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## TRAGEDY OF THE KLADOVO-ŠABAC TRANSPORT REFUGEE RELIEF BOARD

*By Ženi Lebl*

The first emigrants from Germany started arriving in Yugoslavia immediately after the National Socialists came to power, in late February 1933. Individuals or entire families arrived with or without luggage, some with money, others possessing no more than what little clothes they were wearing. The first bigger Jewish center close to the northern border was the one in Zagreb, which had been granted full autonomy by the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers of Yugoslavia (SJVOJ). With the Federation's approval, the Zagreb Center set up the Refugee Relief Board, headed by Dr. Makso Pšerhof, the Center's vice-president. Aleksa Klajn was appointed its secretary (later Arnon).

In collaboration with other Jewish organizations in Zagreb, several commissions responsible for financial, cultural, educational, medical, social, religious, legal and other matters were established within the Board. The Center supported this complex project by providing office space and administrative staff.

Fortunately, generous individuals who volunteered to work for the Board did not lack in those days. Among them, Marko Rozner, an industrialist from Maribor, stood out. A compassionate and openhanded man, he not only sponsored and staffed the entire first-aid service, paid for the railway tickets and other traveling costs, but also – with the tacit approval of the local authorities – organized housing and financed soup kitchens. What's more, he helped the illegal immigrants get re-

leased from jail. This particular work was of great help to the Board.

In 1933 and 1934, the Board in Zagreb registered approximately 4,400 refugees each year. To stay in Yugoslavia, they were required to have temporary residence permits, as well as the Federation's guarantee that the burden of their maintenance would not fall to the state. These documents were quite difficult to obtain, as they depended on the administrative discretion of the Interior Minister Anton Korošec himself (1872-1940), known for his anti-Jewish stance. At first, the majority of refugees stayed in inland Croatia and Slovenia, and later spread to Serbia, Vojvodina, Bosnia and Dalmatia. In fact, the actual number of Jewish refugees in the territory of Yugoslavia exceeded the official figures, because some of them had never contacted Jewish organizations for assistance.

Having realized that Yugoslavia's small Jewish community would not be able to sustain this huge effort on its own, the Federation focused its attention on establishing connections with Jewish institutions abroad. Soon, links were created with the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, or the Joint, and HICEM – Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in New York, i.e. their offices in Paris, which provided wide-range assistance to the refugees in Yugoslavia. The Palestinian bureau of the Yugoslav Zionist Association did all the necessary paperwork to get as many immigration certificates as possible, while Joint and HICEM provided immigration visas for overseas countries. The Yugoslav section of Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) already from 1934 ran a successful campaign for collecting clothes, shoes, underwear, bedclothes, books, toys and other items. It also provided nursing care for the sick.

In September 1935, after the anti-Jewish racial Nuremberg Laws were put into force, the Yugoslav Zionist Association, with the financial and moral support of social, women's and youth organizations, set up the first preparatory agricultural centers, called the Hachshara, for the refugees from Germany.

Between 1935 and 1938 the number of temporary-refuge seekers in Yugoslavia dropped, probably because the Jews believed that the situation in the Reich had stabilized and that the persecution would stop.

On March 11, 1938, Hitler annexed Austria, changing its name into Ostmark and making it a part of the great Third Reich. The persecution of Jews in Ostmark in the aftermath of the Anschluss was even more severe than in Germany. Panic and despair set in. For many, intellectuals in particular, suicide was the only way out. The Jewish Zionist organizations, particularly youth groups, loud advocates of immigration to Palestine (despite a constant shortage of certificates) had already before organized the Hachshara, which gave the prospective immigrants a vocational training in farming, thus preparing them for a new life in the land of their fathers. After the Anschluss, these groups were flooded with applications from disillusioned "Austrians of Moses' faith", who, rather than applying for ideological reasons, used them as "travel agencies" to get out of the Nazi hell. These organizations struggled to get the certificates, which were getting increasingly scarce. All legal channels exhausted, people traveled in illegal *alyah*, groups that worked with young immigrants to Palestine, despite all the dangers at the border crossings, on the roads and rivers. In this way, around 4,800 immigrants from Austria arrived in Yugoslavia right after the Annexation.

### The Group From the No-Man's-Land

Since 1938, the number of Jews who had burned their bridges behind them and were left with no place to go was constantly on the rise. New obstacles were still ahead of them: barriers at border crossings and discriminative immigration policies. As a result, many of those expelled, humiliated, naked, ba-

refoot, starving and freezing people remained on the other side of the border.

By mid March 1938, shortly before the Pesach, the Refugee Relief Board received the news that the entire Jewish population was driven out from Burgenland, a triangle of land between Austria, Yugoslavia and Hungary. The town of Rechnitz was hit particularly hard. Because the Yugoslav authorities denied them entrance, some 60 families counting at least 120 persons, were left there, in the open, in the narrow strip of the no-man's-land, at the threshold of Yugoslavia, near the town of Murska Sobota.

This was the first real test for the Board: the situation required that these people be contacted urgently, provided accommodation and food, and the Ministry of Interior convinced to grant them asylum in Yugoslavia.

That same day, Aleksa Klajn, the Board's secretary, and a certain Wohlmüt, whose sister was among the refugees, drove to the border. The refugees were allowed to use the customs warehouse for provisional shelter.

The refugees' major concern was that Yugoslavia would not grant them entrance, which would certainly result in their forceful repatriation and disaster. Indeed, Klajn could see policemen on the other side of the state line, standing right next to the gate and shouting that the refugees' return to Austria was out of question. If Yugoslavia was not to have them, they were to be deported straight to the Dachau concentration camp.

The arrival of the group of refugees was reported to the nearest two Jewish centers, in Donja Lendava and Murska Sobota, which immediately organized a shipment of supplies. Already on the next day, Klajn telephoned to Šime Špicer, the president of the Federation, and asked him to urgently intervene with the Interior Ministry. Without delay, Špicer contacted the head of the Ministry's visa department, Dr. Hocevar, who said that Minister Korošec alone made all the decisions regarding Jewish refugees. Going directly to the Minister seemed li-

ke the only solution. It turned out that Korošec was away on a leave "somewhere in Slovenia". As he was needed at once, Dr. Peršhof drove to Slovenia that same evening to locate him. Where he looked, whom he talked to and how he finally learned that Korošec was in a hotel near Rogaška Slatina is not known. Also, it is not known how he managed to get Korošec to see him. All in all, he left without any firm guarantee, but the refugees were indeed granted asylum for a period of eight days, allowing the Jewish community to work out an appropriate solution "excluding the option of their staying in Yugoslavia".

Of course, HICEM and the Joint were notified at once, but it was clear in advance that eight days was too tight a deadline for finding a viable solution. The asylum had to be extended to six months, the time needed to obtain immigration documents for Palestine or overseas countries.

Given that Princess Olga, the wife of Prince Regent Pavle, was a close relative of the Duke of Kent, one of the sons of King George V, someone suggested that the British royal home be asked to prevail with Prince Pavle to talk to Yugoslav Prime Minister Stojadinović about making Korošec's change his mind.

At that time, the representative of the German Jews in London was a certain Shalom Adler-Rudel, who was known to have had connections in the Hachshara in Goleniz. Klajn rang him at midnight one night, and because he knew that the phones were tapped, he spoke in a language that he was sure no one would understand, using phrases such as "a possibility of intervention through Mr. Meleh" (the King) and his mishpah (family), whose havera (member) was in kesher (related to) with our malhut (the royal family) and that he should send his regards to Medina (the state) and advise savlanut (patience), etc. Adler-Ruder understood. Two days before the deadline expired, Špicer informed Klajn that he was summoned to Dr. Hocevar's office the next day to bring the list with the names of the people from the no-man's-land. Somehow, the group was granted a three-month extension of stay "with moral and material responsibility and at the expense of the country's (Jewish) community, with the obli-

gation to leave the state". While still in Hocevar's office, Špicer called Dr. Fridrih Pops, the president of the Federation of the Jewish Religious Centers of Yugoslavia, and suggested Podravska Slatina as the place of temporary residence. The head of the local Jewish center there, Artur Bauer, was immediately notified and all the details regarding accommodation were arranged. Within 48 hours, the group from the no-man's-land was transferred to Podravska Slatina. After three months, their residence permits were renewed and their numbers filled in with newcomers as some of them were gradually leaving.<sup>1</sup>

### The Evian Conference

On July 6, 1938, an international conference was held in Evian, a town on the southern coast of the Geneva Lake. It was dedicated to the possibility of migration and social rehabilitation of political refugees and victims of religious and racial persecution in Germany. The proposals set out at the conference included five major points: stop persecution, offer warranty on part of the emigrants' property, launch an international loan to support increased migration, introduce immigration facilities in the overseas countries and colonies, ensure the right to residence and work for emigrants who left their counties of origin by July 1938. However, the conference focused on just two aspects of refugee assistance: facilitating Jewish emigration from the

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<sup>1</sup> Aleksa Arnon, *Never To Be Forgotten – On the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Arrival of the First Jewish Refugees from Austria in Yugoslavia*, *Bulletin of the Association of Yugoslav Jews in Israel* (hereinafter HOJ), 4-5/1963, pp. 13-14, *Idem.*, 6-7/1963, p.19-22; Shalom Adler-Rudel (1894) was the director of the Arbeiterfursorgeamt der Judischen Organisationen Deutschlands. After the war, he lived in Jerusalem and ran the Leo Back Institute. When Klajn contacted him to find out the name of the person who had been hired to do the work, Adler-Rudel said that they were still not ready to reveal his identity. Nevertheless, he stressed that it would be interesting to know whether those who were saved in Yugoslavia were aware of the amount of effort invested into saving them and their families.

Reich and negotiating with the governments of countries which offered refuge in order to facilitate emigration and increase the number of immigrants.

The Jewish organizations found the outcome of the conference disappointing. The only success was that the United States somewhat increased the immigration quota for Jews from Germany; Australia, which until then accepted only refugees from Great Britain, decided to allow in 15,000 refugees from the Reich over a period of three years. Some Latin American countries agreed to accept a certain number of refugees as well.

### **“The Night of the Broken Glass”**

By the end of 1938, there were 800 refugees in the territory of Yugoslavia. The number of those in transit through the Yugoslav territory increased after the Munich Agreement, signed on September 29, 1938 between Hitler and Mussolini, on the one side, and Chamberlain and Daladier, on the other. The Agreement sealed the fate of Czechoslovakia by allotting its Sudeten Region to the Reich. As it is well known, after the Munich Agreement, Hitler promised that the Reich would have no further territorial claims in Europe.

Less than a month and a half later, in the night of November 9, 1938, German Jews were dealt the heaviest blow thus far. The assassination of Ernst Von Rath, secretary of the German Ambassador to France, committed by Herschel Grynszpan, a Jew, was used as a pretext for what followed. That night, known as the Night of the Broken Glass or *Kristallnacht*, massive anti-Jewish riots took place throughout Germany, leaving 90 Jews dead, and around 30,000 arrested and sent to concentration camps. Jewish property was looted and more than 270 synagogues burned down and destroyed. As a result, many Jews took their own lives, and the majority left their native land hoping to find refuge in Palestine, then under the British rule.

## New Collective Centers

Following the arrival of a large number of refugees, the authorities threatened to stop granting them temporary residence permits and to tighten border control. Severe policing measures were also in place, including strict control by the authorities, restricted movement, tighter inspection of letters and packages, etc.

The Justice Ministry drew the attention of the Federation to the cases of "fake marriages", i.e. of local Jews marrying refugees in order to help them stay in the country. Following consultations with Yugoslavia's chief rabbi Dr. Isak Alkalaj and with his consent, on October 18, 1938 the Federation sent the following note to the Jewish centers countrywide:

The Ministry of Justice drew the attention of the Federation to the fact that Jewish refugees in our country sometimes get married here. The authorities consider these marriages to be fake, that is, concluded without the genuine intention to last.

Since such marriages, providing that the information of the Ministry of Justice is correct, are potentially damaging to the common interest of our community, and since the interests of the community must be put above the interests of the individuals, the Federation advises the centers, their rabbis and other priests: to, before performing the act of marriage, examine with utmost meticulousness, and to the best of their ability, if the couple enters the matrimony with motives and aims that are in compliance with the religious and state laws. Should a particular case raise doubts regarding the existence of such legal motives, rabbis and priests shall turn to the Chief Rabbi for further instructions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The minutes of the 32nd session of the Executive Board of the Federation of the Jewish Religious Communities of Yugoslavia in Belgrade (hereinafter: the minutes, October 27, 1938).



Since the Yugoslav authorities were not in favor of the growing refugee presence in the cities, they passed the so-called Alien Jews Residence Decree, which forced the Jews to confinement in designated areas called collective centers. This stirred rather unpleasant associations, although the refugees were explained that they would not be exposed to any harm.

The Federation then decided to set up its own collective centers. True, the "protégés" were not allowed to leave the specified place of residence, but otherwise enjoyed full freedom of movement and got to choose where to live and what to eat. Accommodation options varied from hotels and private rooms, to warehouses, which were made fit for habitation, to uninhabited castles. As a rule, the refugees themselves ran the centers, under the direct control of the Federation and local Jewish centers. Several times a month, their representatives and, whenever needed, doctors visited the centers.

