

## Ex-Yugoslavia

### *Requiem for a lost land*

*I made my first trip to Belgrade in January, 1986, then traveled to Zagreb the following year. In 1988, once I moved to Budapest, I made more and more trips to Yugoslavia's tiny Jewish communities, and one of the reasons I returned so often is because they were the liveliest and friendliest communities I had come across. The photographs I took cover this time period, and then a year later, in 1990, the country began to tear itself apart as the shadow of Slobodan Milosevic spread across the land.*

*Although my work in Sarajevo during the siege of the city in the 1990s constitute a separate chapter, the pictures in this section cover all of what was known as Yugoslavia until 1991, and then you will find photographs and stories of Serbia and Croatia through 1999.*



*The photograph on the left, for instance, shows Rabbi Asiel of Belgrade at a commemoration service in the Serbian city of Novi Sad, in January 1999. This was the spot where Jews and Serbs were murdered by the Hungarian army in 1941. A group of Serbian orthodox priests stand in the background. The photo on the left was taken on assignment for Yeshiva University Museum in Dubrovnik in November, 1993. They were convinced the Serbs would return to Dubrovnik and destroy it completely and therefore asked me to document Jewish sites.*

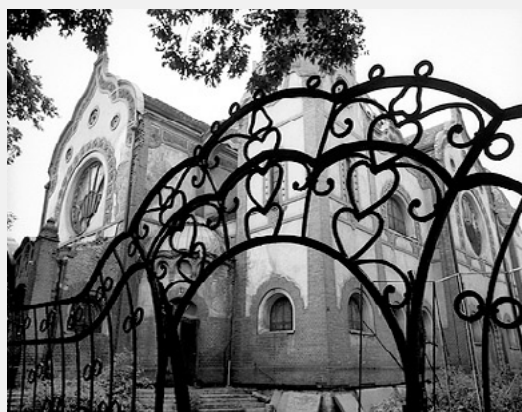


It was while Ladoslav Kadelburg was interned in a German prisoner of war camp that he began hearing of the horrors back home. Yugoslavia's 75,000 Jews were being massacred; parts of Serbia had already been declared "Judenrein" by the Nazis. Croatian fascists were putting Jews in concentration camps and shooting them en masse. The whole of Macedonian Jewry, 7,444 men, women and children had been loaded onto trains by the Bulgarian police and shipped directly to the gas chambers of Treblinka. Not one returned alive.



Kadelburg gathered his Jewish friends together in their POW camps and said there was only one thing to do: it was time — right there in the camp — to begin rebuilding Yugoslavia's post-war Jewish communities. That he and his companions might not make it home was never discussed. That there might not be anyone left to rebuild for wasn't considered. Kadelburg and his fellow Jews were a single minded group: whatever was left, that's what they would build on.

"What we had to build on we couldn't believe," said Kadelburg in 1990 on the eve of his retirement as President of the Yugoslav Jewish Federation (the picture above left, however, was taken in January 1985). "60,000 Jews had been



*The three photos above: on the top row, left, stands the Sephardic cemetery of Sarajevo. The tombstones are unique and seem to peer out over their city. To the right is the interior of the synagogue in the Adriatic port city of Split. It was built by Sephardim in the 17th century. Below is the art nouveau synagogue of Subotica in the Vojvodina region of Serbia, close to the Hungarian border.*

murdered — over 80% of our people. Where we had 120 communities before the war, 85 were completely finished. 15,000 Jews survived, and many were in very bad condition. Between 1949 and 1951, another 8,000 moved to Israel, leaving us with around 6,000 — that's all." He was silent for a moment. Then he smiled. "We had no choice but to work together." Pictured on the left and below is the annual May meeting of all Yugoslav Jewish communities, which took place in Belgrade. I photographed this meeting in 1990. It turns out to have been the last meeting they ever had.

