
EPILOGUE: THE SURVIVING REMNANT

On March 25, 1941, Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact, allying itself with Hitler. Two days later, however, a bloodless coup d'état took place in Belgrade, led by a Serbian general, Dušan Simović, evidently in opposition to the governments pro-Axis policies. As a result, on April 6, German bombers attacked Belgrade, while the Italians struck Dalmatia; shortly after, Hungarian and Bulgarian troops also invaded the country. Within less than two weeks the Yugoslav armed forces surrendered.

Thus, by May 1941 Yugoslavia had ceased to exist as a state. Much of its territory was divided among the conquering Axis powers. Germany occupied Northern Slovenia and the Banat; Hungary acquired Bačka and Baranja, the remaining two sections of the Vojvodina, and several smaller adjacent areas. Italy annexed Southern Slovenia and most of the Dalmatian littoral and also occupied a considerable portion of the interior regions in the south, bordering on Albania. Bulgaria received most of Macedonia. From the remaining territory were carved the small German puppet state of Serbia and the Independent State (later Kingdom) of Croatia, which also included Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Not only did the country suffer from partition and foreign occupation but also a bloody civil war raged uncontrolled in its midst. The Ustaši (the Croatian Fascists), led by Ante Pavelic, with Muslim help, massacred Serbs by the thousands, and the Serbs, especially the Četnik troops led by General Draža Mihailovic, retaliated in kind. But whereas the Četniks began by combating the Germans and the Ustaši, they ended up in a struggle against the Partisans, the Communist forces headed by Josip Broz Tito. During the course of the

war, more than a million and a half Yugoslavs, or about 10 percent of the total population, lost their lives.

While the Yugoslav populace as a whole was being decimated, the Jews were being subjected to a process of systematic annihilation. The treatment of the Jews varied slightly from region to region and the timetable for their elimination differed accordingly, but the ultimate effect was the same virtually everywhere: the almost total destruction of the existing Jewish community.

The Jews of Serbia were the first to experience the full impact of Nazi policy. On May 30, 1941, the German military authorities in Belgrade issued a definition of who was a Jew, followed by a series of regulations whereby Jews were removed from public service and the professions, all Jewish property was to be registered, forced labor was introduced, the Serb population was forbidden to hide Jews, and all Jews were ordered to wear a yellow star.¹ Such measures were merely preliminaries, however, and a more extreme solution to the "Jewish problem" ensued shortly thereafter.

By July of the same year, Jews were being arrested and a number put to death, supposedly in retaliation for Communist activities. In August several concentration camps were set up and a systematic roundup of Jewish men began all over Serbia and in the Banat. In October some 4,000 Jewish men were shot by the German army. Women and children were also rounded up and sent to Sajmište, a special camp erected in Zemun across the river from Belgrade. During the spring and summer of 1942, more than 6,000 of them were killed in gas vans. By August 1942 the Nazis had achieved their ultimate solution to the Jewish question in the area. Serbia was for all intents and purposes *judenrein*.²

In the Independent State of Croatia, implementation of the anti-Jewish policy lay largely in the hands of the Ustaši. Discriminatory regulations, similar to those in Serbia and elsewhere, were issued as early as April 30, 1941. Roundups of Croatian and Bosnian Jews began in the summer of 1941 and continued intermittently thereafter. Sarajevo's Jews disappeared by August 1942; Zagreb Jewry managed to remain largely unconfined until as late as 1944. The most notorious among the various labor and concentration camps where Jews and other "undesirable elements" were interned was the torture camp of Jasenovac, in which a large number of Croatian Jews lost their lives. Those Jewish inmates who did not die from starvation, typhus, and maltreatment in the Yugoslav camps were eventually deported to Auschwitz and other death camps beyond the South Slav frontiers. By the end of 1944, the only Jews to remain in Croatian

192 *The Jews of Yugoslavia*

territory were those who were recognized as “honorary Aryans,” Jewish partners in mixed marriages and *Mischlinge* (products of intermarriages).³

The entire Jewish community of Bulgaria proper managed to survive the war virtually intact, but the Jews in Bulgarian-controlled Macedonia were not so fortunate. In March of 1943 some 8,000 Jews from Bitolj, Skoplje, and other towns in the area were rounded up and shipped in three transports to Treblinka.⁴ Macedonian Jewry was thereby annihilated almost totally.