In the period between 1938 and 1940, 15 such centers, with a total of 3,210 dwellers, were established.<sup>3</sup>

In agreement with the Federation, Aleksa Klajn, the secretary of the Zagreb Board, traveled to London in May 1939 and found employment for approximately 60 girls as baby-sitters in Jewish households there. This was one of the activities of the Refugee Relief Board.

The assistance to refugees provided by the Yugoslav Jewish community took many forms. September 1939, the Zagreb Board learned that *Galilea*, an Italian ship that left Trieste for Haifa several days earlier, with around 600 Jewish refugees on board, arrived in the port of Sušak. Just hours away from its destination, the ship received an order from the Italian naval command to go back and stop off in Fiume (now Rijeka), then under the Italian rule. The refugees were desperate: apart from fearing forceful repatriation to the Reich, they were running out of food (the cooking on board was ritual). And even if there was enough food, they had no money to buy it.

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<sup>3</sup> The minutes of the 3rd session, May 23, 1940.

Against all the odds, Aleksa Klajn and Riki Kon, head of the Palestinian Office at the Zionist Association of Yugoslavia, managed to go to Fiume, bought fresh provisions and had them transported aboard the ship, which finally got the permission to leave for Haifa.<sup>4</sup>

### **The British White Paper and the Refugees from the Nazi Hell**

As the exodus was reaching its climax, the Jewish community learned about the publishing of the so-called White Paper. Passed in May 1939, this new British policy statement imposed drastic restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine and limited the number of new settlers to 75,000 over a five-year period, i.e. 15,000 per annum – a mere drop in the sea of those hoping to find safe haven in the land of their forefathers. This happened less than eight months after the signing of the Munich Agreement and three and half months before the beginning of the Second World War. The Arab policy of the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was that of “appeasement”, intended to win the Arabs over in case of war, which now seemed inevitable. He already had the Jews “in his pocket” as certain allies against Hitler.

The White Paper provoked violent Jewish protests, in Palestine and the Diaspora alike, but without any effect. Professor Haim Weizmann, the first to-be president of Israel, made a prophetic estimate that the quota of 75,000 souls in the following five years would not provide solution for even 5% of those condemned to death.

The White Paper fell short of estimated effect on the Palestinian Arabs, who almost unanimously sided with the Axis

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<sup>4</sup>David Levi-Dale (editor), “Helping the Refugees”, Commemorative Volume of the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities of Yugoslavia, 1919-1969, Belgrade, 1969, p. 77-79 (hereinafter: the Commemorative Volume).

Powers. The Jerusalem Mufti Hai Amin el Hussein lived in the Reich from 1941 until 1945, openly collaborating with the Axis Powers. This did not sway the British, and the White Paper remained in effect throughout the war. The British High Commissioner of Palestine, Sir Harold MacMichael, stuck firmly to the White Paper, running the affairs in Palestine with a firm hand even during the tragedy of the of the European Jews – the severest Nazi persecution and mass murders – he kept the doors of Palestine tight-closed even for those Jewish refugees who somehow managed to escape the Nazi hell.

While at first the reasoning of the Palestinian Jews was, “We shall fight against Germany as if the White Paper did not exist, and we shall fight the British as if there was no war with Germany”, the news about the massive killings of their brethren all over Europe led them to review their priorities: “We shall fight alongside the Allies against common enemy, and once we triumph over Nazism – we shall fight against the White Paper”.

### Youth Alyah

The Yugoslav Jewish community had contacts with the Children’s and Youth Alyah (hereinafter Alyah) since its foundation, even before it was officially promoted into the department of the Jewish Agency (Sohnut). Reha Freier, who first established contact with the Jewish community in Yugoslavia immediately after Hitler came to power, initiated the rescue of young Jewish men and women from Nazi Germany. This cooperation continued even as hard times began for Jews in Yugoslavia as well.

By mid 1940, Freier realized that soon her work in Germany would no longer be possible. She left Berlin for Yugoslavia. In Zagreb, she continued to organize the rescue operations of Jewish children from Germany, their reception at the border, accommodation with families, basic provisions, a brief Hachshara in Yugoslavia, immigration certificates for Palestine, passport

and transit visas – Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish and Syrian. Apart from this, she had to organize medical examinations, translation of documents, etc. Her efforts were actively supported by the Palestinian Office in Zagreb, ran by Riki Kon and Robert Veith, the Yugoslav WIZO branch, Zionist youth organizations and the Refugee Relief Board.

The problem seemed insolvable. The British Consulate in Yugoslavia was unwilling to grant visas, despite the fact that the immigration certificate was in fact one of the visa requirements. Many children did not have birth certificates, most of them were under 18 years of age and therefore not entitled to own traveling documents. And then, someone thought of contacting the Administrator of the Province of Croatia, Dr. Ivan Subašić, who once served his apprenticeship in the law office of Dr. Marko Horn, now president of the Jewish Center in Zagreb. The idea was to ask Subašić to persuade the Zagreb Chief of Police, Rikard Vikert, that it was in the interest of the Province to “get rid of those German children”. Horn and Klajn went to see Subašić, whom Vikert had already informed about the problem. Subašić was pleased that the Jewish community had taken steps towards the solution of this problem and expressed readiness to do all in his power to see those children leave Croatian territory as soon as possible. As for the passports, he delegated the deputy provincial administrator to have it all arranged with the passport department. The department required a list of applicants and their birth certificates, but “under the circumstances” the police was willing to accept the statement of the Jewish center asserting that it assumed all moral and material responsibility for them. The children under 18 needed to have escorts or be covered by an adult’s passport. All this was managed with utmost urgency. Only 48 hours later, Horn and Klajn stood in the passport department holding the list, photographs and documents. Five days later, the passports were ready.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arnon, HOJ Newsletter 6-7/1963, p. 19-22.

## The Way Out: the Danube

The waves of refugees from Germany, former Austria, the Czech-Moravian Protectorate and Slovakia did not subside. New routes of escape and to Palestine were constantly explored. The Danube River, navigable for 2,600 km through Europe, seemed like a logical choice. It connected Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, and Belgrade with the Romanian port of Sulina, on the Black Sea.

The navigation on the Danube was regulated by the so-called Danube Statute of 1856 (Treaty of Paris). Immediately after the First World War, in 1919, the International Danube Commission was set up with the mandate to secure free navigation from Ulm to Braila as well as on some of the internationalized Danube tributaries. The Commission included all the Danube countries and three guests – Great Britain, France and Italy.

Given the extraordinary circumstances, apart from its regular refugee-relief work, the Federation decided to supervise the Danube transports in transit through Yugoslavia. To that purpose, it undertook to hire the vessels of the River Transport Company. The Federation's mandate began at the port of entry at Bezdan, where it became responsible for the course of the refugees' voyage through the Yugoslav national waters, provisions and medical care while in the territory of Yugoslavia. Visas were not required for transit by ship, but Romania, as the last country, required that a ship taking the refugees out of Romania be provided. In the 1938-1939 period, approximately 6,800 persons took the Danube route, but not all of them reached their destination: several hundreds of refugees perished in the Black Sea, during their voyage to Palestine, mostly as a result of inadequate, old, broken-down and non-seaworthy vessels owned by unconcerned ship companies and agents.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Commemorative Volume, p. 73-80.

## The Kladovo Transport

The last legal transport of refugees, mostly from Vienna, set off for Bratislava. Some traveled by train, others by ship. They were all relieved to reach Bratislava, despite the fact that Jozef Tiso's Slovakia was a loyal ally of Nazi Germany.

"We stayed in Bratislava for three weeks, but without ever leaving the ship. David and Zvi came aboard on the day I first arrived there. We thought that we would continue the journey immediately. I had only three minutes with uncle David... I didn't want to go see dear grandpa and grandma because I looked a mess... Uncle David came to see me twice and got me all kinds of stuff to eat. We were not allowed anything else there.

Zvi joined me in Bratislava... He left all his belongings behind..."<sup>7</sup>

The refugees, more than 1,000 of them, boarded the ship *Uranus*, which normally accepted only 400 passengers. Every inch of the space was used. The old and the sick got the equally jam-packed cabins. The passengers fretted about the possibility of being ordered back to Germany by Slovak authorities, which would mean certain deportation to camps. Their second biggest problem was the toilets, which were far too few, and in front of which there was always a long line.

They spent 17 days aboard the *Uranus*. On December 12, 1939, the ship finally lifted anchor and left Bratislava. Heading

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted here are excerpts from letters written by Haya Ides-Weinstock. Her husband David Weinstock perished in the Buchenwald concentration camp shortly after she left Vienna. Her three daughters – Feige, Sara and Esther – and her son Naftali Tuli managed to leave Austria on time. Her other son Zvi had stayed with his grandparents and uncle in Bratislava, where he joined the transport. Haya Weinstock, born May 10, 1895 in Slovakia, died at Sajmište, Belgrade. Zvi set out for Palestine in late March 1941 via Greece, Turkey and Syria, and arrived there safely on April 6, 1941. Some xeroxed copies of her letters to her children from Kladovo and Šabac are kept in the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade (JIM). Originally written in German, they were translated into Serbian by Mirko Nojman, and cited in the book of memoirs "My Unrealized Alyah" by Emil Jichak Klajn, Belgrade, 1993-94, manuscript (hereinafter: Klein). Some letters are kept in the archives in Israel.

south on the Danube, she arrived at the border between Hungary and Yugoslavia, where she was to get rid of her “human cargo”, leaving it in the hands of the Yugoslav River Transport Company (RTC), and sail back home.<sup>8</sup>

This is a story about the tragedy of the ill-fated Kladovo Transport, as it was called. Once forced to make a stop in Yugoslavia it waited there long enough to see the German occupation, in Šabac. The circumstances that eventually caused its demise remained unclear to this day. Apart from the Jewish organizations, this saga involved the Mosad (or: the institution, not to be confused with Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency), a dozen or so people who ran an illegal alyah in Europe, called Alyah Bet. The name of the Mosad woman activist in Romania, who kept contact with the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers of Yugoslavia, was Ruth Kluger. She later changed her last name into Aliav (contraction of “Alyah Bet”).

Sea liner *Hilda*, which was to wait for the refugees from the boats of the Yugoslav River Transport Company in the port of Sulina, never showed up. This was the Romanian requirement for letting the convoy through.<sup>9</sup>

The bulk of the material used for this paper comes from the minutes of meetings of the Executive Board of the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers of Yugoslavia. It has to be noted that some records from the most critical period for the Yugoslav Jewish community – since the end of 1940 until the occupation, in April 1941 – were lost. Hence, there are no offi-

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<sup>8</sup> Nahir, p. 88. In the article “Two Tzars and One Queen”, A Haggada from Kladovo – memento of Alyah “B”, the Jewish Almanac, 1957-58, p. 206-214, its author Naftali Bata Gedalj (hereinafter: Gedalj) mistakenly calls the ship *Saturnus*. Also, he claims that the ship reached the border between Hungary and Yugoslavia in late October 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Kluger-Aliav writes that the reason for stopping the transport was that the refugees did not have transit visas. This is incorrect because, in the first place, visas were not required for as long as they did not leave on the ships. See: Ruth Kluger-Aliav and Peggy Mann, *The Last Escape*, Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 304 (hereinafter: Aliav/Mann).

cial sources from which one could follow the developments from that particular period.

In late November 1939, the Federation was notified from Geneva and Bratislava by telephone that some 1,370 Jewish refugees were to pass through Yugoslavia before the Danube closed for traffic that winter. They asked the Federation to provide food, blankets, clothing and other supplies for the passengers and have it all ready and waiting in the city of Vukovar. Since the Social Fund's coffers were empty, the financial department of the Federation decided to allocate 100,000 dinars to an emergency budget, less than 70 dinars per person, and ask the local Jewish centers to purchase the needed supplies and then bill the Social Fund.<sup>10</sup>

Somewhere around December 12, three empty passenger ships that the Federation had rented from the Yugoslav River Transport Company – *Emperor Dušan*, *King Nikola 2* and *Queen Marija* – waited on the Danube, near Bezdan. The ships were ready to receive the passengers from the *Uranus*, which was quite late and even suspected not coming at all. On board the ships were all the supplies needed for the international passage on the Danube, from the Hungarian-Yugoslav border to the Romanian port of Sulina on the Black Sea, where a sea liner was to take the refugees to Haifa. Because it was estimated that the voyage could take three months, the Federation prepared warm clothes and winter shoes, as well as spare rations, and the sick-bay was supplied with basic medical instruments and drugs.

A group of 400-odd young men and women from the ship *Hehaluc*, most of whom had completed a two-year hachshara, were the first to board the *Uranus*. This group, led by the 22-year-old Arje-Adolf (Jukl) Dorfman, whose brothers were already in Palestine, boarded *Queen Marija*. *Emperor Dušan* received some 350 persons, mostly young couples, whose leader was Josef-Jozi Šehter. *King Nikola* was reserved for the orthodox Jews, who required ritual cooking. Their group leader was Emil Šehter.

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<sup>10</sup> The minutes of the 7th session, November 30, 1939.



The transfer was completed by dawn, and the *Uranus*, saluted with a thunderous “Hatiqwa” performed by those whom she had brought there, sailed away upstream and out of sight.