Before the First World War, there was no Yugoslavia. Its various regions had been, at one time or another, under Hungarian, Turkish, Austrian, Venetian, even French and British rule, and Jews had drifted in over the centuries. Spanish-speaking Sephardim settled in Bosnia, Macedonia and Serbia as the land was added to the Ottoman Empire. Smaller Sephardic groups settled in the two port cities on the Adriatic, Split and Dubrovnik. Ashkenazi Jews made their way down to Zagreb, while Jews from Hungary set up communities in Novi Sad and Subotica (then Ujvidek and Szabadka). Jews were almost exclusively city-folk in an overwhelmingly rural society. There were no shtetls, as in Poland, no towns where Jews made up the majority of the population. It was only in Sarajevo, with some 10,000 Jews, that they made up more than 10% of the population. The Macedonian city of Bitola, or Monastir as it was known to Ottomans and Jews, had around 7%.

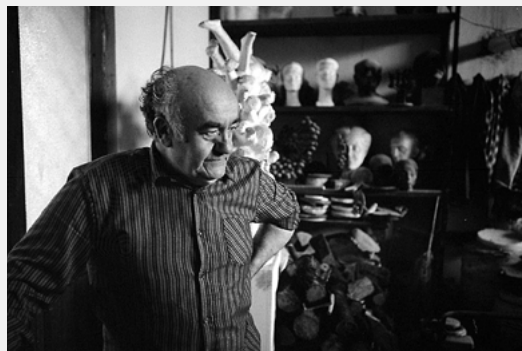
In these disparate lands that would make up Yugoslavia in the wake of the First World War in 1918, antisemitism was as varied as the people and their backgrounds. There was, for instance, considerably less hatred of Jews in Turkish-ruled regions than in Christian lands (Muslims gained little currency in branding Jews as Christ killers). In Slovenia and Croatia however, where the population was largely Catholic, antisemitism was indigenous and so deep rooted Jews were barred from residing in Zagreb until 1780. Still, by the late 1930s, Zagreb Jews had become a large (almost 10,000), neologue (non-Orthodox) and well educated community that was also the country's wealthiest. But its coffers were drained almost entirely by early 1941 as Jews fleeing Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland sought safe harbor from the Nazis. Many were on their way to Palestine, but they had come to the wrong place at the wrong time.

In April of 1941, Adolf Hitler's air force and army attacked Yugoslavia. It took barely two weeks for the country to capitulate. Jews traveled a variety of paths during the Second World War

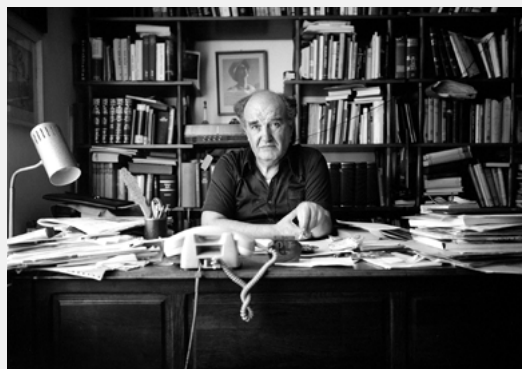




in Yugoslavia, but the end point was almost always the same: death. As Dr Kadelburg had told me in 1990, 80% of the country's Jews were murdered, another 8,000 left shortly after the war, leaving, in the postwar decades, around 6,500 registered Jews throughout the entire country. The photo on the left was taken in May, 1989. Tilda Tauber, who is tending her mother's grave in the Jewish cemetery of Split. They had both been deported to Bergen Belsen and managed to survive together.



If the Jewish population was but a tenth of what it was, it was a vibrant tenth that remains and from the 1950s until the 1980s, Jews could be found in every almost every level of government, in federal and republic ministries, as lawyers, physicians, engineers. There were Jewish generals, supreme court judges (like Dr Kadelburg), plus well respected businessmen, publishers and intellectuals, especially writers. In the photo on the left is Nandor Glid, a sculptor who created the memorials for Yad Vashem and Dachau. Below Eugen Werber, a playwright and historian. Werber, who spoke Serbian, Hungarian, German and English — all without an accent — became an actor in his sixties, and he complained, jokingly, that he was the most-often employed Nazi in Yugoslav cinema.



"We're not big enough to argue all that much," said Igor Bararon, echoing what Dr Kadelberg had told me. At 21, Igor was a part time worker in the Jewish community of Sarajevo. "My grandmother used to say that before the war, we Sephardim wouldn't even talk to the Ashkenazim. In fact, she was like that until the day she died in 1985. She never called them Ashkenazim; only "the Germans," which she said in Ladino. Igor and I were sitting in a Turkish style café in the center of Sarajevo. In the years following, he would study in Bologna and then become a documentary filmmakers in Vienna.



