

BALKAN JEWISH WOMEN

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Strategies of Survival: Balkan Jewish Women and Cultural Representations of Memory

PREFACE

This issue of *Studia Judaica* is in several respects unique and, for this reason alone, exceptional. First, it transcends and thereby expands the journal's existing profile by addressing issues related to Judaic studies in relation to the Balkan Peninsula, going beyond analyzes of Polish-Jewish contacts and focusing also on Sephardic studies. Second, it is devoted to Balkan Jewish women, to the study of their rather superficially researched and modestly described heritage, and focuses attention on interrelated aspects of this heritage from the perspective of both gender and memory studies. Third, the issue is intentionally entirely in English, because we wanted this exploratory issue of *Studia Judaica*, with its focus on cultural representations of Balkan Jewish women, to reach the widest possible group of researchers and help promote international discussion, providing a catalyst for further research, including comparative studies. As the guest editors of this thematic issue, we are grateful to the editor-in-chief, Professor Marcin Wodziński, for his trust and for providing us the opportunity to initiate this dialogue with Balkan studies concerning the study of gender and Jewish women in the Balkans on the pages of such a renowned journal. It is our hope that interest in this rarely addressed issue will only strengthen the rank and prestige of the subject, and will open up new research perspectives and expand current ones.

The history of Jewish culture in the Balkans is rich and complex. It chronologically begins with the Sephardi community, the most numerous

group, which first arrived there in the sixteenth century after their exile in 1492 from the Iberian Peninsula. It was on the Balkan Peninsula, within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, that they found a new home, at the invitation of Sultan Bayezid II. Ashkenazi Jews appeared there much later, arriving in large numbers only in the nineteenth century, though their community was smaller than that of the Sephardim. Jews, however, regardless of whether they belonged to the Sephardi or Ashkenazi community, always constituted a minority in the Balkans, often hermetically sealed within their own native languages (Ladino and Yiddish), religion, and customs, and as they underwent assimilation/acculturation processes over time, they constructed a fluid double identity, which was also in some sense a provisional one. The multi-dimensionality of this issue becomes more prominent when we turn our attention to Jewish women, who have rarely been presented as major protagonists in cultural history. In their communities, they were burdened with the stigma of a double otherness—as women and as Jews. With this issue of *Studia Judaica*, we want to break the relative silence on this subject, focus attention on them, and restore their memory. An additional challenge is the multi-lingual character of Jewish literature originating in the Balkans or referring to Balkan reality. Such an expansive research area requires that we interpret the legacy of Judaism in the context of a diverse, but mutually related, group of Balkan national cultures, which constitute the context within which Jews in the region functioned. We have attempted here to address the problematics arising from this diversity in a multi-dimensional manner: examined within this issue are both literary texts that function more widely in public space, as well as little-known or recently discovered memoirs, ethnographic testimonies, and translations; sociolinguistic aspects of the Ladino language (Judeo-Spanish) are also addressed.

Gender and feminist trends in Judaic research can be found in the almost every major research center since the 1990s.¹ In Poland, important research in the field of Jewish gender studies is also being pursued more and more vigorously. This study has resulted in several publications: a major collected monograph edited by Joanna Lisek, *Nieme dusze? Kobiety w kulturze jidysz* [Voiceless Spirits? Women in Yiddish Culture];² a book

¹ See e.g. Lynn Davidman, Shelly Tenenbaum (eds.), *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (Yale, 1994); and Judith R. Baskin (ed.), *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit–Michigan, 1991).

² Joanna Lisek (ed.), *Nieme dusze? Kobiety w kulturze jidysz* (Wrocław, 2010).

published by Agata Araszkiwicz and restoring the memory of Zuzanna Ginczanka;³ Bożena Umińska's work on images of Jewish women in Polish literature;⁴ studies on the experiences of women (and men) in Holocaust narratives;⁵ Karolina Szymaniak's publication of the works of Rachel Auerbach⁶ and her books on Debora Vogel;⁷ books devoted to Anka Grupińska⁸ and to the work of Amy Levy⁹ have also been recently published. These are just a few key examples, but they show a clear revival in gender studies in Polish research. However, we can still see the dire need—and not just in Poland—for more extensive, in-depth research on this subject with regard to the development of the cultures of communities in the Balkans. The lack of monographs devoted to Jewish women from this region is particularly noticeable in this respect.¹⁰ The American researcher Harriet Freidenreich wrote about this anxiously almost a decade ago.¹¹ Admittedly, individual works by authors such as the Belgrade researcher Krinka Vidaković-Petrov, Sarajevo Romanists Muhamed Nezirović and Eliezer Papo, and Israeli author Dina Katan Ben-Zion were published earlier; however,

³ Agata Araszkiwicz, *Wypowiadam wam swoje życie: Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki* (Warsaw, 2001).