The three vessels of the Yugoslav River Transport Company set course for Sulina in the Danube delta, where the sea liner was to be waiting. On account of the cold weather, the passengers stayed inside their cabins. So much the better, probably, because they went passed German ships taking to the Reich the German citizens from Bessarabiya, now under the Soviet occupation following an agreement with Hitler.

The voyage continued uninterrupted, except for two brief calls in the ports of Vukovar and Belgrade, where they stopped for fuel and water. It is there that the first postal bags, containing thousands of letters and postcards from the refugees to their relatives, friends and acquaintances, were sent onshore. They could finally write openly about everything – a privilege that they had long been deprived of in Germany and the annexed Austria, as well as in other parts of the occupied Europe.

### Yugoslavs On Refugee Ships

With the British authorities in Palestine sticking firmly to the White Paper, other ways, mostly illegal, had to be found for the Jews to enter Eretz Israel. In Yugoslavia, as elsewhere, there was a long waiting list for the alyah, mostly with the names of the young members of Hashomer Hatzair, ranked on the list according to the amount of time each had spent in the Hachshara. When in December 1939 three boats carrying refugees from Central Europe appeared on the Danube, it seemed like a good opportunity. A first list included Jichak Danon from Sarajevo and two Jews from Zagreb, Lev Dojč and Kavezon-Kavic, who boarded one of the ships and after a long voyage reached Eretz Israel and joined the kibbutz of Gat.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Klein, p. 1.

The second group of the members of the Goleniz Hachshara included (?) Tuvi, Menahem Vajs and Valter Koen Pajki. They illegally boarded one of the refugee three ships during the stopover in Vukovar. This group reached Kladovo, stayed on the boats throughout the winter, and it never continued its journey.<sup>12</sup>

A Jewish family from Belgrade – engineer Emil David with wife and two sons, activists of the Akiba youth organization, also boarded one of the ships.<sup>13</sup>

### Holdup At the Romanian Border

With the winter firmly setting in, all the boats from the lower Danube were directed to the marinas. Three ships of the RTC were to pass through the “Iron Gate” of the Djerdap Canyon. It is the narrowest and fairly tricky section of the river, with many underwater rocks and rapids, where boats need to be towed upstream from the banks. Moreover, the terrain there has a 30-meter slant and the water runs at a speed of up to 3 meters per second.

Their last port in Yugoslavia was Donji Milanovac. There, as the contract between the Federation and RTC specified, the captains of the three ships were to get traveling documents and wait for clearance to leave Yugoslav territory as soon as they were cabled the confirmation by the river authority in Sulina that a sea liner was waiting to take the passengers. However, a cable arrived saying that the Sulina authorities were not aware

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<sup>12</sup> Klein, p. 2, Valter Koen Pajki (1918) and his brother Erih Ero (1921), sons of Samuel Koen, who owned the “Tel Aviv” restaurant in Belgrade, joined a partisan unit in August 1941. They died as fighters of the First Proletariat Brigade near Pjenovac, Eastern Bosnia, on January 21, 1942.

<sup>13</sup> Brothers Avraham and Šlomo David arrived in Palestine with a youth alyah shortly before the war, in April 1941, via Greece and Turkey. Their father perished in Zasavica, and their mother at Sajmište. See letter of May 14, 1941, from eng. Emil David to his sons – property of Šlomo David, Bustan Hagalil, Israel.

of any ships coming from Yugoslavia. Naftali Bata Gedalj, Federation representative in charge of the transport, alerted his superiors in Belgrade, and the skipper contacted RTC for further instructions, anticipating the stoppage of traffic as soon as the river started to ice over. Even if they managed to go downstream, going back could prove impossible.

Belgrade cautioned that they should wait. Nobody knew for how long or why. As never before, the post office in Donji Milanovac was busy dispatching letters to destinations all over the world, informing families and friends that the voyage had been halted.

And then, quite suddenly, the tiny fleet moved on, but only as far as Prahovo, to get coal. At the same time, Šime Špicer, the Secretary General of the Federation, arrived in Prahovo, in freezing weather and exhausted from the trip. His words of comfort, which he probably did not believe himself, restored hopes that the voyage would be resumed soon.<sup>14</sup>

### **Community Board of the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers**

Upon his return to Belgrade, Špicer made a report about the situation of the refugees. His guess was that they would stay in Yugoslavia longer than originally thought, and that the Jewish community in general, and the Federation in particular, would have new responsibilities on their plate, both in terms of assistance and organization. In similar cases, the Federation did all it could to help, but the experience showed that wider community participation was more effective.

Accepting the secretary general's proposal, the Federation's Executive Board elected the Community Board (hereinafter CB), consisting of Marko Štajner, Mika Efrajim, Josip Pinto, David Almozlino, eng. Emil Dajc, Dr. Leo Štajndler, Rihard Frelih, Hajim Bararon, Martin Rozenfeld, Maks de Majo, and Izidor

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<sup>14</sup> Gedalja writes that he was the representative of the Federation in Kladovo since December 6, 1939.

Vinter. Moša de Majo was nominated the Federation's delegate on the Board. The Federation's presidency was responsible for the organization of CB's activities.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the latest developments in Europe, the number of Jews who left their homes and came to Yugoslavia looking for safe haven increased by the day. In addition, there were huge numbers of starving and miserable people in organized transits on their way to Palestine, the land in which they had invested all their hopes of a better future.

The number of refugees doubled in no time. The influx of new protégés put the Federation in a very difficult position.

Those whose stay in Yugoslavia was only short-term were now also included in the relief effort. The refugees' status was still undefined, but the general opinion was that a short-time asylum would be the most likely solution. However, this proved to be an increasingly difficult task for the Federation and the entire Jewish community. Worries and duties abounded before as well, but it was always possible to organize work within a certain budget. Soon, it became clear that all calculations were wrong. Projecting its annual budget at 1 m dinars, the Federation decided to establish the Social Fund and expected to realize another 10% of the income from the local centers. However, with new difficulties there came bigger needs, and it soon became clear that this amount was quite insufficient. The Executive Board of the Federation reported that the budget for the coming year should be at least 5 m, providing there were no more unpleasant surprises.

The Board looked at the ways to get that much, and came to the following decision:

1. Given that, according to current projections, the Social Fund will need a sum of 5 m dinars for the year 1940, the Executive Board will make sure that the local boards have paid their dues (to the regular budget, in the

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<sup>15</sup> The minutes of the extraordinary session of the Executive Board of the Federation, December 12, 1939.

form of extra tax levied upon them, etc.). If this proves insufficient, the Board shall call upon the goodwill and understanding of the community members.

2. The Executive Board is hereby authorized to determine the mandatory 10% payable by each local center to the Social Fund not in terms of percentages, but rather based on the size of each center, its overall financial status and the financial status of its members, regardless of the religious service tax they pay.
3. The Main Board authorizes the Executive Board to, irrespective of the collective centers, if and when they become an option, starts setting up new refugee training stations. If the collective centers are activated, the Board will do all it can to provide vocational training for refugees in those centers as well.
4. The Main Board rejects the proposal providing for the centers to pay the 10% contribution to the Social Fund from the mandatory religious-service tax, but rather from the real amount thus earned. However, the centers are called upon to, if possible, pay to the Social Fund the 10% of the mandatory religious-service tax at any rate, irrespective of the actual earnings.<sup>16</sup>

### **No Good News**

One misty day, out of the blue, a huge barge pulled by a small tugboat emerged from the direction of Turn-Severin. A telephone order from Belgrade said that the barge had to be improved for passenger transport within 48 hours. For that to be achieved, all the carpenters from the nearby town of Negotin were summoned to the ships to transform four large stockrooms into dormitories with six or seven levels of beds. In addition, the

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<sup>16</sup> The minutes of the 7th session, December 3, 1939.

necessary arrangements had to be made for the voyage to continue. A group of 30 carpenters arrived with construction material, but that very same afternoon the tugboat skipper received a telegram ordering his vessel back to Romania.

No encouragement arrived from Belgrade, either: a Panama ship, which was to dock in Sulina, broke down on her way from Istanbul. Despite combined efforts of the Federation and international Jewish organizations, it was impossible to find a suitable vessel. In the meantime, more than one hundred ships and tugboats arrived in the winter port some three kilometers to the north of Kladovo. Only the small fleet of three ships with refugees and tugboat "Kajmakčalan", which was used to break ice around the anchored ships, were active, but it was clear that eventually they too would have to cast anchor and look for shelter in the port.

On December 10, 1939, the little fleet entered the winter port at Kladovo. Contact with the town was immediately established, in order to ensure the provision of supplies, but the presence of boats with strangers, who did not speak the language, stirred a lot of excitement and anxiety in the small, 3,000-strong community. The district doctor insisted to put the ships under quarantine due to the alleged presence of typhoid fever on board. To this effect, the district authority was asked to set up a sanitary commission. The doctor's request was refused after it was established that there was an excellent medical service on the ships provided by a team of fine doctors and nurses. It should be noted that, throughout the stay in Kladovo, not a single refugee died. When little Rami, one of the children on board, needed a middle-ear surgery, Bata Gedalja accompanied him to Turn-Severin aboard the "Kajmakčalan".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Naftali Bata Gedalja, Rami, HOJ Newsletter, Tel Aviv, No. 5-6/1960, p. 14-16. Ehud Nahir, p. 90, mentions three death cases: the death of Truda Jung, of "red wind", Engelman, a young boy, and, Percec Frankel, of typhoid fever, on August 18, 1940.

In the meantime, the "Morgenblatt", a newspaper published in the town of Czernowitz, in the Bukovina region, ran a note on February 15, 1940 saying that the refugees aboard three ships in the winter port at Kladovo lived in deplorable conditions. This note was forwarded to the Federation, together with a statement signed by several hundred refugees denying this news and thanking the Federation for the care it had been providing for the refugees in Kladovo.

In fact, some refugees approached public and private individuals with all sorts of requests, and during that period the Federation's representative Gedalja was often criticized for the work he did in Kladovo. It was concluded that it would be in the Federation's best interest, as well as Gedalja's, to establish the facts. Given the number of complaints, as well as the overall condition of the transport, the Executive Board decided to urgently set up an investigation team and send it to Kladovo. The team was made of Dr. Leo Štajndler, Šime Špicer and Avram Azriel.<sup>18</sup>

Already on February 1, 1940, the Federation's Secretary-General Šime Špicer completed the report about his stay in Kladovo, between January 28 and 30. He found that the refugees' situation was satisfactory and that the efforts should now be directed towards making it possible for the voyage to continue. He expressed the hope that the hoped that this issue would soon be resolved. Špicer emphasized the tolerance of the relevant Yugoslav authorities, which allowed the refugees to be transferred by land to a port on the Adriatic coast. This is the first time ever that this option was mentioned in the Federation's documents.

Špicer went on to say that in the Province of Croatia, upon the request of the provincial authorities, collective centers had been established in a number of places. Such centers existed in Samobor near Zagreb, Lipik, Daruvar and Podravska Slatina. Estimates were that at least 800 new refugees would soon be-

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<sup>18</sup> The minutes of the 9th session, February 28, 1940.

come the responsibility of the Jewish community. The minimal estimated amount needed to see them through the day was 18,000 dinars. Špicer said that the Jewish institutions could not be expected to contribute more than one third of the needed sum, and the Yugoslav Jewish community would therefore have to provide two thirds, that is 12,000 dinars per day, or 360,000 per month, or – more than 4 m a year. Given that the 10% tax payable to the Social Fund by the local centers amounts to exactly 1 m dinars, additional taxes would have to imposed.

In response to the secretary-general's exposé, Aleksa Klajn from Zagreb, one of those responsible for the organization of the collective centers, said that the daily costs varied according to location, but amounted to an average of 22 dinars per person, exclusive of extraordinary expenses.

Lawyer David A. Alkalaj noted that the burden of the collective centers exceeded the community's capacities, and requested the introduction of systemic changes as well as military-like measures. Dr. Isak Amar said that the fact that the collective centers were dispersed was impractical and uneconomical, and advocated the concentration of more refugees in fewer centers.

Dr. Moše Švajger suggested that Jewish leaders Nahum Goldman and L. Perlcvajg, who were in America at that time, should be acquainted with this problem and asked to plead with the Joint to give out as much money as possible for the refugees in Yugoslavia. Besides, educational work with the refugees should also be paid attention to, and it would be useful to have distinguished individuals, rabbis and laymen alike, starting with the Chief Rabbi, visit the centers and give lectures in order to boost the morale. The Chief Rabbi, Dr. Isak Alkalaj, said that he had already instructed the rabbis in Sušak, Split and Podravska Slatina to visit the centers.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The minutes of the 10th session, March 3, 1940.



