

OBSERVANCE OF TRADITION AMONG THE YUGOSLAV JEWS

The Jews settled in the territory of the former Yugoslavia in different periods in the course of 2,000 years. At different times they lived in different territories. Nonetheless, they have always organized their lives according to their religious regulations, and set up institutions which have enabled them to observe all the ritual laws. In ancient times, under the Romans, the Jews lived in the territory of Macedonia, Slavonia and Dalmatia. Remnants of material culture, such as inscriptions on tombstones, show that Jewish communities existed in ancient Mursa near Osijek, in Salona near Split and in Stobi in Macedonia.

Apart from the remains of material culture (synagogues, houses, streets), the Jewish community that existed in the territory of Slovenia in the Middle Ages has left behind written sources which give us insight into how the life of this community was organized.

The early written sources are actually a specific rabbinical literature, called „*responsa*“. These are books written in the form of questions and answers. They first appeared when the learned rabbis collected and printed the questions coming from numerous towns on different legal and religious issues and their replies. Thus, these books are in fact anthologies of discussions on observing Jewish religious tradition in a particular region and they represent excellent sources for research. We can use these sources as a basis for studying the history and life of the Jews in the whole territory of former Yugoslavia.

For instance, the Maribor rabbi Isrlein wrote about the Jews in Maribor; and many years later his *responsa* were edited by the regional rabbi from Dakovo, Schulsinger; the Bosnian Jews were described by Sarajevo chief rabbi Dr. Morh Levi, on the basis of the extant municipal records and ample lit-





erature; a journalist from Israel, Ženi Lebi, wrote about the Macedonian Jews on the basis of a great number of existing *responsa* which give details about the Jews in Skopje, Bitolj, Štip and other places in Macedonia; Belgrade rabbi Ignjat Slang wrote about the Belgrade Jews in his book *Jews in Belgrade* – apart from the *responsa* written by famous rabbis from big Jewish centres, such as rabbi Shmuel da Medina from Thessaloniki, he used *responsa* collected and published by Belgrade rabbis in the 17th century. A book of *responsa* referring to the Jews from Split is kept in the Jewish Historical Museum. It was printed in Livorno in 1884.

Apart from the oldest Jewish inhabitants of the Balkans, called Romaniot, there were those who came to these parts in later periods and who differed in terms of their historical and cultural heritage. The arrival of the Romaniot in the Balkans was followed by that of the Ashkenazim, Central European Jews who settled in the Mediterranean and other European countries after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The Ashkenazim were named after the Hebrew word *Ashkenaz*, which designates the territory of today's Germany. These Jews are the bearers of Central European culture and their language is called Yiddish. Yiddish is a mixture of old German and Hebrew with noticeable traces of Slavic (Polish and Russian) words. Later on, Yiddish spread particularly among the Eastern European Jews. The Ashkenazim came to the Balkans from the Habsburg Empire. They founded their communities in the territory of Slovenia in Ljubljana, Maribor, Ptuj, and other towns. However, they were driven away from these regions at the beginning of the 16th century, and never again did they inhabit these parts in greater numbers. Most Ashkenazim lived in the territory of Vojvodina, Slavonia and Croatia where they settled towards the end of the 18th century and in greater numbers during the 19th century. Despite their comparatively late arrival, their economy prospered very quickly and they left a remarkable trace in the towns where they lived. They were in trade, entrepreneurship and the professions.

The other group of Jews are the Sephardim, who lived for ages on the Iberian peninsula, where they created an important culture. Following their expulsion from Spain in 1492, they scattered across the Mediterranean countries, the majority of them settling in the Ottoman Empire. They reached the territory of the former Yugoslavia via Turkey, Bulgaria, and Greece and came to Split, Dubrovnik and Sarajevo from Venice over the Adriatic Sea. They founded their communities in Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Dubrovnik and Split. The Sephardim were tradesmen and craftsmen. They spoke Ladino, a language based on old Spanish, with a great number of Turkish and Slavic words.





