Summary

‘A remark made by an anonymous commentator, found in a radical newspaper published in the city of Groningen in 1796, triggered the start of a research programme into the settlement of Jews in this city. This gentleman wrote ‘that the policy of the municipal authorities during the ancien régime with regard to admitting Jews into this city, had been based on both tolerance and expediency.’ His statement in turn triggered the question whether this conclusion was correct or whether the city’s official policy had only served as window dressing to cover the general reluctance to accept Jews in its midst.

This book endeavours to demonstrate how the settlement of Jews, the establishment of a Kehilla, a Jewish Community, as well as the acceptance of the Jews by their fellow citizens actually had developed. With regard to this issue, the acceptance, the research has primarily been aimed at the attitude of the authorities.

The settlement of Jews in the Netherlands had indirectly resulted from the reconquista completed in 1492 and instituted by the Roman Catholic moarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, during which both the Moors and the Jews were been expelled from Spain. They were the descendents of these Jews who settled in Antwerp in the sixteenth century. Circa the year 1550 approximately 450 Spanish and Portugese merchants lived in this city, of which in all probability the majority was of Jewish descent. Many of them decided to leave Antwerp when the uprising of the Dutch against the Spanish ruler started.

The blockade of the river Schelde implemented in 1585 by the Northern Netherlands appeared to be disastrous for the seaport which, prior to the uprising, had been the most important European port. Portugese merchants who in the beginning had planned to stay, had decided to leave also. In spite of a permit issued to them by the States General, they decided not to settle in Amsterdam. The first official record of Portugese traders as a separate entity in Amsterdam dates back only to 1598.

At the end of the sixteenth century Amsterdam had become the most important commercial centre of the Netherlands, thus swapping places with Antwerp. Amsterdam had become one of the biggest cities in western Europe. The increase of its population was to a large extent due to the immigration of people who were either persecuted because of their religion or had left their hometowns to escape poverty.

Amsterdam had obtained a reputation of being a tolerant city. In 1616 the city council passed a law according to which members of the ‘Jewish Nation’ as they were called, could become regular citizens. In fact this is the only document from the first decades of the seventeenth century in which the rights and obligations of Jews in the Republic had been set down. Although these regulations officially only governed the rights and obligations of the Sephardic Jews, in the years to come they would also apply to their Ashkenazi brethren.

Jews had already settled in the district of Groningen during the second half of the sixteenth century, especially in the vicinity of Appingedam and Delfzijl. In 1563 the city council of Appingedam granted permission to establish a pawnshop to Joest Muesken, a former citizen of Linnich and Neuss in Germany. Muesken was born in Prague at the end of the fifteenth century. Most probably this gentleman was the father of Uri Halevi (Philip Joosten), originally from Embden. In the beginning of the seventeenth century Philip Joosten acted both as ritual slaughterer and mohel (performer of circumcisions) for the Sephardic community of Amsterdam.
In 1573 Simon Michaëls obtained permission to open a pawnshop in the city of Groningen. From the above and other examples it became clear that, contrary to the situation in the surrounding German lands, no general rules applied for the admittance of Jews to the district of Groningen. Within the framework of local regulations individual Jews received permission to settle down and earn a living. The absence of general rules regulating the settling of Jews in the district of Groningen was due to the following two reasons: in the first place very few Jews lived in this area, hence there was no ground to implement uniform regulations. Secondly, the region of Groningen did not constitute a territorial entity. A strong centralized authority did not exist. In 1594 the armies of Maurits and Willem Lodewijk van Nassau captured the city of Groningen. This event heralded the end of Spanish supremacy and the formation of the ‘District of City and County’ (Gewest van Stad en Lande). It also meant that from then on Protestantism was going to be the only official religion which would be permitted. This formation turned out to have very little bearing on the Jews: a uniform law on district level governing the settlement of Jews not come into being. Just like before 1594 per prepayment local authorities continued to grant certain civil and economical rights to individual Jews. The governors of the ruling Protestant church did not like this policy or lack of same at all. Starting in 1612 they urged the civil authorities of ‘City and County’ to ban the Jews from the territories over which they had jurisdiction. However, the Protestant governors remained unsuccessful and in 1679 they adopted the policy of trying to convert the Jews to Christianity. In this endeavour they failed.

In the seventeenth century the attitude of the municipal council of Groningen vis-à-vis religious minorities had been very intolerant. This attitude had changed however during the last three decades of this century. The number of Jews in the region under consideration increased as a result of this latter development. Although able to settle down, practicing their religion publicly was still forbidden. In the beginning of the eighteenth century a draw-back occurred: in 1710 Jews were expelled from the city and were made to understand that they would never be allowed to return. Official reason for this sudden change in attitude was that some members of this still small community were being accused of fencing stolen property. In fact the implementation of the law to expel the Jews was far less stringent than expected. Jews continued to dwell in the city and a few even acquired citizen rights.

