactive; his intervention depended on being asked. It was in any event a time in which politicians provided ‘political favours’ and would put in a good word with ministries or civil servants upon request. But Vermeylen was also a leading member of the Flemish PEN Club; in that capacity he was concerned about the fate of persecuted writers and intellectuals.³²

Equally important, he was part of the Jewish network at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. A frequent guest at the Erreras’ salon (first with Paul and Isabelle and later with Jacques and Jacqueline),³³ he became a close, and maybe intimate, friend of their daughter Gabrielle Errera-Oppenheim, who had returned from Frankfurt in 1933 with her husband. In Frankfurt she had befriended Adorno and hosted a salon, where she was famous for flirting. After fleeing to

²⁷ <http://blogimages.bloggen.be/gnomon/attach/9648.pdf>. See also the fictional account by Xavier Tricot about the meeting between Einstein and Ensor at Au coeur volant, a restaurant in Den Haan, on 2 August 1933 (X. Tricot, *ENSOR/EINSTEIN* (Koekelare: Devriendt, 2005). Besides the De Groot family, in its Cantecroy castle, the Erreras opened their doors: Jacques shared a laboratory at the ULB with Einstein (M. Errera-Bourla, *Les Errera. Une histoire juive. Parcours d'une assimilation* (Brussels: Racine, 2000), pp. 162-163). See also: Musée Juif de Belgique, Archives, Errera Fund, Box 7: Letter signed by Albert Einstein, 8 April 1933.

²⁸ Jacques Errera Archives, Université Libre de Bruxelles.

²⁹ For aid organizations, see a.o. Caestecker; *Ongewenste gasten*, pp. 28-30.

³⁰ See J.-P. Schreiber, ‘L'accueil des réfugiés juifs du Reich en Belgique Mars 1933 – septembre 1939: le Comité d'Aide et d'Assistance aux Victimes de l'Antisémitisme en Allemagne’, in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine* 3 (2001), pp. 23-71; and S. Collignon, *Le Comité d'assistance aux Enfants Juifs Réfugiés. Les homes Général Bernheim et Herbert Speyer (Bruxelles, 1938-1940)*, unpublished thesis, Université libre de Bruxelles (2004).

³¹ Other Socialists who took a stance were Emile Vandervelde and Camille Huysmans, mayor of Antwerp (see F. Caestecker, ‘Het reëel bestaande socialisme in West-Europa en de vlucht uit Nazi-Duitsland, 1933-1934. Een oefening in private internationale solidariteit’, in *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis / Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent* 15 (2005), pp. 107-122).

³² See my article on Joseph Roth and the Belgian PEN Club (in print).

³³ See my lecture for the MJB: http://www.new.mjbmb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1283359&Itemid=458&lang=french.

Princeton in 1939 via New York, she continued to receive distinguished guests at her table, including Albert Einstein.

In addition to being a member of the PEN Club, Vermeylen was involved with anti-fascist organizations and took part in their meetings. In June 1935 he drafted a motion in the name of a Flemish group for a 'Writers congress for the defence of culture' in Paris. In December of that year, he also took part in an anti-fascist meeting organized by the Belgian branch of the Dutch Committee of Vigilance.³⁴ In 1936 Vermeylen had contact with anti-fascist organizations such as the Global Committee of Women against War and Fascism, the Universal Union for Peace (which fought for amnesty), the Local Vigilance Committee of Antifascist Intellectuals and the Liaison Centre of the Committees under the Immigration Statute (which advocated for asylum).³⁵ He addressed the Association for the Protection of German Authors at its meeting on 27 April 1936 with the words 'For Carl von Ossietzky! For the defence of peace and culture'. He was invited that same year to write an article for a book that Lion Feuchtwanger and Anna Seghers wanted to compile – but was never published.³⁶ In 1938 he was asked to write a letter for the International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture, as the French writer Franz Hellens had done.³⁷ He also spoke at a meeting in December 1938 that was protesting anti-Semitism. This would end up costing him dearly: he was removed from his many official positions during the occupation. According to the writer Ernest Claes, that was due not only to the fact that he fled to France when the Germans invaded, but also his pro-Jewish actions.³⁸

