This thesis documents the history of the city of Groningen’s Jewish community between 1796 and 1945, a period of enormous change. Many of these changes were induced by the opportunity and allure of integration into Dutch society. Pressures from within the Jewish community as well as from outside of it contributed to this phenomenon. At the same time, however, the Jewish community in Groningen also feared it might lose its traditional shape. This struggle, between integration on the one hand and protection of traditional Jewish identity on the other, forms the central theme of this study. National and/or international historical developments which influenced this struggle or dilemma will also be discussed in this context.

In September 1796 an Emancipation decree in the Netherlands entitled all Dutch Jews to ‘political emancipation’. By virtue of this decree all rules and regulations which had previously limited mobility and freedom were nullified. Jews in the Netherlands, for example, were now free to live wherever they wanted and could enter any profession.

From this date Jews were no longer treated as if they were members of a separate nation (the ‘Israelite nation’), but were instead regarded as Dutch citizens who were also members of a religious community, just as were their Catholic and Protestant compatriots. This new group of Dutch citizens was referred to as ‘Israelite Dutchmen’; the government chose to refrain from using the term ‘Jewish Dutchmen’ because the word ‘Jew’ had negative connotations at that time.

After the implementation of the Emancipation decree Jews struggled to achieve an equilibrium between two forces: further integration into Dutch society versus preservation of their own Jewish tradition. This balancing act often led to conflict within the Jewish community. In Groningen for example, a city with one of the largest Jewish communities in the Netherlands, these tensions led to a rift over choir singing in the synagogue.

Although the Emancipation decree of 1796 led to greater political equality for Dutch Jews, socio-economic and cultural differences between Jews and non-Jews remained long thereafter. For example, compared to the rest of the Dutch population a much greater percentage of Jews lived in...
poverty. And despite the newfound freedom to choose any profession, the choice of professions remained very one-sided; most Jews chose the traditional Jewish professions in the area of shopkeeping and trading.

Influenced by the ideals of the Enlightenment, Dutch Jews began to abandon many of their traditional customs. Their behavior became more sedate and more in line with what Dutch society considered to be ‘civilized behavior’. Their traditional language, Yiddish, was forbidden at both schools and synagogues alike and was replaced by Dutch. Synagogue services were modified to mirror Protestant worship; they became quieter and more dignified. Those who misbehaved, left their seats too early, caused trouble or were inappropriately dressed were expelled or fined. The rules were all scrupulously written down in the ‘Reglementen van godsdienstige en ceremonieele orde’ (‘Regulations of confessional and ceremonial order’). Just like their Protestant colleagues, dignitaries wore a black gown and beret, accentuated by a pair of white bands. In 1905 the Jewish community of Groningen even went so far as to ask a Protestant church architect, Tjeerd Kuipers, to design their new synagogue. Although Kuipers was well known for his church design, he had no previous experience in designing synagogues.

The integration process, however, was not seamless or as pervasive as it might appear. A portion of the Jewish community strongly resisted these changes from tradition. This resistance to change finally erupted in Groningen when the Jewish Council tried to introduce choral singing into Jewish worship. To the outsider this might seem like a minor modification; but to more traditional Jews this was a sacrilege they could not and would not tolerate. They decided it was time to establish their own Jewish community with their own temple which they called Teschuat Jisraël (‘The salvation of Israel’). Another institution, Etz Haim (‘Tree of Life’), originally established to study Talmud and other books of Jewish wisdom, tried in vain to stop the secular tide by modifying their lectures such that they might reach a larger and particularly younger audience. Other Jewish institutions such as the ‘jeugdsjoel’ (‘synagogue for the youth’) were founded with a similar aim: to keep the Jewish community together and strengthen its inner cohesion.

