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## Bosnian Jewry: A Small Community Meets a Unique Challenge During the 1990s War

Ivan Ceresnjes, September 16, 2007

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### Interview with Ivan Ceresnjes

- During wars, Jewish communities often become scapegoats and victims of the combatants. In the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s, the opposite happened. The Jewish community in the country's capital Sarajevo extended humanitarian services indiscriminately to people of all religions and was respected by the three warring parties, Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Roman Catholic Croats.
- Support from the American Joint Distribution Committee and other foreign groups enabled the Jewish community to provide free food, medicine, as well as radio and mail services.
- During the battle for Sarajevo the Jewish community evacuated a thousand Jews and two thousand non-Jews in eleven convoys and planes.
- At present, six Jewish communities remain in Bosnia-Herzegovina with a total of a thousand members. Of these seven hundred are in Sarajevo and the remainder in Mostar, Zenica, Tuzla, Banja Luka, and Doboij.

During wars, Jewish communities often become scapegoats and victims of the combatants. In the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s, the opposite happened. The Jewish community in the country's capital Sarajevo extended humanitarian services indiscriminately to people of all religions and was respected by the three warring parties, Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Roman Catholic Croats.

Ivan Ceresnjes, an architect who now lives in Jerusalem, was chairman of the Sarajevo Jewish War community at the time of the war. He also was vice-president of the Yugoslav Federation of Jewish Communities. In the 1990 Bosnian presidential elections, Ceresnjes was a candidate for the seat on the country's seven-person presidency reserved for someone who did not belong to the three large ethnic groups. He received over a third of the vote but because of political maneuvering a "Yugoslav" candidate, Ejup Ganic who had joined the Muslim SDA party, was elected.

### Preparing for the Eventuality of War

About the war Ceresnjes relates: "The military offensive for control of Sarajevo started on 6 April 1992. Bosnian Serb soldiers fired at the town from three sides. Three weeks later the town's siege was complete. In March Sarajevo citizens of the various religions had still marched together in favor of peace in Bosnia."

Ceresnjes remarks that he had seen the war coming for a long time. "I suggested to our community members to take some money out of their bank accounts and transfer it abroad. At the time this could only be done under special conditions. For instance, Muslims who went on the Hajj to Mecca were allowed to withdraw around \$2,000-3,000 for that purpose. I wrote to the banks that Jews had also an important holiday coming up-Tisha B'Av-and should be allowed to take out money for a visit to Israel. Surprisingly few members of the community availed themselves of this opportunity. They did not understand where the political situation in Bosnia was leading.

"To prepare for the eventuality of war I obtained 350 Israeli visas in the Belgian embassy in still-valid Yugoslav passports. On behalf of the community, I attended a meeting of NGOs of all religions where Red Cross representatives were also present. In 1990 we had revived the community's charity La Benevolencija, which had been founded in 1892. In 1946 it had been banned by the Yugoslav communist government.

"Few attendants of that meeting took the situation seriously even though in Croatia the war between the Orthodox Serbs and Roman Catholic Croats had been going on since 1991. By then Merhamet, a Muslim NGO in Sarajevo, was already receiving aid from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Kuwait. After that meeting only one foreign NGO reacted, the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). They had been supporting the Yugoslav Jewish community since 1920 as part of their regular activity, which they continued. Even though the JDC was not prepared for the possible outburst of hostilities, they acted quickly."

### Planning for Evacuation

"When the firing on Sarajevo started we organized the evacuation of those in the Jewish community who wanted to leave. We arranged to have a former Yugoslav-army plane come to the Sarajevo airport to pick up our members. The

official Serb version is that it was made available free of charge. In reality we paid heavily for it-officially and unofficially.

"We decided that even though Serbia was considered an enemy state by Bosnia, its capital Belgrade was the better destination for the evacuees. The JNA-the Serb-controlled Yugoslav army, which was still in charge at the Sarajevo airport-might have reacted very negatively if we had chosen to send the plane to the Croatian capital Zagreb. The war between Croatian Serbs and the Serb-controlled rump Yugoslavia on one side and Croatian Roman Catholics on the other was then still going on.

"When our members arrived at the airport there was shooting by Bosnian Serb irregulars through the terminal hall, despite the JNA presence. Thousands of people had gathered at the airport because the air services to Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia were still functioning. Our group came together on the first floor waiting to enter the arriving plane via the connecting bridge. Because of the shooting, however, the aircraft stopped in the middle of the runway.

