ASHKENAZI-DUTCH PINKASSIM AS SOURCES FOR STUDYING EUROPEAN-JEWISH MIGRATION: THE CASES OF MIDDELBURG AND THE HAGUE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Compared with the vivid international research activities on both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews in Amsterdam, the issue of Ashkenazi communities outside the Dutch metropolis has suffered from certain neglect. This certainly applies to the early decades of these Jewish groups, which were constituted mostly at the end of the seventeenth or beginning of the eighteenth century. That fact stands in contrast to the rich source material about the provincial communities that can be found mainly in numerous public archives in the Netherlands and that has only recently been rediscovered.\(^1\)

For a part of the bi-national research project, “Yiddish in the Netherlands,” that recently has been realized in Amsterdam and in Düsseldorf, we have decided on a comparative study of early modern Ashkenazi communities and their administration in the Netherlands, as they appear from the central documents of the communal leadership, the minute books, in four communities: The Hague, Middelburg, Leeuwarden, and Oisterwijk.\(^2\) These places, and their Jewish populations, differed greatly in size, importance, and location within the Dutch territory. As the main political center of the Dutch republic and the residence of its Stadtholders, and located in the rich province of Holland, The Hague could boast a prestigious position. Middelburg and Leeuwarden, on the other hand, were merely provincial capitals of Zeeland and Friesland. Oisterwijk was by far the smallest, being not more than a village; it was situated in Brabant in the Generality lands. To a certain degree, the difference in stature of these places is reflected in the pinkassim [minute books] of their Jewish communities. The minute books of the

\(^1\) Riety van Luit (ed.), *Yiddish Sources in Dutch Archives Outside Amsterdam. What is Left in the Medine?* (forthcoming).

congregations of The Hague and Leeuwarden were kept very systematically, whereas those of the communities of Middelburg and Oisterwijk show considerable deficiencies.

In this article I would like to present the examples of The Hague and of Middelburg by using rather unusual parts of those manuscripts. My intention, therefore, is not only to focus on pinkassim in general, but also to demonstrate the rather unexpected fields of research that can be covered by using the minute books. Among the many other minutes and entries, both pinkassim include pages with names of the annually-listed new community members who, by writing their names in the pinkas, declared their desire to know and to adhere to the community regulations, the takkanot. In the minute book of The Hague we find twenty pages filled with a total of five hundred and seventy signatures of heads of families (in Yiddish, ba’ale battim) between the years 1723 and 1798.\(^3\) The pinkas of Middelburg includes only five pages with this content, containing eighty-eight signatures altogether, covering the years between 1724 and 1797.\(^4\) Despite the remarkable quantitative difference in the number of newly added members, the fact remains that the identical type of sources, which cover nearly the same period, enable us to distil the hidden statistical data held in these lists. This data enables us to compare both Jewish groups regarding the number of annually-joining members, which is, needless to say, also an indication of each community’s size. In addition, in some cases, new members mentioned also their places of origin, provided they were not living in The Hague or Middelburg before founding their own households. This particular data enables us to gain new insights into the question of eighteenth century Ashkenazi Jewish migration, both within and towards the Dutch republic.\(^5\)

Before focusing on these lists, it is helpful to have a short look at the history of the communities of The Hague and Middelburg. The

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\(^4\) Zeeuws Archief Middelburg, NIG Middelburg, no. 1, pp. 9–12, 14.

\(^5\) Only little research has been done on Jewish migration to the Netherlands. For Amsterdam, see Y. Kaplan, “Amsterdam and Ashkenazi Migration in the Seventeenth Century,” in his An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe (Leiden 2000), pp. 78–107.