Belgium

National Affairs

Belgium, a constitutional monarchy, is a loose confederation of three “regions” based largely on language: the Flemish Region, predominantly Dutch-speaking, in the north; the Walloon Region, predominantly French-speaking, in the south; and the Brussels-Capital Region, with a mixed-language population. Each enjoys a significant degree of autonomy, with Dutch, French, and German (spoken in Eupen and Malmédy) all official languages. The bicameral Parliament is elected by proportional representation. The cabinet, by law, must contain an equal number of French- and Dutch-speakers. A four-party center-left coalition continued to govern, under the leadership of Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt of the Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD), who had been in office since 1999. The sole Jewish MP was Claude Marinower, a member of the Reformist Movement (MR), the French-speaking liberal party.

In October, legislation was introduced to “improve the methods of investigation in the fight against terrorism and grave and organized crime.” Among the provisions were eliminating some existing limitations on house searches, allowing suspects to be filmed without judicial authorization, and the creation of confidential files on suspects to which the latter and their lawyers could be denied access. Human rights organizations objected, and the year ended with no action taken.

The threat of a far-right, xenophobic, separatist movement in the Flemish Region remained strong as the renamed Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), formerly known as Vlamms Blok (Flemish Bloc), won 24 percent of the vote in the Flemish Region’s elections in June, making it the second largest party there. It was already the largest party on the Antwerp City Council and the fifth largest in the Federal Parliament. It appealed to those fearful of immigration, particularly the influx of Muslims, associating such newcomers with crime and violence. Filip Dewinter, the party leader who planned to run for mayor of Antwerp in 2006, claimed that 5,000–6,000 non-Europeans were entering the city annually, and could soon constitute a majority. He campaigned for the votes of the city’s
large Orthodox Jewish community by avoiding any hint of anti-Semitism and stressing the alleged danger of Muslim immigration.

Some who were skeptical about Dewinter's claims may have changed their minds in early November, when the Muslim riots in Paris (see above, pp. 337–39) spilled beyond the borders of France. In Belgium, five cars were set afire in Saint-Gilles, the area surrounding Midi Station in Brussels, on November 6. The authorities announced that "only a small number of youths" were involved and that "the Brussels Fire Brigade is providing no further information in order to avoid knowledge of these acts of violence spreading." The next evening five more cars were torched at the same location, others were overturned, and Molotov cocktails were thrown at police. Similar events occurred almost nightly for more than two weeks in various parts of the country, petering out on November 24. All in all, 233 incidents of vandalism were reported and 123 people were arrested—almost all of them quickly released.

The vexed language issue, always the greatest potential threat to the unity of the nation, came up once again in 2005 in relation to the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde electoral district. In recent years French-speakers from Brussels had increasingly been moving into the Dutch-speaking suburbs, threatening Flemish political control. Several compromises had been suggested but to no avail, and in May, the Federal Parliament voted to put off the matter for two years.

On June 21, French and Belgian judicial authorities announced their intention to hold the trial of serial killer Michel Fourniret in Charleville-Mézières, France, in June 2006. In 2004, Fourniret admitted to raping and killing several young girls in Belgium, some of them French nationals. Police were led to Fournier after discovering the body of Elisabeth F, a young girl from Namur, who disappeared in 1990 (see AJYE 2005, p. 352).

Belgium celebrated its 175th anniversary and 25 years since the adoption of its current federalist system. King Albert II and Queen Paola launched the festivities officially on February 17, and events marking the occasion continued throughout the year. Among the many exhibitions held in Brussels were "Made in Belgium," which reviewed historic and cultural highlights of the Belgian experience; a retrospective of the history of Belgian diplomacy, held in the former library of historic Egmont Palace; an exhibit on the art of the Romantic period in Belgium; and another on Art Nouveau from 1830 to 1958. The Jewish Museum of Belgium offered an exhibition on 175 years of Belgian Judaism (see below, p. 371). On October 4, Independence Day, close to 750,000 people came
to watch fireworks and attend festivities near the royal palace in downtown Brussels.

The Belgian broadcasting networks RTBF and RTL-TVI set aside the evening of January 14 to solicit funds for the victims of the tsunami in Southeast Asia, and collected more than 52 million euros. The Jewish community carried out its own campaign for the same purpose, organized by the Jewish Central Consistory of Belgium.

Israel and the Middle East

On June 22, Brussels, as the capital of the European Union (EU), hosted an international conference on the future of Iraq that was attended by representatives from over 80 nations and nongovernmental organizations. Its aim, according to the official statement issued after its conclusion, “was to provide a forum for the new Iraqi government to present its priorities, visions, and strategies for the transition leading up to the next round of elections toward the end of the year.” U.S. president George W. Bush used the occasion to compare the current struggle against terror and for democracy in the Middle East to the rescue of Europe from the Nazis in World War II. Several hundred protestors stood outside the meeting hall to protest American policies, under a large sign saying: “President Bush: The World Holds You Accountable.”

In late November, Belgians were shocked to learn that a female suicide bomber in Iraq was a Belgian convert to Islam, Muriel De Guage. Experts believed that in the previous month alone at least five other Belgians had gone to Iraq to become “martyrs.” A few days later, Belgian police arrested 14 people for alleged involvement in terrorism, including the suicide bombing of De Guage.

Belgium, like the rest of the EU, supported a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Bilateral relations between Israel and Belgium continued to improve as memories of Belgian attempts to try Ariel Sharon and other Israeli nationals for war crimes in 2002–03 faded (see AJYB 2004, pp. 329–30). The only crisis in relations during 2005 came in January, when the Israeli Foreign Ministry called in the Belgian ambassador to protest a meeting that his opposite number in Lebanon held with Hezbollah chief Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah.

The number of Belgian officials who came to Israel during the year was exceptionally high. Karel De Gucht, the foreign minister, arrived on February 27, and laid a wreath at the entrance of a night club where a suicide attack had taken place two days earlier (see above, p. 237). He called
on the Palestinian Authority to take steps to disband terror groups and on Israel to ease the situation of the Palestinians. The next day, he told Prime Minister Sharon that he would look favorably upon Israel’s candidacy for membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and would carefully examine Israel’s request that the EU list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Prime Minister Verhofstadt attended the opening of the new Yad Vashem museum in March (see above, p. 000), and used the occasion also to speak with Prime Minister Sharon. Other high-ranking Belgians who visited Israel were the army chief of staff, the minister of culture, the finance minister, and the president of the Belgian Socialist Party.

