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THE WESTERN BALKANS

A Bridge from Europe to Europe?

Multilingual and multiple minorities. Who are the Balkan Jews?

KATARZYNA TACZYŃSKA

The documented history of Jews in the Balkans can be traced back to the early Middle Ages and has been studied by researchers from diverse perspectives. Undoubtedly, it is a vibrant, dynamic and tumultuous story, set at the crossroads of multiple intersecting cultures and social groups. Although the Second World War profoundly impacted the Jewish world, it did not bring about its end.

In less than three years, we have lost three women who had made a tremendous impact on Balkan Jewish culture. The first to pass was Flory Jagoda, who died in January 2021. Born in 1923 in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) as Florica Papo, Flory emigrated to the United States after the Second World War. She was an accomplished singer and composer devoted to the preservation of the Ladino and Sephardic traditions. Then, this year, the literary world lost Gordana Kuić, a popular Serbian writer (and Laura Papo Bohoreta's niece[*]). Born in 1942 in Belgrade (Serbia), she preserved the history of Sephardic Jews from various post-Yugoslav countries in her numerous books. Soon after, Dina Katan Ben-Zion died in Israel. This Sarajevo-born writer, literary scholar and translator brought the important contribution to the *Studia Judaica* issue on "Strategies

[*] Laura Papo Bohoreta (1891-1942) was a Sarajevo-born Sephardic activist and writer. She was active mainly in the interwar period, during the period of the so-called first Yugoslavia (1918-41).

of Survival: Balkan Jewish Women and Cultural Representations of Memory", which I edited with Magdalena Koch.

Documenting a culture

Those who remember the Second World War and have directly experienced its consequences are quickly passing away, and the pace of their passing is only increasing. Additionally, their deaths, especially the deaths of such figures as the aforementioned women, result in the disappearance of a unique aspect of the past – the realm of Jewish women's culture in which their experiences have been documented and which existed outside the mainstream, on the periphery of dominant trends. Within the Balkan Jewish community, Sephardic women are often regarded as being (at least) doubly marginalised. The lives of these women, like lenses, bring into focus the fate and dynamics of the changes experienced by the Jewish community in the Balkans. The trajectories of these lives varied and researchers still find it a challenge to map their detailed courses, which could lead us to a deeper comprehension of the history and presence of Jews in the region. In September 2023, I initiated a research project titled "Jewish, Balkan, Female: The Literature of Balkan Jewish Women as a Minority Experience"*, which is why I feel so acutely the loss of these women that actively helped to safeguard and shape Balkan Jewish culture. Regrettably, I will never have a chance to ask them the questions I had prepared. What remains are the multilingual cultural texts they authored, which I regard as a significant means for conveying not only their personal experiences, but also the experiences of the social groups to which they were linked and with which they identified. How will these writings surprise me? Only time will tell. And as for why exactly are Jewish women worth analysing as a separate group?

When I was writing these words in late July 2023, I learnt about the passing of David Albahari – one of the most prominent contemporary writers whose works were devoted to Jewish culture and the Holocaust, particularly in the context of the former Yugoslavia. He was born in 1948, in Peja/Peć (Kosovo), to a Sephardic family. His academic journey led him to study literature and English in Zagreb (Croatia). During the tumultuous war in the 1990s, Albahari served as the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia, playing an active role

* The project is carried out in the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, and financed by the National Science Centre, Poland (No 2022/47/B/HS2/00584). This article is a part of this research project.

in the evacuation of the Jewish community from Sarajevo. In 1994, he made an important life-changing decision to emigrate with his family to Calgary, Canada. These biographical turning points held great significance for the formation of his identity as a writer. As a result, Albahari is now perceived as a multi-centric figure, interpreted through the prism of several pivotal cultural categories, including in the context of Serbia, Canada and Jewishness. The passing away of significant figures from the Jewish world of the Balkans was a direct impetus for me to elucidate (to the extent permitted by the limits of this text) the history and nature of the Jewish community in the Balkans as a collective. The diversity of factors that shaped Jewish culture in the region, as a culture of a minority group, suggests that said culture should not be treated as homogenous. On the contrary, it should be understood as a reflection of Jewish cultural pluralism and, as such, invite exploration through the prism of its distinct local manifestations. With that in mind, let us start from the very beginning.