Vermeylen fretted over the fate of Jewish intellectuals. His correspondence shows a record of contact with the Dutch-Jewish writers Siegfried and André van Praag and with Salomon Dembitzer regarding the publication of his work. I also found letters to Vermeylen from the Austrian-Jewish pharmacologist Hans Handovsky. After Hitler came into power, Handovsky was one of fifty professors fired from the University of Göttingen. He relocated to Ghent at the invitation of Corneel Heymans,³⁹ whose assistant he became:

He and Professor Heymans hit it off brilliantly. The newcomer was lauded, in particular, for his great scientific value. The scientific research by Hans Handovsky produced an impressive 46 publications. Nevertheless, in July 1940 Heymans, ostensibly expressing the opinion of

³⁴ Diary of Vermeylen, Sunday, 12 December 1935: 'Anti-fascist meeting at the Rubens-Palais in Antwerp, organized by the Vigilance Committee of Anti-fascist Intellectuals. Chair: Reyntjens, soc. instructor. Speakers: G. Colens, solicitor in Brussels (Cath. Avant-Garde), W. Janssens (lib., Antw. city councillor), A. Vermeylen, J. van Extergem, L. Augusteyns, L. Craeybeckx. After Van Extergem I'm going back to Brussels.' (Letterenhuis V4655/H Diary 1935-36).

³⁵ About these committees, see a.o., A. Polsenaere, 'Des femmes contre le fascisme', in *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, 14-15 (1976), p. 39 and N. Racine-Furlaud, 'Pacifistes et antifascistes. Le Comité de vigilance des intellectuels antifascistes', in *Des années trente. Groupes et ruptures*, ed. by A. Roche and C. Tarting (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1985); N. Racine, 'Le Comité de vigilance des intellectuels antifascistes': in *Dictionnaire historique de la vie politique française*, ed. by J.-F. Sirinelli (Paris: PUF, 1995).

³⁶ See D. Danzer, *Zwischen Vertrauen und Verrat* (Göttingen: V&R, 2012), p. 281.

³⁷ Letter from Denis Mansion to Vermeylen, 25 May 1938 (Letterenhuis V4655 B2).

³⁸ Diary of Ernest Claes (Archives Ernest Claes). With thanks to Bert Govaerts for the tip.

³⁹ Letter from Handovsky to Vermeylen, 14 May 1942. According to his immigration service file (ARA: no. A107344), he came to Ghent with his wife on 27 December 1933 and they settled into Vlaanderenstraat 65 in Ghent on 1 January 1934. His entry into the register was reported to the Office of Public Safety on 29 January 1934.

everyone involved, questions the benefit of a renewed appointment for Handovsky and points out that *'we think he has been allowed ample time since his appointment to find another position'*. The greatest enmity came from Frans Daels, who informs Handovsky on 3 July 1940: *[Y]ou should count yourself lucky, because were I at this point still the administrator, I would forbid you access to the laboratory.*

[...]

In answer to Handovsky's request to extend his tenure as works manager based on valid humanitarian grounds, [dean] Vlaeyen could only reply that he could *'undertake nothing against Daels'*. On 24 June 1940 – at Vlaeyen's suggestion – Handovsky directs his request directly to Daels and Heymans. Handovsky receives in response *'that it is pointless to try and do anything'*, with Daels explicitly adding, *'that would provoke the occupier'*. The adverse recommendation from Heymans, back in Ghent on 10 July 1940, is considerably less harsh than that of Daels, stating *'that under the current circumstances assistant positions must be reserved for our fellow countrymen and, especially, young scientific minds'*. It is not until the Faculty of Medicine agrees to approve a temporary extension of six months that Heymans is prepared to accept it. This recommendation from Heymans to dean Vlaeyen still predated the anti-Jewish measures that would eventually push Handovsky out for good.⁴⁰

By his own account Handovsky claims to have been registered in the 'Jodenregister der Stad Gent' (Municipality of Ghent's Register of Jews) in late 1940 and his possessions were later confiscated.⁴¹ As a result of the German ordinance of the 28th October 1940 (that forbade Jews to practise a public function)⁴² and with effect from 1 January 1941 Handovsky was suspended from his job as works manager and lost his salary, though he would remain affiliated with the institute run by Nobel laureate Prof. Heymans until mid- to late 1942. We learn about how everything played out and his subsequent fate from a letter to Fernand Toussaint van Boelaere, who continued to offer Handovsky protection after Vermeylen's death together with the latter's son.