## Rose Jacobs' visit

Rose Jacobs, a delegate of the Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, arrived in Kladovo from Turn-Severin in a fisherman's boat, in mid March 1940, during a brief visit to Europe.<sup>20</sup>

As any person from the free world would in a similar situation, in a letter she wrote Jacobs described the Kladovo tragedy of more than 1,000 people, including around 30 children, 400 youth group members, many of whom Hachshara graduates, and 200 young men and women ("Hausboot auf dem Fluss"). She also mentioned two newborns. During her visit there, she spoke with many elderly people, doctors, dentists, engineers and tradesmen, longing for their passed lives, cozy homes, medical practices and offices, which they had to leave behind in Hitler's Reich. Jacobs described three ships, on which people were living in dismal conditions "on the edge of the world, in no-man's-land", far from all sources of vital needs. She says that the ships were completely unfit for people, even if only for one week, let alone several months, and that it was only thanks to the freezing cold that no epidemics had yet broken out. She wrote that there was only one hairdresser on the ship, and workshops for the repair of shoes and clothes also existed. Hebrew and English language courses were organized and newspapers and magazines received on the ships. Because it was winter, Kladovo was virtually trapped in ice, and to get to the nearest phone, one had to walk 8 miles through snow and frost. The Romanian town of Turn-Severin was a half-hour's motorboat-drive away, but in winter it could only be reached by sled.

Jacobs described the ordeal of this large group of people whose movement was restricted, who spent all their time toget-

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<sup>20</sup> In a letter of December 9, 1977 to lawyer David Alkalaj, Bata Gedajlja says that in December 1939 he went to Turn-Severin to fetch Ms. Jacobs, a representative of the Joint, and came back to Kladovo with her in a fisherman's motor boat. Twenty-four hours later, she returned to Turn-Severin. It is therefore impossible to establish whether the visit took place in December 1939 or in mid March 1940.

her, with nothing to do. They had all been through terrible times, their nerves were weakened, and now this ravaging uncertainty about the future. To her mind, they desperately needed a therapist, a social worker and a psychologist, to help them sort out their emotional issues. Jacobs ends her letter in the following words: "My visit there earned me a cold, an upset stomach, low spirits and a broken heart."

Rose Jacobs too mentions the case of little Rami, who was taken to Romania for an urgent surgery. Naftali Bata Gedalja, who also wrote about this case, accompanied the boy. HOJ Newsletter 5-6/1960, p. 14-16. See: Gabriele Anderl/Walter Manöschek, *Gescheiterte Flucht*, Wien 1993, p. 61-62; CCA, L 375/30.

### Complaints From the Ships

Following a flood of complaints coming from the three ships, the Federation decided to dispatch another team of investigators. Their task was to inspect in detail the conditions aboard the ships, feel the pulse of the passengers and listen to their grievances. Once the boats were gone, it would no longer be possible to take the testimonies and establish the truth in a disciplinary procedure against the Federation's deputy secretary Bata Gedalja, which was to be conducted by Dr. Isak Amar, a member of the Main Board of the Federation.

On April 4, 1940, investigation team members Šime Špičer and Avram Azriel presented their findings about the situation of the refugees to the Federation, based on their stay in Kladovo between March 22 and 27, 1940.

1) General conditions: Most people sleep on the floors, they wake up and wait in line, sometimes for an entire hour, to wash their face, and almost as long in front of the lavatory and after that, with dishes in their hands, they wait in line for food. Add to this the nervousness caused by the uncertainty of their position, and it is clear that even the best of food could not please them. Served on a white-sheeted table, in proper dishes and

plates, in a situation of peace and calm – this food would certainly be highly appreciated by everyone, as the refugees themselves admitted it. For all their hardship they hold responsible those who are powerless to solve any of their many problems, including make the ships more spacious or give them more lavatories. – On the ships, as elsewhere, morality is a source of controversy. What is immoral to one seems perfectly natural to another. Objective witnesses claim that nothing ever happened that in normal circumstances would be regarded as deserving reprimand. The more fastidious ones have all kinds of remarks about things that in this small space tend to be more noticeable than they would be under normal circumstances.— Frequent thefts are an unfortunate trend. The group leaders have tried to suppress it by revealing the names of those caught stealing. – Work is another problem. Except for a few craftsmen – tailors, shoemakers, barbers, manicurists and kitchen staff – all others go about without anything to do. At night, some 30 people keep watch. – The overall health situation is satisfactory; the medical service is functioning well most of the time. To date, 40 people got sick, but there were days with as many as four or five cases. There are only three doctors, and it should be noted that they are summoned to Kladovo whenever there is a case there that needs their attention. This is done in agreement with the district administrator and the district doctor.

2) Mood: The young and the veteran Zionist activists are disciplined and enduring with stoicism and all they can think of is to get to Palestine as soon as possible. A discontented minority wants to stay in Yugoslavia or go to another country. The commission believes that this is a clear indication of how important previous Zionist education is for those going to Palestine.

3) The work of Naftali Bata Gedalja: After the Federation received a number of complaints regarding his work and conduct, malversation and excessive drinking, the team interrogated all the group leaders and agents on the ships, as well and three residents of Kladovo, and submitted 23 reports about this matter. The Commission has found that Gedalja has fulfilled his

duty in compliance with the Federation's guidelines, and believes that frictions have largely resulted from language and mentality differences.<sup>21</sup>

Suddenly, there were rumors that the refugees' departure from Kladovo was scheduled for Saturday, March 30, 1940. In an agreement with the Interior Ministry, the Federation invited all persons chosen to join the transport to leave their places of temporary residence and come to Belgrade, from where they were to take a boat to Kladovo. One hundred and sixty of them showed up.<sup>22</sup>

Among "the persons chosen to join the transport" there was a group of young Yugoslav Jews from the Hachshara in Golenitz, whose names were on the Hashomer Hatzair's immigration lists for Eretz Israel.<sup>23</sup>

As previously agreed, they had left Hachshara in February 1940 and waited at home to be invited. In late March, the candidates were cabled to urgently come to Belgrade, where a high representative of Hashomer Hatzair was waiting for them. He told them to take a boat to Kladovo that same evening, posing as "Jewish emigrants from Austria". They all got new names and were handed some certificates, and had lunch at the Jewish student cafeteria in 19, Kosmajaska Street. The following day two groups of ten youths from Hashomer Hatzair and Tehelet-lavan were among the first refugees to come to Kladovo.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>The minutes of the 14th session, April 4, 1940.

<sup>22</sup>Among them were several emigrants from the Vrata collective center, including Lotta and Jonas Streifler from Vienna, and others.

<sup>23</sup>Jakov Kabiljo Jakile, Salamon Romano Salamonče, Blinka Švarc, Avram Papo and his sister Rivka Rikica, all from Sarajevo; Tirca Engel and Zehava Kon from Vinkovci, and Emil Jichak Klajn from Osijek.

<sup>24</sup>The members of Tehelet-lavan who in late March 1940 arrived in Kladovo included Nisim Alba, Eli Ferber, Jakica Romano, Bencion Satler, Cipora Šlezinger, Dov Štajner, Hermina Viler and David Zelmanovic. Another group from Hashomer Hatzair arrived in April, among them Tirca Engel from Vinkovci, Hedva Livni and Josif Bibi Šmeterling from Zagreb, Mirjam Pipsi Hari from Varaždin, Šalom Malah from Sarajevo and two Lithuanian girls who attended a Hachshara in Yugoslavia since 1938. Klein, p. 4.

It is clear from the minutes of the Executive Board that many of the new passengers were not familiar with the situation, and proved difficult to handle from the outset. According to reports from Kladovo, the grumpy new arrivals only added to the already tense situation that reigned on the ships after their four-and-a-half month's ordeal.<sup>25</sup>

The youths from the Yugoslav Hashomet Hatzair and Tehelet-lavana tried to lessen the frustration and boost the morale of their fellow passengers. However, "due to new unpredicted difficulties", the transport failed to leave on the scheduled date. The Federation contacted the Geneva refugee committee to find out when the transport could leave next, but received only a vague answer.

### In the Winter Port

The River Transport Company informed the Federation that its vessels had to be emptied of passengers in order to get ready for the next season.

On the unresolved issue of the Kladovo transport, the Federation's Executive Board reached the following decision:

As a result of the opening of the winter port in Kladovo, on March 26, 1940 new obligations arose toward the River Transport Company of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, whose ships were used by our protégés, i.e. a new legal relationship in which the RTC charged a rental fee of 45,000 dinars per day. It then reduced this amount to 25,000 per day while the ships remain in the winter port. The members of the Main Board have followed the work of the Executive Board regarding this matter from the Board's minutes. The report about the most recent phase is yet to be submitted. Following countless discussions, we have received today a new offer from the RTC, which reduced its fee to 22,500 per day for the entire duration of our pro-

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<sup>25</sup>The minutes of the 14th session, April 4, 1940.

tégés' stay on the ships, including the period after March 26 of the current year.

The Federation refused this offer as well and insisted on 20,000 dinars per day. It is now beyond doubt that our offer will be accepted and the matter solved in a tolerable manner... Our hearts have been in this, and we acted with love and to the best of our knowledge conviction.<sup>26</sup>

The dispute between the Federation and RTC was discussed at the session of April 12, 1940. It was decided to pay the amount of 20,000 per day for the period from December 31 until the termination of the refugees' occupation of the ships, thus ending the obligation resulting from the agreement signed on December 10, 1939. – In addition, the Federation was held liable for a lump sum of 150,000 dinars in damages caused during the stay of the refugees, and another 1.5 m for tugboat services and transport of sick patients to Turn-Severin, due immediately after a negotiated solution for liquidation is agreed upon, with the balance payable in 100,000-dinar monthly installments, starting June 1, 1940 until the due amount is paid in full.

The structure of costs of the transport of refugees on the ships *Queen Marija*, *Emperor Dušan* and *King Nikola* in Kladovo, since the day of its entry in Yugoslavia, December 10, 1939, until May 17, 1940 is as follows: river transport, food, food supplies for the remainder of the voyage, assorted goods (soap, hygiene products, clothes, leather, tools, etc.), drugs, construction works and alterations to the barge, cigarettes, newspapers, books and magazines, postal costs, police, customs, port and ship taxes, traveling costs and per diems, phone bills and telegrams, and other. Total costs: 6.085,526 dinars.

The decision was made: unless alternative vessels were provided for the passengers, the Federation should try and obtain official permission to get the refugees onshore, into makeshift homes, and wait until they are granted new certificates. If this plan fails, the River Transport Company should be asked to

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<sup>26</sup> The minutes of the 18th session, May 23, 1940.

provide cheaper vessels, make them fit for habitation and allow the refugees to wait there until a next opportunity to leave presents itself.

Secretary general of the Federation reported to the Executive Board about the collective centers and the Kladovo refugee transport. In relation to this, he read two letters sent by the Federation to the Interior Ministry on April 11, 1940, describing vividly the concern and difficulties regarding the transport.

On behalf of the Executive Board of the Federation, on April 11 Dr. Fridrih Pops and Šime Špicer sent a letter to the Interior Ministry's National Security Department (No. S/A 2220), stating the following:

The Federation of Jewish Religious Centers of Yugoslavia accepted the difficult task of supporting the refugees in the collective centers in Daruvar Lipik, Makarska, Samobor, Fužine, Vrata, Ruma and Sremska Mitrovica. We are responsible for approximately 600 people and, although our hearts are in this endeavor and we empathize deeply with the difficult position in which these dispossessed people have found themselves, the scope of responsibility exceeds our strength in every way imaginable. Instead of increasing the support for the refugees in these difficult times, under the burden of their own problems and intense charity work that they do for the millions of people in the occupied Poland, the major international Jewish organizations had to scale down this support and now expect us to go the extra mile. However, our efforts have already been such that our centers are finding it difficult to cope. If this Federation is to be their only source of support, it has no choice but to ask the Interior Ministry to show understanding for this difficult situation and be of assistance in the following ways:

- a) Grant us permission to relocate all our Jewish Orthodox protégés – some 80 of them – now staying in the collective centers in Makarska, Vrata, Podravska Slatina and so on, to Bačko Petrovo Selo, Ada and Mol in the Dunavska Province, or in Ilok, in the Province of Croatia. This measure is needed out of respect for their religio-

usness, the practicing of which has been disrupted in their present dwellings. The first example is food, which has to be prepared in separate slaughterhouses and under special scrutiny. Apart from the material burden that the maintenance of these facilities in places where there are no Jewish centers lays upon us, they are inappropriate also because we are understaffed for this kind of work. Just one attempt to simplify the ritual procedure resulted in people getting very depressed and telling us that they would rather starve than breach the elaborate religious laws. This position may, of course, be challenged from many aspects, but in this day of debauchery and godlessness one should admire this fanatic devoutness and do everything possible to help those people keep their faith in God and man.

- b) Give us permission to move all our other protégés from the present collective centers to a large asylum somewhere in Southern Serbia or in Drinska or Vrbaska provinces.

The reasons urging the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers to make this request are the following:

- 1/ This will cut maintenance costs nearly by half;
- 2/ We will have more control of our people and hence less responsibility towards the authorities;
- 3/ We shall be able to provide at least basic education for the many children among the refugees;
- 4/ We shall provide vocational training in farming and crafts in order to get our protégés prepared for their future lives, when they leave our country;
- c) Excuse from staying in the collective centers individuals over 60 years of age with relatives in our country who agree to take full care of them;
- d) Excuse from staying in the collective centers the gravely ill and unfit for work, whatever their impairment.



Wishing to avoid any interference with the spirit of the decree of the Interior Ministry Pov. I No. 4828 of February 8, 1940 and putting together this proposal based on our experience and the wish to sort the situation out, the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers pleads for and expects a favorable answer.

We thank you in advance.

