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JEWISH WOMEN IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

by Ana Lebl

The earliest traces of Jewish presence on the territory of the former Yugoslavia are archaeological finds from Roman times. We have so far excavated remains with Jewish symbols from over ten different sites. An epitaph found in ancient Pola (Croatia) from the second or third centuries C.E. bears the name of Aurelia Soteria. Her sons, Soter and Stephanus, dedicated the monument to the memory of their mother, God-fearing and pious sympathizer of the Jewish religion.



After a gap of many centuries, the earliest written sources on the Jewish presence in this area date from the fourteenth century. The largest wave of Jews arrived in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, following the expulsion from Spain and Portugal. Sixteenth-century documents also offer some information on Jewish women. We read, for example, about Donna Gracia Mendez Nasi, born in Lisbon. She is remembered for her outstanding knowledge, intellect, wealth, and business relations, all of which she used to help Jews in need. She was recorded to have visited Dubrovnik, in Croatia, on her way from Italy to Constantinople in 1553.

More substantial information on Jewish women exists from the mid-nineteenth century. It was the period of great social changes, in Jewish as well as the greater society. On the territory of the former Yugoslavia there were both *sephardi* and *ashkenazi* communities. Typical examples of nineteenth century Jewish centers are the predominantly *sephardi* Sarajevo in Bosnia, *sephardi* and *ashkenazi* Belgrade in Serbia and mostly *ashkenazi* Zagreb in Croatia.

Bosnia had been part of the Turkish Empire for four centuries. From old photographs, we can see that *sephardi* women in Sarajevo were dressed very much like Turkish women, possibly respected and opulent, but hidden behind their clothes. In 1878, the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia slowly brought in a European flavor, a new way of life, which is obvious from the fashionable women's dresses. The way women were dressed indicated their social status and their life-style.

Laura Papo-Bohoreta, born in Sarajevo in 1891, was an exceptional Jewish woman of her time. The most recent and detailed source for her life and work is a book on Judeo-Spanish literature in Bosnia and Herzegovina published in Sarajevo during the war of 1992. She spoke six languages, taught French and literature, wrote poetry, short stories, plays and prose, including 15 pieces in various Jewish magazines between 1924 and 1936. Her essay named in Ladino "*La muser sefardi de Bosna*" meaning "*Sephardi* woman of Bosnia," was written between 1931 and 1932. Two hand-written versions of it are still kept at the City Archive of Sarajevo (as are most of her other works). They have not been published or translated. Perhaps such a translation would be a project for the HRIJW.

Realizing that the old *sephardi* dresses and traditions were starting to disappear, she wrote a study of the *sephardi* woman in Bosnia at the turn of the century. Bohoreta described in detail the woman, her home, her neighbors, cooking, holidays, weddings, children, charities, her relationship with her mother-in law. She described the *sephardi* woman of 19th century Sarajevo as very proud, concealing her problems, moral to the point of fanaticism, merry, curious, patient. Bohoreta also compiled texts and music of old *sephardi* romances, proverbs, rituals and traditions.

European influence was stronger and came earlier to the ashkenazi communities of Zagreb and Belgrade. There, *ashkenazi* women, usually wealthy, were dressed like their European neighbors. We can see their leisurely life-style in the style of their dresses. The fact that 15-20 meters of textile were used for each dress and that the ritual of getting dressed obviously required plenty of time, shows that they lived in comfort, had a lot of free time and were allowed to show off in public.

The social changes of the second half of the nineteenth century brought emancipation to European Jews. They began to work in new professions and became more integrated in non-Jewish society. The founding of the first associations of Jewish women in what was Yugoslavia coincided with the establishment of similar non-Jewish organizations.

Women gradually gained the right to education and participation in social and public life. The first school for Jewish girls from age six to 13 was opened in Belgrade in 1864, only four years after the first girls' school in the area. Attendance was, at the beginning, only a privilege of girls from well-to-do families. For a few more years, higher education was restricted to private, expensive schools. Girls there could study, together with non-Jewish girls, music, foreign languages and handicrafts for a year or two. In Serbia, schools became obligatory for girls in only in 1882.

Despite differences in traditions notable until the second world war, both *sephardi* and *ashkenazi* women organized into Jewish women's associations that had similar ideas and goals. The first women's charitable "ladies' societies" of the mid-19th century in Croatia were multi-ethnic and multi-religious, including Jewish women as active members. The first Jewish women's associations in Croatia were created in 1861 in Vukovar and in 1887 in Zagreb. The women who created these philanthropic societies were usually from wealthy homes, educated far above the level of the majority of women, and natural leaders. The first women's organization in Belgrade was the Jewish Women's Association, founded in 1874. Soon after, the Ladies' Society was established in Sarajevo too.