⁴ Bożena Umińska, *Postać z cieniem: Portrety Żydówek w polskiej literaturze od końca XIX wieku do 1939 roku* (Warsaw, 2001).

⁵ See Bożena Karwowska, *Ciało. Seksualność. Obozy zagłady* (Kraków, 2009); Aleksandra Ubertowska, "Kobiece 'strategie przetrwania' w piśmiennictwie o Holokauście (z perspektywy literaturoznawcy)," in Sławomir Buryła, Alina Molisak (eds.), *Ślady obecności* (Kraków, 2010), 317–335; ead., "'Niewidzialne świadectwa': Perspektywa feministyczna w badaniach nad literaturą Holokaustu," *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2009), 214–226; Agnieszka Nikliborc, *Uwięzione w KL Auschwitz-Birkenau: Traumatyczne doświadczenia kobiet odzwierciedlone w dokumentach osobistych* (Kraków, 2010); Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman, *Kobiety Holokaustu: Feministyczna perspektywa w badaniach nad Shoah. Kазus KL Auschwitz-Birkenau* (Warsaw, 2012).

⁶ Rachel Auerbach, *Pisma z getta warszawskiego*, ed. Karolina Szymaniak, trans. Karolina Szymaniak, Anna Ciałowicz (Warsaw, 2016).

⁷ Karolina Szymaniak, *Być agentem wiecznej idei: Przemiany poglądów estetycznych Debory Vogel* (Kraków, 2007).

⁸ Jagoda Budzik, Beata Koper (eds.), *Niezależna: Próby o Ance Grupińskiej* (Kraków, 2015).

⁹ Ilona Dobosiewicz, *Borderland: Jewishness and Gender in the Works of Amy Levy* (Opole, 2016).

¹⁰ There have been only isolated attempts, for example, the publication in Bulgaria of a memoir by Lea Cohen: Lea Cohen, *Ti vyarvash: 8 pogleda varhu Holokosta na Balkanite* (Sofia, 2012); in Serbia a study on the writings of Judita Šalго: Silvia Dražić, *Stvarni i imaginarni svetovi Judite Šalго* (Novi Sad, 2013); and in Croatia a book on Laura Papo: Jagoda Večerina Tomaić, *Bohoreta – najstarija kći* (Zagreb, 2016).

¹¹ Harriet Freidenreich, "Yugoslavia," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women's Archive (2009), <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/Yugoslavia> [retrieved: 12 Oct. 2017].

the subject of Jewish women's participation in culture was viewed from within the wider context of the history of Sephardic literature,¹² and in the work of Katan Ben-Zion, published in Hebrew, a language not present in Balkan cultures.¹³ Ben-Zion emphasized metaphorically that the “feminine voyage” in Jewish literature of the countries of the former Yugoslavia began with the work of two writers born in the same year—Laura Papo Bohoreta (1891–1942) of Sarajevo and Paulina Lebl-Albala (1891–1967) of Belgrade. However, it was not until 2005, many years after their deaths, that the books of both authors first appeared: Papo Bohoreta's essayistic monograph *Sefardska žena u Bosni* [Sephardic Woman in Bosnia] and Lebl-Albala's memoir *Tako je nekad bilo* [It Used to Be Like That]. The case of these writers seems to confirm emphatically that texts written by women—hidden away in archives or family collections—still need to be found, described, and introduced into the region's history and culture.