The second letter to the Interior Ministry's National Security Department, Belgrade (No. S/A 2221), of the same day, reads as follows:

In addition to supporting Jewish refugees in the collective centers set up according to the Decree of the Interior Minister of Feb. 8 this year, Pov. I No. 4828, the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers has for the past four months had in its care a transport of 1,003 refugees on three ships belonging to the River Transport Company of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, anchored in Kladovo.

It is due to the extraordinary international political situation that these poor people, whose relatives in the overseas countries have eagerly been waiting for them, had to stop here in the first place, and stay throughout the winter. This situation is now making impossible every single attempt to take them out of the country. We are informed that passage across the Adriatic has now been under consideration.

This situation has imposed huge material burden and immense moral responsibility upon the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers. It is clear from the letters that we receive that Kladovo is known on all five continents, thanks to the correspondence that our dependents have maintained with their relatives all over the world. Even the slightest discontent from their part, resulting first and foremost from their uncertain future, creates the impression that these people have been starving and abandoned. We have fought to suppress such erroneous impressions, since in our view, which we believe to be unbiased, we have by far exceeded our strength helping these people and meeting their needs. Some irresponsible individuals even went so far as to claim that there was a breakout of

typhoid fever among them and similar things. We shall not expound on the malicious nature of such rumors at this point.

Still, not everything is as we would want it to be. We believe that we should point to some elements of our present difficulties that go beyond the material support that we provide for these people.

1) Overcrowded conditions of living and insufficient medical care for the many patients with serious chronic conditions (diabetes, lung disease, etc.) and the general conditions onboard the ships have had a negative impact on many, above all the elderly, but young people too, due to psychological stress, have become too exhausted to remain with this transport, whose fate is uncertain.

2) A certain number of people on the ships had applied for entry visas for various overseas countries – the United States, Brazil, Bolivia, etc. – before leaving their countries of origin to join this transport and were granted visas only after having already joined the transport. Their relatives who stayed behind in Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia and who are also covered by the same visas mailed copies of them to the relevant consulates in Belgrade. All these individuals, in order to receive the visas, must appear in person in the consulates. They would presumably leave for their new destinations immediately.

3) The Direction of the River Transport Company insists to have its ships emptied as navigation is now back to the normal regime. Their position is that the company must not suffer and normal traffic be suspended because of our misfortune. The Federation of Jewish Religious Centers asked for permission to have a certain number of individuals described under 1/ leave the ships and stay in collective centers and that every such individual is replaced by a new passenger.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>The minutes of the 15th session, April 12, 1940, and copies of two letters.

In response to the second letter, on April 11, 1940 the interior minister issued the following order to the District Police in Kladovo:

The Jews from the ships are to be allowed to go ashore in Kladovo under the following conditions: if some individuals wish to and can find private apartments in Kladovo, they should be allowed to stay in those apartments.

b) as for the accommodation of others, allow them to erect provisional shacks if this is approved by the local municipality, or on private property, as paying tenants;

c) make lists with the names of all the individuals coming ashore in order for the authorities to be able to keep them under constant surveillance;

d) The Jews staying in Kladovo will not be allowed to leave the area specified by the authorities;

e) All the Jews who leave the ships will hand over their passports, which will be kept by the authorities until their departure.<sup>28</sup>

On the basis of this decision, on May 2 and 3, 1940, approximately 650 people went ashore, and the ships *Queen Marija* and *King Nikola II* returned immediately to Belgrade, empty.

The interior minister, in a response to the Federation's letter No 2221 of April 11, 1940, ordered that old people and the sick should be separated providing the same number of young people was added to the transport. The minister agreed to let those who, according to the Federation, fitted in this category stay in the shacks, homes for the aged and empty houses in Kladovo, which thus officially became a collective center.

The Federation paid a lump sum of 10 dinars per head daily worth of provisions for the group as of April 22, 1940.

Excerpts from the letters from Haja Vajnstok:

May 3, 1940 – Yesterday, we received the order to leave two ships and go to the small nearby town. We got up at 5 p.m.,

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<sup>28</sup>Letter to the Head Office of the River Transport Company of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, April 15, 1940.

had breakfast and collected our possessions. I haven't got any valuables, but we all have a lot to carry: rucksacks, little bags, small parcels, blankets, etc. At 12 o'clock we must all disembark, with luggage, and wait for further instructions... We got into our apartment late that night. I was lucky to get to a completely empty room before the candles were lit, and then I lit the candles. I got a room for the two of us and slept in the bed again after a long time. For how long we are to stay here, nobody knows. This is a cozy little town. Those who can afford to make their own food are free to do it, and so I signed in too... It is very cheap: 10 dinars per day, 18 dinars for two people...

May 6, 1940 – Postal traffic has been suspended for several days on account of flood. A raging hailstorm last week destroyed the crops...

May 27, 1940 – We are no longer permitted to prepare our own food. We get three cooked meals a day: even bread in the morning, meat soup with potatoes or pasta at noon, and eggs, butter and tea, for dinner. I get half a liter of milk for Zvi (son) every day, two apples and 80 grams of butter. That is quite sufficient for the two of us... Our people now occupy every other house; two, sometimes three couples stay in the same room. Zvi and I are lucky to have the whole room just for ourselves... We are staying with a woman with two daughters. We get to understand each other rather well, because the Serbian language is similar to Slovakian, which Zvi speaks well.<sup>29</sup>

### **River Transport Company Issues Ultimatum**

The financial burden bore by the Jewish community of Yugoslavia exceeded its potentials. At the session held on May 9, 1940, the Federation's secretary general read the correspondence between the Federation and the bureau of the Jewish Agency in Geneva (letters of March 30 and April 9), and the Jo-

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<sup>29</sup> Klajn, p. 18-19.

int's office in Paris (of May 9). The letters dealt with the obligations and assistance of these organizations to Kladovo refugees and underlined the damage resulting from their position of vacillation.

At the same session, a rather strong-worded letter from RTC Head Office dated April 19 was also read. In it, RTC refuses the Federation's offer for a negotiated settlement. It says:

1) We hereby conclude that you failed to meet the conditions, within the set deadline – noon on April 18 – as specified in RTC's letter No. 23080 of April 16, 1940;

2) Demurrage amounts to 45,000 dinars per day for all three ships for the entire period of detention;

As you failed to empty the RTC barge 26625 until the aforementioned deadline as described under 1/, we will charge an extra 3,500 for every 24 hours until we have the barge at our disposal and in the original condition.

We demand the immediate lifting of embargo on 1.5 m dinars in the Serbian-Swiss Bank in Belgrade.

We demand that you settle your debt in full and within the deadline that we suggested the last time.

We demand the payment of default interest on all outstanding debts, as specified in the agreement.

Finally, we demand that you have our ships emptied as well as we need them urgently, and that you settle the entire matter regarding your debt in a peaceful way, because that is in your best interest.<sup>30</sup>

The Federation prepared the following reply to RTC's letter-ultimatum on April 25, and attached it to the session's minutes:

We have received your letter No. 24274 of the 19<sup>th</sup> this month and have come to the following:

We will stick to our offer for a negotiated, out-of-court settlement of our obligations.

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<sup>30</sup>The minutes of the 16th session, May 9, 1940.

We believe that our offer... exceeds by far the amount that the RTC may rightfully solicit based on our mutual agreement...

We refuse your request for barge rental increase. You are aware of the fact that we rented the vessel for passenger use and not for the transport or storage of goods. Hence, commodity trade rules do not apply here and it is debatable whether at all this kind of dictate from your part is appropriate. While the arbitrary increase of the rent is out of question, the real question is: as the transporter of living people, after accepting that we were unable to pay the expensive transport fee, immediately after realizing that the voyage could not be continued due to a higher force, and in the interest of the health of its passengers, shouldn't RTC have put at their disposal at its own expense not just one barge, but as many vessels as were required to maintain tolerable hygienic and sanitary conditions?

Likewise, the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers refuses to pay damages itemized in your list. It is unrealistic to rent ships for twice or three times the number of passengers they are designed for without accepting in advance the possibility of considerable damage to the inventory. RTC Head Office already knew from the previous transports that benches and tables, and even the flooring in the boiler rooms, are used as beds and it probably, anticipating the damage to the ships and furniture, charged as much as 500,000 dinars for the transport – which normally costs, including the trip with no passengers on board, 100,000 dinars at the most and it instead of 15,000 dinars, it charged the astronomical 18,000 dinars for the transport from Prahovo to Kladovo.

The Federation will only cover the damage caused by obvious neglect by the passengers and will, with clear conscience, let the court and honest men decide whether or not it is just to solicit from us to, after having endured this voyage under the abovementioned conditions, buy new chairs, to give just one example, for *Tzar Nikola II* to replace the decrepit ones at the price of 150 dinars each!

And finally, we refuse to pay the default interest, because we have offered repeatedly to sort out the controversial issue in good faith...<sup>31</sup>

The letter, signed by Dr. Fridrih Pops and Šime Špicer, was never sent, because in a conversation with the two men the director of RTC, Mr. Popović, explained that the whole matter was handled by the minister of transport himself.<sup>32</sup>

At its next session, the Executive Board of the Federation was informed that in the letter sent to the Federation on May 15, 1940, the RTC Head Office repeated that it could not renounce its claim, but this time the contents of the letter suggested that there was readiness for a peaceful solution and compromise.<sup>33</sup>

The Federation received the information that on Friday, May 3, 1940, a Greece barge *Penelope* had left Braila. The barge, which had been improved for passenger transport, had 1,137 beds. This vessel, towed by Romanian tugboat *Lavoisier*, was expected to arrive in Kladovo on May 10.

On May 15, the young Zionist activists from *Tzar Dušan* were transferred to the new vessel, not without passive yet obvious resistance. The little luxury that they had enjoyed on the crowded ship was now gone. Fortunately, their stay on *Penelope* lasted only about a month, after which the young activists were allowed to go ashore and stay in tents in a hill above Kladovo. They were overjoyed: the fresh air made them feel like they were just freed from slavery, and the tents seemed like the ultimate luxury. On July 9, they were moved to the outskirts of Kladovo, where there were tents and shacks. The young members of Has-homer Hatzair organized their section of the compound to look like a camp, and it stood out for its style, beauty and cleanliness.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Anney to the minutes of the 16th session, May 9, 1940.

<sup>32</sup>The minutes of the 16th session, May 8, 1940.

<sup>33</sup>The minutes of the 17th session, May 16, 1940.

<sup>34</sup>Nahir, p. 92. Ehud Nahir, *The Kladovo-Šabac Affair*, Jalkut Moreshet 34/1982, p. 85-120 (hereinafter: Nahir).

The Federation now learned what it had suspected for a long time: that the refugees' passage through Romania depended on whether there was a ship waiting in the Black Sea to take them away. Therefore, the arrival of the barge with tugboat did not mean that the voyage would resume immediately. Still, reports suggested that there was a possibility to provide sea boats within days. The secretary general stressed that the Federation could and would not have anything to do with making arrangements for those ships. Apart from its other obligations, the Federation had to think of a way out for the refugees as soon as possible. For 1,200 of them, 1,000 of which were going to Palestine, the necessary clearance procedure had already been underway. The procedure included a series of formalities to be taken care of with the local and consular authorities, with each case demanding independent intervention. These formalities and interventions alone engaged the entire administrative apparatus.<sup>35</sup>

A week later, they were informed that the ship that was supposed to take all the refugees from the Kladovo transport was in Turn-Severin. For reasons of formality, she was not allowed to come to Kladovo, but all measures were taken to make it happen very quickly, most likely in a day or two. Besides, a message arrived from Geneva informing that a boat was waiting in Sulina to take the refugees from the Kladovo transport. It was expected that the transport would leave Yugoslavia soon.<sup>36</sup>

### Collective Centers Change

The Kladovo transport was important, but only as one of many issues on the Federation's plate. In July 1940, the issue of the collective centers featured on the federation's agenda, after certain changes occurred. Following an order from the Dunavska Province, the collective center in Sremska Mitrovica was to be moved to Lazarevac. Some refugees had already been moved

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<sup>35</sup>The minutes of the 16th session, May 9, 1940.

<sup>36</sup>The minutes of the 17th session, May 16, 1940.



elsewhere, while others still remained in Mitrovica, waiting for further orders. Besides, the order provided for the relocation of the collective center in Makarska, but the new location was still unknown.<sup>37</sup>

Four months later, the District Authority in Lazarevac informed the Federation that the collective center for Jewish refugees was to be moved from Lazarevac to Kuršumlijska Banja upon the order of the Interior Ministry. The Federation took all the necessary measures to put this new collective center on its feet. It asked the Ministry to authorize the transfer of a dozen sick and old people from Lazarevac to Šabac and to have the same number of people there sent to Kuršumlijska Banja, as their replacements. The Ministry agreed in principle.<sup>38</sup>

In 1940, the Federation had in its care some 3,000 refugees in 15 shelters at the following locations: Banja Slatina near Banjaluka, Daruvar, Draganica near Karlovac, Fužine (later Borsanski Šamac - Jastrebarsko), Kladovo (later Šabac), Lipik, Makarska (later Derventa), Podravska Slatina, Rajhenburg (later Leskovac and Krško), Ruma, Samobor (later Čapljina near Mostar), Slatina, Sremska Mitrovica (later Lazarevac, Kuršumlijska Banja, Niška Banja), Stubičke Toplice i Vrata (later Brčko).

