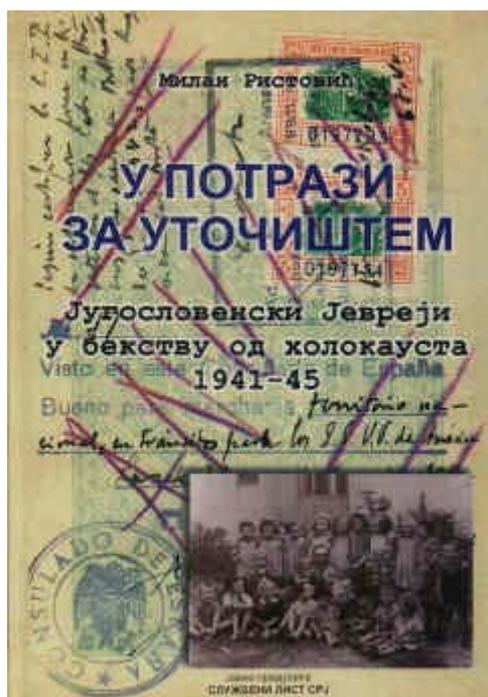


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In search for Refuge

Yugoslav Jews Fleeing the Holocaust 1941-1945



U potrazi za utočištem

Jugoslovenski Jevreji u bekstvu od holokausta 1941-1945
Sluzbeni list, Belgade, 1998

Summary

Since April 1941, the Yugoslav Jewish community has been the target of anti-Semitic policy of occupying authorities and local collaborators. During the four year of war, 60.000 or 80% of its members were killed at places of execution and in concentration camps in the country and territories of the Nazi German Reich. Some 3-5.000 Jews - foreign nationals and refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia - happened to be in Yugoslavia when the war broke out. Most of them perished. Out of the 121 Jewish communes that existed until 1941 in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, many of them were left without majority of their members during the war or were completely extinguished. One estimate suggests that between 8.000 and 10.000 Yugoslav of Jewish survived the war by hiding, fleeing or living in internship in Italy.

The fate of Jewish refugees from the Yugoslav territory during 1941-1945 has been studied and presented in this book as part of the drama of the Yugoslav and European war. It may be observed as a separate case study. On the other hand, due to many common features of the refugee problem in World War II in general, the case of Yugoslav Jewish refugees is a kind of paradigm. On the basis of documents from a variety of sources - the testimonies of survivors and historiographic literature, the author has tried to follow the search for refuge and flight from Holocaust of the surviving Jews from various parts of Yugoslavia not only as their movement across new and old state borders and occupation zones, caused by and occurring in hard war circumstances; this is also an attempt to penetrate and comprehend their wartime refugee daily routine, living conditions in refuge, internment or hiding places in the provinces. The author has also addressed such issues as the impact of the lives of refugees and expellees on individual and group psychology, family relations, etc.

Flight has not been understood only as a forceful change of place caused by endangered life, but also as a temporary, imposed "escape into a different identity", particularly of those who during the war hid in the country. In addition, this segment - from the most tragic period in the history of Yugoslav and European Jews - is necessarily reflected in the relations and policy of Axis powers, as well as on the Allies and their governments. In discussing the political and diplomatic aspects of the Yugoslav Jew refugee problem, the author has tried to give equal attention to the positions and actions of individuals, ordinary people, Jews and non-Jews, as subjects and objects of historical processes, with all their complexity.

Differences in the degree of success in the implementation of anti-Semitic policy of the Axis countries, who occupied and divided Yugoslavia since Spring 1941, rendered it possible for the members of the Jewish community who had more courage, luck, material means, friendly connections, a better assessment of the situation or simply stronger self-preservation instincts to try to escape the tragic fate of their kin in other occupied European countries. The chances for the survival of Jews in occupied territories under German control and administration (above all in Serbia), and those encompassed by the Croatian Ustashi state (Independent State of Croatia - NDH) were very small. To escape north, to Hungary, or south, to the Italian occupation zone, to Dalmatia, Herzegovina, Boka Kotorska, to Kosovo or Albania, with enormous risk, fear and insecurity, left some hope that, owing to less rigid stand of the Hungarian and, particularly, tolerant attitude of Italian authorities, it would be possible to avoid deportation and death in one of the Nazi or Ustashi camps.

Refugees also managed to find unsafe, temporary refuge in the Bulgarian occupation zone (southeastern Serbia, Macedonia) until the spring of 1943, when almost all Yugoslav Jews (including refugees from other regions) who happened to be there at the time were turned in to German allies.