The main motivation for these societies was the same as today: to be able to help the needy. The charitable work included helping impoverished, pregnant and ill women, gathering dowries for poor girls and providing various means of relief to the members of the community. In times of economic crisis, the differentiation between members grew bigger. It was important to overcome the disparities and to enable every woman to feel comfortable, not to lose her dignity. Each member of the women's society had the feeling of belonging, and an opportunity to contribute and help others in one way or another.

In times of war, urgent charitable and humanitarian actions left no time for planning. During the Balkan wars Jewish women took active part as volunteer nurses, in collecting and producing donations for hospitals and for the wounded. The *sephardi* community provided everything necessary for a military hospital of 100 beds and the *ashkenazi* community organized "The 22nd reserve military hospital for *ashkenazi* Jews" with 40 places. All nurses were members of the Jewish Women's Societies.

Neti Munk is the example of a Jewish woman whose activities brought her the recognition of non-Jews. Born into a wealthy Jewish family in Belgrade in 1865, Neti Munk was a volunteer nurse in all wars between 1885 and 1918. She was awarded the highest military, Red Cross, crown and church medals and plaques of the time. She was one of the most active members of the Executive Board of the Jewish Women's Society. She was buried in 1924 at the Jewish military cemetery in Belgrade with the highest military honors.

At the turn of the 20th century there were eleven Jewish women's associations in Croatia alone. That number increased during the first decades of the 20th century to 31 organizations in 1929. In the 1920s, many Jewish girls in Croatia studied in Jewish schools and had their *bat mitzvah*. They grew up fully conscious of their future role and joined Jewish Ladies' Societies as a natural continuation of their education.

Until the end of the first world war, *sephardi* and *ashkenazi* women's organizations were separate. WIZO, the Women's Zionist Organization, founded in Zagreb in 1924, put all Jewish women together in one organization. Left-oriented Zionist girls' movements focused on promoting Palestine, studied Jewish topics, organized cultural and sports activities and also read and studied communist, often forbidden, literature.

Jula Weiner said in her speech at the founding conference of WIZO in Zagreb: "The status of a poor Jewish woman in some of our towns is desperate. It is not enough to visit them once or twice a year during our philanthropic campaigns. WIZO has to find ways of improving their social and economic status." By 1930 WIZO already existed in all, large and small, Jewish communities in Yugoslavia. In 1940 there were as many as 67 WIZO organizations in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Between the two World Wars, the number of Jewish and non-Jewish women's associations increased rapidly, with Jewish women as members of both. For example, in 1928 Paulina Lebl Albala, an active Zionist, founded the "Yugoslav Association of Women with University Degrees" in Belgrade.

The importance the Jewish community attributed to women is evident from the article called "The status of the Jewish woman," written by the Chief Rabbi of Vrsac Dr. Hinko Urbach in 1927. The Rabbi compliments "our charitable women's societies that do invaluable humanitarian, social, hygienic and educational work, full of understanding for social needs, with a lot of sensibility for calm and tender generosity, without much talking and spectacle."

The period after the WWI was peaceful and fruitful for women's societies. There were about 35,000 Jewish women in Yugoslavia in the period before the second world war. They organized many events, including activities oriented towards the education and health of children, and towards young mothers and their problems. Jewish summer camps were organized for hundreds of Jewish children. During the 1930s, thousands of Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia found temporary haven in Yugoslavia. Jewish women's organizations helped them in many ways, before they faced the same fate in 1940.

Of the 71,000 Jews in Yugoslavia registered in 1939, only about 12,000 survived the war. Of the entire Jewish population of Yugoslavia 83% perished in the Holocaust. Five aliyot of Yugoslav Jews left for Israel between 1948 and 1952. Only 6,200 Jews remained in Yugoslavia.

Of the 35,000 Jewish women in Yugoslavia before the war, only about 7,500 survived the *Shoah*. They returned after the most terrifying experiences, many with their husbands and children missing or killed, their homes burnt. Yet, hundreds of orphans, as well as old and sick and hungry people, needed help. Jewish women found new strength to distribute aid parcels, to cook meals, to reopen kindergartens and old age homes.

It was not before 1951 that women were able to renew Jewish women's organizations. By then, only about 2,700 Jewish women remained in Yugoslavia. The Jewish women's sections were revived in Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo and in a dozen smaller towns. They all united into the Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections of Yugoslavia in 1958.

