

## **FUNERAL FUND MEMBERS, BANK DEPOSITORS, WOMAN SHYLOCK VICTIMS Working-class savings and debts in Amsterdam, 1850-1940**

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In general, during the 1850s and 1860s Dutch working-class people faced lives of dire poverty. The greatest Dutch writer ever, Multatuli (1820-1887), was among the first to call attention to this fact. One of Multatuli's most poignant texts is an essay about a French sociologist who went by the name of Frédéric.<sup>1</sup> This man, Frédéric Le Play to be exact, we all know as the author of a book based on inquiries into family budgets from various parts of Europe, *Les ouvriers européens*.<sup>2</sup> Multatuli was thoroughly impressed by Le Play's method. In his essay, it induces him to wonder what life is like for lower-class people in Holland. With a certain eagerness he touches on a sore point: working-class living conditions in Holland contrast unfavourably with those in other European countries. In a few well-worded sentences Multatuli then unfolds a bold plan. He'll visit King of the Netherlands William III and make sure that the monarch casts a glimpse at a couple of working-class budgets: 'Sire,' he imagines he'll say, 'the crowds who are shouting and cheering for you on each Amsterdam visit – here's how the poor devils have to feed themselves!'<sup>3</sup>

Of course, these words were never uttered. Multatuli didn't go to the king, let alone he showed him any budgets. The plan wasn't executed. There was another plan Multatuli didn't execute. He wanted to write a Le Play-like book on working-class life in Holland. What a pity it never came to that!

By now a question may have entered some readers' minds. Multatuli's dealing with the topic of Dutch working-class living conditions, did it have a base in empirical evidence? Oh yes, it most certainly had. In his essay, he published the family budget of an Amsterdam saw mill worker, named Klaas Ris.<sup>4</sup> Multatuli had met this man in 1864 while lecturing for a free-thinking club.<sup>5</sup> The famous writer had turned his new friend inside out with questions about his living conditions.

### **The Ris family**

Ris was married and had three children. He and his wife had to make both ends meet on an income of six guilders per week. They had much difficulties in that, even though they were allowed to occupy a house rent-free and didn't have to pay for fuel.<sup>6</sup> On the next page, we can take a look at the budget Multatuli got out of the saw mill worker.

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1. Multatuli, 'Idee 451' in: *Verzamelde werken van Multatuli IV* (Elsevier-edition; Amsterdam 1907) 28-98.
  2. M.F. Le Play, *Les ouvriers européens. Études sur les travaux, la vie domestique, et la condition morale des populations ouvrières de l'Europe* (Paris 1855). Alain Desrosières, *The politics of large numbers. A history of statistical reasoning* (Cambridge 1998) is worthwhile studying for those interested in Le Play's budget inquiries.
  3. 'Idee 451', 75.
  4. 'Idee 451', 75.
  5. Martin Schouten, *De socialen zijn in aantocht. De Nederlandse arbeidersbeweging in de negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 1976) 74.
  6. 'Idee 451', 75.

**Table 1**  
**Saw mill worker's budget (Amsterdam, 1864)**

EXPENDITURES:	Cents daily	Per week
<i>On bread</i>	22.5	<i>f</i> 1.575
<i>On principal dish at the midday-meal</i> Consisting of 5 cups of potatoes or 2 cups of peas, or 2 pounds of flour	20.0	1.400
<i>On salt</i>	—	0.075
" <i>butter</i> , half a h.-gram daily	05.0	0.350
" <i>grease</i> , half a h.-gram daily	05.0	0.350
" <i>pepper, vinegar, mustard, flour for gravy</i>	—	0.150
" <i>coffee</i> , 2 h.-gram per week	—	0.260
" <i>burned syrup</i> , 2 h.-gram per week	—	0.030
" <i>milk</i> , half a litre daily	03.0	0.210
" <i>buttermilk</i> , once a week, 4 litre, <i>f</i> 0.100 3 h.-gram flour 0.060 1.5 h.-gram syrup 0.045		0.205
" <i>oil for light</i> weekly	—	0.095
" <i>soap, laundry starch and such</i> weekly	—	0.200
" <i>haberdashery, wools</i> weekly	—	0.200
" <i>member contribution to funeral fund</i> weekly	—	0.180
" <i>school-fees for one child</i> weekly	—	0.100
" <i>tobacco, shaving, once in a while a glass of gin</i>	—	0.400
	TOTAL	<b>F 5.775</b>

As has been said above, the saw mill worker's weekly income came to six guilders. Putting two and two together, we can conclude that each week there were twenty-two and a half cents left over. However, the truth was different. Of course, the Ris family had to eat. But the saw mill worker also had to try his best to

fulfill the basic need of clothing (not included in the budget). In doing so, Ris often ran into debts. 'We always are in want of something,' he told Multatuli:<sup>7</sup>

If we must purchase a coat, a pair of trousers, or any other piece of clothes, it happens that I ask the patron for an advance of *f* 10 or *f* 12. In such cases the patron deducts 50 cents per week from my wages. During the debt settlement we go hungry.