My great downfall during the occupation was the erratic behaviour on the part of Prof. C. Heymans.⁴³ He started out maintaining good relations with the major Nazis in the country and allowed me to work independently in his laboratory. After Stalingrad he appeared to change his tune. In late 1942 he informed the Nazi authorities that I was still working in his laboratory. The Nazis, who had until that point looked the other way, then evicted me from the university. As a result of those events, we were left in terrible circumstances: we used up our savings, had no employment options, no income, no way to earn a living, all as more and

⁴⁰ M. Verschooris, *Schrijven in de schaduw van de dood. Over thuiskomen opduiken en achterblijven* (Ghent: Snoeck, 2005), p. 90.

⁴¹ Letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 22 September 1946.

⁴² Dickschen, *L'école*, p. 21.

⁴³ According to Handovsky, Heymans 'snitched' on him to the Nazis (letter, 20 April 1947). For more on Heyman's fate after the occupation, see <http://www.ugentmemorie.be/personen/heyman-corneel-1892-1968> (in Dutch).

more people turned their backs on us. “If Heymans no longer dares maintain relations with you, then we are in even less of a position to do so” was the general attitude we met with after January 1943. In February 1943 Mr Heymans tried to assassinate me.

It was at that point that Auguste Vermeulen offered me his help and within a couple of months a group of professors, industrialists and ordinary people provided us with moral and financial assistance.⁴⁴ The University of Brussels, although closed, allowed me to use its library.⁴⁵

Thus, it is clear that Handovsky’s status as a voluntary assistant at the University Ghent had come to an end. The university also refused him any financial support in June 1943.⁴⁶ After the liberation, in October 1944, his request for renewal of his mandate was refused because of his age and his German nationality.⁴⁷ Yet, in January 1945, after the death of Vermeulen, Handovsky is re-appointed works manager at the university,⁴⁸ where – as he recounts – he revokes his complaint against Heymans after the latter provides him with a satisfactory explanation and turns out to be mentally unwell.⁴⁹ Yet it is clear from his numerous, sometimes melancholy, pleas to Toussaint van Boelaere that his situation has not become any brighter: his appointment is only temporary at first, his naturalization papers are being held up and he is denied a travel visa to Switzerland in early 1947. Handovsky sums up matters as follows in a letter to Toussaint van Boelaere: ‘Nothing has been done for me up to this point: xenophobia + clericalism + chauvinism are stronger than humanity + justice + mora brain politics.’ In his view, he is ‘the only intellectual in the civilized world being treated in such a manner.’⁵⁰

He fares no better in his personal affairs. His wife dies in May 1946 following a long illness, which Handovsky attributes to the deprivations of war. Due to his lack of financial resources, he is unable to remarry and care for his children. He himself also falls ill: chronic infection and neurasthenia.⁵¹ He does finally obtain citizenship in late 1948, after three years of appeals, so that he can no longer be denied a permanent appointment under the argument that he would be taking away a position from a Belgian citizen.⁵² He returns to Göttingen in 1957, two years before

⁴⁴ See also Dickschen, *L'école*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ Letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 22 September 1946. The library was a (Foucauldian) *heterotopia* also used by other intellectuals. The Viennese author Max Hayek used the Royal Library (Meinen, ‘Stratégies’, p. 148).

⁴⁶ Dickschen, *L'école*, p. 73.

⁴⁷ Dickschen, *L'école*, p. 73.

⁴⁸ See also Dickschen, *L'école*, p. 73.

⁴⁹ Letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 22 September 1946.

⁵⁰ Letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 12 January 1947.

⁵¹ Letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 20 April 1947.

⁵² Letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 22 September 1946. Once he was granted citizenship, the file with the immigration service (ARA: no. A107344) was closed.

his death, despite having previously indicated that he would never return to the countries (Germany and Austria) where all the barbarity had started.⁵³

Vermeyleen, ‘le protecteur’

Handovsky must have gotten to know Vermeyleen shortly after the latter’s chancellorship at Ghent University had ended.⁵⁴ He seeks to renew his contact with Vermeyleen on 14 May 1942, stressing that he is ‘in no way suffering from financial need’, though he complains about the boycott by ‘Belgians, Jews and Germans’.⁵⁵ He asks Vermeyleen for advice and information. In a later letter he explains his situation thus, ‘I am currently a citizen of the German Reich (Austrian) and considered “Volljude” (full Jew) by some German services but “Mischling erster Ordnung” (first order person of mixed Jewish blood) by others. My wife is “Aryan”, “Volksdeutsche” (ethnic German), and currently holds German nationality. Our children are thus, depending on which view prevails, either “Halbjuden” (half Jews) or “Vierteljuden” (quarter Jews)’ (letter to Vermeyleen, 2 June 1942). Handovsky had been conferred German nationality against his wishes after the *Anschluss* and then his citizenship status was deemed ‘uncertain’ after the German invasion of Belgium.⁵⁶