The Jews in the Hungarian-occupied regions experienced a similar fate. In January 1942 several thousand Jews and Serbs were shot in a bloody massacre which took place in Novi Sad and several of the surrounding towns in the Bačka.⁵ Between 1942 and 1944, some 4,000 Jews were mobilized into labor units and sent to the Ukraine, various parts of Hungary, and the local Bor copper mines. Soon after the Germans took control of the Hungarian zone in March 1944, mass roundups of Jews began. At first these Jews were interned in a number of collection or concentration camps in the area or else crowded into the newly created Subotica ghetto. But beginning in May 1944 a majority of the Jews of Bačka and Baranja found themselves on transports heading for Auschwitz.⁶ Like the rest of the Jews in the Hungarian provinces, these Jews remained unconfined longer than most of their fellow European Jews under Nazi occupation, but not long enough to outlast the war.

The Jews who managed to escape to those regions under Italian control fared relatively better than Jews in other parts of the former Yugoslav kingdom. While most of these Jews, whether natives of the area or recent refugees, were eventually interned in Italian camps, they appear to have received better treatment. The Italian authorities saved them from deportation to the Reich as long as they were in command.⁷ After the capitulation of Italy, those Jews who fell into German hands were transported to death camps. Others, however, succeeded in reaching southern Italy, where they were able to remain alive in such camps as Ferramonte, which the Jewish Brigade later helped to liberate. A considerable number of Jews from the Italian zone, especially those who had been interned on the island of Rab, joined Tito's Partisan forces.⁸

Thus, the Holocaust wiped out an estimated 55– to 60,000 Yugoslav Jews, approximately 80 percent of the prewar Jewish population of the country.⁹ Some were shot in the streets, others died in Yugoslav concentration camps; many were sent to the crematoria of Auschwitz and death camps elsewhere. In addition, a relatively small

but nevertheless significant number of Jews lost their lives while fighting with the Partisans.

By the end of the war, fewer than 15,000 Yugoslav Jews remained alive. Among these survivors, many had found refuge through emigration, mainly in Italy, but some in Switzerland or the United States. A substantial group had fought with Tito's Partisans. Although exact figures are not available, it would appear that between 2– and 3,000 Jews joined the Partisans during the war, both for ideological and pragmatic reasons. (Eleven Jews, among them 4 from Sarajevo, were later designated National Heroes, the highest possible honor in Socialist Yugoslavia.)¹⁰ About 450 Jewish reserve officers and 200 non-commissioned officers and soldiers, who were in the Royal Yugoslav Army when it surrendered, returned home in 1945. They had spent five years incarcerated in Germany, generally segregated as Jews, but protected by German adherence to the Geneva Convention regarding military prisoners of war. Others had somehow managed to endure the concentration camps, and a few had been successfully hidden by non-Jewish families for the duration of the war.¹¹

In 1946 a total of 12,495 Jews were counted on Yugoslav soil. In Belgrade 2,236 Jews were to be found; in Zagreb, 2,126; and in Sarajevo, 1,413.¹² The vast majority of Holocaust survivors had been left with nothing. Their families had perished and their health, both physical and mental, had been destroyed. The future looked bleak indeed.

Soon after the creation of the State of Israel, the Yugoslav authorities permitted Jews to emigrate there freely if they so desired. At first, doctors and other professionals were discouraged from leaving, but later they too were allowed to go with their families. Non-Jewish spouses were also given permission to leave the country. Between 1948 and 1952, in a series of five emigration waves, 7,578 persons departed for Israel.¹³ Thereafter, individuals could follow if and when they chose. About 150 Jews returned from Israel to Yugoslavia; others made their way from there to North or South America, where there were several small Yugoslav Jewish emigre colonies. After more than half the surviving population had gone on aliya to Israel, a Jewish community of 6– to 7,000 remained in Yugoslavia.

