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SOURCES FOR TRACING ANTWERP'S SIXTEENTH-CENTURY IMMIGRANTS

DONALD J. HARRELD

When the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian made Antwerp (in modern-day Belgium) the commercial center of the new Habsburg Netherlands in 1484, merchants, artisans, and other laborers from near and far began coming to Antwerp to make their fortunes in this booming new center of trade. By the mid-sixteenth century Antwerp had become Europe's most important commercial center. Peoples from all over Europe came to make their home in Antwerp, including French, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Bohemians (Czechs), Danes, and Germans.

With so many people coming into the city, Antwerp was growing rapidly during the first half of the sixteenth century. Around 1500, the city's population probably stood at about 40,000 souls, but by mid-century, it may have exceeded 100,000. This impressive population growth made Antwerp the second largest city north of the Alps, after only Paris.¹ Within just a generation or two, Antwerp's immigrant population surpassed even the city's native-born population.

The implication for the family historian is that once ancestors are traced to sixteenth-century Antwerp, it is fairly easy for the trail to run cold because of the large immigrant population. This is, of course, a problem for any researcher focusing on sixteenth-century sources, but it is a particular problem with Antwerp records because so many of the city's inhabitants came from other places. About 85 percent of Antwerp's immigrants probably came from other urban areas very close to the city.² People coming from the towns of Mechelen (Malines) and Leuven (Louvain) probably made up about 35 percent of Antwerp's immigrants in the 1520s.³ But scores of other people came from much farther away, drawn by the economic opportunities Antwerp offered. These groups are much more difficult to study because of the kinds of sources available. Sources that trace the origins of migrant populations do not always exist and those that do are difficult to find; in addition, many migrant families routinely avoided activities that might trigger an official record of their presence in a city.⁴

Family historians who encounter a dead end in Antwerp's sixteenth-century genealogical sources, however, are blessed with a variety of sources to aid in determining the place of origin of immigrant populations. The most important sources for beginning a study of immigration in early modern Antwerp are the citizenship registers, or

¹ Based on population growth rates, An Kint has estimated that an average of about 2000 immigrants per year must have settled in Antwerp. See An Kint, "The Community of Commerce: Social Relations in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1995), 38.

² Hugo Soly, "Social Relations in Antwerp in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Antwerp: Story of a Metropolis*, ed. Jan Van der Stock (Antwerp: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 1993), 38.

³ Bruno Blondé and Raymond van Uytven, "De smalle steden en het Brabantse stedelijke netwerk in de Late Middeleeuwen en de Nieuwe Tijd," *Lira Elegans* 6 (1996): 145.

⁴ Gabriel Audisio, "Une Grande Migration Alpine En Provence (1460-1560)," *Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino* 87, no. 1 (1989): 69-70.

Poortersboeken. The archivists of the Antwerp Municipal Archives (Stadsarchief Antwerpen) compiled a modern edition of the *Antwerpse Poortersboeken* culled from the *Vierschaar-Boecken der Stad Antwerpen, 1533–1795*, which are the records of the magistrates containing the judgments of civil and criminal court cases and, because of jurisdictional concerns, lists of all new citizens. The Family History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah, holds only volumes four (1609–1712), five (1712–1795), and six (index) of the *Antwerpse Poortersboeken* (call number 949.321/A1 P4a). The first three volumes of the *Poortersboeken*, which list entries from 1533 to 1608, seem to be available only in the reading room of the Antwerp Municipal Archives and in other archives in Belgium. Fortunately the Family History Library has microfilms of the *Burgerschapenregisters, 1502–1795* [FHL Film #622429-622446], which contain the same information as the *Poortersboeken*. Along with the name of the immigrant, and date of the grant of citizenship,⁵ these sources also provide information on the immigrant's place of origin, occupation, and often the name of his or her father.