Handovsky would go on to visit Vermeyleen in Brussels on multiple occasions, though the lack of transportation and bombings in 1943 and 1944 would prevent some of these visits. With the help of a colleague in Brussels, Handovsky gets some work in Antwerp but remains very isolated and must even retreat to the country on doctor’s orders.⁵⁷ His life is not without risk: he reports arrests being made, including of his friend Dr. Norbert Goormaghtigh,⁵⁸ whose situation fortunately improves.⁵⁹ After the Liberation, Handovsky’s life becomes ever more precarious. We also know he joins the Austrian Freedom Front, an anti-fascist organization that avoids taking political sides.⁶⁰ His position in that association is quickly contested, however, as we learn from

⁵³ A. Szabò, *Vertreibung, Rückkehr, Wiedergutmachung: Göttinger Hochschullehrer im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus: mit einer biographischen Dokumentation der entlassenen und verfolgten Hochschullehrer* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2000), pp. 397-403.

⁵⁴ Letter to Vermeyleen, 14 May 1942.

⁵⁵ Letter to Vermeyleen, 14 May 1942.

⁵⁶ As a result of a German ordinance issued 25 November 1941 (ARA: no. A107344). According to his immigration service file (ARA: no. A107344), Handovsky refused to be called ‘German’ after the war and had to wait until Austria was recognized as a separate country by Belgium (not until 1947) before he could renew his Austrian nationality.

⁵⁷ Letter to Vermeyleen, 13 February 1944, 1 April 1944 and 8 June 1944.

⁵⁸ About Goormaghtigh (1890-1960), see https://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/MEM10/000/001/148/MEM10-000001148_1960.pdf.

⁵⁹ Letters to Vermeyleen, 18 July 1944 and 4 August 1944. Goormaghtigh was one of seven references Handovsky gave when applying for a passport so he could travel to Switzerland (letter to ‘The Honorable Director of the Border Force’, 10 January 1947, copied in a letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 18 January 1947). Another was Alfred Errera.

⁶⁰ The association was reported to have 700 members in 1944 (Wikipedia); Handovsky puts it at 500 (letter to Vermeyleen, 16 December 1944).

a letter of his included in his file with the immigration police in which he protests against attempts to get rid of him.⁶¹

‘Un hasard ridicule’?

The question remains: How did Handovsky manage to stay under the radar?⁶² Was it truly merely the result of ‘un hasard ridicule’⁶³ (sheer chance) that he managed to keep out of the Nazis’ clutches? First, it is commonly known that while Brussels did go along with following the administrative measures instituted by the German occupiers, it counteracted them in practice.⁶⁴ In Ghent, as well, the administrative guidelines (drawing up documents; registering Jews) would be followed but then actually undermined, by the head of the Office of Records, for example.⁶⁵

Second, Handovsky, who knew Dutch and French, appealed for help to influential people – such as to Count Lippens on the occasion of his petition for amnesty, at the suggestion of Vermeylen, and to the Flemish writer Herman Teirlinck, who was close to the king.⁶⁶ The correspondence also refers to contact with the German art historian Carl Hentze (1883-1975), a friend of Vermeylen’s from before the war who became a person of some importance in Antwerp during the war before accepting a post as ‘professeur ordinaire’ in Frankfurt.⁶⁷ According to one of the letters, Handovsky could be absolved from wearing the Yellow Star⁶⁸ if the *Oberfeldkommandantur* (divisional administrative headquarters) in Ghent granted permission. This would require external support, according to Handovsky, indicating there was some room for political negotiations with the German occupiers.

⁶¹ Letter dated 28 February 1945 to the ‘Comrades on the Executive Committee of the Austrian Freedom Front’.

⁶² Thanks to Marc Verschooris.

⁶³ Letter to Toussaint van Boelaere, 22 September 1946.