Such was life for the Ris family. Little had it made Multatuli sit up had his friend told him he had taken to drinking in order to get the misery out of his mind. But the story wasn't like that at all. Ris was a well-behaved man, who only had a glass or two occasionally.<sup>8</sup>

### **Food Expenditure Percentage (FEP)**

Having arrived at this point, I would like to introduce a term that plays a major role in the paper: *percentage of total expenditure spent on food*. I vote to immediately shorten this to *Food Expenditure Percentage (FEP)*. In what follows, I will use the FEP as a measure of economic well-being. The reader will get to know me as an advocate of the law formulated by the German-born statistician Ernst Engel (1821-1896): 'the poorer a family, the greater the proportion of its total expenditure devoted to the provision of food'.

In general, in the second half of the nineteenth century Dutch working-class people's FEP was very high. As budget inquiries tell us at least until the early 1880s it was well above fifty. Further evidence from working-class budget inquiries demonstrate that it was not until the 1920s that the FEP definitely fell below fifty. This decrease in poverty went hand in hand with an increase in working-class people's capacity to save.

This will be discussed at length later on. For now, it's back to Multatuli and the saw mill worker's family. As has been said, in the budget on page 2 the basic need of clothing isn't included. So, we have some difficulties in determining this family's FEP. However, making an educated guess, I assume it must have been hovering near seventy. Multatuli was indeed right in calling Ris a poor devil.<sup>9</sup>

Did Ris go to the savings-bank? Not likely. His lack of economic well-being surely induced him to keep away from it. There was no way for him to become a bank depositor. However, it must be emphasized that the saw mill worker didn't refrain from every form of saving. As the budget on page 2 shows, he was contributing to a funeral fund, which in my view is a savings strategy as well.<sup>10</sup>

Klaas Ris was so disciplined as to set aside money for future funeral costs. By far he was not the only one in Holland. In fact, this savings strategy at the time was more than widespread in the Dutch working-class, despite the ever-present poverty.

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7. 'Idee 451', 76.

8. 'Idee 451', 76.

9. 'Idee 451', 75.

10. Saving refers to that part of income that is preserved for future use. *Quarterly Bulletin DNB* (March 2006) 46.

### **Structure of the paper**

I will pursue this matter further in section A of the paper. My focus there is on the years 1850-1910. I will be looking at things from a national perspective. A table will be presented, indicating what changes there were in Dutch working-class economic well-being. Using the information in the table, I'll say something about changes in working-class people's capacity to save during the period. To conclude the section, I'll discuss working-class participation in funeral funds.

Section A will be followed by the sections B and C. Section B deals with the years 1910-1935. It differs from section A in that my focus is almost exclusively on Amsterdam. Again, there'll be a table with information on changes in working-class economic well-being. The greater part of section B centers on the so-called Money Box System for Savings, which in Amsterdam became particularly popular in the prosperous late 1920s. The section draws to its close with some reflections on people's dealing with money in *de Jordaan*, a genuine Amsterdam working-class quarter. They are based on the findings of research work done by a Dutch sociographer using the method of participating observation. In section C we'll remain in the Jordan Quarter. In the years around 1900 many a down-and-out inhabitant of this area was so unfortunate as to fall victim to a usurer. This concluding section is based on work of the Dutch author Israël Querido (1872-1932) – not as great a writer as Multatuli, but very interesting nonetheless – who got very much worked up about women shylocks operating in the Jordan Quarter.

## A. 1850-1910: FUNERAL FUND MEMBERS

To begin this section, we'll trace the changes in Dutch working-class economic well-being between 1850 and 1910. Let's look at Table 2.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Average household accounts of groups of workers, 1852/63–1910/11**

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PERCENTAGES OF TOTAL EXPENDITURES

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	1852-63	1870-72	1880-82	1886-97	1910-11
				Holland cities	Holland Cities
Food	<b>57.6</b>	<b>55.6</b>	<b>56.7</b>	<b>43.6</b>	<b>48.5</b>
Housing	10.8	14.9	15.8	23.3	15.1
Clothes, shoes	15.0	8.4	12.2	15.6	11.9
Various	16.6	21.1	15.3	17.5	24.5
N =	15	10	16	16	38

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Table 2 tells us that around mid-century working-class families really were poor. Spending on food came to 58 percent of total expenditure, which indeed meant poverty. After having met the housing and clothing needs, the families had very little spare cash left for other expenses. This situation lasted into the early 1880s. Then circumstances grew more favourable. As the 1900s dawned the FEP had fallen considerably. An average working-class family was not as poor as it had been in 1850.

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11. Jan Luiten van Zanden and Arthur van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914. Staat, instituties en economische ontwikkeling* (Amsterdam 2000) 355.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that working-class people had a very low capacity for saving. Accordingly, putting money in the savings-bank for most of them was out of the question. Although towards the end things began to change in this respect, during the period under review saving with banks was predominantly a middle-class strategy.<sup>12</sup>

The savings-bank wasn't within reach for an average working-class family. But there were more ways than one to preserve money for future use. In the decades following mid-century working-class participation in funeral funds spread and gained momentum.

