



Jewish Soldiers in the Collective Memory of Central Europe

**The Remembrance of World War I
from a Jewish Perspective**

böhlau

**Edited by
Gerald Lamprecht
Eleonore Lappin-Eppel
Ulrich Wyrwa**

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Yugoslavs of the Mosaic Faith?

Public Discourse about Jewish Loyalty in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia,
1918–1941

The aim of this study was to offer an overview of the dynamic interconnectedness between the Yugoslav Kingdom and its diverse Jewish population, which existed in the delicate balance of powers generated in Europe in the aftermath of the Great War. The contemplation of the interwar events in countries that later became socialist deserves special consideration. Socialist regimes introduced a sudden discontinuity as compared to the previous, mainly monarchist regimes, causing many personalities and occurrences to fade into obscurity for half a century. The aforementioned phenomenon is even more pronounced when examining a history of a minority, indicating that one ought to be rather cautious when developing conclusions and generalizations about the interval between the two World Wars.

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (from the 1929 Kingdom of Yugoslavia) was a complex, multinational and multi-confessional system formed from the Kingdom of Serbia and parts of the disintegrated Empires, representing both the formal end of these entities and their continuation. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires left rather heterogenic legacies in the newly created state, which directly mirrored the diverse economic, social, and cultural background of its inhabitants. Similarly, the Kingdom of South Slavs encompassed Jewish communities with a significantly different emancipation history, which perceived their new Yugoslav reality from a divergent perspective. Moreover, the state itself, during its first years of its existence, did not take a uniform strategy to address the diverse Jewish communities living on the recently acquired territories.

For instance, no one questioned that Bosnian Jews, mostly Sephardim, belonged to Yugoslavia, since they had been part of the local milieu for several centuries in a special *millet*, a form of a religious-national, organizational unit within the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, except for a few minor, isolated incidents, there is no historical evidence that since their arrival on the Balkans (late fifteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth century) Sephardim of Serbia and Bosnia had endured such violent persecution and pogroms as their Ashkenazi brethren were faced with in the territories of Western and Central Europe or

Russia. This favorable position was maintained until 1941, when Ustaše from the Independent State of Croatia and other Nazi collaborators dismembered Yugoslavia and began the infamous killings of members of the Jewish, Serbian, and Roma populations.¹

Back in the 1920s, the Kingdom of Serbia arose as a victorious party out of the ashes of the First World War, but at a tremendous cost: the war was a severe demographic catastrophe for Serbia, losing more than twenty-five percent of its inhabitants and had more casualties per capita than any other belligerent on either side. What is more, scholars estimate that more than 62.5 percent of males between the age of fifteen and fifty-five died.² Such a profound collective trauma and joyous reestablishment of the state found a lasting place in national consciousness and collective memory of the people. Serbian Jews shared the fate of war with the rest of the population, a fact that had a deep impact on the public discourse surrounding them. In the decades following the Great War, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and the Serbian Jewish community outwardly expressed their mutual fondness, in a manner that was unparalleled anywhere else in Europe.

Precisely for that reason, in this paper a special attention is given to Serbian Jewry, who were seemingly in a most favorable position: their devotion to the Serbian and Yugoslav Kingdoms was beyond any doubt, as they fought with the Serbian Army in the Great War. To supplement the significant literature dealing with this phenomenon, the present study provides some critical retro-vision points of the manifestations that concern the manifold relations between Jews and the Yugoslav Kingdom. Three particular issues are explored: the relation of the Yugoslav state to the legacy from WWI, the possibility of a Yugoslav Jewish nation, and lastly, several illustrations related to Jewish patriotism.

The monarchy's vs. Serbian soldiers

The South Slavs' Kingdom, proclaimed in 1918, was a political entity assembled from territories and inhabitants that had belonged to the vanished Habsburg Monarchy. The new state unified the Slavic brothers, but it also represented a

1 Jasenovac, the Balkan Auschwitz, was the only non-Nazi-led extermination camp. The methods of killing men, women, and children there were so violent that even the Nazis found them bestial. See more in: Stuart J. Kaufmann, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (New York: The Cornell University Press, 2001), 169.

2 Mark Cornwall, "Introduction," in Anđež Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War 1914–1918* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007), vii.

controversial reality: approximately more than a half of the Kingdom's members came from former Austro-Hungarian lands. Thus, its population had been mobilized into the Habsburg Monarchy's army in order to fight against the Kingdom of Serbia in the Great War. Willingly or not, Croats, Muslims of Bosnia, Slovenians, and even ethnic Serbians stood against Serbia, a state that was at the forefront of the South Slavic unification and considered to be a Yugoslav Piedmont after the Great War.