"On the ground floor of the terminal suddenly doors opened and a flood of women, youngsters, and children ran out to the plane. The JNA had informed its officers in Sarajevo about the plane's expected arrival. They used the occasion to evacuate their families on our plane.

"The pilot together with the navigator came to tell us what had happened. The plane had space for 350 persons, as all seats had been removed. The pilot said that he still had a hundred places available. We threatened him and then he pulled out a pistol, saying he would kill us if we didn't let him do his job. So we sent only a hundred people with him."

## An Exchange of Words

"Thereafter I asked to see the JNA person in charge of the airport. From his office I called the general in Belgrade who was in charge of our operation and told him that if he did not call the plane back, I would give an interview to the international TV crews at the airport and tell what had happened including specifying those who had received bribes to allow the plane to come in.

"After an exchange of words the general promised that he would solve the problem within an hour. He soon called me and said he was flying in two planes from a military airport in western Bosnia. They had three hundred places available. On the seats we did not need, we took whoever else wanted to leave.

"At the time the Bosnian Jewish community numbered 2,000 of whom 1,300 were in Sarajevo. From Sarajevo three evacuations by air, using five planes, took place in the first weeks of the war, removing up to five hundred Jews as well as many others. Thereafter evacuations took place with great difficulty-by bus convoys-while the battle for Sarajevo raged. By its end the Jewish community had organized eleven evacuations that took three thousand people from the embattled city including one thousand Jews.

"Bosnian president Alija Izetbegović requested that Jews should not depart, saying it was a bad omen for the country if they did. Indeed, foreign journalists routinely asked whether the Jews were leaving the city. I replied to Izetbegović that only the old, sick, and children were departing. In fact, we also evacuated non-Jewish and Jewish youngsters who did not want to be drafted. My own family stayed on for five more months so we could show him that the Jewish community's leaders were not running away."

## The Battle Flares Up

"On the first of May 1992 the battle for Sarajevo, which was now totally surrounded, flared up. There were many fires in the city. People shot at each other across the river. There were corpses all around. For weeks close to the river the corpse of a young Serbian soldier was lying in a personnel carrier because nobody dared to take it out.

"One of the sites from which the Bosnian Serbs were shooting at the city was the old Jewish cemetery, which was damaged during the war. It is on unstable ground on a hill and may disappear altogether in the coming decades.

"The first day of major shooting my family stayed in the cellar of our home. When the fighting slowed a bit, our neighborhood in the New City-where the front line was two hundred meters from our home-came alive again. I walked six kilometers to the Jewish community center in the Old City. There were corpses on the street, shops had been burned, and defenders of Sarajevo were looting them."

## Starting Humanitarian Activities

"For a few days I went under sniper fire on foot from home to the community center to meet other leaders of the community and volunteers. We soon realized that walking was too dangerous because the barracks of the JNA troops were in the narrow connection between the Old and New cities. It became known worldwide as the 'sniper alley of death.'

"UN troops had by then established a base at the airport. They showed themselves in the city but didn't do anything. When people tried to run for safety from the embattled town over the runway of the airport, the UN stopped them. In 1993 the Bosnian government started to dig a tunnel under the runway to create a link with the outside.

"We obtained a car to collect the volunteers in the new part of the city and drove them every day to the community center. There was great confusion yet some food suppliers remained in the city and with JDC money we bought food and medicine. La Benevolencija opened a pharmacy in the community center where those who managed to arrive could get medicine for free. The pressure soon became too great and we approached the Muslim owner of a no-longer-functioning metal shop on the other side of the road asking whether we could move the pharmacy there. He let us use his shop for free.

"La Benevolencija also operated two additional free pharmacies elsewhere in the city. Later we also began the distribution of free food to those who came irrespective of people's persuasion. The Roman Catholic charities exclusively took care of Catholics unless one was willing to convert. The Muslim charities only looked after Muslims. Nobody tended to the Orthodox Serbs because they were considered enemies. Mainly people from the Old City, who were refused

elsewhere, came to us. Others didn't dare because of the shooting. At the community center a placard was hung saying that no politics should be discussed there."

## The Food Convoys

"After some time we established 'Friends of La Benevolencija' support organizations abroad. The first one was in the Netherlands where the government gave donations as well. There were also such organizations in Switzerland, Germany, and France. The major problem, however, was transport. Only rarely did we get some help there from the UN.