The Sephardim and the Ashkenazim lived in separate communities in the Balkans, with separate synagogues and other institutions. They had different costumes, customs and attitudes towards their living environment. The environment, on its part, treated the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim differently. As the Sephardim started inhabiting these regions as early as the 16th century, they had lived here longer than the Ashkenazim who came mainly in the 19th century. This is why the Sephardim were better accepted by society, and were considered to be the native population, whereas the Ashkenazim were regarded as newcomers and foreigners. Nonetheless, the Balkan nations' treatment of Jews was very tolerant, especially if compared to the treatment of Jews in other European countries, where they were persecuted. Due to their life style and the need to observe their customs, the Jews usually lived in specific streets in all the towns they inhabited, and such a street would later on be known as Jewish Street. There still exist Jewish (Žudioska, Jevrejska) streets in Belgrade, Ljubljana and Dubrovnik. In some towns these were actually districts, while there were real Jewish ghettos in Split and Dubrovnik. Consequently, a street in Split is called „In the middle of the ghetto”, and Žudioska Street in Dubrovnik was a ghetto as it was closed at both ends. Living in such a small space was partly due to the necessity for all Jewish institutions to be concentrated in a restricted space. In Sarajevo, for example, a synagogue was built within Siavush-Pasha's Daira, a space allotted to Jewish inhabitants. As on the *Sabbath* Jews are not allowed to walk too far to reach the synagogue, these were built within the bounds of Jewish districts. Such examples are numerous in many towns inhabited by Jews. Next to the synagogue there was usually a ritual bathhouse, along with a school, a flat for the rabbi, and chambers of different societies. There was a similar regulation regarding graveyards, which were also built near Jewish districts. One of the most famous examples of such graveyards is the Jewish Cemetery in Prague, which still fits perfectly into its urban environment. There are a few old Jewish graveyards in the territory of the former Yugoslavia too, which, admittedly, are not shrouded in such a veil of mystique as the one in Prague, since they are not as compact and incorporated into the everyday living space. On the other hand, there are graveyards, such as the old Sephardi cemetery in Kovačići in Sarajevo, which are extremely significant on account of their uniquely shaped tombstones. The origin of this shape has not been explained yet.

Jewish societies played a big role in keeping tradition and fulfilling tasks set by the Jewish religion. Humanitarian societies for taking care of the sick are among the oldest Jewish societies. Particularly important was the *Hevra Qaddisha* society which looked after the dying and organized funer-





als. In many towns, this society is as old as the Jewish district itself. A great part in maintaining tradition was also played by religious societies where Jews gathered on holidays which involved various morning prayers or midnight gatherings. In these societies the *Talmud* and the *Torah* were studied on Saturdays, and special ritual meals were arranged, too. The building of the Jewish society *Oneg Shabbat*, dedicated to preserving traditions, still exists in Belgrade. Sarajevo still boasts the building of the Jewish society *La Benevolencia* which is a symbol of a totally different type of society. These were humanitarian societies founded at the end of the 19th century and in the 20th century, and engaged in humanitarian work in a more modern way. Their primary goals were financial support and education of pupils and students and assisting cultural work. In big Jewish communities different kinds of societies developed. Besides those which dealt with traditional tasks such as taking care of the sick and the poor, there were also women's societies primarily focused on providing dowry for poor girls.

There was a very strong Sephardi movement in Sarajevo in the twenties and the thirties. As part of this movement, various cultural events were organized by a number of Sephardi societies, as well as evening gatherings where amateur theatre performances were put on. These depicted different customs, which incorporated many romances and other folklore elements. In 1924 *La Benevolencia* published a memorial edited by Stanislav Vinaver and printed in Belgrade. Many texts from this rare book are classics nowadays, above all the text by Avram Altarac „Wedding customs of the Bosnian Sephardim” and the text by Dr. Atijas, „The Atmosphere in Bosnian synagogues”. This is one of the most beautiful depictions of Yugoslav Jews.