I had met Igor in the same place I had met scores of other Yugoslav Jewish youth: in the summer camp of Pirovac on the Croatian coast. That is where I took the picture on the left above, of Igor Hamovic and his fiancé, Rosita Danon. They were also from Sarajevo and fled to Israel when the siege began in 1992.



November, 1988 and I taxied from the train station across Zagreb to photograph a Yugoslav Jewish Youth Conference. One hundred ten people between the ages of fifteen to twenty-five had come to learn Israeli folk dancing, discuss Jewish topics, and end each evening in the community center's basement disco. Some were barely in high school, others had just finished university.



At one table sat two youths in jean jackets and they were discussing Hannukah. I took this picture of them on the left. It turns out they were both from Sarajevo but were studying history in Zagreb. On the left is Eliezer Papo, who would soon flee the region to Israel, where he was ordained as a rabbi and then received a PhD in Balkan Jewish history at Ben Gurion University. On the right is Daniel Ovadija, who who also soon flee. He is now an architect in London.



Six months after that youth meeting, when spring came in May, 1989, I accompanied a delegation of Yugoslav Jews to the Croatian town of Dakovo, which had served as a concentration camp during the war and it was run by the Croatian Ustashe. 556 Jewish women and children had starved to death there and every year, Jews from all the Yugoslav republics came to pay their respects.

One of those who came from Sarajevo, Jakob Finci, told me that the following year, in May, 1990, he saw something that made his blood run cold. "As we were leaving our ceremony, I saw people selling Kalashnikovs out of the back of their cars."



Jakob Finci would become one of the wartime leaders of the Sarajevo Jewish community and I have devoted an enormous section of my archive to that story.

When those wars did come in 1991, in both Zagreb and Belgrade, most Jews refused to take part in the nationalist orgies that were sweeping their countries although a few notably did. By and large, however, there was an exodus of yet more young people and the communities kept their heads down, ever dependent on financial aid from abroad to keep their social welfare institutions going.



*The photograph above was taken in the house of the Tolentino's. They had been the last Jewish family in Dubrovnik. Three siblings never married and their father had been the last rabbi of Dubrovnik. That is his portrait and his rabbinical certificate.*

As stated in the introduction, Yeshiva University Museum in New York was convinced that the Serbs were about to attack Dubrovnik for a second time, only this time they were coming to destroy the Jewish community. I found the idea absurd, but since Yeshiva was offering to pay me to spend a week in Dubrovnik to document Jewish sites, of course I said yes. The photographs are all in color, as per Yeshiva's request.

When NATO bombs tore into Serbian government buildings in April, 1999 — and thanks to bad intel, the Chinese embassy — the Belgrade Jewish community organized an exodus of young men of draft age, whether they were Jewish or not. Their families often came with them, and the Hungarian Jewish community found them places to stay, kitchens to eat in and even classrooms to study in. A few hundred came, around half that many went on to Israel.





What I found so moving was that for the first time since the Second World War, a European Jewish community (Hungary) had reached out to help a neighboring community in need.

As of this writing in 2017, none of the former Yugoslav republics is doing well, economically. In fact, standards of living are lower than they were before the country's breakup, yet very few people would want to live in a unified state again.



Sarajevo's Jews will be discussed elsewhere, and as for the largest two communities, Belgrade and Zagreb, they still work hard to be relevant and young people do come to events — and they now run them. No one who has attended community events in these cities hasn't marveled at the level of energy and optimism they exude. Even if the future is not bright, they will fight for every inch of it — for themselves and their children.

On the top a photo taken on Jewish Street. Below is Mimi Ferrara, one of the last Jews of Dubrovnik.



The pictures above: on the top row is the America House in Belgrade, which was destroyed when NATO bombs fell on Serbia. Below left is of the Passover seder run by Stefan Sablic of Belgrade for his friends, all of whom had fled to Budapest during the bombing. On the next two photos we see Serbs arriving in Budapest.