

## Micro-Encounters of Orthodox Jews in immediate post-war Antwerp

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Antwerp's liberation occurred on 4 September 1944. British, American, Canadian and Polish troops engaged in a battle to defend this strategic Western European port city, which suffered severe bombings between October 1944 and March 1945. During these months, a few hundred Jews, who had survived the war in hiding in the city, left their hiding places. Jewish life, which had been erased officially from the city by the Nazi regime and its collaborators, reorganized itself. It was often Jewish Allied soldiers who assisted local Jewish communities, not only with the most urgent basic care but also with organizing the first observances of Jewish holidays after liberation and helping Jewish survivors search for their families.

This paper will analyze the early encounters between orthodox Jews in liberated Antwerp and Jewish Allied soldiers. It will do so by studying a group of writings and personal letters by Jewish Allied soldiers who discussed the dire situation of the surviving Jews. These documents reported on the Jews' hardships and urgent needs, as well as the characteristics of Jewish life. These papers not only provide important information, but also form both outsider and insider views on Jewish life in the immediate post-liberation period. Indeed, having been disconnected from the hardships, persecutions, robbery and genocidal regime to which fellow Jews fell victim to in Europe, the reactions of Jewish Allied soldiers were ones of shock and horror, especially when their reports preceded the liberation of the camps in the East. At the same time, Jewish members of the Allied forces were often the first to understand the cultural and religious needs of Jewish survivors and were able to establish connections between the isolated survivors and the international Jewish community.