### **Setting aside money for funeral costs**

In the years under study burial insurance was by far the most important form of life insurance. Towards end-century almost the whole working-class of Holland was setting aside money for future funeral costs.<sup>13</sup> This is what members of a Research Committee concluded in their report of 1891:<sup>14</sup>

For working-class people a proper burial is a matter of great importance. Although they are lower class members, even belonging to the beggar's ranks and to those being on the dole, a pauper's burial is a loathing thing to them. [...] the funeral funds make their members [...] familiar with the notion of assurance, the notion of precaution; they force even those who have the most difficulties in sparing money, to save, however small the amounts are.

Elsewhere in the report it was noted that – in the cities as well as in the country – funeral fund members<sup>15</sup>

are recruited from the poorest part of the population (...). With regard to one of our largest cities we were told that funeral fund members were 'proletarians'. According to others, they were 'factory-workers', 'working-class people', 'farm-labourers'. We also heard it said that 'almost all people lower than middle-class are in a funeral fund.

An educated guess tells us that around 1890 the number of funeral fund members came to 2.4 million, which was half of the Dutch population at the time.<sup>16</sup> Burial insurance was booming business! Players on this lucrative market were mutual-workers funds as well as commercial funds.

A moment ago I quoted a sentence as to how working-class people loathed a pauper's burial. Why was it loathed so much? What economic historian Paul Johnson is saying, makes sense: working-class people preserved money for future funeral costs in order to maintain a certain level of socially sanctioned behaviour. A pauper's burial, which was paid for by the community, was seen as a sign of final degradation and for that reason something which had to be avoided at all costs.<sup>17</sup>

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12. Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, *De eenheidsstaat: onderlinges, armenzorg en commerciële verzekeraars 1800-1890* (The Hague/Amsterdam 2000) 58 and 63. Van Leeuwen's views are mainly based on: R.H. van der Voort, 'Sparen 1800-1890' in: J. van Gerwen en M.H.D. van Leeuwen ed., *Studies over zekerheidsarrangementen. Risico's, risicobestrijding en verzekeringen in Nederland vanaf de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam/The Hague 1998) 450-465.

13. Van Leeuwen, *De eenheidsstaat*, 82.

14. Van Leeuwen, *De eenheidsstaat*, 82.

15. Van Leeuwen, *De eenheidsstaat*, 88-89.

16. Van Leeuwen, *De eenheidsstaat*, 87.

17. Bulder is giving some thought to the views of Paul Johnson: Elles Bulder, 'Working-class saving behaviour and old age in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Netherlands'. *Tinbergen Institute Research Bulletin* 3 (1991) 3, 261.

## B. 1910-1935: BANK DEPOSITORS

During the 1910s working-class people's capacity to set aside money was a much-discussed matter. It would be off topic for me to go into this in detail here. I'll come back to the subject at some future time. For now, it will suffice for my purpose to concentrate on the point of view put forward by the Dutch Social Democrats. At issue was the question as to whether their budgets permitted working-class people to save for old age. The Social Democrats' answer was a clear 'no'. At the beginning of 1911 their party's newspaper had it that as a rule the wages of working men were insufficient to save for old age.<sup>18</sup>

This view is not contrary to the fact, that working men actually do save, that a great many workers are savings-bank depositors. [...] Working-class saving always is a temporary matter. Working-class people set aside money, knowing that they soon will have to use it for urgent needs, for things that require a bigger expenditure at once, for things that can happen every day [...]. The purchase of a bigger piece of furniture or of clothes; the upbringing of the children; sickness or unemployment – it all makes savings melt away long before old age makes itself felt. [...] Indeed, savings are part of many working-class budgets, but for saving for old age there's no room left.

Working-class people are saving all right; a great many are depositors in the savings-bank; it is just there's no possibility of them engaging in long-term saving; the working-class savers' concern is the fulfillment of short-term needs – that's how the Dutch Social Democrats thought about it.

### A weighty question

The Social Democrats' view is supported by research findings. Elles Bulder, who has kept herself occupied studying working-class saving in Holland some time ago, arrives at the same conclusion as did the above-quoted newspaper in 1911. Let's shed some more light on Mrs. Bulder. In the 1990s she published two worth reading essays on working-class saving through banks.<sup>19</sup>

Bulder's focus is on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is her empirical-based view that during this this period most of the savings-bank depositors were working-class people.<sup>20</sup> For certain, this is

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18. 'De sociale verzekering', *Het Volk*, March 18th 1911.