Most Yugoslav Jews sought refuge in those territories under Italian occupation and control in the Adriatic coast and its hinterland. At the highest point of relations between the Third Reich and Fascist Italy, Yugoslav Jewish refugees, like those in Greece and in French territories under Italian occupation, were the subject of continuing and fierce dispute. In 1943, refugees from cities on the Adriatic coast (3.577 people) were taken to a prison camp on the island of Rab (Arbe). Part of the refugee population on several occasions was taken to camps throughout Italy (most frequently to the Feramonte di Tarsia camp) and internment in Italy (4-5.000). Particular experience for Yugoslav refugees was life in "free internment" and camps in Italy, where from by mid-1943, due to the Italian government's policy, it was possible for those who could provide a visa for a Latin American state, to leave Europe via Spain and Portugal. Most of the internees were deprived of this possibility and forced spend months and years of meager life in restlessness in camps throughout Italy, Albania or on the Yugoslav coast.

That part of Yugoslav Jewry which sought refuge under the protection of the Italian occupation authorities were able to survive also because some Italian military commanders and diplomats obstructed the enforcement of Mussolini's orders about extradition to German and Croatian authorities.

Only a few surviving Yugoslav Jews tried to save their lives by fleeing to one of the Allied or neutral states. They reached these territories mostly from Italy, with the help of visas for a South American state (via Spain and Portugal) or by illegal entry (Switzerland, often also Spain).

Those Yugoslav Jews, as well as their kin from other European countries and all other members of different nationalities or religions, who sought refuge in countries which remained uninvolved in the war, faced the high wall of inexorable regulations, border blocks, difficult and for most refugees almost insurmountable obstacles. Concerned with maintaining their relations and very profitable economic connections with the Axis states, in particular Germany, neutral countries (Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, Turkey) pursued a restrictive refugee policy. This policy affected Jewish refugees from Yugoslavia very much and greatly restricted possibilities for their salvation and survival. Those, who in spite of all the obstacles managed to enter these countries, have been granted only temporary refuge and were threatened with extradition, detention in camps for foreigners or expulsion.

By studying the problem of Jewish refugees from Yugoslavia, it is possible to observe the moves of the Allied powers, most of all Great Britain and United States, which throughout the war did not manage to develop and implement a clear policy for the salvation and placement of Jewish refugees. Using this example, we can monitor the interaction of humanitarian and political issues which reflects many aspects of interior - and foreign policy of all countries faced with a refugee problem. Thus, this resistance from within the political establishment and the general public which refused to accept more European runaways from the Holo-caust, with slow, belated and strictly controlled information about its true extent, are only part of the complex American and British stand toward Jewish refugees. War victims from Yugoslavia were subjected to the same entry procedures in the U. S. that worked within a rigid policy of quotas. For the government in London, Palestine was the key of their Middle East policy. Hence, they limited any mass entry of Jews. The proof of unsuccessful refugee policy was the Bermuda Conference in 1943 with its pitiful results. Only great pressure applied by international Jewish organizations and the mounting evidence about the extent and horrors of the "final solution of the Jewish issue" forced the British government, on several occasions, to grant limited entry into Palestine. Such circumstances are why few Yugoslav Jews came to this destination during the war or managed to reach British soil.

Latin American states played a significant, but often very contradictory role in the odyssey of Yugoslav Jewish refugees. Trade in authentic and counterfeit visas and travel documents of Paraguay, Cuba, Bolivia and other Latin American states, changes in regulations about entry of their territory and cancellation of issued documents, were usual phenomena encountered by the Yugoslav refugees.

The Vatican's policy was no less important and contradictory. So-me of its representatives played an important role in some rescues of Yugoslav Jews, particularly because of their influence in Catholic Axis states. Even the Yugoslav Royal Government addressed the Holy See asking for intervention with the Italian government in favor of Yugoslav Jewish nationals who fled or were interned in Yugoslavia or in Italy. On the other hand, the Vatican failed to condemn and employ its great influence to prevent mass killing of Jews (as well as the killing of Serbs and their forceful conversion into Catholicism) in the Independent State of Croatia by the regime which insisted on its loyalty to the principles of Catholic Church. In addition, part of the clergy, specifically members of the Ustashi movement, were actively involved in the "final solution" of the "Serbian and Jewish issue" in the Independent State of Croatia. Analysis of the entire complex of the Jewish refugee problem would not be possible without monitoring the activity of the Yugoslav Royal Government in exile. Already in the first months of its own exodus in 1941, it had to face the refugee problem. Torn by internal conflicts and dissent, acting in complex international circumstances, and largely dependent on the influence of its British hosts with its rump diplomatic apparatus, it was still the only international legal support to Jewish refugees scattered throughout Europe.