Israel and Belgium had substantial economic relations. Israeli exports to Belgium reached $2.77 billion and Belgian exports to Israel totaled $3.22 billion. By far the largest single item on both sides was the trade in diamonds.

A grand ceremony of tribute to the memory of Yitzhak Rabin was held in Brussels on November 30, the tenth anniversary of his assassination, in the presence of Foreign Minister De Gucht, members of the Rabin family, and leading figures from politics, academia, the arts, and the Jewish community. Brussels’s mayor, Freddy Thielemans, named one of the paths in Leopold Park for Rabin and planted a 100-year-old olive tree, symbolizing life, on it. The anniversary was also marked by a trip to Israel by a dozen MPs representing the Reformist Movement (MR), under the leadership of its chairman, Didier Reynders.

The International Center for Urbanism, Architecture and Landscape in Brussels published *In the Footsteps of Modernism: Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem* as part of its Ville et Architecture (City and Architecture) series, dedicated to the heritage of Art Deco and Art Nouveau cities.

Anti-Israel sentiment was common in Belgium, as in other states of the EU. An example of this was Action Platform Palestina, which campaigned against Israeli “occupation” of the Palestinians and particularly against Israel’s separation fence on the West Bank. In November 2004 it presented a petition with over 20,000 names titled “Tear down the wall” to the cabinet secretary. In 2005 it launched a new project, “Use your head against the wall,” based on the decision of the International Court of Justice in 2004 that the barrier was illegal. The aim of “Use your head” was to get Belgium, which voted in the UN General Assembly to back the court decision, to take concrete steps to force Israel to comply. Sympathizers were asked to send in photos of themselves to be posted on the
Platform’s Web site, so as to constitute a “photo petition.” A number of political figures were associated with the movement.

Politically, anti-Israel feeling was bolstered by a perceived need to cater to Muslim voters, who tended to live in the Brussels Region and vote for the Socialist Party. A leading Jewish political figure in Brussels who served in the regional parliament, Viviane Teitelbaum (who had left the Socialists when they turned cool toward Israel, and joined the MR), was unsuccessful in her attempts to resurrect a cooperation agreement between the Brussels Region and the State of Israel. The regional government, with its Socialist-Catholic-Green majority, refused even to take up the matter.

Anti-Semitism

While no reliable statistics were available, both the number of anti-Semitic incidents in 2005 (around 60) and their seriousness (mostly verbal insults and petty vandalism) seemed to mark a lessening of the problem since 2004 (see AJYB 2005, pp. 354–55).

Among the more serious incidents, on May 7, five petrol bombs were thrown at a synagogue in the Anderlecht district of Brussels, causing a fire and considerable damage. The government denounced the attack but there were no arrests.

In June, Christian De Smet, a borough councilor in Forest (one of Brussels’s 19 boroughs) told a colleague that the Nazis may have exterminated six million Jews but that they had forgotten one, Monique Langbord, Forest’s deputy burgomaster for population matters. Both had been members of the RM (Liberal) party, but De Smet had left it to chart an independent course. Langbord called De Smet to confirm his remarks; he did, but said it had been a joke. Langbord brought charges against De Smet for the expression of anti-Semitism.

Congregants of the Mizrahi Synagogue in Antwerp discovered that a Torah scroll was missing on Saturday morning, July 23. The previous night a suspicious car had been spotted in front of the synagogue with foreign license plates and four people who seemed to be of North African descent aboard who were behaving strangely. A complaint was filed and an investigation launched.

There were suspicions that some of the violence that spilled over from France late in the year (see above, p. 360) was not haphazard, but directed at Belgian Jews. Thus in a number of instances in which only one or two
cars on a street were torched, they turned out to belong to Jews, in one case a Jew who had been attacked several times in the past on his way to synagogue.

Hoping to counteract the problem of racial taunts at soccer games, the minister for sports of the French-speaking community, the Center for Equal Opportunity and Against Racism, and the Belgian Soccer Union organized a day of soccer on August 27 with the theme, "Red card for racism and discrimination," that attracted more than 400 young people.

One official of the union used the occasion to state that racism was not confined to one community. Asked about this later, he referred to an incident in 2004, when a team had been disciplined because of anti-Semitic slurs by some of its players. "What is unacceptable," he said, "is that 'they' made use of their relations, because they have the financial resources and fill all the key positions! We were forced to punish a team because of two or three fifteen-year-olds who did not know what they were saying." By "they" he meant the Jews.

In April, a former student of a school in Laeken who had verbally abused a Jewish teacher was given a one-year suspended prison sentence for inciting racial hatred. Two trials for anti-Semitism took place in June, both in Brussels. In the first, a 22-year-old man was sentenced to six months in jail and a 500-euro fine for threatening a Jewish man with a knife in June 2004 and threatening to kill him and all other Jews. In the second, a 23-year-old man was convicted of racism for verbally abusing two young Jews, and received a two-month suspended sentence and a 330-euro fine.

Holocaust-Related Matters

On January 27, King Albert II was among the 44 heads of state who came to the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp for the international ceremony marking 60 years since its liberation. Accompanying the king was a delegation of leading figures in Belgian life, including Julien Klener, president of the Jewish Central Consistory of Belgium. Also in attendance were former deportees and many Belgian young people.

On May 7, Prime Minister Verhofstadt, accompanied by about 250 invited guests—including leaders of the Jewish community—inaugurated the refurbished Belgian pavilion in Auschwitz. The pavilion, originally opened in 1978, told the story of the more than 25,000 Jews and Gypsies deported from Belgium to Auschwitz. The prime minister, in his remarks, apologized for his country's "share of responsibility" for the Holocaust,
and pledged, “in the name of tolerance we will never again tolerate the intolerant.”

There was another commemoration the next day, May 8, marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Belgium. After a ceremony at the Monument to the Unknown Belgian Soldier, the presidents of the two houses of the Belgian Parliament received 300 war veterans, former POWs, concentration-camp survivors, and another 300 young people, in the presence of the king. One well-known participant, 91-year-old Baron Arthur Haulot—poet, fervent human rights activist, and former deportee—had to be hospitalized the next day, and passed away on May 24. In connection with the anniversary of the liberation, the Belgian Senate sponsored a three-day series of public discussions about citizenship in the modern world, and adopted a resolution on May 19 commemorating the Holocaust and condemning anti-Semitism and racism.