In 1731 Groningen’s magistrate leased the city’s pawnshop to a Jew from Amsterdam by the name of Mozes Goldsmid (Mosche ben Yosef Stadthagen). The lease contract also stipulated explicitly that Goldsmid and his relatives would not only be at liberty to practise their religion, but they were also granted the privileges of acquiring certain citizen rights and of applying for membership with the guilds. The lease of the pawnshop and the associated privileges would prove to be of great importance for the development of the Kehilla, the Jewish community of the city of Groningen. As a result of this more liberal settlement policy the number of Jews increased from two families in 1730 to 54 individuals in 1735 and 90 in 1744. Within the Jewish community this strong increase triggered the need for stricter regulations which would serve as guidelines for the members of the Kehilla. To achieve this end two representatives of the community developed a set of regulations which were subsequently approved by the city’s magistrate. From this moment on the Jewish community formed not only de facto but also de jure an accepted part of society.

As of the mid-eighteenth century the city council’s attitude vis-à-vis the Jews with respect to settlement became significantly more tolerant than before. This was also demonstrated on the occasion of the initiation of the new synagogue which took place in 1756 in the presence of the entire municipal council. Meanwhile the number of Jews continued to increase. In 1754 at least
180 resided in the city. This strong increase took place simultaneously with the implementation of stricter regulations by both the city council and the leadership of the Jewish community.

It has to be said that not everyone was happy with the presence of Jews in the city. The guilds belonged to their fiercest opponents; they were mainly opposed to granting economic rights to the Jews. The guilds however were fighting a battle they could never win. During the last three decades of the eighteenth century, after initially having been given permission to become members of the merchant guild, also could become members of certain trade guilds. The latter organisations were however more succesful in an other field. Under pressure from the guilds, burgomasters and city council issued an edict stipulating the conditions to which Jews were subjected. Only those in possession of a ‘certificate of good conduct’ and able to prove that they were capable of earning their own keep, were eligible for permission to reside in the city. Aliens and wandering Jews recieved a permit for a maximum of two days only. This regulation was also adopted by the governors of ‘City and County’. Hence commencing in 1754 uniform rules applied for the entire province.

The separate position of the Jews in the city during the ancien régime was not only due to legal restrictions but also to social- and cultural differences between Jews and gentiles. In fact Jews constituted a separate ‘Nation’ with its own set of values and norms. The obligations dictated by their religion mainly determined Jewish daily life. Obeying these religious laws and passing on same to younger generations in turn dictated the need for a variety of institutions and functionaries. In addition to this, the presence of a large palet of such institutions and dignitaries both guided and facilitated Jewish daily life. As a result of the tolerant attitude of Groningen’s city council, the most important Jewish organisations could be found in the city 25 years after Mozes Goldsmid had received a license to settle back in 1731. Apart from a synagogue the community also owned a cemetery and a school. By 1756 it also employed the service of its own rabbi. In the years between 1756 and 1780 the Kehilla started to show an increasingly diversified picture. The internal integration of Jews had reached a high level. Many new organizations were added to those already in existence. These developments enhanced the possibilities for maintaining a Jewish identity and contributed to the cohesion within the community of which the members originated from various parts of Europe, each carrying his or her own tradition, background, and opinion about Judaism.

The tolerance of the magistrates did not apply to all Jews. Wandering Jews gradually became stigmatized and some of them even expelled. During the last three decades of the eighteenth century, though initially reluctant, the board of the Jewish community adopted with increasing conviction the magistrate’s policy regarding these wandering Jews. In 1774 this resulted in the parnassim taking over the city council’s duty of scrutinizing the credentials of newcomers.

The last 25 years of the eighteenth century can be considered a transition period to a more modern era. Influenced by the idea’s of the Enlightenment a thorough change took place. Most important was the French Revolution of 1789 with its ideals of Freedom, Equality and Fraternity. These ideals fell on fertile ground both within and outside the Jewish community. In the gentile world the latter became apparent in the greater possibilities for Jews to become members of the guilds and the municipal militia, to participate in public thanksgiving- and prayer gatherings, to take oaths on the county’s constitution by the kehilla’s rabbi and the the acquisition by the Jewish community of a status equal to that of its protestant counterparts as far as tax freedom was concerned.

Within the kehilla a number of developments related to the ideals of the Enlightenment took place. First of all, in 1776 the supremacy of the rabbi in matters of organization of the kehilla came to
an end. In addition to this the city’s kehilla started to become more influential on the province’s smaller communities. This trend eventually resulted in acknowledging the authority of the City of Groningen’s rabbi over other kehillot in the province. By doing so, future centralization was anticipated. Furthermore community members started to question the authority of both parnassim and rabbi in moral and religious issues. This tendency was of such a nature that the ‘Jewish Authorities’ more than once felt the need to mobilize the civil council’s assistance in order to maintain their authority.

At national level these developments culminated in 1796 in an decree passed in the National Assembly stating that from now on Jews were to enjoy the same rights and obligations as their fellow citizens. This in turn accelerated a process of emancipation, traces of which already became visible during the last quarter of the century. In the city of Groningen this ‘proto-emancipation’ was clearly demonstrated by the city’s policy to grant the same rights to both Jews and followers of other denominations.