

# JEWISH HISTORICAL MONUMENTS IN DUBROVNIK



## I.

Historical monuments and written sources prove that Jews lived in various parts of the present Yugoslavia, especially in Dalmatia and Macedonia, already in the first century of our era. Among the present Jewish communities in Yugoslavia, the oldest ones are those in Dubrovnik and Split, whose continuity over the whole period since the middle of the fourteenth century is proved.

The Jewish community in Dubrovnik dates as back as 1352, and since 1407 it enjoys legal recognition. The Jews lived in a small Ghetto in an off-street, not far from the center of the town. This street was called „Via del Ghetto” and still bears the name of the „Jewish Street” (Žudioska ulica).

The position of Jews in the ancient Republic of Ragusa was: rather favourable under the conditions prevailing at that time, though they experienced some difficulties and discriminations from time to time, (Yellow badges, special contributions, ritual murder trials, etc). Except some privileged families, all other Jews lived in the Ghetto. Nevertheless they played a rather important part in the trade of the Republic of Dubrovnik, and some of them exercised certain public functions, too.

Among the notable Jewish personalities in Dubrovnik, there are two from the period of Renaissance who deserve particular mention. One is a Portuguese Jew, Juan Rodrigo de Castelbranco, known in the world under his scientist's pseudonym Amatus Lusitanus. He was one of the famous anatomists, physicians and botanists of his time; he wrote many important medical works in Latin, the best known of which is his „Curationum medicinalium centurias septem” (Seven centurias of Medical Treatment). He lived and worked in Dubrovnik as a physician from 1555 to 1558. Another prominent Jew at that time was Jacobus Flavius, known under his poetical and literary name of Didacus Pyrrhus. He lived in Dubrovnik from 1557 to 1601 and was buried there. He was instructor in classical languages and literature and a well known Latin poet of his time.

Among numerous rabbis of the Jewish community in Dubrovnik, the most famous are Solomon Oef and Aron Cohen, well known Jewish writers in XVII century, and Jacob Pardo who lived at the end of XVIII and the beginning of XIX century.

It is of interest to note here that the great earthquake which nearly destroyed Dubrovnik in 1667 left the whole Ghetto and the synagogue unimpaired.

Complete civic equality was granted the Dubrovnik Jews only after the entry of the French troops there in 1806.

From that time up to the Second World War the small Jewish community in Dubrovnik carried in the main a normal life. However, during the Second World War the nazi and the fascist occupants and their Ustashi collaborators brought great misery on the Dubrovnik Jews, as they did in other occupied parts of Yugoslavia.

(out of 75,000 Jews living in pre-war Yugoslavia some 60,000, or 80%, were killed as martyred victims of fascism or as fallen fighters). Most of the Dubrovnik were Jews taken to the concentration camps, where many of them were killed. Their property was completely plundered, as well as many other cultural and historical treasures, including the rich old archives of the Jewish community, which could not be found out up to the present. The existing synagogue treasures were rescued by the members of the Tolentino family, with assistance of some non-Jewish fellow-citizens.

The small number of surviving Jews in New Yugoslavia, and so in Dubrovnik too, enjoy again full civic equality and free exercise of their religious and national minority rights.

## II.

Among the Jewish historical monuments still existing in Dubrovnik particular mention deserve the Synagogue and the Cemetery.

The Jewish Synagogue in Dubrovnik is one of the oldest not only on the Balkans but also in Europe. Its beginnings date as far back as XIV century, though it obtained its present form mainly in 1652. It is located in the building of the Jewish Community (Žudievska ulica 3) where also the offices of the Community are. The outside form of the building is typical of many Dubrovnik buildings. The windows of the Synagogue are in Gothic style, and the interior is mainly in Baroque.

The Synagogue is an oblong-shaped room divided by three arches and panelled in dark wood. The ceiling is painted blue with gold stars from which hang antique Florentine Candelabra. At the back of the room there is a gallery for women, placed there about 100 years ago; but inset in both sides walls there are still the old wooden grilles through which, in earlier days, women looked down on to the service. The entrance to these grilles is in the house next door, occupied since centuries up to the present by the Tolentino family.

In the centre of the Synagogue stands the delicately carved platform, and the Ark with its spiral, wooden columns holds some of the handsome Books of Torah brought from Spain by the exiled Sephardic Jews. One of the principal treasures is the magnificent 13-th century Moorish carpet brought from Spain and formerly hung before the Ark on the High Festivals. It is a superb piece of work with its floral design glowing in brilliant colours against a dark back-ground. It is said to have been a gift from Queen Isabella of Spain to her Jewish doctor when he was forced to leave the country. There are many other superbly embroidered tapestries, and some excellent examples of synagogal silver. An interesting possession of Dubrovnik Jews is the letter they received from Sir Moses Montefiore.

The present Jewish cemetery is about 300 years old, though it contains also some older monuments transferred from the earlier Jewish cemetery.

The tiny cemetery with its oblong patches of earth on terraced levels is planted with tall cypress trees and is well cared for. On many of the old tombstones a five-pointed crown formed part of the carving. This symbol was granted in the year 711 to the Chief Rabbi of Kordoba in Spain by the Moorish conqueror, and was born as a badge by the Spanish Jewish exiles.

It is worthwhile mentioning that when the town waterworks were introduced in 1420 one of the three fountains was given the name of „Fontana per gli Ebrei” (Jewish fountain), and is also known under the name of „Fontana Kosher”. At present it stands at the Pile (Brsalje). Under the lion's head there is a shell into which water flows, and below it there is a lion's leg.

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The history of the Dubrovnik Jews is expounded in a number of historical works and articles, the most important of which is the extensive book „The Jews in Dubrovnik” by Dr. Jorjo Tadić, professor at the University of Belgrade. The book covers the period up to the end of XVI century.