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## TRIPARTITE COOPERATION IN PURSUING AND KILLING JEWS

*By Zvi Loker*

An unrecorded column of three Holocaust victims in Šabac (Serbia).

Hungarians, Croats and Germans were collectively responsible for the expelling from their homes of entire Jewish families, residents of the townships of Temerin, Čurug (read = Chooroog) and the surrounding villages of *the* Bačka district<sup>1</sup> in Yugoslavia, marching them under heavy guard to the left bank of the Danube river, sending them over by ferry boats to the right bank, where they were received by another armed unit which force-marched them to the city of Šabac<sup>2</sup>, handing them over to the soldiers of the Wehrmacht. The latter put them in the (Šabac) camp<sup>3</sup>, from where they were eventually marched

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<sup>1</sup> Together with the districts of Baranja and Banat, it forms the central part of the Vojvodina province. Its capital is Novi Sad (Ujvidek, in Hungarian). Since 1918, it has belonged to Yugoslavia. Actually, it is an autonomous region of Serbia.

<sup>2</sup> Šabac in Western Serbia is an important economic centre, in a fertile agricultural region. Prior to World War II, some 70 Jews lived there. See "Pinchas fakehilot – Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities – YUGOSLAVIA" (Hebrew), Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1998, pp. 305 and 321.

<sup>3</sup> The concentration camp was established in April 1941 by the Wehrmacht. The story of this is recorded in several publications of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, Belgrade (1952, 1957 (with an English summary), 1997 & 1980); in "Yalqut 1948-1978", Jerusalem 1979, pp. 115-129, "Toledot haShoah – Yugoslavia" (Ed. Menachem Shelah), Jerusalem, 1990, pp.93,101-103,11-115 & 432 & in "Toledot Yehudey Yugoslavia" (Ed. Zvi Loker), II. vol., Jerusalem, 1991, pp. 27, 118 & 231. (all in Hebrew) and in Christopher R. Browning's article entitled "The Final Solution in Serbia - a Case Study" in "Yad Vashem Studies", vol. XV, (1968), Jerusalem, pp. 55-90.

to the nearby village of Zasavica, where spot they were shot in the head and buried in a mass grave.<sup>3a</sup>

This event occurred between April/May 1941 and October 12–13, 1941, the dates of extermination of the still surviving inmates of the Šabac camp. This camp, improvised by German occupational troops, which arrived in Serbia in April 1941, having first submitted Belgrade to a four day air attack, served them to house some 1,250 Jewish refugees, formerly of German or Austrian nationality.<sup>4</sup> These refugees comprised a contingent of Zionist youth, which embarked ships on the Danube at Vienna, already in 1939, en route to Palestine via the Black Sea; their voyage being stopped at the Danube port town of Kladovo, due to lack of further transportation and the ensuing winter freezing of the Danube.<sup>4a</sup> Assisted throughout their stay by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, they were ordered by the Yugoslav authorities to be relocated in Šabac. The story of this tragic episode is well-known and documented under the name of the “Kladovo-Šabac group”<sup>5</sup>.

Untold to date is the plague of the “Temerin/Čurug column” whose members were dragged from their homes in the fertile plains of Bačka and brought to the Serbian provincial town of Šabac. Upon arrival, they were warmly received and so-

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<sup>3a</sup>A factual report on the Šabac camps (as, in fact, there were several so-called camps – one in a disused mill, another in disbanded army barracks at a place called Senjak, in the outskirts of the city), comprising a topographic map, accounts by eye-witnesses and photographs documenting the actual extermination, is available in a monograph issued by the Veteran's Association of Serbia. Its details follow: Stanoje Filipović, “Logori u Šapcu” (Concentration camps in Šabac), Novi Sad, 1967, see especially pp. 135–143 (in Latin script). Mentioned in Shelah, *op.cit.* p. 101, n. 14.

<sup>4a</sup> The policy of brutal deportations of all non-Hungarian inhabitants of the occupied Yugoslav territories affected primarily the Serbian (settlers), but also Romas (Gypsies) and Jews.

<sup>4</sup> The first to report on this was Naphtali Gedaya, the then Secretary of the Jewish Federation in Belgrade, *m Yalqut*”, as above; literature quoted by Shelah, as above. See Hanna Weiner, “Dead-end journey: The tragedy of the Kladovo-Šabac group”, Lanham, 1996.

me of them housed by the small Jewish community of Šabac<sup>5</sup>, which itself later become the second contingent of inmates and victims of the Šabac concentraton camp, together with their ex-German hosts and with the new, now third contingent, the story of which is the reason of this paper.