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<sup>37</sup>The minutes of the 20th session, July 14, 1940. It was during this session that secretary general Špicer informed the Federation about his decision to send his children to Palestine.

<sup>38</sup>The minutes of the 26th session of the Executive Board of the Federation, November 14, 1940. The fate of the refugees who were in Kuršumlijska Banja at the breakout of the war is not clear. Some reached Priština, and later crossed over to Albania. It seems that the majority were transferred to Niška Banja, from where the men were taken to Bubanj and executed, and women and children deported to Sajmište. Also, it looks like a small group, including Margit Fonjo, Bernhard Epštajn, Salo Lastman, and Oskar Medak, and led by medical student Izrail Hazan, tried to escape. The list of those shot at Banjica shows that they were caught and brought to the camp on August 10, 1942 and killed already on the following day. Some refugees stayed in Lazarevac, where they hid successfully until June 1943, when they were taken to Banjica and shot on August 17, 1943.

## From Kladovo to Šabac

Finally, on September 19, 1940, the little fleet moved. The three barges maneuvered by three tugboats lifted anchor and made 330 km in three days – but upstream, first on the Danube, then on the Sava River. Instead of Sulina, they headed for Šabac, where they arrived on September 22. One hundred and forty seven refugees had stayed behind in Kladovo.<sup>39</sup>

The survivors believe that their transfer to Šabac was ordered by the Yugoslav authorities, which tried to avoid the possible friction and clashes in Kladovo, which started filling with Germans abandoning the regions given to the Soviet Union.

The minutes of the session of the Executive Board of the Federation of September 17 mention the man who was responsible for taking the refugees from Kladovo to Šabac:

In deep financial trouble that we found ourselves in as a result of our support to the refugees, and just as we thought that everything was breaking apart at the seams, our faith was restored and our strength recovered. When the Interior Ministry ordered that our dependents from Kladovo had to be transferred to Šabac, we were in serious trouble, because the RTC asked for 250,000 dinars for the transport of our 1,200 people.—As in addition technical problems arose as well, the Federation contacted Mr. Josip Dojč, a ship owner for advice and help. But Mr. Dojč provided a lot more than just advice. He told the gentlemen who came to see him that he was ready, as soon as there was a chance to continue the voyage, to have our dependents taken to the Black Sea on his own vessels. Sadly, the Federation again is not in the position to reward such a deed according to merit, and can only express its profoundest gratitude.

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<sup>39</sup> On page 212, Gedalja writes that the barges left in late August and made 1,800 km. Ehud Nahir (p. 92) mentions the same erroneous figure, which he probably took from Gedalja: 1,800 km from Kladovo to Šabac! He writes that the refugees left Kladovo on September 17, which is also incorrect.

Conclusion: The Executive Board is thankful for such great deeds that give us faith and strength for a successful conclusion of our efforts and we thank Mr. Dojč for his generosity.<sup>40</sup>

## Šabac

Unlike in Kladovo, where there were no Jews, in Šabac the refugees found a small but welcoming Jewish community, with Dr. Haim David Ruso, president of the local Jewish religious center, and rabbi Nisim Jakov Adižes, at its head.<sup>41</sup>

The refugees who could afford it, rented apartments in the town, but the majority shared several houses. Some lived in a mill, where they had two-level beds, their own dining room and lavatories. A second group shared a warehouse with the offices of the transport company, food and clothes storeroom and workshops for shoe repairmen, tailors, carpenters and locksmiths, as well as two kitchens, one of which was kosher, in accordance with dietary laws.

One building, previously home to a sanatorium, was turned into a hospital with 20 beds. It was staffed with nine doctors from the group of refugees and two local doctors. The hospital also had a decent pharmacy. In addition to this, one apartment was turned into dentist's rooms.<sup>42</sup>

The refugees were allowed to work within the boundaries of the camp, but any outside activity was banned. Haja Vanjstok writes:

I would gladly do something, but we are not allowed to take jobs... Hebrew and English are taught here a lot... We have everything we need. Not that you need much here. Most people

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<sup>40</sup> The minutes of the 23rd session, September 19, 1940. Ship owner from Pančevo Josip Dojč, the son of Julius and Iva, was born in Pančevo on August 15, 1883. Arrested and taken to the Banjica concentration camp on September 18, 1941, he was shot on October 18, 1941.

<sup>41</sup> Rabbi Adižes was born in Priština, Kosovo, on October 5, 1885. He finished religious school in Thessalonica and Izmir. From 1912 to 1915, he was schechter and mezamer in Priština, and from 1919 till 1930 religious teacher in Piroć. He arrived in Šabac in 1931. He was married to Simha Sofi Levi and had five daughters: Sara (1918), Amada (1921), Margareta (1923), Rahela (1926) and Rejna (1928).

<sup>42</sup> Nahir, p. 93

use the collective kitchen. I get a weekly allowance for the two of us, and we're much better off than most... Four times a week we meet in a club...<sup>43</sup>

Naturally, the refugees were a very diverse group, brought together by the "finger of destiny". One must not forget that there were very fine intellectuals among them, as well as the barely literate; people who were once rich – and people who lived in abject poverty for as long as they can remember; hard-working and honest craftsmen and scoundrels who fished in murky waters; there were physically ill people as well as mental patients; some were very religious, others were atheists; there were members of political parties, groups and factions, whose fanaticism never lost its edge even in such a difficult situation. The small space and prolonged tension only highlighted the differences in mentality and opinion.

However, there was something in the collective center in Šabac that they all shared – apart from suffering and destiny – and that kept them going. Even in dire circumstance like these, they had strength for culture, education and sport. Some wrote poetry, other wrote music ("The Refugee Song", Alyat Honoar March", "Thank you, Yugoslavia")<sup>44</sup>, etc. Youth groups members formed a choir – a serious accomplishment given the circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

In November 1940, Dr. Rudolf Buhvald (Buchwaldt) visited the refugees on behalf of the Zagreb Zionist Association. He

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<sup>43</sup>Klajn, p. 20-21.

<sup>44</sup>The Yugoslav group in Kladovo had its own songs. Here are the words of one of them: "Hey, Danube River/ you carry plenty of ships/ many sad destinies/ accompany you/ around the world./ Around the world/ many ships sail/ you carry many destinies/ end many lives/ and you beg for mercy./ You beg for a little peace/ just a little peace/ anywhere/ there, far away./ Far away/ new hope awaits/ Will in this century yet/ the river take us away/ and to our distant goal? See: Klajn, p. 9. An improvised school was set up for the little refugees. Experts in various fields held lectures, which were very popular and attracted large audiences. Dr. Rotenstrajh (Rotenstreich), one of the managers of the Palestinian office in Vienna, arrived once a week to give lectures about the current political developments and the situation on the fronts. Those lectures maintained a sense of optimism and helped greatly to alleviate psychological tension among the refugees.

<sup>45</sup>Nahir, p. 67

gave a series of lectures and held a number of meetings. The discipline, work and remarkable organization of the school made a most compelling impression on him.<sup>46</sup>

While still in Kladovo, the young athletes organized sporting events, including football matches, to briefly turn them away from grim reality. They all kept the memory of Perec Frenkel, called Pec, who died of typhoid fever shortly before the group left for Šabac.<sup>47</sup>

Right upon the refugees' arrival in Šabac, the local paper "Šabački glasnik" of October 19, 1940 ran a story about the new stars of the local "Mačva" football club. They were:

Kurt Hilkovec, born in 1911. Very short but fast and a real fireball, he quickly became the darling of the fans. Rumor had it that prior to the Nazis' accession to power, he played for the German national team. He came to Šabac with wife Irma and two children, and their third child was born there. They stayed in the theater of cinema "Paris", which they shared with three more football players. One of them was goalkeeper Otto Ferri (1920), a total opposite of Hilkovec: tall, well-built, a real athletic type. The other two were Franc Mandl and Artur Goldsmit, halfbacks.<sup>48</sup>

Apart from these "stars", the survivors also kept the memory of Herman Steiner (1920) and halfback Emil Silbermann (1909), who was known for always playing barefoot.

### **Both Belgrade Jewish communities act to help the Kladovo refugees**

Knowing that, with the winter approaching, the situation of roughly 1,200 exhausted, depressed and penniless "Kladovo refugees" in Šabac was only going to get worse, in October 1940

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<sup>46</sup> Židov (The Jew) 46/Nov. 8, 1940, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup>Klajn, p. 22-23.

<sup>48</sup>Zbornik 4. Hilkovec's name appears under 408 on the list of victims; Ferri under 209. Mandl and Goldsmit are not on the list. Their fate is unknown.

the capital's two Jewish communities – Sephardic and Ashkenazic – at the initiative of the Federation and in cooperation with all charity, women's and youth groups launched a broad charity drive for money, clothes, shoes, fuel, books, prayer books, etc.

The Action Committee, made of the representatives of both communities, sent a petition and invited its members to fulfill their duty to their suffering brothers and give away things that they no longer needed. Contributions went directly to the local centers, which then forwarded them to the Action Committee.

The drive was a success. A total of 433 parcels were collected, and the offerings carefully sorted out, packed in 15 large crates weighing 2.7 tons, and sent to the refugees in Šabac. Financial donations amounted to 33,088 dinars.

Committee members visited the collective center in Šabac on November 9, 1940. During the visit, the delegation inspected the overall living condition and organization in the center: housing, food, clothing, health care, the organization of life, etc. The delegation found that, under the circumstances, the conditions were rather acceptable. It also found that the complaints were not only unfounded, but also unjustified.<sup>49</sup>

### **Approved: 250 plus 50 certificates!**

In early February 1941, the Federation was notified that Alyat Honoar was granted 250 certificates for children and teenagers and an additional 50 adult certificates. They needed transit visas for Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon. Bulgaria refused to grant them visas after signing the three-partisan treaty of friendship with Yugoslavia and Germany by which it joined the Axis Powers. The alternative way was through Greece. The group had to spend the night at the station in Thessalonica, in a sealed wagon. This was quite risky because the city had been frequently bombed from Italian positions in Albania.

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<sup>49</sup>*The Herald of the Jewish Sephardic Community in Belgrade*, Vol. 22 of October 1, 1940, p. 15 and Vol. 24 of December 1, 1940, p. 7.

Still, the opportunity was not to be missed: the certificates had to be used or returned. They decided to give it a try.

From Haja Vajnstok's letter:

Šabac, March 14, 1941 – Word has it that all those with certificates will be leaving, which means Zvi as well. The first 33 people are leaving today, and another group on Tuesday, and so on – until the quota of 200 is met. We now know that they are not going through Bulgaria, but through Greece, by train all the way to Eretz. The WIZO will provide complete gears for children with working clothes and nice outfits, shoes, pillows, comforters, linen covers, suitcases, backpacks and other. He has enough supplies to last him two years... He is leaving here with the “Mizrahi” youths... My condition is difficult to describe. Should I send him away as well? My thoughts are with you, day and night. What I am going through I wouldn't wish my worst enemy. My heart is broken, and now I have to say goodbye to Zvi, too. But I shall endure a lot more to come, as I have endured until now. It's very hard to keep on, but I so want to see you again, my little lambs...<sup>50</sup>

As it is clear from the letter, apart from food and provisions for the road, the Women's International Zionist Organization WIZO had prepared complete kits for a new start in Palestine for all the children. The costs of equipment amounted to around half a million dinars.

### **Last-Minute Rescue**

Some of those who got the certificates were staying in other collective centers. Several days before Germany attacked Yugoslavia, in late March 1941, right after the coup in Belgrade, the Zagreb Board hurriedly put on a train to Belgrade a group of 120 children and young people with several escorts. The Federation knew nothing about this and there was no one at the station to meet them. They went to a Federaton's home, but the

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<sup>50</sup> Klajn, p. 21

doorman would not open the gate, causing turmoil. Hermina Melamed, a WIZO and Federation's activist, was accidentally there and asked the doorman, who had recognized her, to let the children in at her responsibility. Melamed immediately tried to get in contact with the secretary of the Federation, Špicer, but he was away. Ela Hammerschmidt, one of the refugees who happened to be there with her daughter Miriam, asked that the tired and scared children be found accommodation for the night. Melamed decided to let them stay in her apartment and in the apartment of her sister Ruža Azriel Levi. On the following day, the chairwoman of the Women's Sephardic Society, Jelena Demajo, found them new accommodation.