Here follows an extract describing a synagogue which was arranged by Maći Bohor in his house in Sarajevo, on Banjski Brijeg: „With such warmth were Selah prayers said in Maći Bohor's temple once, next to kerosene lamps and slim tapers on the teva! Late Sor Leon, very pious, of a somewhat sloppy appearance, but exact and taking the lead when it came to God-fearing and God-pleasing things, his face radiating a peaceful smile, would say the *eleu-na sebasamayaim* sighing in such a way that your soul would be touched. He would say the words in a moved prayer, which sounded like crying, and which brought back to you distant secrets of remote times from the darkness of the early mornings in Elul through the windows of that temple. How big was this ceremony when the temple extended to another room! To the Jews from Banjski Brijeg it was as if their property had doubled. Maći Bohorin's family with him as the head were scattered across the big yard of the temple, as if they were consecrated on Banjski Brijeg. Maći Bohor, precise, devout, quick and always equally gentle, of a short stature, wearing a fez and Bosnian





siacks, was never idle. When he was not praising God in his prayers, he was putting his yard in order, building *sukkot* or making kosher cheese.”

In 1986 an exhibition entitled *Jewish holidays* was staged in the Jewish Historical Museum. It covered the annual cycle of holidays and included an introductory explanation of the Jewish calendar. The exhibits and photographs from the Jewish Museum were displayed, as well as those from the collections kept in Jewish municipalities and synagogues in different towns of former Yugoslavia.

This exhibition was the last one in a row of exhibitions which presented the collections of the Jewish Historical Museum: an exhibition of metal ritual objects, an exhibition of embroidered fabric, an exhibition of old Jewish books and manuscripts, and a display of the Jewish press in the territory of Yugoslavia. The exhibition regarding Jewish holidays, unlike the earlier ones, had an ethnographic character, and the exhibits were only an illustration of the objects used on holidays. The organization of this exhibition gave rise to the conclusion that the study of Jewish customs would be continued by presenting „the life cycle”, that is the customs related to birth, wedding and death.

In the meantime it became possible for a big exhibition entitled *The Jews in the Territory of Yugoslavia* to be organized in the Museum Showroom in Zagreb. The exhibition was put on in Zagreb in 1988 and during 1989 it was staged in Sarajevo, Belgrade and Novi Sad, travelling to New York and Toronto in 1990. This huge project brought about changes in the plans made by the Jewish Historical Museum in the following few years. Other factors which caused changes in these plans were undoubtedly the breakup of the country, the war and poor working conditions. As a result, staging of the exhibition relating to „the life cycle” was put off time after time for over ten years, but this subject matter was included in the mentioned exhibition „The Jews in the Territory of Yugoslavia”. Namely, birth, *B'rith Milah*, *Bar Mitzvah*, and *Bat Mitzvah*, as well as the wedding rite were included in the chapter *Religious rites and customs* presented by Professor Vidosava Nedomački, Ph.D. Mourning rites and customs were presented as a separate unit and a specific subject matter.

A catalogue offering explanations on how Jewish holidays had been celebrated in these parts accompanied the exhibition dedicated to holidays. Apart from the existing literature related to this issue, the main source of data for the contributions in the catalogue was a short survey of the celebration of Jewish holidays by Yugoslav Jews. This survey was initiated by sociologist Srećko Mihailović, who helped Milica Mihailović and Hedviga Bošković, authors of the exhibition and the texts in the catalogue, to conduct the sur-



vey. As the introductory part of the questionnaire made for the purposes of this survey contained a few general questions regarding the observance of tradition, we will touch upon some of the findings here.

The questionnaire on the celebration of Jewish holidays by Yugoslav Jews was published in *The Jewish Review* for November/December 1984. One hundred thirty nine Yugoslav Jews filled in the questionnaire. Seventy of those surveyed were male, sixty nine female, and the average age was 73. The oldest participant was born in 1892 whereas the youngest one was born in 1943. The replies came from 38 towns of former Yugoslavia, and 53 of those 139 polled Jews were Sephardim, 81 were

Ashkenazim, while 5 of them were Jews from mixed marriages. The questionnaire contained 158 questions related to observing the tradition on holidays, nine of which were of a general character and so they could give us an insight into the family in general.