Nevertheless, the latter controversy was rarely mentioned, seemingly for the sake of practical reasons. This controversy, however, would be (ab)used in future arguments between Slavs during the twentieth century. In the interwar period, it appeared that there was a tacit mutual agreement between the parties involved to seemingly disregard the past because it could have ruined the relations among the South Slavic brothers, as many of them considered themselves.

The position of Yugoslav Jews in this matter followed the general pattern of forgetting the reality of the Great War. Jewish communities disregarded that they had fought against each other in the conflict, rapidly adapting to the South Slavic Kingdom that emerged while assuming new social roles. During the existence of this kingdom, Jewish communities were more preoccupied with the future as well as with questions concerning the creation of their own state. Various forms of proposed Zionism, partial or complete assimilation into the local environments, and even conversion (for a small minority) were all options for the Yugoslav-Jewish congregation.

Nonetheless, the Great War indirectly determined the fate of divergent Yugoslav Jewry: Serbian Jews contributed to its victorious outcome. They appeared to be closer to the king and, thus, many of them were often accused of being too highly assimilated and not Zionist enough. On the other hand, the beginning of the Great War had provided a possibility for Habsburg Jewry to reaffirm their allegiance: Jews in Croatia, Slavonija, and Vojvodina as well as elsewhere were believed to strongly support the war efforts of the Central Powers, both by making financial contributions and joining the army.³ The community of neighboring Slovenia was small and merged with that of their Zagreb co-religionists, most probably following their manifestations of loyalty to Kaiser Franz Joseph. However, from the point of view of Jewish popularity, this merger was evidently useless. By the end of the conflict, with the monarchy's downfall, the

3 Filip Hameršak and Ljiljana Dobrovšak, "Croatian-Slavonian Jews in the First World War," in *The Great War. Reflections, Experiences and Memories of German and Habsburg Jews (1914–1918)*, eds. Petra Ernst, Jeffrey Grossman and Ulrich Wyrwa, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, n. 9 October 2016, www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=378 (accessed January 30, 2017).

local population became increasingly exhausted and impoverished, repeatedly blaming their Jewish neighbors for their defeat.⁴ It was comparatively harder for these Jews than for the Slavs to become Yugoslavs: many of them did not speak Serbo-Croatian and had been born elsewhere.

As Marsha Rozenblit affirms, after the collapse of the monarchy, the Jews who had lived there underwent a collective, strong identity crisis, because as a supranational entity, it had provided them with a sense of belonging. The monarchy had allowed them, as the author argues, to develop a “tripartite identity,” for they belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire politically (their patriotism was defined as loyalty to the emperor), to surrounding nationalities (Germans, Poles, Croats, Hungarians) culturally, and, finally, they were Jewish ethnically.⁵ Consequently, many of the Austro-Hungarian Jews were attached to the Monarchy, aligning themselves with both integrationist and Zionist currents. However, as these Jews rapidly integrated and acculturated, the resistance to their full acceptance and antisemitism grew paradoxically. This behavioral paradigm associated with the non-Jewish population continued after the disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy: antisemitism was particularly strongly pronounced in Croatia, Slavonija, and Vojvodina in Yugoslavia, that is to say, the former parts of the Empire.⁶

It seems that Yugoslavia offered similar multi- and supranational frameworks to former Habsburg Jews, and they only had to shift their loyalty from the Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the King of Yugoslavia. Following that line of thinking, divergent Jewish communities should have had relatively harmonious relations among themselves. Conversely, the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities⁷ was in a constant crisis during the entire interwar period due to the perpetual disputes among its members.⁸ Some of these disputes

4 A phenomenon of antisemitism without Jews had a tradition in Slovenia, apparently due to clericalism in rural areas, see: Laslo Sekelj, *Vreme beštastia: ogledi o vladavini nacionalizma* (Beograd: Akademija Nova, Institut za evropske studije, 1995), 65.

5 Marsha L. Rozenblit, “The Dilemma of National Identity: the Jews of Habsburg Austria in World War I,” <http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/ybo3/14rozenblit.pdf> (accessed December 11, 2018), 147–49.

6 Ana Ćirić Pavlović, “Antisemitism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia: The Case of Croatia,” *Topola, Journal of the Memorial Zone Donja Gradina* 2 (2016): 105–6.