⁶⁴ T. Delplancq, ‘1940-1942, une cité occupée et ses Juifs. Quelques aspects heuristiques’, in *Les Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine* 3 (2001), pp. 125-134; Delplancq, ‘Des paroles et des actes’; and B. Majerus, ‘Logiques administratives et persécution anti-juive: la police bruxelloise et les arrestations de 1942’, in *Bruxelles et la question juive / Brussel en de joodse kwestie*, special issue, *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis / Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps présent* 12 (2003), pp. 181-217.

⁶⁵ ‘The department head at the Office of Records put up opposition in his own fashion. He knew perfectly well who had gone into hiding during the occupation and had helped with provisioning, since these people were not entitled to the requisite cards and stamps: “Madame Vigenon was the intermediary responsible for validating the identity papers, which needed to be done every six months, so that the Jews in hiding could receive their food/ration coupons.” The department head received special commendations after the war for his services. Maurice stated that he had done no more than his duty: “During the dark tragedy we lived through, I always tried to help my countrymen and those entitled to refuge in Belgium, to the extent my means and opportunities provided, by acting according to my conscience and sense of justice. I only did what any of you would have done in my place.” When he died in 1986, the Jewish Community of Ghent requested that 18 trees be planted in his honour in the Forest of the Righteous in Jerusalem’ (e-mail, Marc Verschooris, 14 July 2016).

⁶⁶ Letters to Vermeylen, 18 August 1942 and 5 September 1943.

⁶⁷ Letters to Vermeylen, 2 June 1942 and 7 June 1942. Hentze was sentenced to a year in jail after the war. See the archives of the immigration service (ARA 2202430).

⁶⁸ Letter to Vermeylen, 7 June 1942. Jews were obliged to wear the Star of David by the German ordonnance from the 1st of June 1942.

Third, Handovsky worked for a while at a chemical company in 1943 (Belgochemie) owned by the German Richard Klohe, as reported by the historian Marc Verschooris:

In March or April 1943 he approached Hans Handovsky. Klohe had started a chemical business in the midst of the occupation period. He was in particular need of any chemical engineering advice the fired professor could give him: *[He] would give me something to earn if I took on the role of technical consultant to him. (...) I produced 3 technical assessments for him (5,000-6,000 fr.) – in March (?) through July (?) 1943....* Handovsky got along very well with this ‘*decent, friendly and helpful person....*’ He describes his guardian angel as a man ‘*who helped not only me, but also other Jews and also Belgians (...). His behaviour is proof for me that he had nothing to do with the Gestapo.*’⁶⁹

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that thanks to his wife Handovsky would be tipped off about any pending raids (and could make sure no one was home).⁷⁰ So his marriage to an Aryan woman might have played a part into his survival. This could have been all the more so because, according to Meinen, Jews from a mixed marriage were safe from deportation.⁷¹ Moreover, his integration in Belgian society had already started much earlier than it was possible with immigrants that had entered the country since 1938.

Handovsky was not the only member of Vermeyleylen’s circle of acquaintances to survive the war without being deported. Alfred Errera, brother to Jacques, and André van Praag managed to keep their heads above water in Brussels. The circumstances under which this was possible are far from clear and require further study.⁷² What is certain is that the Belgian Jews, some of whom were comfortably off, could count on more support than later, mostly poor immigrants. Immigrants such as the now-forgotten Austrian proletarian poet Adolf Unger (1904-1942) met an entirely different fate: he and his wife ended up in Auschwitz by way of France.⁷³ It is possible that the more well-to-do intellectuals were better able to save their skin. Having a way with words, together with money and good luck, might have been a gateway to salvation.

⁶⁹ Verschooris, *Schrijven in de schaduw*, p. 90.

⁷⁰ ‘Mother knew people in the Wehrmacht who warned her when raids were planned.’ (Verschooris, based on information from Handovsky’s son; cf. e-mail, Marc Verschooris, 14 July 2016).

⁷¹ Meinen, ‘Stratégies’, p. 161.

⁷² As to Alfred Errera, who declared to be Belgian and non-religious, see Dickschen, *L'école*, p. 66.

⁷³ H. Exenberger, ‘Adolf Unger (1904-1942), ein jüdischer Arbeiterschriftsteller aus Wien’, in *Archiv 1985. Jahrbuch des Vereins für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 1 (1985), pp. 54-65. See also Schmidinger, *Transit Belgien*, pp. 219-240.

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