19. 'Working-class saving behaviour and old age in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Netherlands'. *Tinbergen Institute Research Bulletin* 3 (1991) 3, 259-270 and 'Sparen 1881-1940' in: J. van Gerwen en M.H.D. van Leeuwen ed., *Studies over zekerheidsarrangementen. Risico's, risicobestrijding en verzekeringen in Nederland vanaf de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam/The Hague 1998) 694-706. Besides Bulder several other historians have been interested in the topic of working-class saving in Holland. In chronological order: R.H. van der Voort, *Sparen in de 19e eeuw. Onderzoek naar de werking van de Nutsspaarbank te 's-Gravenhage en de Leidsche Spaarbank* (Master's thesis Economic History University Leiden, Leiden 1987); R.H. van der Voort and L.A. van Heijningen, *Sparen in de negentiende eeuw* (The Hague 1988); R.H. van der Voort, 'Sparen 1800-1890' in: J. van Gerwen and M.H.D. van Leeuwen ed., *Studies over zekerheidsarrangementen. Risico's, risicobestrijding en verzekeringen in Nederland vanaf de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam/The Hague 1998) 450-465; Joost van Genabeek, *Met vereende kracht risico's verzacht. De plaats van onderlinge hulp binnen de negentiende-eeuwse particuliere regelingen van sociale zekerheid* (Amsterdam 1999); Jacques van Gerwen, *De ontluikende verzorgingsstaat: overheid, vakbonden, werkgevers, ziekenfondsen en verzekeringsmaatschappijen 1890-1945* (The Hague/Amsterdam 2000); Marco H.D. van Leeuwen, *De eenheidsstaat: onderlinges, armenzorg en commerciële verzekeraars 1800-1890* (The Hague/Amsterdam 2000); Joost Dankers, Jos van der Linden and Jozef Vos, *Spaarbanken in Nederland. Ideeën en organisatie, 1817-1990* (Amsterdam 2001).

20. Bulder, 'Sparen', 705.

a research finding of great importance. All the more a pity, that Bulder leaves a weighty question untouched. Most of the savings-bank depositors were working-class people – that's all very well. But how many working-class people were depositors? Furthermore, Bulder almost completely seems to lack the notion that for getting a sound grasp of working-class saving it is necessary to take a close look at changes in working-class economic well-being. It is a well-known fact that after World War I working-class people in Holland had better times coming. In the late 1920s the average working man's purchasing power was much higher than before WW I.<sup>21</sup> What was the effect of this increase in economic well-being? Did saving through the savings-bank become considerably more widespread in the working-class than it had been in harder times? Or, to put it in another way, did the increase in economic well-being effect working-class saving in the sense that the number of workers who became savings-bank depositors grew significantly? These are the questions I'll try to answer in this section of the paper.

In what follows, I'll have the opportunity to present what I found out about the popularity of the so-called Money Box System for Savings in Amsterdam. But first, a digression on changes in working-class economic well-being.

### **Changes in working-class economic well-being**

After World War I working-class people in Holland had better times coming – that's what I said a moment ago. Is this somewhere near the truth? As Table 2 showed, in sixty year's time working-class people's FEP had fallen considerably. In 1910 an average working-class family was not as poor as it had been in 1850. Relatively, things weren't all that bad. But soon economic well-being was jeopardized by World War I. In Table 3 on the next page we can see how – at least in Amsterdam – towards the end of the war the FEP was above fifty again.<sup>22</sup> Once more using the FEP as a measure of economic well-being, we see things getting a whole lot better after the early 1920s. That marked a real turn of the tiding. The FEP dropped from 51 in 1921 to 38 in 1935. Working-class people were going to be better off than ever before. And better than ever before they could afford to be savings-bank depositors.

The 1920s are fascinating years. Dutch working-class people were enjoying economic good times. Let's look at some more evidence to the same effect. Graph 1 on the next page shows the trends of real wages in the Netherlands from 1913 to 1935.<sup>23</sup>

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21. B. Bölger, 'De welstand van de arbeidersklasse in Nederland. Voordracht, gehouden in de vergadering van de Afdeling voor Technische Economie van het Kon. Instituut van Ingenieurs op 18 Juni, 1927 te 's-Gravenhage', *De Ingenieur*, March 10th 1928, T.16; 'Loonen en loonsverhoudingen in Nederland. Het Ned. loonpeil aan de spits. 25 pCt hooger dan vóór den oorlog', *Het Vaderland*, June 7th 1929.