"Usually I would hire private truck owners from whom we created a convoy. During the battle of Sarajevo, which lasted from April 1992 till November 1995, we managed to bring in one hundred thousand tons of supplies. It was also difficult to find gasoline, which was the most important merchandise around and was stolen by everybody. Almost always we initiated the convoys on the Bosnian-Croatian side. Twice we used the territory of the Bosnian Serbs as point of origin.

"To get these convoys through the checkpoints, we had to inform the warring parties that the trucks contained only food and medicine. We also had to supply them a list of all goods transported. They forbade high-tariff items such as chocolates, coffee, cigarettes, and cosmetics. We soon realized that we got no protein-rich food such as meat, but only pasta, beans, and oil. The French brought in two trucks of bottled water because they rightly assessed that water supplies would be stopped.

"The world tried to help Sarajevo, where the citizens really suffered. The electricity, gas, and water supplies were under Serbian control but supervised by the UN. UN soldiers would sometimes escort the engineers who came to repair the installations, but wouldn't stay to protect them. After they left the Serbs and sometimes the Bosnians would switch the supply off again."

## Evacuating More People

"I could leave the besieged town by car and, by permission of all three warring sides, pass their checkpoints. I had a paper as a JDC representative and the illiterate soldiers manning the checkpoints saw me as a representative of the Americans and let me through. The word also spread that the Jewish community was feeding and curing people in Sarajevo, which made us respected.

"Since the airport was closed we had to take out people in buses. The first of eight such convoys was in August 1992; the last one in February 1994. The Bosnian government was often very unhappy with these. They said we were taking out draftees, people aged 17-55 and professionals needed for defense, and also were giving enemies the occasion to leave the city such as relatives of Bosnian Serbs. During the first period of the war everybody fought against everybody. Croats and Muslim Bosnians, Serbs and Muslim Bosnians, Croats and Serbs. It was a religious war, as all people were more or less of the same ethnicity.

"Once we obtained fifty-five Israeli passports, a great service that the Israeli government provided. By using them forty-eight people were able to leave Sarajevo, but the other seven were arrested. This was not because they were Jews but because Muslims needed these passports, probably for terrorist activities.

"There were many Palestinians who had studied in Yugoslavia fighting with the Bosnian Muslims. There were also Afghans, Chechens, and various other Arab nationalities. One cannot say they were terrorists because they were wearing Bosnian military uniforms. Only after two months did we get the last passport back. It had been opened and cut into pieces. We destroyed the returned passports and informed the Israeli authorities of their numbers.

"The convoy with which my wife and children left was initially stopped and hijacked by Bosnian Croats. One of them, however, recognized my wife and thereafter they helped escort them to Croatia. One of the convoys with evacuees I accompanied was also attacked when we traveled through the Serb part of Bosnia and another, carrying food, was attacked in the Croatian part. It was very important to choose the right drivers, who could pass through Muslim, Serb, and Croatian areas without being killed. That was one reason why in almost every convoy a member of the Jewish community had to be present."

## Communications with the Outside World

Ceresnjes tells about another major contribution the JDC made. "They gave us a radio station where all those holed up in Sarajevo could communicate with their family members abroad. The JDC also paid the phone bills.

"Mail, we initially sent out by buses. The JDC paid for the postage from Zagreb to its destination. The UN, however, started to confiscate mail for what they called 'security reasons.' We then managed to get through the JDC Israeli flak jackets that had ceramics inside. We removed the ceramics and the space thus created could be used to transport mail by those who left the city with these jackets.

"The UN's rules obliged it to allow representatives from humanitarian organizations on their flights. One could only get on wearing a flak jacket and a helmet. One also needed a UN blue card, which was meant for certain categories of people. Against its rules the UN also sold these cards to others provided they had the money to pay.

"One day a Swede of Jewish descent offered his services to the community. He was a musician and was willing to do anything we asked, including washing dishes. As he had a blue card for some reason or another, he became our mailman flying on UN planes and smuggling letters in and out.

"One person whose memory I particularly cherish is Simon Wiesenthal. He sent us bags of money with small German coins. He knew that if you pay with big banknotes people will not give you change."

## The Community Today

"About one thousand Jews from Sarajevo left for Israel and another two hundred went to other countries such as Spain, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Of these about three hundred returned.