Since 1952 very little migration by Jews either to or from Yugoslavia has taken place. The overall population of the Jewish community has remained fairly constant. Within the country there has been internal movement of Jews from smaller to larger centers. In 1939 of

194 *The Jews of Yugoslavia*

the total Jewish population, 72 percent lived in ten cities. This figure increased to 77 percent by 1946. By 1958 over 85 percent of Yugoslav Jewry were registered in the ten largest communities. The size of the three major communities has not increased very greatly, however. Between 1952 and 1969, the Belgrade Jewish population grew from 1,380 to 1,602; Zagreb, from 1,287 to 1,341; and Sarajevo, from 1,028 to 1,090.¹⁴

Yugoslav Jewry today is comprised very heavily of natives of the country. According to a survey conducted in 1971,¹⁵ approximately one-third of the members of the Belgrade and Zagreb communities were born in the city in which they now reside, but almost 60 percent of those living in Sarajevo spent their earliest years there as well. Eighty percent of the Jews in Belgrade and Zagreb claimed Serbo-Croatian as their mother tongue, whereas 93 percent did so in Sarajevo.¹⁶ Nearly 14 percent of those enumerated in the population survey claimed some knowledge of Ladino, but only 4 percent reported it as their native language. Of those respondents age thirty and older, fewer than 5 percent knew Yiddish and only 5 percent considered it their mother tongue. None of the younger generation were familiar with Yiddish and only eight persons in the thirty to forty-four age group were able to speak the language.¹⁷

The ratio between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in the overall Jewish population has remained relatively constant from the interwar period to the present. The line of demarcation between these two groups no longer exists to the extent which prevailed previously, however. Some Sephardim have crossed over from the poorer and less developed areas of Macedonia and Bosnia to wealthier regions, such as Croatia or even Slovenia. Official distinctions are no longer being made between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and the differences between them are gradually disappearing, especially among the younger generation. According to the results of the 1971 demographic survey, about one-third of Yugoslav Jews had Sephardic parentage and about one-half, Ashkenazic parentage, while slightly less than 5 percent were of mixed Sephardic-Ashkenazic origin and the remaining 10 percent considered themselves to be Jews without further specification.¹⁸

The economic condition of the Jewish population in postwar Yugoslavia is, in general, fairly good. The community gives intermittent monetary aid to the elderly and the sick who can no longer support themselves, but poverty is not a major problem among Jews. Their economic well-being is quite uniform in the various parts of

the country, unlike before World War II when there were much greater discrepancies between different regions.

In the interwar period most Jews were involved in business, crafts, and private white-collar jobs, and some were engaged in the free professions. Under the Communist regime, the economic structure of the country has changed drastically and the Jews were obliged to adapt themselves to the new circumstances or leave. Consequently, the Jews who remained in Yugoslavia after the war were mainly professionals or civil servants, many holding high positions in these fields. This rather peculiar occupational distribution may be accounted for by the survival of a high percentage of the Jewish professional class who had been reserve officers in the Royal Yugoslav Army and by the policy of the authorities to discourage the emigration of these professionals, especially medical doctors.

Hence, the Jewish population continues to display a high proportion of individuals engaged in professional occupations, such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, professors, engineers, and scientists. (Table 15 presents the occupational structure of Yugoslav Jewry in 1953 and 1970, which may be compared with table 9 for the interwar period.) According to the 1971 demographic survey, in Belgrade, out of 333 persons gainfully employed, 141 (or 42 percent) were considered professionals; of 328 in Zagreb, 161 (or 48 percent) fell into this category; and in Sarajevo, 157 out of 288 (56 percent). Correspondingly, the number of persons with higher education is quite high—approximately one-third of the respondents in Belgrade and Zagreb and close to a quarter in Sarajevo.

The surviving Yugoslav Jewish population have thus managed to rebuild their lives since the Holocaust. The community, too, has succeeded in reconstructing itself to the best of its ability after the devastation of the war years. It has been a long and hard struggle, but the community has emerged considerably more unified than before.

Immediately after the Germans invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities ceased to function. Some local Jewish communities were able to continue their operations temporarily, albeit in a restricted fashion. In Belgrade the separate Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities were abolished and replaced by the Representative Body of the Jewish Community (*Vertretung der jüdischen Gemeinschaft*). The Jewish council, similar to the *Judenräte* elsewhere in Nazi Europe but apparently with more limited authority,¹⁹ provided aid to the needy Jews who had lost their jobs, and to

196 *The Jews of Yugoslavia*

those who had been transferred to Belgrade from elsewhere. It set up soup kitchens to feed hungry Jews and even provided food for internees in the collection centers in the area. It also organized a Jewish health service and clinic, as well as a hospital staffed by Jewish doctors and other trained medical personnel.²⁰ When Belgrade Jewry was destroyed several months later, this body, too, disappeared.