The answers to the questions in the questionnaire on Jewish holidays demonstrate that almost all families who attached importance to tradition possessed different kinds of candelabra (for *Sabbath*, *Hanukkah*) and other ritual objects. The Yugoslav Jewish community was not one of the economically powerful and rich communities, and some details on what the members of poor Sephardi families had to do in order to meet the requirements of tradition are very touching. There were rich families who owned silver hanukkah lamps, but on the other hand, there were families where the mother would scoop out potatoes, pour oil and place wicks in the holes to make them look like eight lit candles. In some families candles were replaced by straws from a broom, which were wrapped in cotton and dipped into oil. Some families had special, artistically decorated little boxes for scents used in the *Habdalah* rite following *Sabbath* (some respondents were so happy to be reminded of those little boxes that they drew them in the questionnaire), but there were those from poor families who said that at *Habdalah* members of their family would smell coffee or lemon, as they had no boxes.

This small-scale survey helped us find out how much importance Jewish families (prior to the Second World War) attached to their tradition. When asked, „Was your family religious, partly religious, or not religious at all?” most Sephardim answered that their family had been religious, a small number said their family had been partly religious, whereas only four said they had not considered tradition important. The majority of Ashkenazim said their families had been partly religious, while no one said tradition had not been considered important.

The answers to the question, „Did any members of your family go to the ritual bathhouse (*mikveh*), and on which occasions?” made us conclude





that this custom had been observed only in more religious families, that it had been obeyed more by the Ashkenazim than the Sephardim, that „the regulations” had been observed, and that it had been done mainly by women following their menstrual cycle, prior to their wedding, before *Sabbath* and other holidays, and by men before the beginning of *Yom Kippur* or other holidays. Some stated in the questionnaire there had been no such bathhouses in their neighbourhood (Zemun, Murska Sobota, Novi Sad, Sivas, Niš, Zavidovići, Derventa, Bihać), but even some Belgrade Jews gave this answer although Belgrade had two ritual bathhouses, a Sephardi one and an Ashkenazi one.

When asked, „Did any of your family wear or use *tefillin*, *tsitsith*, large *talliths*, *tallith* shawls, *kittel*, *kappel*, *shatl*, *tukado*...” a great majority of the Ashkenazim and Sephardim said their fathers and grandfathers had worn *tefillin* and *tallith* shawls. Seventeen Sephardim and 16 Ashkenazim said their forefathers had used *tsitsith*. The *kittel* had been used more by the Ashkenazim, while the *tallith* had been predominantly used by the Sephardim.

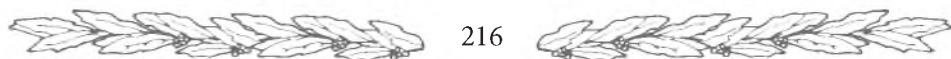
This survey also showed to what extent the Jews living in this territory observed the regulations regarding ritual diet – *Kashruth*. Sixty percent of the polled observed these regulations, whereas 37% did not (3% did not answer this question).

A new questionnaire, referring only to the life cycle, was published in 1995, in the February issue of the *Bulletin*, a newspaper of the Jewish community. It contained 37 questions. Unfortunately, the members of Jewish municipalities responded in small numbers, but as all information is valuable, the received answers will be taken into consideration as illustration of how the customs and tradition are observed, especially because some replies are rare descriptions of the wedding rite, or *Bar Mitzvah* and the mourning rites. Collected below are a few interesting depictions of the mourning rites, collected by means of the latest survey:

All the customs were observed in Bački Petrovac: eggs covered in ashes were eaten after the funeral, people sat in the straw on the floor for 7 days, and during these 7 days the mourners did not cook but they ate what their relatives brought.

Margita Ast, Sarajevo: it was customary to eat what the relatives brought.

Aleksandar Demajo, Belgrade: In cases of death in the family, it was customary to tear visibly the front of a shirt. I think this was worn in the first week, when people sat on low chairs and received condolences. Each morning a relative (and there were many relatives in my case), or maybe even a friend, brought breakfast – *dizajuna*. These were mostly cheese or spinach pies, usually ordered in a shop owned by a man called Danon who made





such pies and to whose shop people went if they wanted these specialties. His shop was near the Imperial Cafe close to Studentski trg, approximately in the empty space between today's Faculty of Philosophy and the University Rectorate building. It is very likely that such pies were also made by somebody who had a shop in Dorćol. As far as I remember, the deceased would be buried in the simplest wooden coffin without a lid, covered by a white sheet. Earth would be thrown over the coffin (1939).