The use of the *Poortersboeken* is even more promising in cases when immigrants came to Antwerp in family groups. The Beste brothers are a good example of this. The three brothers were from “Nyenwerstadt” in the “Mark” (perhaps Neuenwege near Oldenburg) and worked as sugar refiners in Antwerp. Dierick, Jakob, and Willem de Best, all sons of Peter Beste, came to Antwerp during the first half of the sixteenth century. According to the *Poortersboeken*, Willem de Best obtained Antwerp citizenship on 18 January 1538,⁶ and Jakob a few years later on 23 May 1544.⁷ Dierick does not appear in the registers, so he probably never obtained citizenship.

However, the *Poortersboeken* contain only a minority of all the foreigners who migrated to sixteenth-century Antwerp, because far fewer immigrants obtained citizenship than actually entered the city. Part of the reason that most immigrants did not become citizens is that the most common ways to become one were either through marriage to a citizen or by purchasing citizenship. But in Antwerp those who were known as *ingezetenen* (established residents) had almost the same rights and privileges as citizens did.⁸ There were several reasons why an immigrant might want citizenship, such as an exemption from local tolls and being subject to the jurisdiction of local courts, but these privileges were usually given to established residents of the city too. The most important reason for wanting citizenship was because non-citizens were excluded from membership in the city's craft guilds.

Adding to the difficulty in tracing Antwerp's sixteenth-century immigrants is that no records of those with *ingezetenen* status were kept. The best the family historian can

⁵ The term ‘citizenship’ had a different meaning before the French Revolution than it does today. National citizenship, as we understand it now, was not a concept understood by early modern Europeans. In the sense discussed in this essay, citizenship was conferred by the city—for example, individuals from nearby towns were not citizens of Antwerp.

⁶ *Burgerschapenregisters, 1502–1795, Poorters and vrije burgers, A-Z, 1533–1539* [Family History Library, hereafter cited as FHL, Film #622438]; or see *Antwerpse Poortersboeken, 1533–1608* (Antwerp: Stadsarchief Antwerpen, 1977/78).

⁷ *Ibid.*, A-L, 1540–1562 [FHL Film #622439].

⁸ An Kint, “Becoming Civic Community: Citizenship in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp,” in *Individual, Corporate and Judicial Status in European Cities (Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period)*, ed. Maarten Prak Marc Boone (Leuven: Garant, 1996).

do is to scour the various registers of notaries and of the city aldermen to find individuals who were identified as *ingezetenen*. Bear in mind, however, that notarial registers and aldermen's records were not kept to track immigrants, rather they were mostly concerned with recording contracts, so searching these records is a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack. There are hundreds of volumes of notarial registers of the city's notary publics and of the *Certificatieboeken* (certificate books) of the city aldermen. The Family History Library has microfilm copies of all the existing early modern notarial registers from the regional state archives in Antwerp (Rijksarchief te Antwerpen), totaling approximately 230 reels. The Antwerp Municipal Archives has even more extensive holdings in notarial records that have not yet been microfilmed.

Notarial registers are kept chronologically by notary, so researchers will need to examine the registers of multiple notaries for any given range of years. In early modern Antwerp, wills were also registered with notaries, so it is often possible to gather a great deal of family information for immigrants who left wills in the notarial records. For example, Evaerdt Ursinger was an *ingezetenen* (established resident) of Antwerp, but not a citizen. In his will, recorded by the Antwerp notary Jacobus de Platea on 4 July 1525, we read, "Evaerdt Ursinger, born in Nuremberg, now established resident of Antwerp makes his testament..."⁹ It is quite likely that Ursinger intended to live out the rest of his life in the city without becoming a citizen.

The *Certificatieboeken*, records kept by the city aldermen, are also important sources for determining place of origin for Antwerp's early modern immigrant population. The earliest entries in the *Certificatieboeken* (for 1488–1513) are found in Renée Doehaerd's *Études Anversoises: Documents sur le commerce international à Anvers*, 3 vols. (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1962).¹⁰ The *Certificatieboeken* have been microfilmed, but do not appear to be available in the Family History Library. While, like the notarial registers, the *Certificatieboeken* were public records, they were kept for reasons other than tracking citizens and immigrants. The *Certificatieboeken* include the certificates that individuals or firms requested from the city magistrates as documents to establish matters of legal fact. While anyone could request a certificate from the magistrates, most requests came from merchants. Businessmen often were required to provide witnesses to attest to the truthfulness of the matter under consideration. For example, a merchant might request a certificate from the magistrates affirming that certain products with his mark belonged to him and not some other merchant, or that a particular individual is authorized to represent him in commercial affairs. The point of the merchant requesting a certificate was to avoid potential disputes. Here is a typical certificate from 1542 identifying Wolf Pruner as the agent of the Welser firm of Augsburg:

Hans Bertel, age 42 born in Lithen in Tirol, Wolff Puschinger of Leipzig age 38, and Sebastian de Maur of Branne in Bavaria, all merchants resident within the city, truthfully declare that they have known for a long time Wolff Pruner merchant from Munich in Bavaria who also is resident within the city, and that the same Wolff Pruner is the factor of Hans Welser and brothers of

⁹ Notariële Akten, 1524–1543, J. de Platea (1525), 50–51 (FHL film #1069420). This record is also found in Jakob Strieder, ed. *Aus Antwerpener Notariatsarchiven: Quellen zur deutschen wirtschaftsgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlags, 1930), 18.

¹⁰ Available at the Family History Library, Salt Lake City, call number 949.321/A1 U3d.

Augsburg and Nuremberg, for all wares and goods and business of Hans Welser and brothers.¹¹

In this brief record, we find the place of origin of four Antwerp residents and the ages of two of them. Further research identified Wolf Puschinger, one of the witnesses in the certificate, as the Antwerp factor for two of Augsburg's largest merchant families, the Herwarts and the Herbrots. While the above record tells us that Wolf Puschinger was born in Leipzig about 1504, the notarial register of Jacobus de Platea indicates that he probably came to Antwerp sometime around 1532, which is the year he rented a house in the city.¹² He appears to have lived the rest of his life in the city without ever becoming a citizen, dying around 1559. Research into the records of the city's bond markets show that Jeronimus Puschinger, Wolf's son, was important in Antwerp financial markets in the 1560s.¹³ Jeronimus Puschinger married Susanna Smits (a native of Antwerp) and the two had a daughter named Beatrix born in December, 1577.¹⁴

American family historians are accustomed to thinking in terms of tracing the lines of their immigrant ancestors from their origins in a particular area of Europe to North America. What we rarely consider, however, is that even within Europe, migration was a common phenomenon long before the period when scores of people left their native lands for new opportunities in America. Europeans, too, often encounter difficulty in tracing their ancestors because migrants were rarely differentiated from local natives in most official records in the premodern period. Several years ago, I had a conversation with an Antwerp archivist whose family name was Imhoff, which he knew to be an old Antwerp family. He was surprised when I told him that the Imhoff family actually originated in Germany and had emigrated to Antwerp in the early sixteenth century. This connection could not have been made using more obvious genealogical sources. Only by extending the search to include notarial and commercial records could actual origin of the family be established allowing for the discovery of his immigrant ancestors.

In this short article, I have tried to show that genealogists researching in early modern Antwerp, a fast-growing city with a large foreign population, have at their disposal several types of sources that can help them trace the place of origin of the city's immigrants. The most important for tracing immigrants to the city are the *Poortersboeken* (citizenship register), the notarial records, and the *Certificatieboeken* (certificate books). Most of these sources are available on microfilm at the Family History Library, but some are only available in Belgian archives. Researchers should not overlook these sources when tracing Antwerp's early modern immigrant population.

¹¹ Stadsarchief Antwerpen (SAA), *Certificatieboeken* 5, f^o 49, October 25, 1542 (author's translation).

¹² Notariële akten, 1524–1543, J. De Platea (1532), 189-90 (FHL Film #1069420).

¹³ Stadsarchief Antwerpen, T-1275, Vreemde Crediteuren (16th–18th centuries), unnumbered pages.

¹⁴ See the baptism register for the Antwerp's Onze Lieve Vrouw Kerk (Our Lady's Church) for 1577 (FHL Film #621561).

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