The initiators of this complex criminal operation were Hungarian occupational forces, who had invaded the entire Bačka region of Yugoslavia<sup>6</sup>. The Jews of Čurug/Temerin were among the numerous victims of the Hungarian occupation of Yugoslavia, the most atrocious of which occurred in January 1942, known as the "Razzia"<sup>7</sup>. This was perpetrated against Serbs and Jews by Hungarian gendarmes and regular army troops in Novi Sad and in the town and villages situated along the Tissa (Theiss, in German) river. During an early phase of this occupation, Jews living in small communities between the Tissa and the Danube rivers, namely Temerin, Čurug and surroundings were deported. Their martyrdom came fully to light in the wake of an examination of the Yad Vashem file on Lazar Ljubičić,<sup>8</sup> a Rightous Gentile and resident of the Zasavica village.

He had saved the Schosberger family of Temerin, namely father Oscar, wife Ravica and son Tomi, then aged six, by spiriting them out of the column passing through his village and by harbo-

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<sup>5</sup> The Kladovo goup arrived in Šabac during September 1940. Until their incarceration by the Germans in April 1941, they were comforted by the Jewish Federation of Belgrade as well as by local Jews. Of the latter, 63 are known to have been killed during October 1941.

<sup>6</sup> As members of the Berlin-Rome axis and allies of Nazi Germany, Hungarian troops invaded Yugoslavia, occupying the provinces of Baranja and Bačka in April 1941; allthoug Banat also formed part of Vojvodina, a region that was under Hungary until the Paris/Trianon Accords in 1918, the Germans kept Banat for themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Under the excuse of "cleansing" the area from the then inactive Serbian Chetniks or Partisans, the Hungarian occupation forces carried out massacres of Serbs and Jews in Novi Sad and in the 'Shaykash' zone that lasted three days from January 21st 24th during which time at least 2,500 Serbs and 1,500 Jews were murdered. Amongst sources, Janos Buzasi, "Ay Ujvideki razzia", Budapest, 1963 and Andreja Deak, "Razzia in Novi Sad", Zurich, 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Yad Vashem File No. 6115a.

uring them until they were able to escape safely. Tomi is now living at Rehovoth, Israel, and he related to me the details of the three-part ordeal, as indicated above. He also remembered that their guards wore uniforms and that their head covers were 'šajkače' (a soldier's cap used in the Balkan armies). However, he was unable to identify the national identity of the guards<sup>9</sup>. Another Jewish community, that of Ruma in neighbouring Srem, was also involved in the Šabac camp story. The Jews of Ruma, themselves later completely wiped out by the Croats, were forced to provide food for the inmates of the camp<sup>10</sup>.

Here we encounter a problem: Who were these secondary drivers of the column, accompanying them from the right bank of the Danube, through a district known as Srem (Srijem, to Croats) – inhabited by both Croats and Serbs, with tiny Gypsy, German and Jewish minorities – and from there to the Serbian city of Šabac? It was difficult to ascertain at this point whether they belonged to the remnants of the Royal Yugoslav Army, which officially capitulated to the German invaders on April 1, or were they the Nazi occupiers, or perhaps members of a local militia. The savior of the Schosbergers, Mr. Ljubičić, provided the solution. In an interview which he had granted to the Serbian newspaper "Sremske novine" published in 1990, he declared that the soldiers-drivers were the Croatian Ustashe collaborators. He also related in the same interview that even after the passage of the column, the soldiers came to back to him and asked if he kept some Jews in his home and if so, they had brought special Jewish badges for them; he replied in the negative and even declared that he would be prepared to wear the badges<sup>11</sup>. The presence of Croatian armed units in this region is at

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<sup>9</sup> Based on recent conversations with Mr. Tomi (Meir) Schosberger.

<sup>10</sup> Ruma had a Jewish population of 250 in 1940. V. Pinkas, op. cit, pp. 301/2. There no survivors. See Memorial booklet by Božidar Pauković, "Rumski Jevreji", Ruma, 1996 (in Cyrillic letters).