Another group of mostly secular Jews also started to have second thoughts about the wisdom of assimilation, but for a different reason. This group was strongly influenced by the emerging ideology of Zionism. These Zionists propagated ‘volkstrots’ (pride in the Jewish nation) instead of assimilation and preferred the term ‘Jew’ above that of ‘Israelite’. Although the Zionists in Groningen formed a relatively small minority of the Jewish population, they almost caused another rift within the Jewish community.

As previously stated, the quest for integration within the Dutch Jewish community was influenced by the Enlightenment and its philosophy about the equality of man and tolerance towards people of different beliefs.
Under French rule (1795-1813) these ideals were indirectly imposed in the form of political and administrative changes. These political and administrative changes ultimately undermined the autonomy of the Jewish community and the position of its leaders. Prior to 1796, Jews were more or less free to govern their own communities; they were able to make and enforce their own rules and regulations. Louis Napoleon forced Jewish communities to join the ‘Oppervoondering’, a central institution which presided over all Jewish communities in the country. This institution was the perfect instrument to stimulate and/or enforce social, economic and cultural integration of Dutch Jews on a national level.

More profound changes within the Jewish religion itself were instigated by the German-Jewish Haskalah, the enlightened circle around Moses Mendelssohn and his disciples. The Haskalah tried to find a balance between traditional Judaism and surrounding Christian culture. Some Haskalah ideas were further radicalized by nineteenth-century reformers who adapted these beliefs to better fit their Christian environment. This reform movement strove openly to modernize Judaism. For example, they rejected the idea that Jews were or should be a nation unto themselves; they also substituted the ideal of the coming of the messiah with the ideal of universal deliverance and the brotherhood of mankind.

These German ideas had some effect on Groningen’s Jews and led to changes in areas as diverse as education, choir singing and the design for a new synagogue. The reasons they were influenced by their German counterparts lie in the proximity of the German border, the close business contacts between the two countries and family ties. Most Groningen reformers were actually of German descent.

The integration process was also heavily influenced by non-Jewish society. Society seemed to demand Jewish assimilation as the price to be paid for having been granted political emancipation. In Groningen – as in the Netherlands in general – the necessity for large-scale adaptation to the dominant culture was felt less than in Germany. The Netherlands had always been a mixed society in which people of different beliefs lived side by side. Simply because someone belonged to a different religion did not mean their loyalty to the nation could be called into question. One could be an orthodox Jew living according to the traditional laws and at the same time be a good citizen. This explains why the new German ideas were not gratuitously copied in Groningen. Moreover, each change involved a real struggle within the Jewish community. In spite of all adjustments, the dearth of outside pressure may explain why the Jewish community of Groningen remained far more traditional than most Jewish communities in Germany. While the reform movement in Germany often led to radical changes, in Groningen these changes were mainly restricted to aesthetic aspects of the religion, like decorum and ceremony.

These differences were still noticeable when, from 1933, German-Jewish refugees arrived in Groningen in search of safe haven. These refugees were often amazed by the rather traditional Jewish way of life they found in Groningen. They were especially dumbfounded when confronted...
with the Jewish quarter in Groningen which they viewed as a relict from a distant and obscure past.

The arrival of German Jews not only revealed the differences between these Jewish groups, it also showed how little had remained of traditional Jewish solidarity. German Jews were seen in the first place as Germans and in this sense the attitude of Groningen’s Jews toward them was no different from the non-Jewish population.

The presence of German Jews and the stories they related also forced Jews in Groningen to confront the consequences of growing anti-Semitism in Germany as well as the existential insecurity of being a Diaspora Jew. Strangely enough, this confrontation did not lead to a review of their own position or their own possible fate. For the majority of Dutch Jews, it was unthinkable that the state of affairs which existed in Germany could ever develop in the Netherlands.

Nonetheless, increasingly Jews joined the Zionist movement in Groningen. That is also why discussions about Jewish identity became more pronounced. Were Jews a separate people? Zionists underlined this Jewish ‘differentness’ and called attention to the unique place of Jews within history and among the peoples of the world. New attempts at assimilation were therefore considered to be a waste of time. Palestine was the land of the future where a new, more self-aware and self-confident Jew would arise.