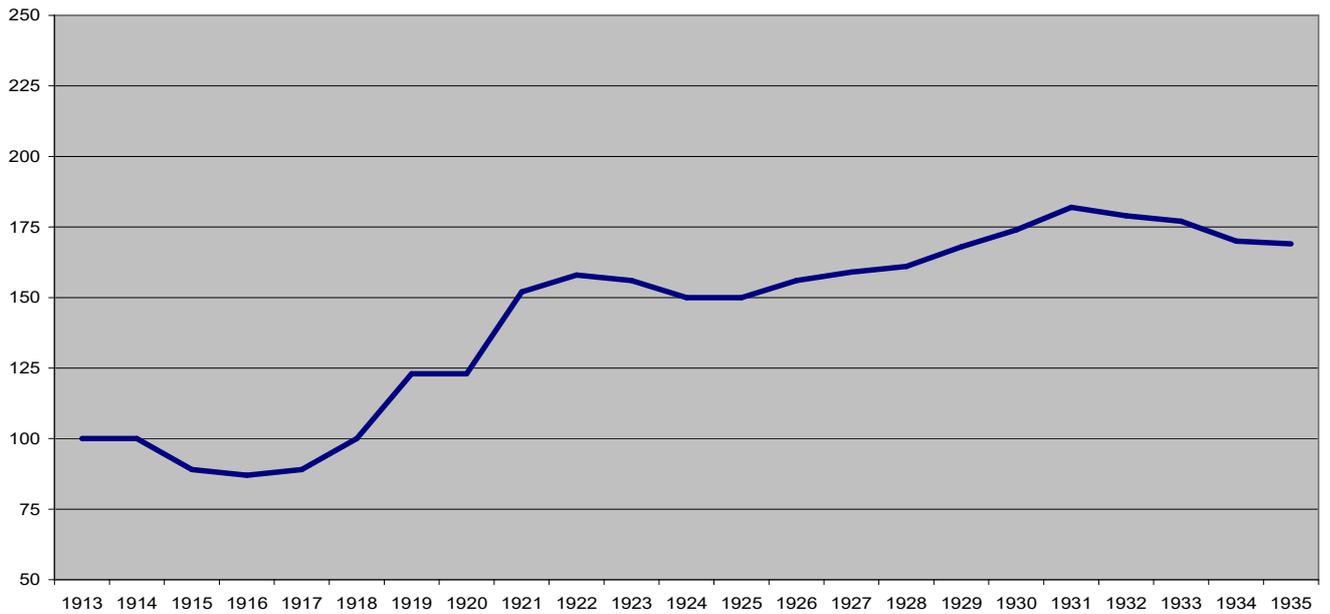
22. Table 3 is borrowed from Van der Goot: Willemien Hendrika van der Goot, *De besteding van het inkomen. Het indexcijfer van de kosten van levensonderhoud* (The Hague 1930), Statistical appendices, Table E. See p. 93 of the book for more details on Table E. The 1934-'35 data were added by me. The figures rely upon the budgets no. 4, 19, 37, 43, 46, 66, 92, 115, 119, 133, 154, 181, 192, 208 and 246 in *Inkomsten, uitgaven, verbruik en physiologische waarde van de voeding van 184 gezinnen uit verschillende kringen der bevolking gedurende de periode 1 Maart 1934–28 Februari 1935*. Bureau van Statistiek der Gemeente Amsterdam (Amsterdam 1941).

23. Graph 1 is borrowed from: D.J. van der Veen and J.L. van Zanden, 'Real-wage trends and consumption patterns in the Netherlands, c. 1870-1940' in: Peter Scholliers ed., *Real wages in 19th and 20th century Europe. Historical and comparative perspectives* (New York/Oxford/Munich 1989) 212 and 228.

**Table 3**  
**Group of Amsterdam working-class families: their budgets in 1917–1921**  
**compared with similar budgets in 1910-11, 1923-24, and 1934-35**

PERCENTAGES OF TOTAL EXPENDITURES								
	4 weeks of 1910-11	march 1917	march 1918	dec 1918	march 1919	march 1921	4 weeks of 1923-24	4 weeks of 1934-35
Food	47.2	53.1	53.8	55.1	54.9	50.9	45.3	38.5
Housing	16.1	14.2	12.0	10.9	10.3	8.2	11.6	18.1
Clothes, shoes	12.4	6.6	9.0	7.7	8.2	15.2	9.5	7.2
Various	24.3	26.1	25.2	26.3	26.6	25.7	33.6	36.2
N =	23	32	31	27	32	23	15	15

**Graph 1**  
**Real wages in the Netherlands, 1913-1935**  
**(indices 1913 = 100)**



The conclusion is permitted that the late 1920s in particular were prosperous years. What effect did the economic good times have on the working-class propensity to save? This question gives me the opportunity to present what I found out about a peculiar form of saving in Amsterdam.

### **Saving with home boxes in Amsterdam**

In 1907 the Amsterdam Savings Bank introduced the Money Box System for Savings.<sup>24</sup> A few words on the history of this home deposit system, which wasn't a new thing in 1907. Its origin was American. In 1890 New York had witnessed the coming of the C.O. Burns Company, the original, patented manufacturer of the system. At the time that the Amsterdam Savings Bank was considering the introduction of the system, it was already in use in countries as diverse as the United States, Canada, Chili, Cuba, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Great-Britain, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Turkey, Germany and France. The system was already in use in the Netherlands too: Groningen and Rotterdam preceded Amsterdam in this respect.<sup>25</sup>

The system's official name was 'Home Deposit Banks System'. As the reader might have noticed, I'm referring to it as 'Money Box System for Savings', a phrase borrowed from an old issue of *The New York Times* (February 4, 1917).

Let me describe the key features of the system. It was 'tailor-made' for regular savers of small amounts of money. Savers got boxes on loan from the savings-bank. It was for free. The boxes were taken home, where they could not be opened – the keys were held by the bank. So, at home a saver couldn't be tempted to take hold of the contents of his box. He had to go to the bank, which he did three times a year at most. At each visit the saver's box was opened by a bank clerk, who added the saved amount to a savings-book, standing in the box-holder's name.

It was all about the 'smallest of savers'. The student of the Archives of the Amsterdam Savings Bank<sup>26</sup> encounters this phrase more than once. In discussions held at the Bank managers' meetings, it must have been used time and again.