"Today the remaining Bosnian Jewish community numbers one thousand members, of whom seven hundred are in Sarajevo. Since the war started hundreds of new members have joined. We knew about the people who because of their or their parents' Holocaust experiences, did not want to register with the community. The same happened all over the former Yugoslav Federation. We had six thousand members registered in communities and estimated that there was at least a similar number of Jews who were not members."

Ceresnjes explains that the criteria for community membership are broadly similar to those of the Israeli Law of Return. "The number of halachic Jews among them is not known; it is probably less than half.

"There are five other Jewish communities in Bosnia today, respectively Mostar, Tuzla, and Zenica in the Bosnian-Croatian part of the country and Doboje and Banja Luka in the Bosnian Serb republic. Despite the division between the country's two entities the Jewish community organization functions as one.

"There remains only one functioning synagogue in Bosnia, the former Ashkenazi one in Sarajevo. The synagogue part has been downsized and the remainder is used as a community center. The great Sephardic synagogue was partly blown up by local sympathizers of Germany during World War II. It has been donated to the city and refurbished to serve as a cultural center.

"There are several other former synagogue buildings in Sarajevo, such as the Old Temple, presently the Jewish Museum; the New Synagogue, part of it is now La Benevolencija's art gallery; Il Kal di la Bilava, presently occupied by squatters; and the former Jewish Theological Seminary, presently a building with numerous offices. None of these is owned anymore by the Jewish community."

## The Smaller Communities

"In some smaller Jewish communities former synagogue buildings still stand but are no longer owned by the Jewish community. In Zenica the former synagogue is in use as a museum. The remnants of the Jewish communities fulfill a symbolic role because they are not Serb, Bosnian, or Croat. The Jewish community of Mostar numbers forty people. Its former synagogue had been donated decades ago to the municipality and is now a puppet theater. Yet as a damaged Orthodox church, a Catholic one, and a mosque are being rebuilt, also a sign has gone up for a new synagogue in Mostar. The need for it is doubtful and one wonders whether it will go beyond the first stone that was solemnly laid.

"In Tuzla the Sephardic synagogue and the adjacent house of the rabbi and the school still stand, and the community is trying to regain ownership. In Banja Luka there is no synagogue.

"In Doboje, however, a non-Jewish Serb benefactor gave the money for the construction of a new synagogue. It was inaugurated with the blessing of the Serb bishop and a Serb church choir sang there, but it holds no services. The town never had a synagogue; the small community wanted to build one between the world wars but was too poor to pay for it."

## Holocaust Memorials

"A painful chapter concerns Holocaust memorials. During World War II large parts of Bosnia belonged to Croatia, a puppet state protected by Nazi Germany. This Roman Catholic state was, if at all possible, even more perverse in its persecutions than the Germans. Murder by gunshot in a Croatian concentration camp was a luxury."

Ceresnjes observes: "There are many Holocaust sites in Croatia and Bosnia the remnants of which are gradually fading. For instance, there is a 'small' extermination camp, Kruscica, near the town of Travnik. There three thousand people were killed by the inhabitants during the two months of its functioning, among them one thousand Jews. They are not referred to on the monument, which only mentions the murdered Serbs. Those now living near the site are the children or grandchildren of the murderers."

The major World War II memorial in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo is in a dilapidated state. It was severely damaged in the last decade's war. In its Holocaust sections only a few stone letters remain from the names of the over seven thousand murdered Jews from the town. Ceresnjes says: "The letters taken away are sometimes affixed to crosses, an ultimate insult." He adds: "The memorial is unlikely to be rebuilt because that would mean making political choices with regard to who were the perpetrators or the victims in World War II."

There also was a Palestinian Arab criminal element in the Bosnian Holocaust history. During World War II, the mufti of Jerusalem visited Bosnia to help recruit a Muslim Bosnian SS division. He also helped establish a Kosovo Muslim unit. Both murdered local Jews as part of their criminal activities.

Ceresnjes concludes: "Sarajevo has been an important Jewish community since the early sixteenth century. Its present small institutions try to keep that memory alive. The Jewish community's role in the siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian war has been documented by many journalists and by the Italian national television RAI in a documentary titled The Children of Abraham that memorializes Sarajevo's most recent Jewish history."

*Interviewed by Manfred Gerstenfeld*

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### About Ivan Ceresnjcs

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