<sup>11</sup> The interview appeared in "Sremske novine" No. 1533 dated June 6, 1990 under the headline "Monument – an unploughed field" – in reference to the burial ground of the Zasavica massacres, which has since been intentionally left barren by the Ljubičić family.

the first sight surprising, since Šabac and its surroundings, the Machva district (also known as the 'Sava Bend') was – and still is – part of Serbia and had no Croatian inhabitants. However, it is safe to believe Mr. Ljubičić, as these Ustashe units were known to have been recruited shortly after the collapse of Yugoslavia in the Srem area, and from there they most likely infiltrated across the Sava river into Serbia proper, then already under Wehrmacht rule. As Allies, the Germans would presumably have allowed their presence and even may have used them for their own purposes. So the second group of criminals in this action were Croats. The third group of protagonists in this episode and the final executors of a 11 three groups of Jews were units of the Wehrmacht<sup>12</sup>.

Apart from its intrinsic value to the Holocaust records, the Temerin/Čurug column points to a wider international dimension. The mere fact that soldiers of three different countries participated in the aforementioned deportations and executions appears to be unique. In Holocaust history we know of certain cases in which two countries/nations (i.e. their armed forces) collaborated in the destruction of Jewish populations, such as the the Kamenets-Podolsk massacres, carried out – jointly by Hungarian and German authorities<sup>13</sup>.

Let us recall briefly that the purpose of this action, undertaken by the Hungarian government was, to quote Randolph Braham, “to expel from Carpatho-Russia all persons of dubious citizenship and to hand them over to the Government authorities in Eastern Galicia. Their tragic end was similar to that of the detainees of Šabac.

There is common ground between the Kladovo/Šabac and Kamenets-Podolsk executions, to wit: the Hungarian Government's decree No. 192/1941 of July 12, by which “alien” Jews

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<sup>12</sup> For full details on the actors and responsibilities for these executions – see Christopher R. Browning's essay “Wehrmacht reprisal policy and mass murder of Jews in Serbia” in “Militaergeschicht Mitteilungen”, 1983, pp. 31-47.

<sup>13</sup> See Randolph L. Braham “The Politics of Genocide – The Holocaust in Hungary”, New York, vol. I, pp. 200-205.

were to be eliminated. These were mostly longtime residents, whose former nationality was either non-Hungarian or unclear, Jews born and raised on Hungarian soil, but who were unable to prove, at short notice, their Hungarian ancestry from the nineteenth century onwards. Under such rules, Jews living in the Danube/Tisza area, like those of Temerin, Ćurug and other places were easily declared “hontalan” (homeless) and shared; the fate of their brethren from either old Hungarian territories and particularly the Jewish residents of Carpatho-Russia, a region known also as PKR, which was a Czechoslovakian territory in the inter-war period and was later annexed to the Ukraine. The Hungarians were so keen to “resolve” the issue of their alien citizens that they established a special government department, known by its acronym KEOKH, meaning “Central Countrywide” Controlling Agency for Foreigners”. A known pre-war anti-Semite, Miklos Kozma, was named head of this agency. Braham provides all the details<sup>14</sup>.

It should be noted that while the Roma 160 of them – living around Šabac and all the Jews gathered there were totally destroyed, while some Serbs also perished under the Wehrmacht’s formula of 100 prisoners for each German soldier killed, and 50 prisoners for each wounded. However, upon the liquidation of the Šabac concentration camp, its Serbian inmates were sent on forced labour in Germany and Norway, probably by the Todt organization<sup>15</sup>.

The Nazi authorities in charge of Serbia, both civil and military, pursued a policy of retaliatory and punitive measures against the local population, which was adopted following attacks by Serbian partisans. They clearly distinguished between Serbs and Jews, the latter being considered implacable arch-enemies to be liquidated remorselessly. Consequently, Serbian Jewry’s fate was sealed even before the Final Solution was decreed. This posture has been analyzed and documented by Chri-

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<sup>14</sup> On his policy and the operations of KEOKH – see: Braham. *op.cit.* I, p. 170 *passim*

<sup>15</sup> Browning, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

stopher Browning, in his words: "...the Wehrmacht in fact dealt with Jewish hostages differently than Serbs only because they were Jews. The resulting massacre of these Jews was primarily the responsibility of the military commanders in Serbia, not the local SS, (nor) Keitel, and OKW or of the central authorities of Berlin"<sup>16</sup>.

I am grateful to Yad Vashem for having asked me to review some of its files regarding Righteous Gentiles thus enabling me to contribute to our further knowledge of those times.

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<sup>16</sup> Browning, *op.cit.*, p.39.