Some 30 teachers from both the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities spent a week at Israel’s Yad Vashem memorial museum in April for a training course in teaching about the Holocaust. The trip was financed by the Belgium Foreign Ministry and organized with the help of Yad Vashem’s Belgian affiliate.

A new encyclopedia containing factual details about Belgian nationals honored with the title Righteous Among the Gentiles was released by Yad Vashem on September 27. The occasion was marked by a ceremony at Yad Vashem attended by many survivors. Among the speakers were the Belgian ambassador to Israel, the chief historian of Yad Vashem, and the president of the Association of Israelis of Belgian Origin. The volume contained 610 rescue stories about 1,172 Belgians who risked their lives to help Jews during the Holocaust.

On November 15, the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research responded favorably to Belgium’s application and designated Belgium a full member. Foreign Minister De Gucht expressed gratification that his country was “taking one more step toward ensuring that the memory of the Holocaust is upheld.”

In 2003, the government had given the Center for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society the task of conducting a thorough investigation of “the facts and possible responsibilities of the Belgian authorities in the persecution and deportation of the Jews of Belgium during the Second World War.” On December 13, 2005, the center presented a preliminary report of its work, available on-line at www.cegesoma.be. The final report was expected in summer 2006.
The major Holocaust museum in Belgium was the Museum of Deportation and Resistance, located in Mechelen/Malines. Besides maintaining its regular collection of materials documenting the fate of Belgian Jews during World War II, the museum also conducted a number of special events during the year. Particularly noteworthy were programs for young people who were brought by their schools to the museum to learn about the Holocaust.

On November 23, Nathan Ramet, president of the museum, was given an honorary doctorate by the Dutch-speaking Brussels Free University (VUB). This followed another honorary VUB doctorate, given the week before, to Robert Maistriau, the sole survivor of a group that stopped the 20th train that set off for Auschwitz in 1943, thereby enabling several dozen Jewish prisoners to escape. As a member of the Resistance, Maistriau spent time in Nazi concentration camps.

JEWSH COMMUNITY

Communal Affairs

There were about 35,000 Jews in Belgium. The Jewish Central Consistory of Belgium was the officially recognized body representing the Jewish community, acting for it in contacts with the federal and regional governments, foreign Jewish communities, and other religious and ethnic groups. With the "defederalization" of religious matters in Belgium, the Consistory was in the process of revising its structure so that it might advocate Jewish interests effectively in the Brussels and Walloon regional parliaments.

The Consistory played a central role in all Belgian Holocaust commemorations, addressed manifestations of anti-Semitism, and was the Jewish interlocutor in multicultural matters. Its president, Julien Klener, spoke at the conference of IJCIC (International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations) in New York at the end of February; at the November 23 event commemorating the 50th anniversary of Nostra Aetate sponsored by the World Jewish Congress, the Israeli embassy in Brussels, and the Consistory; at the annual meeting of Orthodox Jewry in Jerusalem; and at European Jewish meetings in Paris, Salonika, Novalja (Croatia), Basel, and Houffalize (Belgium).

One problem that particularly concerned the Consistory in 2005 was a possible threat to kosher slaughter, as the Belgian Senate conducted
hearings on whether to require the stunning of animals prior to slaughter, a procedure that could render the animal unkosher. The Consistory made known to the Senate its opposition to stunning. The year ended with no action taken on the matter.

The CCOJB (Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations in Belgium), headed by Brussels attorney Philippe Markiewicz, was the umbrella body for 40 Jewish organizations, primarily in the French-speaking part of the country. Like the Consistory, it fought anti-Semitism and maintained contacts with the relevant government authorities as well as with Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim organizations. Several of the CCOJB leaders were important figures in the Fondation du Judaïsme Belge (Belgian Jewish Fund), which supported Jewish charities and cultural institutions in the country.

A similar role was played in the Antwerp area by the Forum der Joodse Organisaties (Forum of Jewish Organizations), which elected a new president, Ruth (Kouky) Frohmann-Gartner, in 2005. The Forum was particularly involved in Holocaust commemorations and the battle against anti-Semitism, winning two lawsuits and filing five more complaints against anti-Semites, in cooperation with the country’s Center for Equal Opportunity, and kept close track of the debates in the Belgian Senate about the responsibility of local Belgian authorities for the Nazi deportation of the Jews during World War II. The Forum also participated in the Belgian Jewish Fund. In 2005, the Forum created a committee to work toward the establishment of a new museum in Antwerp to be called MAS (Museum at the Stream), which would highlight the role of Jews through the centuries.

Coordinating social welfare services in the Jewish community was the Brussels-based Centrale d’Oeveures sociales juives (Central Administration of Jewish Welfare Organizations), which funded affiliated institutions for the needy. The task remained difficult, as economic conditions did not improve during the year and the number of applications for assistance rose. The primary recipient of its funding was Jewish Social Service, which provided educational, health, and psychological assistance as well as social programs for people in need of all ages. The Centrale also published a highly regarded quarterly, Centrale, which concentrated on matters of Jewish interest, including little-known historical facts relating to the Jewish experience in Belgium and elsewhere.

A leading pro-Israel group was the Center for Information and Documentation (CID), which sent out about ten e-mail bulletins per week containing news about Israel to more than 1,000 subscribers free of
charge, ran a Web site dealing with democracy in the Middle East, www.cid-online.be, and broadcast twice weekly on Radio Judaïca, the community’s radio station. CID’s Documentation Center included a library of written material and films as well as archives, all open for research, and regularly hosted exhibitions and lectures. Other active pro-Israel bodies were the Belgium-Luxembourg section of the Women’s International Zionist Organization and the Ben-Gurion Circle, both of which sponsored Israel-oriented activities and at the same time provided social programs for their members.