The group, which was put together in haste, did not have Greek visas, so Hermina Melamed went to see a certain Ergaz, a Greek national, who knew people in the Greek consulate. The consulate promised to issue 50 visas now, and once the passengers crossed to the Greco-Turkish border, they would give them new visas. This was out of question, and Ergaz and the Federation eventually managed to get all the visas they needed. What's more, several young Jewish men and women from Yugoslavia went to Palestine with this group. The WIZO activists prepared provisions and medicines for the road, and organized their Macedonian counterparts in Skopje to go see the refugees at the railway station and bring plenty of hot tea and other provisions to last them during their trip via Djevdjelija, Thessalonica, Deagach, Istanbul and Beirut.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> In 1941, Hermina Melamed fled from Belgrade to Split, and further on to northern Italy. With her grandson Aleksandar Levi she arrived in Eretz Israel in 1944 and lived in kibbutz Shaar Haamakim. She died in New York on April 17, 1963. In March that year, on the 20th anniversary of this group, several of them came to visit Ela Hammerschmidt in Ramat Hadar, Israel. They sent very emotional greetings to Melamed, who had already been ill. See: Hermina Melamed, *On the Eve of the War in Belgrade*, Newsletter of the Association of Yugoslav Jews in Israel (hereinafter: HOJ Newsletter, Vol. 9-10/1963, p. 14-15; Aleksa Arnon, *Never to Be Forgotten, Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the Arrival of the First Jewish Refugees from Austria in Yugoslavia*, HOJ Newsletter, Vol. 6-7/1963, p. 19-22.



The Greek consul phoned to report good news: Athens had authorized the transit. The first group of 50 children and several escorts left in a sealed wagon attached to an express train for Thessalonica. After spending the night there, the group continued through Lower Trachia. Before crossing over to Turkey, the group leader mailed a ready-made telegram in Greek to the consulate in Belgrade, as a proof that the group left the territory of Greece.

The last group of young men and women and their escorts left the Belgrade railway station on March 30, 1941, exactly one week before Belgrade was bombed and the war broke out.<sup>52</sup>

Although Greece, which, unlike Bulgaria, allowed the transit of refugees over her territory, deserves gratitude, it has to be noted that because the passes were issued in lots of not more than 50 at the time, many young people who had British certificates were still in Yugoslavia when the Germans occupied it and were all killed there.

## Occupation

Like in other parts of the occupied Serbia, the Jewish men and women in Šabac – residents and refugees alike – were forced to wear yellow bands and perform forced labor within days after the occupation. Their property was confiscated and looted.

The refugees, about one thousand of them, were immediately kicked out from the mill and private houses that they had rented, and packed in grain storages in Pop Lukina Street in Donji Šor, where they were detained pending deportation to the camps. The ground floor housed the office of a board that represented their interests with the German authorities. They used a collective kitchen where they ate from a common caldron, and the provisions were paid for by the Jewish center in the town of Ruma. At first, they were allowed limited movement in the town, but were banned from bars, restaurants, mo-

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<sup>52</sup> Bata Gedalja, p. 213-214. See also: Hermina Melamed.

vie theaters, parks... The board guaranteed that there would be no escape attempts.

The Germans sold the synagogue building, and looted the contents. Rabbi Nisim Adizes was forced to do hard labor and was beaten whenever he would yield to the exhausting tempo. One day he came out shaved; whether he did it or someone else did it, it is not known. He was "promoted" into chimney sweep in the army barracks.<sup>53</sup>

The Jewish cemetery too was put up for sale, but there were no buyers. A local ethnic-German stonemason appropriated the most beautiful tombstones, redid and sold them.

In July 1941, all Jewish refugees were moved to a camp at the banks of the Sava River, run by Kreisscommandant Kvasny. On August 21, 1941, Dr. Alfred Bata Koen was brought into the district prison from the villa of Miodrag Petrović in Vranjska, then taken to a square outside "Zeleni Venac" hotel and shot dead. His body was left to hang in the city center.

Next to the National Bank, two elderly Jewish camp inmates are dragging a dead man covered in blood on the sidewalk toward an iron power post, where two other Jewish men were standing, tying thick rope around the post...<sup>54</sup>

Although the Šabac Jews had paid the Germans a sum of half a million dinars, hoping that this would deter further measures against them at least for a while, already on August 22 they were all thrown out from their homes and taken to the camp, to barrack No 5, after the Germans searched them and took away all their valuables. Medical doctors Hajim Ruso, Salo Bergwerk and Markus did their best to help the prisoners. Jewish women were forced to do the soldiers' laundry and wash

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<sup>53</sup> On page 139 of his book *Logori u Šapcu, Hronika iz NOB* (Camps in Šabac, War Chronicle), Stanoje Filipović writes, "This joke cost the old rabbi his life". It is not clear what this means: did he fall from the roof and die? Series 2, Novi Sad 1967: *Jevreji su bili prvi* (Jews Went First), p. 135-145.

<sup>54</sup> Jovanović, p. 259.

hospital bedclothes. Their hands were soaked in water all day long.

As the partisans approached Šabac on September 26, all male residents were transported to Jarak. In the notorious “march of blood”, the victimized people were hit with rifles and beaten into running a distance of 23 km from Klenko to Jarak. Whoever straggled or collapsed from exhaustion was shot on the spot. Three local Jews and five refugees were thus killed.<sup>55</sup>

After the march, the Jews were taken back to the camp. An official German proclamation released on October 9 said that 2,100 Jews and Gypsies would be shot in reprisal for the killings of 21 German soldiers near the city of Topola – in line with the principle to shoot 100 hostages for every German killed. The shootings were executed by the members of the Wehrmacht, and the security police was charged only with supplying the needed number of hostages. It was decided to take 805 Jews and Gypsies from the camp in Šabac, and the rest from Topovske Šupe camp in Belgrade. On October 12, the Germans took the inmates out of Šabac and shot them near Zasavica.

Milorad Jelesić, a farmer from Majur who witnessed the execution, said: “On the day of Miholjdan, I was one of the group of 40 people who were taken to Mačvanska Mitrovica, and from there to Zasavica. We believed that they were going to shoot us. They took us to the bank of the Sava River and ordered us to sit down. The soil was flooded and muddy, and we asked them not to make us suffer, but kill us right away. A German who spoke Serbian said that we were not going to be killed, and that we were taken there as laborers. At that moment, a German machine-gun company, with roughly 150 soldiers, arrived. Lunch was brought and the Germans ate. After the lunch, behind a cornfield from the direction of Mitrovica, a group of

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<sup>55</sup>On page 138 of Filipović carries the statement given by Borika Wettendorf to the District Office of the Serbian Fact-Finding Earth Commission investigating the crimes of the occupying authorities and their collaborators in Šabac. It does not contain the names of the eight Jews killed during the march of blood.

some 50 people in civilian clothes was brought in, and I could tell that they were Jews. They each had to straddle poles sticking from the ground one or two meters apart, facing a hole in the ground. Four German soldiers carrying a blanketed spread between them approached each Jew, who threw something in, probably money and other valuables. This done, the officer gave an order and the Jewish men were shot in the back of the head by two German soldiers each. We immediately ran to them and threw them in the hole, and then the Germans ordered us to search the men's pockets and collect all the things of value, such as watches, money, and also to take their rings off. As some rings wouldn't go off, the Germans gave us tongs with which I cut the rings and handed them over to them. Before throwing the men into the hole, I saw the Germans pulling golden teeth out of their mouths, and if they wouldn't come out, they'd break them off with the kick of the boot. After the first group was done with, we ran behind the fire squad, and another group appeared from the cornfield. We repeated the same procedure. That evening, they took us back to Sremska Mitrovica and locked all 40 of us in one wagon. The following day, we were taken to the same place again, and the shootings continued. While on the first day only Jews were shot, on the second day it was mostly Gipsy people.

Throughout the killings, several Germans were taking pictures: the victims moments before they were shot, straddling the poles, us carrying the corpses to the hole, the fire squad, and other scenes. On the first night we left the hole with the bodies open, and when we came back the following day, we found dogs eating the corpses. One German shot a dog, and said, pointing to the hole, "These too are dogs, and this," he pointed to the slain doctor, "is their brother".<sup>56</sup>

Other witnesses from the village of Štitar, including Janko Arsenović, Svetislav Resa Arsenović, Mihailo Ćosić, Miodrag P.

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<sup>56</sup> Crimes, p. 41-42.

Ćosić and Dragoljub Terzić, supplemented Jelesić's statement with additional details.

The first group did not realize what awaited them, and composedly did as they were told. They realized what was going on only moments before they were shot.

The subsequent groups were more difficult. People were "undisciplined", did not greet the commander in the position of attention, refused to go where they were told, called one other and refused to surrender their valuables. They stood in groups, hugged each other, smoked and refused to stand next to the poles, from where they could see the blood-spattered corpses of their relatives and friends. A young man refused to give away his accordion and was shot with it...<sup>57</sup>

In two days, all Jewish men from Šabac, local people and refugees alike, were executed in this way. Only women and children remained in the camp. They were transferred by train to Ruma on January 26, 1942, and from there they were forced to walk to Zemun, i.e. the camp at Sajmište (fairground) in immemorial cold and deep snow. Old and sick women and children fell in the snow and were left like that, babies in strollers or those carried by their mother were also left in the snow. Among the victims was Žana, the wife of doctor Hajim Ruso; Luci, a four-year-old daughter of doctor Koen, froze to death, leaving her mother crazed with pain. By the time they reached Zemun, she had pulled out her hair and was covered in self-inflicted scratch wounds. Irma Hilkovec lost two of her children on the way, and the third, which was born in Šabac, froze on her bosom.<sup>58</sup>

Together with women and children from Belgrade, Banat and other parts of Serbia, the women and children from Šabac died in a gas van in the spring of 1942.

Out of 1,200 Jews who lived in Šabac in 1941, only two women survived. In late November that year, Borika Wettendorfer somehow persuaded the police to let her go to

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<sup>57</sup> Filipović, p. 142

<sup>58</sup> Jovanović, p. 265.

Belgrade for an alleged eye surgery. Three members of her immediate family were shot: Bernat (70), Aleksandar (35) and Franc (32).<sup>59</sup>

The second survivor was a German woman, Dorothea Thea Fink, who alongside her husband Walter (1909) was in Kladovo and Šabac. She was taken to Sajmište after he was shot, and finally freed for being Aryan.<sup>60</sup>

### The Children of Villa “Emma”

Another 60 refugee children still remained in Zagreb. They witnessed the beginning of war and the proclamation of NDH, the Independent State of Croatia. They were not included in the subsequent registration of Jews. A way to take them out of Croatia needed to be found. Josef Indig went to Ljubljana, then under the Italian administration, and found the way to transfer the children over the border, in the collective center at Krško, in June 1941. In early July, they occupied the old Habsburg castle of Lesno, in the hills above the Horjuljska Valley. They stayed there until July 1942, under the sponsorship of DE-LASEM (Italian refugee relief board) and received assistance in medicines from the Jewish institutions in Switzerland. The bulk of the aid went to the wounded and sick partisans, who had been very active in those parts. When the Italians ordered the group to leave, the partisans and local farmers showed the children a safe way through the forest and to the nearest railway station, in the town of Drenov Gric. Finally, the children got to the village of Nonantola, not far from Modena, where they stayed in Villa “Emma”. There, the group increased to roughly 100 children after a group of children from Sarajevo and Osijek, who had managed to reach Split and from there Nonanto-

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<sup>59</sup>Filipović, p. 138; Zbornik 4, list of victims, p. 276.

<sup>60</sup>The letter of Dorothea Fink, Yad Vashem Archive, 010/12, Zbornik 4, list of victims, p. 268.

la, joined them. After its capitulation in September 1943, Italy was occupied by the Germans. The villagers of Nonantola hid the children until they got genuine Italian identity papers. After the original plan to get them to the South behind the frontlines and in the custody of the Allies failed, they were to be transferred to Switzerland. Ithai wrote:

“It was a tragic night of Yom Kippur in 1943. The Swiss were clueless. They asked why we had fled, if we had committed murder or theft and wanted to send us back to get on with our cozy peaceful lives, because surely the Germans would never hurt us. After three days of ordeal and waiting, the captain of the camp gave us a long speech about the difficult position that Switzerland was in...”

In Switzerland, the children and youth went to Hachshara centers (Ex-les-Bains and other). As part of the first post-war *alyah*, organized by Riki Kon, they set off from France and Spain on the ship *Plus Ultra* and reached Haifa on June 18, 1945.<sup>61</sup>

## Underhand Dealings With Darien 2

Many years after the tragic events, the archives revealed new facts about the Kladovo Transport, showing that the refugees were victims of unscrupulous policy of Great Britain and its secret service. As mentioned earlier, Britain kept rigorously to the letter of its 1939 White Paper, despite the obvious tragedy of the European Jewry. Through diplomatic channels, Britain tried to prevail upon the governments of the “countries of origin and/or transit”, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece and Bulgaria, to hinder or stop the Jews’ flight to Palestine. In addition, the British navy did all in its power to prevent the ships from entering the ports of Eretz Israel.

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<sup>61</sup>Josef Ithai Indig (Kibbutz Gat), *Djeca bježe, Iz povijesti jevrejske izbegličke djece za vrijeme Drugog svetskog rata* (Children Run, from the WW2 testimonies of Jewish refugee children), *Jewish Almanac*, 1963-64, p. 129-136; Josef Ithai, *The Children of Villa Emma*, Tel Aviv, 1983.

Despite British pressure, the Yugoslav authorities allowed the River Transport Company to take the Jewish passengers from Bezdán to Sulina, adding one crucial clause to the contract it had signed with the Federation: that the ships would cross the Romanian border only upon reception of telegram from the representative of the River Transport in Sulina confirming that the ship *Hilda* was waiting there to take the passengers. The telegram never arrived, and neither did the ship.