In 1907 the Amsterdam Savings Bank already had almost sixty years of history behind it. The Bank had been established in 1848.<sup>27</sup> It was one of the two really noteworthy institutions facilitating saving in the national capital of Holland, the other one being the 'Rijkspostspaarbank' (RPS). The RPS was the National Savings Bank. Established in 1881 after the British example, it was attached to the postoffice.

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24. Amsterdam Savings Bank Annual Report 1907 (Amsterdam 1908); Amsterdam Municipal Archive (AMA), 1431: 251.

25. AMA, 1431: 742.

26. AMA, 1431.

27. M.H. Verrijn Stuart, *Spaarbank voor de Stad Amsterdam 1848-1948* (Amsterdam 1948).

During the years under study in this section of the paper, the Amsterdam Savings Bank went through a process of growth. At the beginning of the period the Bank consisted of a head-office and six area-offices. At the end of the period fifteen area-offices were operating. Four of the nine new area-offices had been established in the second part of the 1920s.<sup>28</sup> Three of these four were operating in real working-class quarters.

At the start of the 'Bank at Home' practising the Amsterdam Savings Bank placed 500 steel boxes at the savers' disposal.<sup>29</sup> They had come from J. Lips Bzn, a manufacturer of fire/burglar resistant safes and safety-locks. In the years following 1907 the Bank would become a good customer of this famous Dutch firm.



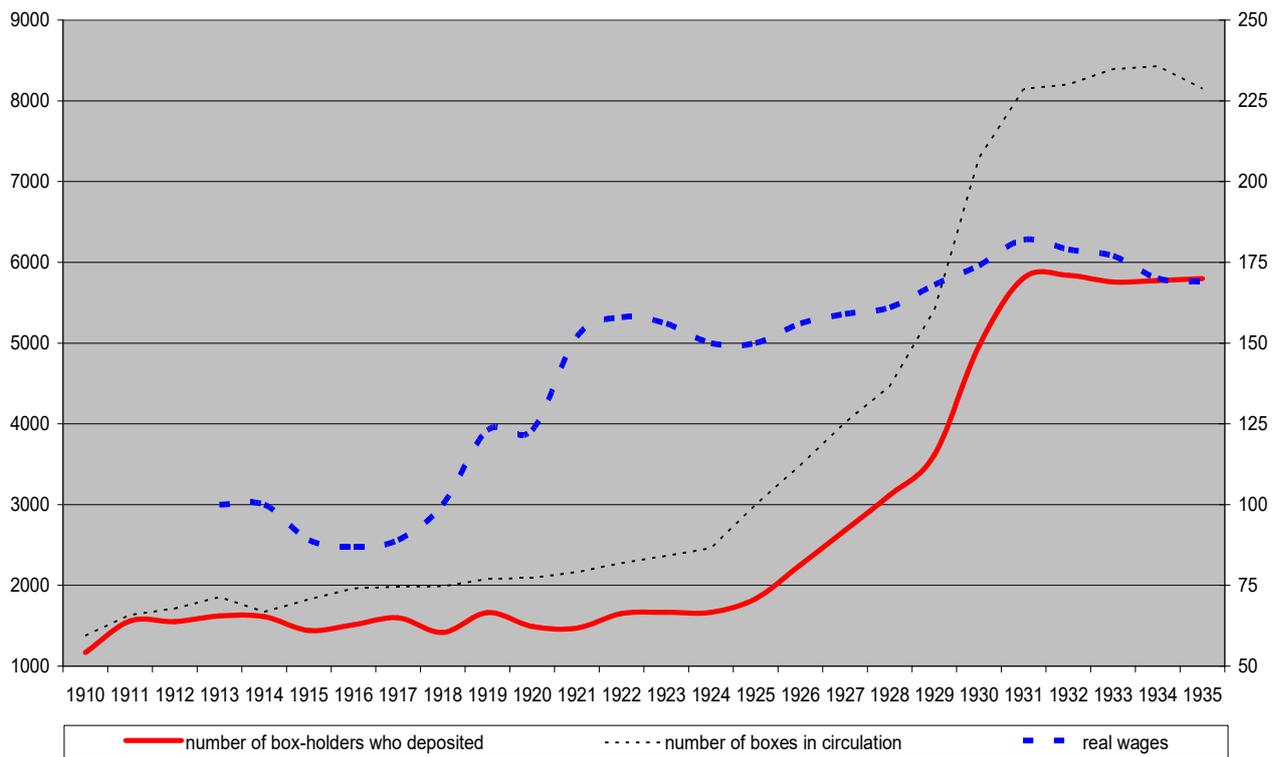
28. In the Annual Reports the years 1925-1930 are marked as successful: Amsterdam Savings Bank Annual Reports 1925-1930 (Amsterdam 1926-1931); AMA, 1431: 253-254.

29. AMA, 1431: 742.

What was the social position of the Amsterdam inhabitants who engaged in the Money Box System for Savings? Available data strongly suggest that they were working-class people. It's a fact that round about 1910 working-class people were already savers at the Amsterdam Savings Bank. At that time the Bank itself was eager to get a clear picture of the persons who started depositing money. In the Annual Reports on 1910 and 1911 tables were published, based on the Bank's administration and a recent occupational census.<sup>30</sup> From them we learn that in both years the percentage of persons belonging to the working-class among the new depositors approximately amounted to sixty. It simply cannot be imagined that when the Bank managers spoke of 'the smallest of the bank's savers', they were referring to persons other than these belonging to the working-class.