Another key organization was the Jewish Secular Community Center of Belgium (CCLJ), which promoted a humanistic rather than a theistic understanding of the Jewish experience. It organized trips and hosted conferences and lectures, including one by Claude Moniquet in June on “Jihad and Islamism in Belgium” that showed how Belgium had become a hub of international Islamist terrorism, and another in November, attended by a large audience that included a number of dignitaries, titled “Already Ten Years since Yitzhak Rabin Was Assassinated!”

The Union of Jewish Progressives of Belgium (UPJB) was a relatively small group that dissented from the communal mainstream in espousing a left-wing political orientation and expressing criticism of many Israeli policies. It organized conferences, lectures, and film showings, and published a monthly, Points Critiques.

Education

There were three Jewish schools in Brussels. The largest, Ganenou Atheneum, was a Zionist primary and secondary school, and while officially Orthodox, most of the students came from nonobservant backgrounds. All told, it had close to 800 students from about 450 families. Maimonides Atheneum was an Orthodox institution that served all ages, from infant day care through the end of high school. Beth Aviv consisted of a kindergarten and primary school, and had a very liberal orientation. Maimonides did not accept the children of mixed marriages or those having a parent who was converted to Judaism by a non-Orthodox rabbi. Beth Aviv accepted children from families in which the father alone was Jewish, but Ganenou would only do so if the child underwent a conversion. All three schools were officially recognized by the state, and Ganenou was recognized by Israel’s Education Ministry.

The educational situation in Antwerp, with its large Orthodox population, was quite different. Fully 90 percent of Jewish children went to
Jewish schools. Antwerp had two large schools. Tachkemoni, with about 800 pupils, operated under the aegis of the Shomre Hadass community and was known for its high level of Hebrew language study that enabled graduates to handle the work at Israeli institutions of higher education. Yesode HaTorah, which belonged to a stricter Orthodox community, Machsike Hadass, had separate sections for boys and girls. There was also a smaller school, Yavne. All three were recognized by the state. In addition, each of the many Hasidic communities ran its own small private school not accredited by the government, some of which dispensed religious education only.

Adult Jewish education was provided by the Jewish Studies Institute, which operated as part of Brussels Free University. Among the areas of study it offered in 2005 were Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish language and civilization, Yiddish, Jewish history, contemporary Israel, Talmudic thought, Jewish philosophy, and the literature of the Holocaust. The Institute hosted a lecture marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of Albert Einstein. It also put together an exhibition on Jewish life in Arlon, Belgium’s oldest Jewish community, and published the fourth volume of a series of books on the subject.

**Interreligious Relations**

The Christian-Jewish Consultation Body in Belgium (OCJB) was the primary organization that dealt with Jewish-Christian relations. The theme of its May 18 meeting was the painful topic of the baptism of Jewish children during World War II, a subject that became particularly controversial with the opening of some Vatican archives touching on it. Professor Dan Michman produced a publication on this subject, and the Catholic Church’s Kerknet on-line media network devoted considerable space to the issue. At its November 16 meeting, the OCJB condemned Iranian president Ahmadinejad’s statement urging that Israel be wiped off the map.

On August 29, Msgr. Jozef de Kesel, auxiliary bishop of Brussels, visited the Jewish Museum of Belgium to see the exhibition on 175 years of Belgian Judaism. He was given a warm welcome, and proceeded to discuss the significance of the exhibition with museum officials. He went from there to visit the main synagogue in Brussels, in rue de la Régence.

Two important interreligious conferences were held in the fall. On September 30, the Church’s National Commission for Relations with the Jewish World, the Institutum Iudaicum, and the Theological School of
Leuven held a colloquium in Leuven on the future of Jewish-Christian dialogue. And on October 10, a conference-debate on "Justice and Religions" was held in Charleroi at the initiative of the Interreligious Meetings and Actions Group (GRAIR).

On November 13, the Central Consistory of Belgium awarded a medal of recognition and distinction to Pierre Kieffer in a ceremony held in the beautiful synagogue of Arlon, the oldest in Belgium. Kieffer was president of the Arlon Jewish-Christian Friendship Association, which he founded in 1964. It was the first, and remains the only, such association in Belgium. He was also a member of the Catholic National Commission for Relations with the Jewish World.

A ceremony marking the 40th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's declaration Nostra Aetate, which condemned anti-Semitism and stated that the Jewish people was not collectively guilty of the death of Jesus, was held at the Brussels Fine Arts Center on November 23. The event was arranged by the European Jewish Congress with the help of the Israeli embassy, the Consistory, and CCOJB.

A multicultural concert the next day, November 24, called "Se connaître pour se respecter" (Knowing each other to respect each other) was organized by École Nôtre-Dame de la Paix, a Catholic school in Brussels, to give the three major religions an opportunity to celebrate the end of Ramadan, Hanukkah, and Christmas together.

An association called Informatique et Bible, founded by Maredsous Abbey in 1980, celebrated its first quarter-century in 2005. Through the application of data-processing software and painstaking work, it computerized the Bible's index and then established a multilingual concordance of the Bible. The Hebrew, Greek, and Latin texts were encoded, as were several important translations into modern languages.

Culture

The Jewish Museum of Belgium continued its programs for primary and secondary schools, higher-education institutions, and families. These included guided and interactive tours, workshops, lectures, and walks about Brussels neighborhoods of Jewish interest. Four specialized libraries with total holdings of close to 25,000 publications were open to the public: one of Yiddish material, another of general and reference works, a third dealing with art and Jewish artists, and the fourth about Judaism in Belgium. Certain other collections were, for the time being, open only to qualified researchers.
June 23 was the opening date of the exhibition "175 Years of Jewish Life in Belgium," scheduled to run through September 2006. It offered a chronological perspective on Judaism in Belgium from 1830 to the present. Visitors were invited to stroll through the museum following an itinerary marked by various highlights, each of them linked to a specific theme, and illustrated by Judaica, Hebraica, textiles, paintings, sculptures, engravings, archival materials, old books, photographs, and posters. The subject of the Holocaust was also included.

A group of young volunteers from Germany, Poland, Ukraine, and other countries spent the first week of July, despite awful weather, at Arlon's Jewish cemetery with two of the museum staff members, Philippe Pierret, a specialist in funerary epigraphy, and Olivier Hottois, an archaeologist, to learn about inventory and restoration techniques. They then set about cleaning some 100 tombstones—even managing to restore 40 of them—putting them back in place and encoding them in a digital database.