Zionists too surprised by the speed at which world events evolved. In 1940 the Netherlands were invaded by the Nazis and soon anti-Jewish laws were introduced. With the German occupation, the process of assimilation and integration of the Jews, which had started 144 years earlier with the Emancipation decree, had come to an end.

On the eve of the Second World War did a recognizable Jewish life still exist in Groningen? It is a question which Jaap Meijer, a well known Jewish historian born in the province of Groningen, answered with a resounding ‘no’. In his opinion, Judaism as it existed in pre-war Netherlands had already ended ‘before the Germans came’. When one equates ‘Judaism’ with ‘a traditional Jewish community where both people and nation are closely intertwined and where Jewish laws and commandments are strictly adhered to in daily life’, then this judgment is probably correct. The roots of this change can be traced to the Emancipation decree.

Jewish identity is, however, a dynamic concept. Definition of what it means to be Jewish has often changed over the years and continues to do so according to both time and place; that is why ‘Jewish identity’ cannot be narrowly defined. Before 1796, the situation was easier as the terms Jewry and Jewish identity coincided. If someone had a Jewish mother, he naturally belonged to the Jewish nation, was a member of the Jewish community, lived according to Jewish laws and prescriptions, and married within the Jewish circle.

By 1940, however, Groningen’s Jewish community members had very little in common. Religious laws and regulations which once dominated daily life were now only obeyed by a small minority. Religion in general had become less of a common denominator. Groningen Rabbi Van
Loen gave an extreme classification of this when in 1890 he divided the members of the Jewish community into three categories: those who were ‘dead and dry’ and ashamed of their Jewish descent; those who were not fully alive to the Jewish spirit and more involved in earthly than in spiritual matters; and finally those who did not only wear the outward garb of Jewry but who openly strove to further and preserve ‘our holy interests’.3

Like Van Loen, there were many others who worried about the growing ignorance of the holy scriptures and the lack of interest in religious life. This secularization process was intensified by Jewish migration out of the Jewish area, thereby intensifying their contact with non-Jews while decreasing their proximity to the synagogue (geographically and psychologically speaking). At the end of the nineteenth century two groups of Jews lived in Groningen: the first poor, more traditionally-oriented group which generally lived near or within the former Jewish quarter, and a second, more well-to-do, secularized group which lived outside the Jewish quarter. Both groups had their own schools and their own organizations. In spite of growing contacts between Jews and non-Jews, mixed marriages, however, rarely occurred before the 1920s; only then was this last barrier to complete integration brought down.

In the course of the nineteenth century, clear, tangible criteria for Jewish identity disappeared. The entire image of what it was to be a Jew had become more complex, more diverse and more dynamic. Jewish identity was transformed into a colorful, continuously changing mosaic of different elements, a mosaic that at the same time changed color when the refraction of outside light changed.4

This thesis ends with the War which largely ended Jewish life in Groningen. Of those who survived the Holocaust, a large group emigrated within a few years after the war. Israel, in particular, was a favored destination. The newly founded state provided many Dutch Jews with a new sense of Jewish identity. The War also accentuated another aspect of Jewish identity, i.e. the feeling of a common Jewish destiny. Given their experiences during the War, the belief that a Jew in the Netherlands was protected against anti-Semitism and persecution no longer held any credence. Once again the interesting mosaic of Jewish identity took on a new shape, also in Groningen.

NOTES
1 Translated by Carol Wagt-Lehman.
2 Meijer, Hoge boeden/lage standaarden, 35.
4 David Sorkin gave a lecture on 18/11/2001 entitled: ‘The new “Mosaic”: Jews and European culture, 1750-1940’. It’s from him that I derived my metaphor. The lecture was given during a symposium in Amsterdam, entitled: ‘Dutch Jewry in a cultural maelstrom, 1880-1940’.