Nisim Navonović, Priština: The dead person would be taken to the graveyard in a simple coffin, whereas the actual funeral ceremony was performed without any coffin. The customs of *keri'ah*, *shivah* were observed, the first meal consisted of eggs and bread, and the mirrors were covered. The annual commemoration was called *anju* and until the first year was out a candle was lit each Friday evening.

In Niš the annual commemoration was called *limud*, and during the seven days of mourning only men were supposed to sit together. They were not allowed to shave during this time, while the food was brought by relatives and friends.

Josip Pesah described the customs related to funeral and other mourning customs in Derventa: people in Derventa were buried in simple coffins, there was *no Hevra Qaddisha* society, and the customs of *keri'ah*, *shivah* were observed. The first meal after the burial consisted of boiled eggs and pastry with oil. Nothing was cooked in the house, the food was brought by others, and it was customary to sit on the floor. Mirrors were covered, thirty days of mourning were commemorated, as well as the full year and this annual commemoration was called *limud*. In connection with this latter custom, Josip Pesah explained: „The Temple in Derventa was consecrated in 1911. All local Jews contributed to the building of the Temple, but there were five prominent and wealthy Jews whose contributions amounted to 2,000-5,000 gold crowns, which made them worthy of merit. My grandfather (father's father) Josef Pesah was one of them. For each of them a mortar plate with the appropriate inscription was placed in the Temple (both left and right from the *Ehal*). The municipality accepted to arrange for their names to be read out at *Erev Yom Kippur* after *Kol Nidre* and also for *limud* with the obligatory *minyan* to be held after *tefillin* on each anniversary of their death. Apart from the *limud* dedicated to my grandfather which was held each year in the Temple, a *limud* was held in the evening in our house on each anniversary of my grandparents' death (father's parents). The *limud* was read by the rabbi, in the presence of twenty worshippers. I think my father and his brothers fasted on that day. After the prayer, fruit preserves, rakija (brandy), boiled eggs (*in-haminadus*), lukum and black coffee would be served. The rabbi would be





served first, and he would then say the blessing (*biraha*), followed by all others. Before they left, people would be given a lukum and two boiled eggs to take home so that their family could say the *biraha*.

Dr. Isak Levi, Sarajevo: „*Shivah* was observed. If the funeral of the deceased happened to be on a Friday, *shivah* did not start before Sunday. If a distant family member died before the year was out, the *shivah* would last only for an hour. If a closer member of the family died, or any occupant of a shared building, all water in vessels would be emptied (thrown away) – *vazojat las aguas*. *Yahrzeit-limud* was held after 30 days,

months, and all commemorations of the date of death; (*limud* after 30 days and the one after 11 months were held on the day of funeral, whereas the annual commemoration was held on the day of death). The mourners spent the first seven days at the back of the house, and the remaining days of the first 30 days at the back of the Temple (opposite entrance). In earlier times, this and throwing water away were precautions against catching diseases.

What did the Yugoslav Jews look like at the beginning of the 20th century? At that point, they were already emancipated citizens wearing ordinary town clothes worn by other people in their surroundings. Only a small number of Sephardim wore traditional costumes, that is women wore *tukados*, and men wore *fazzes*. If you look at any old photograph, you will see that at the beginning of the century all elderly Sephardi women wore *tukados*. You also get such an impression after looking at the gravestone photos in the Jewish Cemetery in Belgrade.”