Fifty-eight directors and curators of Jewish museums from Europe, the U.S., and Israel met in Brussels on November 12–15 under the aegis of the European Association of Jewish Museums (AEJM), of which Daniel Dratwa, curator of Jewish Museum of Belgium, was president. On November 15, a dinner reception was held to pay tribute to 100 of the museum's most generous donors. Professor Georges Schnek, acting on behalf of the board of directors, gave these honored guests the first "privileged member" cards designed for the museum by the well-known Belgian graphic artist Gille Fiszman.

The Contemporary Memory Foundation, created in 1994 to make the Jewish contributions to twentieth-century Belgium better known, continued to conduct research, assemble and inventory documents, host visitors, and produce articles and reports, including the sixth issue of its journal, Cahiers de la Fondation. Among the research projects underway were a study on Jewish schooling during World War II that was nearing completion, another on illegal immigration to Palestine from Belgium after the war, and a third to create an inventory of places of memory linked to the history and heritage of Belgium's Jewish communities, such as commemorative plaques, monuments, prayer houses, and burial grounds. The Foundation also established collaborative links with other institutions dedicated to contemporary history.

The Institute of Jewish Audiovisual Memory (IMAJ) began to emerge from its budgetary problems with a broad spectrum of activities centered on its primary mission, education through films with Jewish themes. On
April 6 it began broadcasting a weekly half-hour program on Radio Judaica in the hope of raising its profile in the Jewish community and spreading the multifaceted image of Judaism that is portrayed in film.

September 4 was European Jewish Culture Day in Belgium and across all of Europe. Fewer Belgian institutions participated in 2005 than previously, but visits to the Jewish Museum of Belgium and to the main synagogue proved very popular, as was a tour of Jewish Brussels led by a guide well versed in the history of the neighborhoods where Jewish life had flourished.

Georges Schnek
The Netherlands

National Affairs

Immigration and Demography

The national birthrate continued to decline, and toughened naturalization procedures brought a drop in immigration. At the same time, emigration was on the rise: in the first nine months of 2005 nearly 89,000 people left the country, 4,000 more than in the same period of 2004. Even so, the Netherlands remained densely populated, with well over 16.3 million inhabitants living within a mere 13,000 square miles. The high number of non-Western immigrants was still a cause for concern, since their birthrates were higher than the national average and many did not seem to integrate well into Dutch society. These immigrants and their children numbered about 3.1 million in 2005, or 19 percent of the total population. Those figures were projected to increase to 5.3 million and 30 percent by 2050.

On February 4, Rita Verdonk, minister of immigration and integration, unveiled a new examination that would-be immigrants would have to complete and pass in their countries of origin as a condition of entry. It included some questions generally seen as silly, such as “does a car have two or four wheels”; others that many Dutch natives found irrelevant and obscure; and yet others that seemed designed to scare off immigrants, such as “is it legal to sunbathe topless on Dutch beaches.” While this apparent confirmation of the image of the Netherlands as a permissive society and a threat to Islamic values could conceivably deter Muslims from coming, it might also feed the flame of radicalization for those already living in the country.

Politics and Society

The news media in 2005 were mostly dominated by foreign events. On January 5, the Netherlands joined other European countries in a three-minute period of silence in memory of the tsunami victims, and an appeal for donations raised over 110 million euros in Holland. Other high-impact international events were the earthquake in Pakistan and India, the elections in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, and, of course, the Israeli
pullout from Gaza. Rioting Muslims in nearby France as well as the terror attacks in London were widely covered. They caused the Dutch public to regard their Muslim neighbors with apprehension, further complicating the debate over their integration.

On July 27, Islamic fundamentalist Mohammed Bouyeri was jailed for life for murdering filmmaker Theo van Gogh on November 2, 2004 (see AJYB 2005, p. 364). Any lesser sentence would have been socially unacceptable. Van Gogh’s murder, for attacking Islam in newspaper columns and in his provocative film Submission-I, caused widespread panic in the country, reinforcing the feeling that Dutch politicians had mishandled the integration of the country’s non-Western immigrants.

Immigration policies were strictly enforced. Visa applications were processed quickly, and those people turned down were immediately sent to detention centers and then expelled. On the night of September 26–27, a fire broke out in a detention center at Schiphol Airport, and 11 people, most of them awaiting expulsion, died in their cells. This tragedy did not lead to any change in policy.

Still jittery after two recent politically motivated murders (the first victim was right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002), the population did not have much confidence in the country’s leaders. A scandal early in 2005 made things worse. Ruud Lubbers, a former cabinet minister, resigned from his position as UN high commissioner for refugees in February, after a confidential UN report accused him of a pattern of sexual intimidation and abuse of power.

In June, 62 percent of the Dutch voted “no,” defeating a referendum for the adoption of a European constitution. Clearly, Dutch public opinion was wary of further steps toward the integration of Europe. The Dutch rebuff, and, more significantly, that of the French (see above, pp. 335–36), set off something of a crisis for the European Union.

Nationally, the government headed by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, a Christian Democrat, remained firmly in the saddle. The resignation of Minister for Administrative Reform Thom de Graaf of the left-leaning party D66, after his plan for the direct election of mayors was rejected, did not rock the coalition boat. De Graaf’s party, the smallest in the coalition, simply replaced him with someone else.

Dutch relations with Israel remained much as before, with left-wing elements severely criticizing the policies of the Jewish state, and devout Christians maintaining their traditional special relationship with it. Foreign Minister Bernard Bot came in for only mild criticism after meeting with Hamas representatives. Some of the more right-wing, anti-
immigrant politicians expressed considerable friendship for Israel. In September, the most popular of these, Geert Wilders, suggested that the Dutch embassy be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which Israel considered its capital. Such views had little public support. In November, for the first time in four years, a small Dutch trade mission left for Israel.

**Anti-Semitism and Extremism**

In August, CIDI (Center of Information and Documentation on Israel), the nongovernmental organization that monitored racism and anti-Semitism, published statistics for 2004 and the first five months of 2005. In 2004 there were 326 reported incidents, a slight decline from the 334 reported in 2003, and the early 2005 data seemed to confirm this trend. The CIDI findings were supported by anecdotal evidence in the community that the problem was not quite as serious as before. The sharp rise of incidents in 2002 and the gradual decrease in 2004 and 2005 seemed to confirm the theory—based largely on the fact that most perpetrators were Muslim immigrants—that the number of anti-Semitic incidents was related to the level of violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

As in previous years, CIDI pointed out that all too often the police either declined to investigate or did so inadequately, and local courts were reluctant to prosecute. Such laxity led to the widespread feeling that going to the authorities was useless, and thus an unknown number of anti-Semitic incidents probably remained unreported.

