

Preface

After four years of activities, encompassing two years devoted to a rather global approach to the problem and two years of intensive fieldwork, the Study Commission herewith submits its detailed Final Report.

The Report is structured into a gradual build-up towards its final conclusions and observations. The argument proceeds from the analysis of the anti-Jewish measures and practices during the war period (Part 2), across the diverse aspects of the post-war restitution policy (Part 3), to the description of the estimated total extent of the despoliation within the most important sectors examined by the inquiry (Part 4).

Section by section, chapter by chapter, the conclusions were gradually assimilated into what constitutes the closing section of the Report : Part 5 offers a concisely formulated presentation of the final conclusions, proposals, and observations.

While it is not the intention to anticipate on these aspects in this Foreword, there are, nonetheless, two points that deserve immediate mention prior to proceeding to the presentation of the report.

First of all, we need to point out the factors that have made it possible for the Study Commission to bring this in-depth inquiry to its conclusion in what is indeed a rather short period of time. These factors may be summed up as follows : the Study Commission developed its own – special – methodology, it was able to count on the support of a well-grounded and motivated research group, and it enjoyed the confidence and co-operation of people in the most divergent circles.

Specific to this Study Commission is its decision to conduct an in-depth and detailed study of the material presented for its scrutiny. As a base for its activities, it identified and subsequently entered into a databank a near 100 % comprehensive record of the Jewish population in Belgium during the war years. To that end, a variety of sources were consulted. Now, at the conclusion of the Study Group's activities, this databank contains information on the identity of nearly 70 000 individuals.

Using this databank as a starting point, the Study Commission subsequently examined the archival records of essentially the public authorities, financial institutions and insurance companies and further traced and entered into the databank the possessions and assets of Jewish victims of nazi persecution.

In this way, the research group was able to conduct a serious, thorough, and precise inquiry with as its sole reservation – which is in fact not an insignifi-

cant one – that in many instances the consulted archival records presented major lacunae.

The research group, which came together in May 1999, was composed of young, motivated individuals. Its number - including the historian-director of the study and the two research-art historians who joined in June 2000 –at no time exceeded seven researchers, one university collaborator for the management of the databank, and three administrative assistants. In addition, special recognition is offered to the SOMA historian who edited all chapters dealing with the diamond sector. The fact that this Study Commission, despite its very small personnel base – small in comparison with other commissions – was able to book such notable results is largely due to the personality of and the commitment from its research director.

The Study Commission was favoured with the trust of the Government. Thus, it was able to proceed in complete independence and received, on the basis of its Interim Report of June 1998 and without any reservations, the additional means – personnel and data processing equipment – that it had requested.

Also in the broader quarters to which it had to turn for assistance in order to execute its mandate to the full and gain access to the necessary archives, the Study Commission met as a rule with general co-operation, understanding, and loyal collaboration.

It thus greatly behoves me to express a vote of heartfelt thanks to the research team, and all of the others, individuals and institutions alike, that for the past four years have given their assistance to this Study Commission.

In conclusion, I further wish to add that within the Study Commission itself, the various members - representatives of the different ministries and of the Jewish associations and societies, historians, and one Magistrate Emeritus – were guided by a spirit of mutual understanding and collaboration towards the achievement of one single objective, which helped enormously to promote the smooth and constructive exchange of ideas.

There is the further important consideration as well that in the account of the present Final Report one may not and must not divorce the tale of despoliation and redress and the ‘material’ deficit from its tragic human backdrop; no figures can adequately express the tragedy of the subject we have treated since the brutal loss of 24.140 lives cannot ever be quantified in ‘moral’ terms.

While it may be stated somewhere in this Final Report that the Nazi authorities in Belgium were not able to accomplish the total despoliation of Jewish possessions according to their anticipated planning, it does remain a fact that the Jewish population was effectively and quasi completely ripped from participation in economic life and that those who survived the holocaust after the war found only devastation : the devastation of their families and the ruin of their possessions.

8 – Study Commission Jewish Assets

It is thus fitting that this Final Report be approached and read as a work of remembrance. The whole mechanism of conscious racial hatreds and discrimination, of deliberate and premeditated genocide, contained in chill, cold-blooded edicts, lies here exposed in painstaking filigree. Against that chilling background there was, at the one end of the scale, much indifference, misapprehension or ignorance, and criminal complicity and, at the other, much courage and resistance. May this then be the most important message that this Final Report has to offer : the will to oppose what Georges Bernanos called "*l'accablante banalité du mal*".

Lucien Buysse
Chairman

July 3, 2001