In the questionnaire on holiday customs, 24 Sephardim said their mothers and grandmothers had worn *tukados*. As for Ashkenazim, since they lived in Central European countries, they traditionally wore the European town costume. Their women, like those practicing other religions, covered their heads and wore various kinds of caps. The Orthodox Jewish women were obliged to have short hair and wear wigs called *shatl*. In the same poll nine Ashkenazim stated that their mothers had worn *shatl*-wigs. Some said that long sleeves had been obligatory. In the former Yugoslavia there were Orthodox Jewish municipalities and there is no doubt that the members of these observed the regulations on covering the head (by wearing small caps, which are called differently in different regions – *kappel*, *yarmulka*) and many wore hats, *peyes*, *tsitsith* and other traditional garments. However, to this day not a single photograph showing such Orthodox Jews has appeared in Yugoslavia. Only the Holocaust photos show Orthodox Jews from Senta while they are cleaning the streets and performing other jobs at the Nazis' orders, which was meant to humiliate them. By mistake, there was no ques-



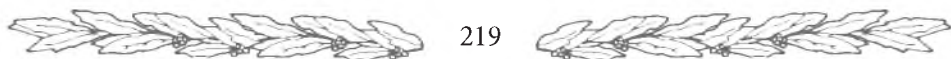


tion in the poll as to whether the men wore *fezzes*, but even without the answer to this question, the photographs prove that up to the Holocaust, older Sephardim in Bosnia and Macedonia wore *fezzes*.

General and obligatory education of children, the emancipation of women and their increasing involvement in the working world were factors leading to changes in the family and to a gradual neglect of tradition. In the years prior to the Second World War there were more and more Jewish families for whom the observance of tradition was reduced to going to the synagogue at particular celebrations and having a more formal dinner on other religious occasions. In all European countries, the Jews were increasingly assimilating into the surrounding culture and in their dress and customs resembled more and more the nations with whom they lived. The most serious blow to the preservation of tradition was the Holocaust which swept away and uprooted the observance of the Jewish tradition from European soil. Today, the sight of traditionally and colourfully dressed Orthodox and Hassidic Jews is a rare one in Europe. Once, the whole territory of Eastern Europe was inhabited by a huge number of very traditional Jews, who had numerous societies, yeshivas, schools, little synagogues, theatres, newspapers and magazines, but all this was devoured by the Holocaust, and what was left behind could not become prominent under the new political conditions.

The Holocaust in the territory of the former Yugoslavia had a particularly ugly appearance, since apart from the German Nazis who initiated the idea of annihilating the Jews, many others took part in this process. This is why Jews joined the Partisans, as the only group openly fighting against Nazism and Fascism. Along with the Partisan movement and its goals, they accepted the communist ideology, too. When the war was over, people were completely changed. The small number of Jews who survived were actually no longer religious. Only a few old people attached to the synagogue survived, while those who wanted to stay loyal to tradition and refused to accept the new life style, moved to Israel in the period between 1948-52.

The Jewish municipalities in the towns where there were Jews took over the task of organizing celebrations, which resulted in the holidays being celebrated in the municipal building instead of people's homes. Performances and gatherings were organized, as well as the *Seder* evenings, whereas the remaining synagogues were usually the venues of holidays such as *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) and *Yom Kippur*. The *B'rith Milah* or *Bar Mitzvah* rites were performed very rarely and secretly. Wedding ceremonies took place in the synagogue in case of foreign citizens. Naturally, everything changed once again after the 1970s, and at present all the rites and customs, if necessary, are again performed publicly and solemnly.





The Yugoslav Jews have completely broken away from tradition. When in the 1950s they pulled down the old synagogue in Solunska Street in Belgrade, which was one of the oldest buildings in Belgrade, charted in the 18th-century maps of Belgrade, not a single word of protest was uttered by Belgrade's Jews. They did not seem to have even noticed this. Or they may have simply turned a blind eye, hoping this would lead to something better, and at that time, sorely needed.

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Supervision of English translation: Jelena Filipović

¹Dr. H. Schulsinger, On Legal and Economic Life of the Jews in Štajerska, Koruška and Kranjska between 1371-1496, Jewish Almanac 1925/26, Vršac, 1925

²Dr. Moric Levi, The Sephardim in Bosnia, Belgrade, 1969

³Ženi Lebi, Rise and Fall, Gornji Milanovac, 1990

⁴Dr. Ignjat Šlang, Jews in Belgrade, Belgrade, 1926