One thing the CIDI statistics did not show was the buildup of pressure upon particular individuals or families, since repeated acts against them were counted as one single incident. In Amsterdam, the year began with continuing reports about a Jewish family that had been forced out of its home in the Diamantbuurt because of harassment from Moroccan youngsters in December 2004. It ended with reports about persistent harassment of another Jewish family in the same neighborhood: New Year's Eve festivities there included pushing fireworks through the family mailbox. The atmosphere became so explosive that Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen called for emergency talks with the chairs of all the city's 14 districts—but stressed that he wanted to minimize the media coverage. Racism in schools was a serious problem, as evidenced by the instances recounted in the CIDI report. Particularly in the Amsterdam schools, group tensions were exacerbated by the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004. And of all forms of such extremism in the schools, anti-Semitism was the single most prevalent category.
A potent source of anti-Semitic propaganda was the Muslim world, from which anti-Western and anti-Semitic broadcasts and DVDs emanated. These were easily received and watched in the Netherlands by means of satellite dishes. Another source was the Internet. Complaints about racism on the Internet rose from around 1,200 in 2003 to some 1,800 in 2004. Once again, allegations of anti-Semitism constituted the single largest category of such complaints.

There were many conferences and educational programs during the year to combat racism. Most of these addressed Muslim-Dutch relations in general, but some had a specific Jewish focus. CIDI started a yearlong series of programs on January 26 with a public debate on “race hatred in schools.” Also in January, the JMW (Jewish Organization for Social Work) sponsored a conference on how to deal with anti-Semitism, and in the course of the year ran workshops on this theme.

Another approach to combating anti-Semitism was thought to be Holocaust education. In January, a Dutch television station commissioned research on what Dutch young adults, aged 13 to 35, knew about World War II. While 80 percent of the respondents said that knowledge of that era was “very important,” about one in five did not know what Auschwitz was and had no idea how many Jews were murdered. The decision to do the survey came after newspapers printed photos of British crown prince Harry dressed up as a Nazi for a fancy-dress ball.

On New Year's Day, the popular Amsterdam-based soccer team Ajax launched a campaign to “lose its Jewish image.” Whenever Ajax played, its fans brandished Jewish symbols or Israeli flags, and fans of opposing teams chanted anti-Semitic slogans, which is why the club wanted to shed the Jewish identification. But nothing changed, and at the end of 2005 the slogans were continuing as usual. The image of Ajax as “Jewish” had been set years before, even though the team had had, at most, one Jewish player at any given time. The team's only current Jewish player, Daniel de Ridder, was the subject of many rumors of a transfer to another club, but he stayed with Ajax.

Holocaust-Related Matters

Many events commemorated 60 years since the end of World War II, particularly the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 1945. Prime Minister Balkenende flew to Auschwitz for the day together with Dutch survivors. The yearly Auschwitz memorial in Amster-
dam on January 30 drew 3,000 visitors, twice as many as in 2004. On April 12, 3,000 people, including 168 survivors, Princess Margriet, many ambassadors, and Israeli interior minister Ophir Pines-Paz attended the 60th anniversary commemoration of the Canadian army’s liberation of Westerbork, the camp from which Dutch Jews were deported to Auschwitz.

In a particularly moving ceremony, all 102,000 names of Jews with Dutch nationality murdered in the Shoah were read aloud. The reading, performed nonstop, day and night, by survivors and prominent Jews, took a total of five days, three in Amsterdam—just the names of victims from that city were read—and two more days in Westerbork, the camp from which Dutch Jews were deported, for victims from the rest of the country, culminating on January 27, Auschwitz liberation day. The readings were also broadcast on the Internet; whole families got up in the middle of the night to listen to “their” names.

In May, the “digital monument” for Dutch Jews who perished in the Shoah went on-line. Not yet complete, this was expected eventually to provide biographical information about all the Dutch victims. The project was funded by restitution money and carried out by a retired history professor, Ies Lipschits, and a young colleague, Karin Hofmeester, who worked on it for five years. After the site, http://www.joodsmonument.nl, went up, the two were flooded with corrections and additional data provided by Dutch Jews. On August 19–22, hundreds of child survivors, together with their children and grandchildren, came from all over the world to Amsterdam for a meeting with the theme, “Still Going Strong, 1945–2005.”

Possibly because of the publicity surrounding the “60 years after Auschwitz” anniversary, a good number of people came forward to announce that they had personal possessions, such as papers, pictures, and diaries, that had belonged to Holocaust victims, and that they now wanted to restore them to survivors or their heirs. Some located the families of these victims through advertisements in the Nieuw Israelitsche Weekblad, the Dutch Jewish weekly, and family members came into possession of photos of relatives they had never known.

Two legal claims were made on funds belonging to so-called “sleeping” organizations that had existed for the care and guardianship of Jewish orphans. These had been founded well before the war as charity institutions. After the war these groups resumed their work as guardians of some 2,000 Jewish children orphaned by the Shoah. When these orphans came
of age, the institutions ceased their activities. JMW, the Jewish Organization for Social Work, took over management of their remaining capital and, as their successor, was granted the use of the interest for its own work.

In the first court case, the brothers Staal, who had lost both parents in the Holocaust, sued the JMW, claiming that their inheritance had not been properly administered by the defunct institutions for orphans and not handed over completely to them when they came of age. The two demanded restitution from the JMW. But the Amsterdam judge ruled that their claim had insufficient proof.

The second case was set off by the JMW’s move to secure a full merger with the defunct orphanages and add their funds to its own capital. Fifteen Jewish organizations—including the national umbrella organization of the Orthodox communities, the Jewish Community of Amsterdam, and most of the youth organizations—sought to block the merger on the grounds that they, and not the JMW, were the true successors of those institutions, and therefore had a right to their capital. Again, the judge decided against them, ruling that only named creditors could block the merger. Both cases continued to make news as the losing side in each appealed, but the two verdicts were upheld in August.