In interdisciplinary reflections on the history and culture of Jews, the phrase “strategies of survival” is often closely associated with the Holocaust.¹⁴ To our mind, the proposed topic is an attempt to extend the framework of this metaphor. The authors of the articles within this issue examine, on the one hand, the particular strategies used by authors in relation to the memory of their own fate and of those around them, including experiences during the interwar period, before the Holocaust. On the other hand, we also attempt to highlight strategies that helped authors develop a process for the recovery of the history of the group with which they identified. In this regard, we are interested in both searching in primary texts for “invisible testimonies”¹⁵ and various representations of culture (literary texts, personal documentary narratives); moreover, detailed case studies on a single writer/activist and large-scale studies (covering a wider time range) provide a synthetic account of the activities characteristic of a given community. Descriptions of these strategies, we believe, give us the opportunity to get closer to answering the question of what memory of Jewish women in the Balkans has survived and how it functions today.

¹² Krinka Vidaković-Petrov, *Kultura španskih Jevreja na jugoslovenskom tlu: XVI–XX vek* (Sarajevo, 1990; first edition 1986) and Muhamed Nezirović, *Jevrejsko-španjolska književnost* (Sarajevo, 1992).

¹³ See Dina Katan Ben-Zion, *Nashim kotvot 'olam: sofrot yehudiyot be-Yugoslavia leshe-avar* (Jerusalem, 2013), and also ead., “The Feminine Voyage in the Post-Holocaust Jewish Literature of Former Yugoslavia,” *Interkulturalnost. Časopis za podsticanje i afirmaciju interkulturalne komunikacije* 7 (2014), 186–191.

¹⁴ See e.g. Ubertowska, “Kobiece ‘strategie przetrwania’.”

¹⁵ Ubertowska, “‘Niewidzialne świadectwa’.”

At the same time, we would also like to help initiate a broader theoretical reflection on the subject of the continuation of memory of Jews in the culture of the Balkans, and the relative absence and sadly still modest body of research on their artistic and cultural achievements.

This issue consists of nine studies written by researchers from several university centers in Poland (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, University of Wrocław, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, University of Opole), Serbia (Institute for Literature and Arts in Belgrade), Israel (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), and Germany (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin). They address “cultural performances of memory,”¹⁶ define strategies for remembering and recovering from so-called “structural amnesia,” describe activities that took place at the borderlands between cultures, and highlight various flows, transfers and limitations, but also the emissive power, of texts written by Balkan Jewish women who worked in the ethnically complicated, transcultural areas of the borderland. The subject of analysis here includes both Slavic (Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Yugoslav, and Bulgarian) and non-Slavic (Greek and Albanian) contexts. Most of the texts that comprise this issue are varied in character and present multi-dimensional and in-depth case studies. Their heroines are Laura Papo Bohoreta of Bosnia (Magdalena Koch), Magda Bošan Simin and Nevena Simin of Serbia (Krinka Vidaković-Petrov), Eva Nahir Panić of Yugoslavia/Israel (Katarzyna Taczyńska), Daša Drndić of Croatia (Sabina Giergiel), Dora Gabe of Bulgaria (Adriana Kovacheva), Rachel (Rae) Dalven, a Romaniote Jewish woman of Greece (Yitzchak Kerem), and Irene Grünbaum and Jutta Neumann of Albania (Agata Rogoś). One of the texts is an overview and presents in a panoramic manner—using the author’s own musical metaphor—a “symphony of unique voices” and their literary testimony in Yugoslavia after World War II (Dina Katan Ben-Zion). An important and unique element in the present issue is a study involving sociolinguistic analysis of the linguistic image of Sephardic Jewish women in texts written in Judeo-Spanish and printed in the interwar Sarajevo periodical *Jevrejski glas* [Jewish Voice] (Aleksandra Twardowska and Agnieszka August-Zarębska).

We hope that the studies included in this issue will enrich existing knowledge about the history, activities, and creativity of Balkan Jewish women. We are convinced that thanks to this publication—and many

¹⁶ Mateusz Borowski, *Strategie zapominania: Pamięć a kultura cyfrowa* (Kraków, 2015), 29.

others that will likely appear in the future—we will be able to expand the horizons of how we view these issues, enriching our knowledge with detailed research on the history of women in the Balkans. Once again, we would like to thank the editor-in-chief of *Studia Judaica* for the trust he has placed in us by making the pages of this issue available to us. We are also grateful to our *alma mater*, the Institute of Slavic Philology and the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, for co-financing this publication. The help and linguistic consultation of Izabela Dąbrowska and Thomas Anessi during our work on the English-language number was also invaluable.

We hope you enjoy it.

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