7 The Federation of Jewish Religious Communities, established in 1919, was an umbrella organization for all Jewish congregations in Yugoslavia, performing multiple functions within its realm: it performed coordinative, cultural, educational, and even arbitrary tasks in the interwar period.

8 The claim could be verified in any of Jewish weeklies issued between the wars. For instance, *Jevrejski glas* (Jewish Voice) was a weekly distributed to the Bosnian Jewish communities, published between 1928 and 1941, which faithfully represented inter-Jewish relations in the kingdom and everything that was relevant to them.

certainly were caused by their rather strong local expressions of patriotism or nationalism, which mirrored the conflict existing between the larger nations to which they had belonged.

The latter was particularly the case with the Hungarian Jews who underwent an intensive process of Magyarization during the nineteenth century. Reports of the Yugoslav government from the 1920s and 1930s describe events at which the strong Hungarian feelings of nationalism and revisionism were displayed in Vojvodina, especially in the Bačka region and by the veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army. In contrast, members of the younger generations of Hungarian Jews in the kingdom were more receptive to Zionism than Hungarian nationalism. Furthermore, they were not reluctant but willing to learn Serbo-Croatian, even accepting a dual identity as both Yugoslav and Hungarian citizens.⁹

Forging a Jewish-Yugoslav Nation

The new Yugoslav state demanded the strengthening of a new, Yugoslav identity under the Serbian Royal Family of Karađorđević. Given that it was a state of “one three-named people,” that is, of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes with numerous national minorities (Germans, Muslims, Hungarians, Jews, and many others), Yugoslavism had to be an inclusive notion that would encompass all the differences extant in the kingdom. It implied that both national and religious freedoms had to be respected. Both Constitutions of 1921 and of 1931 held provisions for officially recognized religions.¹⁰

In 1929, a special law about Jewish communities was enacted by King Alexander, the Law on the Religious Community of Jews in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In the years preceding this enactment, a discussion about the law had produced a fierce debate among the representatives of the Ashkenazi (Neolog), Sephardi, and Orthodox communities.¹¹ In the end, the enactment did not bring many innovations but rather “clarified and strengthened the legal position of the community as a whole,” confirming its organizational framework and granting them benefits enjoyed by other officially recognized religious groups.¹² Many

9 Milan Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918–1941* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2008), 69–70.

10 The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes officially recognized seven religions, including Judaism.

11 In the Yugoslav context, these three communities always appeared separately in Jewish communal affairs, although Orthodox communities were also Ashkenazi by origin.

12 Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 71–2.

authors share the opinion that interwar Yugoslavia treated its Jewish minority fairly,¹³ however, it was not immune to antisemitic voices that had become louder by the end of the 1930s.

In the first years of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, discrimination against members of some Jewish communities was more closely related to the fact that they were foreign citizens and did not speak the domestic language than to antisemitism. Namely, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Svetozar Pribičević, issued a secret decree in 1919 to remove all the “foreign elements” from the provinces of the former monarchy. Chief Rabbi Isak Alkalaj reacted promptly and prevented the further implementation of the order, although it had already affected dozens of Jewish families who were deported from Bosnia.¹⁴ Nonetheless, another similar decree was enacted the following year in an attempt to banish all the citizens of the defeated countries (Hungarians, Austrians, Germans, Bulgarians, Turks), which would have potentially impacted more than a million inhabitants of the kingdom, including thousands of Jews. Fortunately, the massive deportations were also stopped.

Moreover, the Yugoslav government considered the proponents of a socialist revolution and bolshevism as enemies of the regime. In Vojvodina, the government questioned some people who were suspected to be Bolsheviks, most of whom were Hungarians. Even though some were Jewish, the Yugoslav authorities abstained from applying the usual stereotype of the Jewish, worldwide, Bolshevik conspiracy, as many contemporary European governments did, but accused the Hungarians instead.¹⁵ On the other hand, the government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia took some anti-Jewish measurements that were directed against particular Jewish communities in the early 1920s. In 1921 and 1922, a number of Polish Jews who had applied for visas to remain in Yugoslavia gave rise to suspicions, and they were banned temporarily. Even when the authorities issued these visas again, they were marked in a special manner, which indicated that the doubts still existed.¹⁶

Additionally, the territory of the contemporary Republic of Macedonia, as a part of the Kingdom of Serbia that was acquired during the Balkan Wars (1912/1913), was incorporated into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Apart from the Slavic majority population, several thousand Sephardi Jews lived there as well,

13 Ibid., 189.

14 These were Ashkenazi Jews from the monarchy who had settled in Bosnia during the Austro-Hungarian reign (1878–1918). Because they were citizens of a vanished and inimical empire and did not speak the Serbo-Croatian language, they were not perceived as domestic inhabitants.