Meanwhile, in April, other Dutch wartime orphans now living in Israel made claims similar to those of the Staal brothers, and some said that the money of the defunct organizations should be divided among them. They wanted an investigation into the handling of their affairs by their former guardians, a Dutch institution and the Jewish orphanages. These Israeli claims were triggered by the publication of Elma Verhey’s study, *Child van de Rekening: Het rechtsherstel van Joodse oorlogswezen* (literally, “Child of the Reckoning: The Restitution to Jewish Wartime Orphans,” but the first part of the title was also a Dutch expression meaning “loser”). Verhey, a journalist who studied the archives of the defunct foundations for orphans, made serious accusations against the former guardians and, incidentally, the Dutch state as well for refusing to make special allowances for the orphans. Verhey claimed, among other things, that scores of orphans were “irresponsibly” sent to Israel in the 1950s, and part of their money used for the purchase of goods for Kibbutz Gevar Am in the Negev, where more than 40 of the orphans ended up. JMW, the successor organization, denied these claims and charged that Verhey had distorted the archival material. At year’s end, the JMW announced another, independent project of research into the archives.
JEWISH COMMUNITY

Demography

The latest demographic survey of Dutch Jews, conducted in 2001, found approximately 44,000 people, which would constitute only 0.275 percent of the total Dutch population of 16.3 million in 2005. If anything, the size of the Jewish community decreased since 2001 due to a low birthrate and the virtual absence of immigration. Young Jews tended to postpone marriage longer than the rest of the population, and more Jewish women than Dutch women remained childless. Jews, historically "the" minority group in the Netherlands, were now almost negligible in comparison to the much more numerous Muslim minority, and therefore often overlooked.

Communal Affairs

After four months of negotiations between delegates elected by the members, the Jewish Community of Amsterdam appointed a new board in July.

A new Jewish community was founded on April 4, Beit HaChidush, an independent synagogue in Amsterdam that identified with the Reconstructionist movement in the U.S. and had a more lenient membership policy than any other Dutch Jewish community. Services were held once every two weeks in space rented from the tenant of the building that used to be the Uilenburger Synagogue. Plans to reclaim the building outright for Jewish use were thwarted because the tenant was "unable to find suitable alternative premises." On May 1 the congregation appointed Holland's first female rabbi, German-born Elisa Klapheck. Up to this point neither Orthodox nor Reform synagogues had appointed a female rabbi, though several women had been admitted to the new Reform yeshiva that had opened some years earlier, in the expectation that they would serve as rabbis once they finished their studies. In August, the new community— whose rabbi was hit by a smoke-bomb during the Jerusalem Gay Pride Parade—organized a "Queer Shabbaton."

In September, the young Masorti (Conservative) movement organized a conference to publicize its existence and attract new members. Around 60 people attended. Founded in 2003, it consisted of one single community, in Almere. Plans to establish another Masorti congregation, in Amsterdam, remained on hold due to a lack of funds.
The economic recession put the country’s Jewish day schools in dire financial straits. The Dutch government funded the secular part of the curriculum, but the Jewish studies component had to be paid for through “voluntary” contributions by the parents, which, in some cases, amounted to one-and-a-half-months’ salary. Families with many children found themselves in particular difficulty. While scholarships were available, many parents were reluctant to admit to having financial problems or to make their bank statements available to school authorities, who insisted on seeing them before deciding on whether to grant a discount. In some cases, school boards turned down scholarship applications if a family had so much as spent money on a vacation, or held some modest savings.

On January 10, when pupils returned to the Jewish Day School Cheder, an Orthodox institution in Amsterdam, after the winter holidays, they were asked to produce a “green letter” indicating that their parents had paid the “voluntary” tuition. Without the letter, they were refused admission. When the news became public, Hans Vuijsje, manager of the JMW in Amsterdam, said it came as no surprise. He noted that the JMW had been handling a rising number of appeals from Jewish charities and individuals.

Several communal anniversaries were celebrated in 2005. WIZO, the women’s Zionist organization, marked its 85th year with a series of events in Amsterdam that were attended by some 2,500 people. Two centuries since the opening of the synagogue in Leeuwarden were celebrated, first in the Israeli town of Kfar Batya—a youth village that used Torah scrolls and furniture donated by the synagogue—and then in Leeuwarden, where a reunion of former members took place. CIDI, the Dutch organization that provided information about Israel and monitored anti-Semitism, marked its 30th anniversary in April.

Several institutions were in the process of renovating their facilities or moving to new locations. The synagogue on the Lekstraat in Amsterdam—built in 1937, the last to go up before the war—received funding from the city council to restore the structure to its original state even while the synagogue remained in use. Some members of the congregation objected, as the resulting space would be smaller than at present. In June, ambitious plans were announced for a new synagogue in Amstelveen, to replace the current building on the Straat van Messina. The Reform community in Amsterdam sold its synagogue building and prepared to build a new one nearly twice the size and costing 9 million euros, 8 million of which would be financed out of restitution moneys. The new building was
due to be completed in 2007. And the Jewish primary school Rosj Pina in Amsterdam celebrated the opening of a large new building, replacing the old one that had to be demolished when asbestos was found in the ceilings in 1997.

Throughout 2005, inhabitants of many towns continued to work toward the restoration of old synagogue buildings that had fallen into disuse after World War II; most were to be turned into museums or memorials for Jews murdered during the Shoah. On January 19, the original cornerstone of the former synagogue on the Turfkade in Brielle was put back into its walls by the chairman of the Save the Former Synagogue Brielle Foundation and the royal commissioner of Zuid-Holland. The stone, originally placed there in 1871, had been hacked from the wall by the Germans in 1942 and discarded in a dump; it was found by a farmer plowing his field in 1950. The renovation of the building, partly undertaken by a team of Israeli and Palestinian youngsters, was finished in September. Other synagogues to be restored included those in Haaksbergen. The restoration of the former synagogue and mikveh (ritual bath) in Borculo was postponed for lack of funds. A number of Jewish cemeteries were restored, including those in Den Ham, Almelo, Hoogezeand-Sappemeer, and Leek.