From now on, then, the Money Box System for Savings is marked as a form of working-class saving. Was it any popular? Oh yes, it certainly was. And its popularity tended to grow over time, as we can see below in Graph 2.

**Graph 2**  
**Amsterdam Savings Bank: saving with home savings-boxes, 1910-1935**



30. Amsterdam Savings Bank Annual Reports 1910-1911 (Amsterdam 1911-1912). AMA, 1431: 252 .

For the time being, the thick red line is the one we want to look at. It represents the number of box-holders who in the years 1910-1935 actually deposited money in the Amsterdam Savings Bank. If one thing catches the eye, it is the line steeply sloping upwards with regard to the second part of the 1920s. Up to 1926 the number of box-holders who actually deposited never was above 2000. And then in five years' time their number almost tripled. As we saw earlier, the second part of the 1920s also was the time that the real wages had a steady tendency to growth. I think, we can safely assume an empirical correlation. That there indeed is such a correlation, becomes the more clear when we look at Graph 2 again, in which the real wages line is included too (dotted in blue).

The conclusion is permitted that in the second part of the 1920s saving became considerably more widespread in the working-class. 'At least in Amsterdam,' I make haste to add. Whether the conclusion holds water as regards to the Netherlands in general, remains to be seen. A lot of research still has to be undertaken.

Once again: working-class saving was – relatively spoken – booming in Amsterdam in the second part of the 1920s. Working-class people certainly had not kept away from the savings-bank in foregoing years, but it needed a substantial increase in economic well-being to make the number of active depositors grow significantly.

### **A sociographer in the Amsterdam Jordan Quarter**

One of the Amsterdam Savings Bank's area-offices was situated in the Jordan Quarter, a genuine Amsterdam working-class quarter.<sup>31</sup> How many Jordan people were depositors at this area-office? It's hard to say. But of one thing I am as sure as I am that the sun will rise to-morrow and that is, that there were a great many Jordan people who weren't depositors at all. After having done fieldwork in the Jordan Quarter in the late 1920s, early 1930s a Dutch sociographer named Henk Dijkhuis arrived at much the same conclusion. 'All their money is spend on very short-term needs,' Duikhuis said about the workers with whom he had shared a boarding-house, 'They can't manage to save a penny.'<sup>32</sup> His boarding-house mates were the kind of men who got themselves in trouble by buying things on the installment system.<sup>33</sup> They were also among the Jordan people who frequented the pawnbroker's,<sup>34</sup> or who easily fell victim to women usurers.<sup>35</sup>

Dijkhuis admired the Dutch literary writer Israël Querido, who had done fieldwork in the Jordan Quarter at an earlier date. In his writings there are women usurers too.

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31. Verrijn Stuart, *Spaarbank*, Appendix 9.

32. H. Dijkhuis, 'Vijftig dagen in een Jordaans kosthuis' in: Frank Bovenkerk and Lodewijk Brunt ed., *De rafelrand van Amsterdam. Jordaners, pinda-Chinezen, ateliermeisjes en venters in de jaren dertig* (Amsterdam 1977) 64.

33. Dijkhuis, 'Vijftig dagen', 70.

34. Dijkhuis, 'Vijftig dagen', 69.

35. Dijkhuis, 'Vijftig dagen', 68.

### C. THE YEARS AROUND 1900: WOMAN SHYLOCK VICTIMS; QUERIDO'S HEARTFELT CRY

In some of his writings the Dutch author Israël Querido (1872-1932) gets very much worked up about women shylocks operating in the Jordan Quarter, notably in his novel *De Jordaan* [*The Jordan Quarter*] and in his autobiographical account *Mijn zwerftochten door Jordaan en donker Amsterdam* [*My Wanderings through the Jordan Quarter and Sinister Amsterdam*].

Israël Querido is among the few Dutch writers who have been given an entry in *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*. We find him in Volume 9 of the *Micropædia*. He's said to have been an author whose novels 'provide valuable documentary material'.<sup>36</sup> That's bull's eye. Reading Querido is interesting, not because it's enjoyable in a literary sense, but because he adds to the body of social historical knowledge.

By far, Querido's most popular novel was *The Jordan Quarter*, published in 1912. The story takes place in the years around 1900 and is mainly about the woman shopkeeper Neel Scheendert and her second husband Stijn Burk.

#### The Burk family

During the fishing season, Stijn Burk is a fishmonger. When the fishing season is over, he is a worker in a sugar factory. If there's something to be done there. If there isn't, Stijn is out of work, waiting for the fishing season to get started again. Being drunk regularly, Stijn is in the habit of beating his wife Neel.

When we get to know the couple, Neel's tenth child is on its way. Her youngest six children are Stijn's. The eldest three she got from her first husband, Jan Gronjee, who died of tuberculosis. Gronjee has given her a good life. He worked as a diamond-cutter, earning enough to be able to put money in the savings-bank.