In May 1941 two judges were appointed as commissioners responsible for the property of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities of Sarajevo.²¹ In the Bosnian center, too, the local Jewish leaders attempted to alleviate the misery of the Jewish population by providing food and other assistance. These efforts achieved only limited, and temporary, success.²² Soon the Sarajevo Jewish community also ceased to exist. The same tragic story repeated itself in nearly all the other Jewish communities.

In Zagreb, however, the Jewish community somehow managed to continue functioning throughout the war years. It supplied health care and school facilities for the local Jewish population. Together with the Osijek community, the Zagreb Jewish leaders were active in sending food packages to the Jewish internees in the various labor and concentration camps nearby. (Whether many of these parcels actually reached their intended destination is not clear, however.) The Zagreb Jewish executive was also able to arrange for a group of Jewish children to reach Palestine in 1942 with the help of the International Red Cross.²³

Nevertheless, by 1944, with the exception of Zagreb, organized Jewish life had virtually come to a halt in the Yugoslav lands. During the course of the war, the Germans and their allies had completely destroyed or severely damaged nearly all the Jewish public buildings in the country. The main Sephardic synagogues in Belgrade and Sarajevo as well as the Ashkenazic temple in Zagreb had been totally demolished, and the Ashkenazic houses of prayer in Belgrade and Sarajevo and the four-century-old Sephardic synagogue in Sarajevo were almost beyond repair. Communal treasures had been lost and records had, for the most part, permanently disappeared.

On October 22, 1944, two days after the liberation of Belgrade, Dr. Friedrich Pops, who had spent most of the war years in hiding in Belgrade, returned to the premises of the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities, posted a new sign and set up an improvised office.²⁴ He thereby symbolically began the work of rebuilding the Jewish community in Yugoslavia through the organization of which he had been a founder and also served as president on the eve of the war.

In the immediate postwar period, the federation occupied itself primarily with humanitarian tasks—taking care of the returnees from the concentration camps, the sick, the elderly, and the orphaned. From 1945 to 1952 the Autonomous Committee for Aid, established in conjunction with the American Joint Distribution Committee, worked with the federation in assisting the Jewish community in its recovery. Another major task of the federation in the late forties and early fifties was to help emigration to Israel.²⁵ It was only after 1952 that the federation was finally able to consolidate its power and reorganize itself and its activities to correspond to the needs of those Jews who had remained in the country.

By 1946 fifty-six Jewish communities had been reestablished, less than half the number in existence six years earlier. Many of these communities, however, consisted of only a handful of individuals. After the various waves of emigration to Israel, thirty-six organized communities remained.²⁶ In postwar Yugoslavia, the three largest and most important Jewish communities have once again been located in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo. Some Jewish communal activity is also to be found in eight other cities: Subotica, Novi Sad, Osijek, Rijeka (Fiume), Zemun, Split, Ljubljana, and Skoplje. But, for the most part, the remaining twenty-five Jewish communities exist primarily on paper because they do not have enough members to support any kind of real communal life.

In the postwar period, the Yugoslav Jewish community has become very tightly organized both on the countrywide and local levels.²⁷ All Jewish organizations and institutions are subsidiary to the local community and in turn to the federation. Distinctions between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Neologues and Orthodox no longer operate. Thus, every community includes all Jews in its vicinity. This situation contrasts sharply with the state of affairs before the war, when separate communities often functioned side by side, each with a wide variety of associated but independent charitable and cultural organizations. Since the war, this multiplicity of local bodies has been eliminated completely, in part due to expediency, considering the small size of the population, but also out of a desire for uniformity and cohesiveness.

The Jewish community in postwar Yugoslavia is officially recognized as both a national and a religious community, although there are no longer any special laws which define its existence, such as the Law on the Religious Community of Jews in Yugoslavia of 1929. The com-