The Jewish community organized several sports events, including the Maccabi tennis tournament and Jom Havoetbal, an annual soccer festival. The latter, the only event to unite Jews across the religious and ideological spectrum, drew over 2,200 visitors and 59 teams from five European countries. In July, a 140-strong Dutch delegation took part in the 17th Maccabiah Games in Israel. Four years earlier the organization was much criticized for canceling the Dutch trip to Israel “for safety reasons.” In 2005, the Dutch delegation was the only one to see an athlete leave because of a terrorist attack. The other 139 members returned after the games with four gold medals, two of which were for the male and female hockey teams.

Jewish cultural events included a Jewish Discovery Day in Amsterdam, organized by Aish International and attended by some 400 visitors; many performances by visiting Israeli dance groups and by Galili Dance, a troupe based in the Dutch city of Groningen; a Jewish singles weekend in November; Jewish film festivals in Hilversum, Apeldoorn, and Amsterdam; and Jewish music festivals in Amsterdam and Enschede. A concert by the Hasidic American reggae star Matisyahu drew a full house in one of Amsterdam’s “pop music temples” on December 2.
Publications

Numerous books about the Holocaust in Holland were published on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Among them were Achttien adressen (Eighteen Addresses) by politician Ed van Thijn, about his time as a hidden child during the war; Saving the Children: History of the Organized Effort to Rescue Jewish Children in the Netherlands, 1942–1945 by Bert Jan Flim, published both in the Netherlands and the U.S.; and Rechtvaardigen onder de Volkeren (Encyclopedia of the Righteous Among the Nations), which listed the Dutch men and women honored by Yad Vashem for saving Jews.

Works of fiction included Mister Monday and Other Tales of Jewish Amsterdam by Meyer Sluyser, a collection of entertaining and nostalgic tales, translated into English by the author’s son, Mels Sluyser. Ischa, verhalen van verwanten, vrienden en vrouwen (Ischa, Stories from Relations, Friends and Women) by Gijs Groenteman was a collection of stories about the controversial author and performer Ischa Meijer, marking the 50th anniversary of his death on February 14, 1995. De kern van de zaak—Feiten en Achtergronden van het Arabisch-Israelisch Conflict (The Crux of the Matter—Facts and Background of the Arab-Israeli Conflict) by Wim Kortenhoeven, provided 500 pages of information. Dr. Stefan van der Poel’s Joodse Stadjers, de joodse gemeenschap in de stad Groningen (Jewish City People, the Jewish Community in the City of Groningen) included many anecdotes, some critical and others amusing.

Personalia

In the yearly round of royal honors, the following persons received medals: Charlotte Cohen-Stad of Sherman Oaks, California; Willy Brill of Amsterdam; A.M. Struick van Bemmelen; Walter Wijnberg of Voorschoten; Donald de Leeuw of Borne; Jo de Leeuw of Delden; G. Goodeketting of Amsterdam; M. Honig-Winter of Eindhoven; and Riet de Leeuw van Weenen-van der Hoek of Zuidland.

Other awards: journalist Kustaw Bessems, the prestigious Golden Pen Award for a series on Muslims in the Netherlands; Rolf Nihon, the Medal of the City The Hague for his book Slotakkoord der kinderjaren, containing memories of the Jewish high school in that city during World War II; Prof. Hans Jansen, the Israel Award from the Dutch Zionist Organization for his publication on schools in the Palestinian territories; Rabbi
David Lillienthal, named honorary member of Arza, the Reform Zionist organization in Holland; Henny van het Hoofd, director of education for the Orthodox umbrella organization NIK, the Max Fisher Award, presented in Jerusalem, for her Jewish educational work in the Netherlands; author Marga Minco, the Constantijn Huygens Award; poet Nachoem M. Wijnberg, the Jan Campert Award; Dick Houwaart, the Culture Award of the Prince Bernhard Foundation Overijssel; and Carry van Kakerveld, vice-chair of the International Auschwitz Committee, a medal awarded by the Republic of Poland.

Rabbi Arye Ralbag of New York was appointed part-time chief rabbi of Amsterdam. Henri Markens, former chair of the Jewish Community of Amsterdam, resigned his post as head of the Maimonides Jewish High School and was succeeded by Moshe Godschalk. Rabbi Menachem Sebag succeeded Rabbi Wim (Ze’ev) van Dijk as army chaplain. Rabbi Eliezer Wolff of Marseilles took over kashrut supervision for the Jewish Community of Amsterdam from Rabbi F. Lewis, who left for Manchester after years of duty in Amsterdam. Harry van den Bergh was named chairman of the board of JMW. Babette Labeij was appointed conductor of Kinderen voor Kinderen, Holland’s best-known children’s choir. Anneke Mouthaan, who had initiated the controversial organization AnFewish Voice, which criticized Israeli policies toward the Palestinians (see AJYB 2001, p. 344), ceased her activities.

In August, one of the Dutch daily newspapers revealed that the real name of the well-known Dutch author Carl Friedman was actually Carolina Klop, a non-Jewish woman. Klop, best known, under the Friedman pseudonym, for the novel Twee koffert vol—translated into many languages and filmed as Left Luggage—wrote a column in one of the national weeklies that was sometimes decidedly anti-Jewish, but that escaped criticism because of the supposed Jewish identity of the author.

Prominent Jews who died in 2005 included Sal van Wesel, 87, former chairman of the Liberal Jewish Community of Amsterdam; Mortiz (Moor) de Marcas, 86, former longtime treasurer of Hachsjarah & Aljah; Dr. Lou de Jong, official historian of the Netherlands during the Holocaust; the actress Emmy Lopes Dias, 85; Mathijs Alexander Manne Ornstein, 72, former member of the City Council of Utrecht; Frouk Levine-de Lange, 88, chairwoman of WIZO Groningen and valued member of the Groningen Jewish community; Philip Izak de Leeuwe, 85, former vice chairman and longtime leader of services of the Jewish Community of Enschede; Motke Hanuka, 73, owner of the legendary
café Jerusalem of Gold and pioneer of Israeli entertainment in Amsterdam; Michail Stern, 86, who left the Soviet Union for the Netherlands after eight years as a refusenik sentenced to hard labor; photographer and journalist Philip Mechanicus, 68; and former army chaplain Michel Nager, 68, so highly esteemed that over 1,000 people came to his shivah to pay their respects.

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