The burial is over. There are a hundred guilders left on Gronjee's savings-account. Neel pawns her jewelry and sells her furniture. Then she has enough money to open a small shop. Thanks to hard work, things are looking up a bit, but eventually there's too much competition for survival. Neel meets Stijn Burk, who gets her pregnant and then marries her. The shop is closed down. Let me quote:<sup>37</sup>

When they got married, Stijn was working at the sugar factory. But only five weeks of the heavy winter time had passed when the work ended. Neel was pregnant and Stijn out of work. They'd left the shop, being out of stock and having run out of credit. Neel and her whole sorry lot put up at the grubbiest of rooms.

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36. *The New Encyclopædia Britannica. Micropædia*. Volume 9 (15th edition; London etc. 1993) 854.

37. *The Jordan Quarter* (11th edition; Amsterdam 1920) 126.

The downturn is inevitable; Neel and her family are drawing in a pool of misery. Let me quote again:<sup>38</sup>

She grew bitter at her impoverishment, the rottenness and filth, the kids being hungry, Stijn being drunk. Stijn's family was no help, although rumors had it that Stijn's old man kept as much as twenty thousand guilders under his mattress.

After delivery of Stijn's child she applies for welfare benefits. She is turned down, because of Stijn's father's wealth.

So much hardship; so much pain and suffering. No more keeping shop for Neel, no more purchasing fish for Stijn. Neel is at her wits' ends when she finally finds someone to the rescue, the woman money-lender Tonie, 'Hannes Draaideur's shrewd and brutal wife'. Tonie is willing to help with some money. The interest rate is usurious and the debt-repayments are sky-high. But Stijn can be a fishmonger again and Neel herself is able to set up a shrimp and eel booth.<sup>39</sup>

Having arrived at this point, Querido starts booing the Jordan money-lenders, cunning women intent on squeezing their class fellows dry, usurers with gain-greedy eyes, smacking their lips over the weekly installment and interest payments, as hard as nails threatening with the worst scenario: people's exclusion from help, when payment is defaulted.<sup>40</sup>

It only takes a short while for Neel and Stijn to go broke on account of the woman Tonie's usury. The shrimp and eel booth has to be closed down. The family's thrown back to the gutter. Neel and her husband Stijn have dismal, toiling years ahead of them.<sup>41</sup>

### **Querido, a participant-observer**

Querido's book is a work of fiction – there's no doubt about that. But there's every reason to assume that the author's digressions on the malpractice of usury in the Jordan Quarter were pretty much in accordance with the facts. Before writing the novel, Querido had spent several years on fieldwork in the area. He'd had his residence there, living – as it were – the life of a Jordan man among the Jordan people. In his autobiographical account *My Wanderings through the Jordan Quarter and Sinister Amsterdam* (1931) he is looking back on these years of participant observation. In *My Wanderings* there's a section on the women-shylocks worthy of consideration. From it we learn that on the usury front things hadn't changed much since the beginning of the twentieth century.

The usury practices in the Jordan Quarter are among the most hideous things Querido's ever come across. Let me quote:<sup>42</sup>

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38. *The Jordan Quarter*, 127.

39. *The Jordan Quarter*, 133.

40. *The Jordan Quarter*, 134.

41. *The Jordan Quarter*, 140-141.

42. *My Wanderings*, 107-108.

The woman money-lender, more than often living around the corner, has a strong hold on her customers. She's building in safeguards right from the start. Let's say, a man needs a hundred guilders. That is not the amount he's gonna get. No, ninety is what he gets. But hundred is what he's supposed to pay back, in, let's say, installments of five guilders a week. The weekly interest payment comes to five guilders too. In this way, there's a profit margin of more than 200 percent. [...] Every eighth day payments are due. If the installment obligation can't be satisfied, extention of payment can be given, but the interest obligation *has* to be met. Otherwise, the borrower is disgraced. If he remains in default, he risks exclusion from all future help.

The scenes Querido witnessed were agonizing:<sup>43</sup>

[...] people wasting away under the murderous pressure, their zest for work vanishing completely;  
[...] preys hunted down, seeing their lives as built around installment and interest.

Usurers' credit: so easy to get, so hard knocking people to the ground.

### **A happy ending**

Back to Querido's novel. It more or less has a happy ending. Thanks to the financial support of some of her first husband's colleagues Neel Burk opens a small shop again. Times are never easy, and every once in a while woman shylock Tonie can smack her lips over the family's weekly installment and interest payments. But Neel's shop survives. If he isn't out of work, Stijn is trying his luck in fishmongering or is stacking bales of sugar at the factory. It's hard for him to resist the temptation of a drink. At home Neel gets a beating regularly. Business as usual, one might say. Neel delivers her tenth child. There are complications, but all's well that ends well.

### **To conclude**

The focus of this paper was on Dutch funeral fund members, bank depositors and woman shylock victims. The reader also got the chance to meet two of Holland's major men of letters. There can be no doubt as to what my favorite commandment is: thou shalt honor thy classic literary writers.

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43. *My Wanderings*, 108.