History of Balkan Jews

The history of Jews in the region of the broadly-understood Balkans, and more specifically, in the former Yugoslavia, is a truly captivating tale. They came to the Yugoslav territories in multiple waves, and the oldest traces of their presence date back to antiquity. While pinpointing the exact dates of their arrival is difficult, historical records suggest that Jews began settling in Yugoslavia even before the arrival of the Slavs, i.e. before the seventh century. The earliest Jewish settlers originated from the Eastern Roman Empire and are known as Romaniotes. They had a distinctive cultural identity and used a language known as Yevanic (Jewish-Greek). These Jews are often described in historiography as the autochthonous Jewish community of the Balkan Peninsula. The second major wave of Jewish migration to this region occurred centuries later, following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497. Consequently, the Jewish population of the Balkans grew exponentially, giving rise to Sephardic communities.

> The second wave of Jewish migration to the Balkans occurred after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the 15th century.

Despite the ethnic differences between the Sephardim and the Romaniotes, a process of sociocultural assimilation occurred between these groups. Sephardic culture and the Ladino language (Jewish-Spanish) gained prominence and started to exert influence over other groups existing in these areas. The most significant

Sephardic centres of that era in the South Slavic areas included Split, Dubrovnik, Belgrade, Skopje, Bitola (Monastir) and Sarajevo. Each of these cities has a distinct historical background that deserves closer attention. For example, Split and Dubrovnik were shaped by Italian influences, while Skopje and Bitola were homes to particularly hermetic and conservative Sephardic communities. However, in this text, I will focus on Sarajevo, as the city that connects the three women I evoked in the introduction.

Ashkenazi Jews started arriving in Yugoslavia in the 18th century. In Sarajevo, the first small group arrived alongside the Muslim population that had fled from Pannonia, which was conquered by the Austro-Hungarian army. Researchers believe that these early Ashkenazi immigrants assimilated into the Sephardic community. After 1878, when the Ottoman Empire lost control of the Balkans and Austria-Hungary took over, a new wave of Ashkenazi Jews began to arrive in the region. Unlike the previous group, these Ashkenazi Jews did not assimilate with the Sephardim. Instead, they established their own separate community.

The Austro-Hungarian rule over the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) resulted in significant social and economic changes, particularly in the cities. They began to attract new settlers who saw BiH as a good place to work and earn a living. BiH was economically underdeveloped, lacking industry and a sufficient number of skilled workers. At the same time, there were virtually no incidents of antisemitism in these areas, which made them popular among Ashkenazi settlers. In 1879, Ashkenazi Jews established their own religious community in Sarajevo. Consequently, many educated Ashkenazim, proficient in German, Slavic languages and Yiddish, began to migrate to BiH, where their linguistic skills allowed them to take up positions in various economic and administrative sectors.

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For a long time, lasting until the early 20th century, Bosnian Jews maintained their culture and traditions that remained largely unchanged, despite the social and cultural shifts occurring in the region. Interestingly, the continuity of customs and language within these groups was ensured by Sephardic women, who had been regarded as cornerstones of the Jewish identity since the Ottoman period. Their influence was typically limited to the family and the close-knit environment symbolically referred to as the curtijo ("courtyard") or maale ("quarter"). For this reason, the Sephardic community remained relatively closed off and resistant to assimilation processes, striving to preserve as much of its distinct cultural heritage as possible. Over the centuries, the community developed within its isolated

setting, steadfastly resisting external influences and preserving the unique identity of the Sephardic community and the Ladino language.

According to Krinka Vidaković-Petrov, the way Jews functioned in BiH differed from patterns observed in other parts of the Yugoslav region, such as Serbia or Macedonia. This distinction can be attributed to the presence of the local Muslim community in BiH, which consisted of Serbs and Croats who converted to Islam during the Ottoman period. The local Muslim community shared the same language as the Christian Serbs and Croats, but they held a privileged socio-economic position during the Ottoman era and maintained closer ties to the Turkish administration. Consequently, a unique Slavic-Oriental culture specific to BiH emerged in the region, in which cultural division was defined on the basis of religion and religious traditions rather than ethnicity and language. Hence, the Bosnian cultural environment reflected a multi-religious society that included Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and native Muslims (still of Slavic origin), but viewed Sephardic Jews as foreign and isolated, lacking any ties to BiH's territories, as well as linguistic or ethnic connections to the rest of their populations.