Although Yugoslavia at that time was a Communist country, there was relative freedom of religion. Since it had always been a multi-national country, national minorities were accorded the right to keep their traditions. There were no Jewish schools, but there were numerous other activities. Jewish summer camps were permitted, as well as other country-wide Jewish youth gatherings. It was possible for Yugoslav Jews to cross the borders and travel to Israel and other western countries. *Madrichim* (group leaders) from Israel and the USA were also able to participate in our summer camps, etc. Unlike in other eastern European countries, it was no problem for Jews to declare themselves as Jews, without facing any discrimination or anti-Semitism. In many ways, the situation of Jews in Yugoslavia is similar to that of Jews in some post-war western European countries. The Jewish women's sections organized many public Jewish activities, even during the 1950s, such as lectures about the state of Israel, and on aspects of Judaism, as well as about local Yugoslav themes – something unheard of in other Communist countries at that time.

The 40 years from 1951 to 1991 were prosperous in the work of individual women's sections and in the Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections of Yugoslavia. In other Eastern European countries, the Communist years are usually described as the Dark Ages, when everything Jewish was forbidden. But in the Jewish community of Belgrade, for example, during only three months of 1958, there were 14 lectures given for several hundred women. The topics ranged from Judaism and the modern state of Israel, medicine, arts and education, to the analysis of the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. All the Jewish holidays were celebrated along with official Yugoslav and international communist holidays. The Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections became a member of ICJW and Jewish Child's Day, and kept in close contact with the women's section of the Association of Yugoslav Jews in the USA, Swiss Women's Union etc. This Coordination existed for 33 years.

The partition of the former Yugoslavia resulted in the establishment of several countries (namely: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Macedonia and Yugoslavia) each with growing national and religious feelings of their majorities and at the expense of the identity of the minorities. In 1991 the Coordination of Jewish Women's Sections of Yugoslavia ended its existence.

However, all of the new countries still have some form of Jewish women's organizations. In Bosnia, the war in 1992 dictated the activities of the Jewish community. A dozen Jewish women who remained in the hell of Sarajevo, under the leadership of their president Sonja Elazar, organized themselves for work in war conditions. These courageous women did not only look after themselves, but managed to help the weak, elderly, and sick. The Jewish Women's Society provided help for all that needed it, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, often risking their lives. They named their section after Laura Papo-Bohoreta, but each and every of them deserves to be called a Bohoreta of the present.

The Jewish Women's Union of Croatia is based in Zagreb. It consists of women's sections of Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, Split and Dubrovnik with about 150 members. The Union of Jewish Women of Croatia is a member of the ICJW and is connected to other international Jewish women's organizations.

The Jewish community of Split, where I live, has about 120 members, of which 65 or 55% are female. Out of 45 women, 20 are registered with our women's section. During the war in Bosnia from 1992-1996, Split was the main center for getting people and goods to and from Sarajevo. Women from the Jewish community in Split played a vital role welcoming people who came in Jewish convoys from Sarajevo.

Exhausted and hungry refugees, desperate after leaving their homes and their past, found women who cared. Many of them were old people, Holocaust survivors, refugees for the second time, who often fled Sarajevo with not more than one bag.

Lenka Montiljo-Bilalagic, herself a refugee from Sarajevo, initiated the work of the Menorah club for needlework. She organized a group of refugees accommodated in hotels in Makarska, to sit, chat and work together during their endless refugee days. They crocheted *kippot* of their own design. The *kippot* were distributed and sold through the JDC in western countries. That way their dull refugee days became shorter and they regained some measure of being useful again, of earning some money and not being completely dependent on relief to keep going and to preserve their dignity.

Thanks to generous help from American Jewry, through the UJA and the AJJDC, many food and clothing packages reached Split, and, from here, other places. Jewish women tirelessly helped in the distribution of aid. Jewish refugees were all accommodated safely and comfortably. Some elderly refugees, who could not go on traveling and moving, remained in Split. Our community became their new home and family. Women from Sarajevo enriched our women's section.

Today, the Women's section is the most active part of the Jewish community in Split. The section meets once or twice a month to discuss current problems and needs. We organize visits to the lonely and sick members, and try to attract more, especially younger women. The members of the section prepare food and decoration for all our communal celebrations and are the best lecture audience. Our members travel to various meetings in Croatia and other countries. Four of our members took part in the last ICJW meeting in Prague in May 1998.

Despite the fact that we are a very small community and although active young women are few, our daughters are a promise of a bright future!

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