The second ship was to be *Darien 2*, anchored in Piraeus for a routine overhaul. The JOINT sent \$ 30,000 to have the ship registered to the name of Shmarya Zamaret, a US-citizen and Mosad activist in Europe. In late May, Šime Špicer was informed about the purchase of *Darien 2* and asked to urgently get everything ready for the transport of refugees down the Danube to the Black Sea. But after a couple of days a telegram arrived from Palestine, from the leaders of *Hagana* and the Jewish Agency, ordering that the “Špicer Operation”, as it was coded, be immediately aborted. The decision stirred shock and disapproval among the leadership of the Federation. The explanation that the arrangements for the transport were delayed because Italy entered the war in June 1940 were not acceptable, because this did not affect the traffic in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, which went on as usual. While the perfectly legal alyah called the Špicer Operation was being halted, a number of illegal ones, called the AD-AL-PI alyah, were in full operation. This was seen as the British decision not to let the refugees from Kladovo find a ship.

Moše Agami, a Mosad activist in charge of the preparations of *Darien 2*, was dispatched from Piraeus to Palestine to find out why the on-the-ground arrangements were called off and to try and reverse this decision, but with no success. At first, he did not understand what was going on, but all became clear after he was summoned to a meeting with Moše Šertok (Saret), Eliahu Golomb, David Hakoén and other leaders of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish Community in Palestine. He learned that *Mosad* and *Hagana* decided to team up with the British against Germany and her allies,



despite the *White Paper*. *Darien 2* was assigned to a large-scale British special operation team. She was perfect for their plan: a sea boat, but small enough to reach Kladovo up the Danube. The British intelligence schemed to load *Darien 2* with iron scraps and sink it in the Djerdap Canyon, thus obstructing the transport of petrol and raw materials from Romania to Germany.<sup>62</sup>

Fortunately, the plan was never carried out. The Germans found out that *Darien 2* was to be used for an illegal Alyah, a sabotage would put an end to all alyah, legal and illegal alike, and lead to severe measures against the Jews.

The last saved minutes of the meetings of the Executive Board of the Federation reveal that the Federation was not aware of those plans and continued to negotiate with the River Transport Company the transport of 750 refugees from Šabac to Sulina. Secretary general Šime Špicer suggested to give a 15,000 dinar bonus to the skipper, chief engineer and the rest of the crew of each ship after the completion of the task, i.e. after the refugees are safely taken to Sulina and empty boats taken back to Yugoslavia.

Špicer also suggested that Dorfman and Martin Hiršl, the group leaders, should get 15,000 dinars for traveling expenses and contingencies, refundable upon the presentation of valid receipts.

He also pointed out the possible risks of the agreement with the River Transport Company:

- a) The transport may not reach Sulina, for unforeseeable reasons, or the refugees may not be able to change boats;
- b) The convoy may be halted in a foreign country, by which the Federation would be obliged, in terms of the contract, to pay approx. 300,000 dinars per month until the ships of the River Transport Company are emp-

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<sup>62</sup>Haim Weizmann later explained that the times called for farsighted policies and that future goals and interests of the nation had to be put above the interests of a group of people. Weiner/Ofer, p. 77.

tied of passengers. In that case, it would not be possible to provide food for the refugees from Yugoslavia, and this would be the responsibility of the local Jewish community.

The secretary general also believed that, despite the risks, the passage was worth a try for the following reasons:

- 1) Possibility to relieve the Yugoslav Jewish community of further financial load, since it is very unlikely that it should count on much help from abroad in future.
- 2) The people would otherwise never understand why their departure was impeded if they do not see it for themselves, and, in particular,
- 3) State authorities have repeatedly requested it, and it will provide the Federation with proof of its utmost efforts to help these people to leave the country.<sup>63</sup>

Only a week later, on December 7, Špicer wrote a rather strong-worded and angry letter to Ruth Kluger. He said that six weeks earlier, i.e. in late October, she had informed him on the phone that the steamboat *Darien 2* had arrived in Konstanz, but with a different mission, and continued:

“You talked about repairs, difficulties, etc. while in fact the boat has been used all along for the transport of other refugees, instead of being put at the service of those for whom she was bought in the first place and for whom *Hadassah*, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, and other institutions had given money. Had the boat have been in Sulina in November, the transport to Sulina wouldn’t have cost us a single penny. The Šulc shipping company (owned by a Jew) was ready to let us use their barges free of charge and we wouldn’t have had any difficulties or extra safety concerns, which eventually came about with the River Transport Company. Who do you think is responsible for this?”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>The minutes of the 27th session, November 29, 1940.

<sup>64</sup>Yad Vashem Archive, L 22/14/1.

In December 1940, the news arrived that *Darien 2* had entered the port of Sulina, in spite of everything. Without delay, the group from Šabac had to be transported to the Black Sea port. Two men in Romania, Aleksandar Šapira from the Palestinian Bureau and Salamonides, president of the Jewish community in Braila, suggested that the group should take the train to Prahovo, where a tugboat would be waiting to take them to Sulina. Špicer agreed, on the condition that the tugboat already waited in Prahovo when the refugees started their journey. Salamonides informed Špicer that the tugboat would be in Prahovo on December 12, only to subsequently change the date three times. When on December 17 the news arrived that the tugboat was indeed there, the departure was set for two days later, by train. But on that same day, news of two disasters reached Belgrade: on November 25, the ship *Patria* was sunk after reaching the Haifa port, while *Salvador* ran into a storm on its way from Bulgaria and sank in the Sea of Marmara on December 12. Both disasters claimed approximately 490 lives.

The members of the Federation were extremely worried. The question arose of whether it was wise to let people travel by unreliable, accident-prone boats especially since there was no guarantee that they would be allowed to disembark even if they reached Haifa safely. Just about then, the British had deported to Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, some 1,800 people who somehow managed to reach the shores of Palestine.

The Executive Board scheduled a session for December 19, but one day earlier the tugboat was ordered to leave Prahovo and return to the Danube delta. After learning this from Salamonides, Špicer went to Šabac on December 20 to inform the refugees that the journey had been delayed again.

That same day, the news arrived from Romania that another tugboat, sailing under the Greek flag, was found and ready to take the refugees to Sulina, where, apparently, *Darien 2* was waiting, after all. Belgrade, however, was suspicious. The Greek flag was not very appreciated in those days: Greece was against the Axis Powers, while Romania was their ally. Špicer beli-

eved that it would be too dangerous if the refugees found themselves in Romania without residence permits, and the Yugoslav authorities would not have them back in that case.<sup>65</sup>

## On the Margins

Šime Špicer – Hero or Culprit?

Sixty years after the tragic events, the controversy surrounding the Kladovo-Šabac Transport still persists. In the meantime, many books and articles have been written about it, some archives, inaccessible until now, have been opened. Time goes by and the witnesses are getting fewer and fewer, even those who were very young in those days. Some remember this period as heroic, ideal; to others, it is a constant source of depression and remorse. Feeling guilty for having survived the events that killed their loved ones, they are looking for culprits. Blaming those who did their best to save them, they tend to forget (and thus abolish) the real culprits, the ones who caused the tragedy of the European Jewry. They tend to forget that none of the Danube countries had any understanding for the refugees and that, under pressure from two conflicting sides, the Nazis and the British, or on their own, they denied them transit through or stay in their territories. It is precisely in the context of that prevailing trend that one should recognize the greatness and generosity of not only individuals, Jewish groups, centers and the Federation of Jewish Religious Centers, but also the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the country that received them in the face of its government's obvious pro-German leanings.

Šime Špicer, the champion of for the refugees' cause, took the most criticism of all.

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<sup>65</sup>Hana Weiner and Dalia Ofer, *The Kladovo-Šabac Affair, The Illegal Voyage That Did Not Arrive*, Tel Aviv 1992, p. 76-93. Darien 2 was waiting for the Kladovo group in Sulina until December 29, and then sailed back to Konstanztanz for new passengers. After many difficulties, she finally reached Haifa on March 19, 1941, carrying 786 refugees.

An acknowledged Jewish activist, Špicer was elected secretary-general of the Federation in 1937. Since early youth, he took an active part in a number of Jewish organizations, and towards the end of the First World War he co-founded the central Jewish body, "The Jew". He was an active contributor to the Zionist Association, *Keren Kayemet* and *Keren Hajesod* funds, and a member of the Executive Board of the Federation. He dedicated most of his tenure to refugee relief work, which required outstanding organizational skills. Throughout this operation, which was named after him, he enjoyed the support of the Federation, the Yugoslav Zionist Association, chief rabbi and other spiritual leaders. His exceptional organization skills earned him good reputation and acclaim beyond the Yugoslav borders as well.

Because of his work, he was blacklisted by the Germans and killed in 1941, aged 47. The circumstances of his death have never been explained. D.A. Alkalaj writes that Špicer was arrested in 1941 and taken to the Banjica camp, where he was interrogated and tortured. He was killed in the camp by a certain Dr. Jung.<sup>66</sup>

Ruth Kluger excelled all others in criticizing Špicer. A Romanian Jew, this young, handsome and persuasive woman was responsible for finding ships for the illegal Aliyah Bet (after which she later changed her last name into Aliav, a Hebrew word). Whenever needed, she managed to reach those in the highest positions.

Her 447-page book "The Last Refuge", published in 1973, tells her story. From page 421 onwards, she talks about the Kladovo Transport and the efforts to make the journey continue. It is clear from the text that she knew about the joint plans of the Jewish Agency and the British Intelligence Service about *Darien 2*, but never shared it with anyone from the Federation in Belgrade, despite her almost daily contacts by phone

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<sup>66</sup>David A. Alkalaj learned this from a Serb general and Banjica inmate, who was transferred to Osnabrück in 1942. Menahem Šelah, *History of Holocaust in Yugoslavia (Shoa)*, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 100. Dr. Isak Eškenazi, *Life Under Nazism*, Zbornik 2/1973, p. 275-316. Eškenazi, p. 292.

with Šime Špicer (whom she mentions on page 306 as the president of the Belgrade Jewish Center). She never mentions, however, Špicer's letter of December 7. What strikes as odd is that in her romanced novel, Aliav quotes certain telephone conversations she had had with Špicer word for word, as authentic, as if they were authentic transcripts, but without ever specifying the dates. Besides, no one else, neither before nor after her, broke the sensational news that she had offered Špicer Romanian transit visas for the continuation of the journey by train to Konstanz. Had a similar offer ever been made, this would appear in the Federation's records, and if that had been an option, the entire Kladovo Transport could have been moved to the Romanian territory, in Turn-Severin, by the tugboat *Kajmakčalan* in two or three rounds. And if this option had come about during their stay in Šabac, they would have taken a train to the border crossing near Timisoara. None of these options appears in any of the documents – except in Aliav's book. It is clear from the minutes of the Executive Board of the Federation that there was an attempt to conceal the difficulties. Also, Špicer never made independent decisions but rather consulted others and solved the problems – and they were far too many – in full compliance with the Federation's regulations. Surely, mistakes did occur, but he who makes no mistakes, makes nothing.

What seems the strangest is Ruth Kluger's allegation that Špicer deliberately held the transport, believing that in Yugoslavia it was safe from Hitler. If indeed that was his line of reasoning, he would not have secured Palestinian immigration certificates for his two children, Ruth and Jakov, as early as in July 1940, of which he had informed the Executive Board of the Federation:

“Šime Špicer informed the Board that, dedicated to the values that he taught his children, he decided to entrust their further education to institutions in Palestine and that he had obtained to that purpose the permission of the relevant authorities.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>The minutes of the 20th session, July 14, 1940.

In March 1941, his wife and two children left for Palestine via Greece and Turkey. Although he also had the certificate, Špicer remained in Belgrade, and was among the Nazi's first victims.

Kluger writes that she learned about Špicer's death later (?), that the Germans had reached the camp in Kladovo (!) and started rounding up the Jews. After they let them scatter for about two miles, they started chasing and shooting the men, women and children. No one survived. The march of death continued (!) in Šabac. Šime Špicer too was shot dead (p. 446-47).

Among those who attacked Špicer and the entire Yugoslav Jewish community in the harshest of terms was Efrajim Lahav (Erich Feier). He claimed, among other things, that Špicer continually and intentionally lied about the departure and that the refugees were so starved during their stay in Kladovo and later in Šabac that they went around looking for rotten potatoes. Such claims were denied by many, including Ehud Nahir (Erich Nachheiser) but neither he had much understanding for the hosts, particularly Špicer, who he refers to as the president of the Federation (p. 102). Nahir (p. 112) quotes the 1969 "testimony" of a Danzig refugee, Izrael Heršman, about "the final chord of the fate of Šime Špicer". Heršman had fled Šabac before or immediately after the German's arrival there in the fall of 1941 and managed to reach Italy, and later Switzerland. Asked about Špicer's outcome, he replied: "As I heard (!), our men in Šabac complained against him to the Germans (!) and so the Germans killed him. I heard that they found a lot of money on him."<sup>68</sup>

Šime Špicer, the secretary-general of the Federation, a hard-working, enterprising man, full of initiative, responsible, dedicated and self-abnegating and, finally, a victim of Fascism, does not deserve such slandering.

However, dead men tell no tales, they cannot respond, defend themselves, explain, prove.

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<sup>68</sup> March 1969, Yad Vashem Archive 0-3/3316, p. 10.

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