The Yugoslav experience

In 1918, Jews from various parts of the Yugoslav region, with their own distinct historical experiences, were integrated into the single Yugoslav community. These groups spoke different languages and had diverse cultural identities. The period of the first Yugoslav state was marked both by the celebration of the diversity of expressions of Jewish identity and by its questioning and re-evaluations. There was a collective search for an answer to a fundamental question: who was a Jew within the context of Yugoslavia? The new Yugoslav state was a blend of different nations, ethnic groups, religions and cultures, bound by the core idea of forging a new Yugoslav identity. Three South Slavic nations (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), several non-Slavic ethnic minorities from neighbouring countries (Hungarians, Romanians and Albanians), and other groups (Jews and Roma) came together to merge into this new entity. Within this context, Jews were seen as a stateless minority, bringing their additional religion (Judaism), cultural traditions and languages (Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish, German, Hungarian and Yiddish) to the amalgam of cultures forming the new state.

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In the territories of the former Yugoslavia, the Jewish community was comprised of two distinct groups: two-thirds were Ashkenazim, and one-third were Sephardim. After the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 (renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929), the Jewish community became a minority, accounting for a mere 0.5 per cent of the total population. Ashkenazi Jews resided foremost in Croatia, Slavonia and Vojvodina (formerly part of Austria-Hungary), while Sephardic Jews were concentrated in Serbia, Dalmatia, Bosnia and Macedonia, areas which had been previously under the influence of the Ottoman Empire. It is clear, therefore, that the Jewish community existed as a minority group (albeit not a fully homogenous one) in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Balkans. At the same time, it transcended the political and administrative borders of the region.

The documented history of Jews in the Balkans can be traced back to the early Middle Ages and has been studied by researchers from diverse perspectives. Undoubtedly, it is a vibrant, dynamic and tumultuous story, set at the crossroads of multiple intersecting cultures and social groups. Although the Second World War profoundly impacted the Jewish world, it did not bring about its end. There are still numerous topics that warrant further exploration. One such area of study is the history of Balkan Jewish women who have rarely been the focus of researchers' attention. The biographies, works and activities of such remarkable figures as Flory Jagoda (US), Gordana Kuić (Serbia), Dina Katan Ben-Zion (Israel) and many other Jewish women grant us extraordinary insights into the Jewish traditions of the Balkans. This group offers examples of a variety of intercultural and transcultural identifications, shaped in an intersectional manner and drawing from multiple points of reference, such as gender, religion, education, region, culture, nationality and language. These women kept crossing all the primary divisions underlying the basic ways of understanding and describing the dominant cultures of the Balkans.

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The analysis of the writings of Balkan Jewish women allows us to explore how the fundamental issues of both general and Jewish ideological movements find expression within this group. Additionally, it allows us to observe the process of defining one's own boundaries – how individuals bond with their "selves" in the act of narration, through self-attribution and exclusion. I firmly believe that exploring this dimension of Jewish culture will offer valuable insights into the Balkan region. Despite the prevalence of the Slavic element, the area has been influenced by the legacies of three distinct political systems – the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-

Hungarian Empire and the Republic of Venice – resulting in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. By approaching these women's writings from such a perspective, their words can be interpreted as subversive minority voices emerging from the margins. Such exploration can facilitate a deeper understanding of the complex historical and cultural dynamics of the Balkans.

Katarzyna Taczyńska, is an assistant professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and a researcher at University College Dublin in the project When Nationalism Fails. A Comparative Study of Holocaust Museums in ex collaborationist countries. Her research interests include contemporary culture in the context of memory in Eastern and Southern Europe, Holocaust studies, historiography, and literature and art created by Jewish women in the Balkans. Among her most recent publications are "(Un) spoken Histories: The Second World War and Yugoslav Jewish Women," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 17 (2023): 104–123, and (with Sabina Giergiel) "A non-existent cemetery: The memory of Germans in today's Belgrade," *Memory Studies* (forthcoming in 2023).