The Yugoslav diplomatic and consular representations in neutral and Allied states bore the brunt, providing new documents for refugees, co-ping with local authorities about visas and residence licenses, freeing people from camps for foreigners and prisons, distributing modest material aid, as well as giving diplomatic coverage and support to some missions for rescue of Jews from the occupied country (such as e.g. Martin Weltmann's mission (Meir Touval) in Constantinople in 1943). On several occasions the Yugoslav government in exile, warned of the possible threat to Jewish refugees and internees, sounded the alarm, moving a great deal of its diplomatic apparatus into action. They asked the U. S. and United Kingdom, as well as neutral states for intervention and support in assistance rendered to refugees, they aroused all available diplomatic channels. However, sometimes it happened that refugees' demands for aid and intervention remained without any response from the government or were procrastinated for months, as the request was shifted from one department to another. Yet, at the final count, with all its shortcomings, the work of the Yugoslav government in exile and its diplomacy can be largely credited for a successful end to the odysseys of many Yugoslav refugee through the European war inferno. The cooperation and contacts of the Yugoslav government in exile with international Jewish organizations and, in particular, with organizations of Yugoslav emigrant Jews in providing assistance and gathering information about refugees, was of particular significance. Children were a special category of the Jewish refugee population. There were several dramatic attempts, with a very modest outcome, to get Jewish children out of the most dangerous areas (above all, from the Independent State of Croatia). These actions were jointly undertaken by the surviving members of the Yugoslav Jewish community in the country, Jewish emigrants from Yugoslavia, international Jewish organizations, and the International Red Cross. The number of children saved in this way was in great disproportion to the number of children who perished in German and Ustashi camps, but the very attempt possessed high humanitarian and symbolic value for the Jewish community. The capitulation of the fascist regime and the arrival of allies meant freedom for the Yugoslav refugees/internees accommodated in the south of Italy. On the other hand, they became a burden for military authorities in the front rear and the problem which troubled governments. Their war wandering continued in refugee camps, and were burdened daily with concern for their families, with whom they had lost contact long ago, as they fled from the occupying forces. Pleas to the Allied military authorities to evacuate several hundred former Jewish prisoners of the Rab camp, subsequently moved to Serbian villages in Lika and Banija, where they were exposed to continuous attacks of the Ustashi and Germans, to Italy remained unfulfilled.

A part of the Jewish refugee population from Yugoslavia who happened to be in Italy in 1943-1944 was included in an experiment of the American government - the evacuation of the refugee center in Fort Ontario on the American-Canadian border. This episode lasted until 1946.

A large number of Jewish soldiers, particularly after Italy capitulated in late summer 1943, came to Partisan units or joined Yugoslav outfits set up in Italy. An unknown number of Jews saved their lives by fleeing to Hungary, where until spring 1944, in spite of anti-Semitic legislation and anti-Jewish mood among the ruling circles and population, conditions for survival were much better than in the Yugoslav territory. It is hard to ascertain how many were saved

who hid in villages and towns in the Serbian provinces, but the number is probably several hundred. Returnees from concentration camps represent a small group of surviving members of this community.

Jews from mixed marriages also survived, in addition to some 1.200 who hid in the territory of NDH, as well as about 500 officers and soldiers - POWs. A considerable group of survivors were Jews who spent the war years fighting in Partisan units (over 4.500).

The end of World War II in Europe enabled the remaining members of the Yugoslav Jewish community to assemble, count its enormous casualties, and try to heal its wounds. After the war, most Yugoslav Jewish refugees wanted return to the country from refugee camps in Italy and Switzerland and other temporary shelters. Repatriation of refugees lasted for months and surviving members of the Yugoslav Jewry gradually arrived back to country from all parts of the world. They returned to their devastated homes after their long wartime wandering, filled with fear, humiliation, deprivation, illness, as well as strong desire for life. The lists of surviving members of once numerous communities, such as those in Belgrade, Zagreb, Subotica, Sarajevo, Bitola, Skopje, is evidence of the terrible holocaust experience of the Yugoslav Jewish community, which completely changed its future.

Personal or political reasons motivated some of the refugees to remain abroad. This is especially true of those who managed to reach the U.S., Palestine or one of the Latin American states. War suffering made some of the refugees feel a strong urge to make their new home in Palestine, and it was easier for them to go there from reception centers in foreign countries than it was from Yugoslavia. Several thousand surviving Yugoslav Jews joined them subsequently, after the establishment of the state of Israel.