15 Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam*, 144–7.

16 Ibid., 149. These were mostly Orthodox Jews from Poland who sought permission to reside in the northern town of Senta, near Yugoslav-Hungarian border.

mostly in two towns: Monastir (from 1912 and on, called Bitola, *Bitolj*) and Uskub (*Skoplje*). Of all the Yugoslav Jews, these individuals probably had the most complex identity issues. After the Ottoman rule, the ownership of the area was contested by Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, all of which claimed their cultural, religious, linguistic, and other rights to the land. The argument used in the Serbian propaganda was historical: it was Old Serbia, as this area had belonged to the Serbian medieval state of the Emperor Dušan before the Ottomans conquered it.¹⁷

Another point that differentiated this region from the rest of Yugoslavia was that the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* maintained schools for Jewish children there from the mid-nineteenth century up until the time of the Balkan Wars. This institution promoted education and cultural emancipation, but also influenced the demise of their mother language, Judeo-Spanish, by promoting French, which was perceived as more sophisticated and civilized.¹⁸ As Klara Volarić proposes, Ottoman Macedonia was characterized by a-national and fluid identities.¹⁹

From the sixteenth century on these Sephardi Jews lived within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, while maintaining cultural, economic, and personal connections with the nearby Salonica's (Thessaloniki) Sephardi community, their biggest settlement after their expulsion from Spain. Having entered the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Macedonian Jewry was separated by the border from their brethren in Salonica.²⁰ Some of them accepted a Serbian²¹ and later a Yugoslav identity, while others embraced an exclusive version of Zionism or emigrated elsewhere.

Conversely, some authors affirm that Jews of Yugoslavia considered their feelings of Yugoslav patriotism and increasing Zionism to be two complimentary issues. Harriet Freidenreich argues that the younger generations of Jews born on the South Slav lands, predominately in accordance with their social status,

17 Bogdan Trifunović, *Memory of Old Serbia and the Shaping of Serbian Identity* (Warszawa: DiG Wydawnictwo, 2015), 11–3.

18 For a case study on the Alliance's educational influence on the curricula in the Ottoman Empire, see Ana Ćirić Pavlović, "French vs. Judeo-Spanish: An Overview of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle's* Language Policy in the Ottoman Empire at the Turn of the Twentieth Century" in *Judeo-Spanish and the Making of a Community*, ed. Bryan Kirschen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 143–5.

19 Klara Volarić, "Carigradski Glasnik: A Forgotten Istanbul-based Paper in the Service of Ottoman Serbs, 1895–1909" (Master Thesis, Central European University, 2014), 88–98.

20 In the system of newly created nation-states, Salonika became part of Greece, while the territory of today's Republic of Macedonia was first joined to the Kingdom of Serbia (during the Balkan Wars 1912–1913) and then to Yugoslavia in 1918.

21 Zeni Lebl, *Do "konačnog rešenja": Jevreji u Beogradu, 1521–1942* (Belgrade: Cigoja, 2001), 195.

belonged to one of three major groups: the Zionist, the Communist, and the apolitical.²² From the period of the Serbian Kingdom and on, kings of the Karađorđević dynasty maintained rather close relations with the domestic Jewish communities. Fine example is the great confidence invested in two prominent Serbian Jews, Avram Lević and David Albala, during the Great War. Avram Lević, an officer in the Ministry of Finance, was given complete, albeit temporary custody of the state treasury, which contained around 200 boxes of gold, while Serbia was occupied and the king, members of the government, and soldiers were retreating across the Albanian mountains in 1915–16. Additionally, he was tasked with safeguarding an even more valuable Serbian treasure, a priceless twelfth-century, illuminated manuscript *Miroslavljevo jevanđelje* (Miroslav's Gospel).²³ Nowadays, this exceptional piece of medieval literature is preserved by Belgrade's National Museum and occasionally displayed to the broader audience.

Captain David Albala, a Serbian Sephardi and Zionist, was a medical doctor during the Great War who fought and suffered with the Serbian Army, surviving the aforementioned retreat through Albania (*Albanian Golgotha*), as well as injuries and disease. In 1917, the Serbian government sent him as a special envoy to the United States to acquaint the American public with the Serbian position and gain support from the American-Jewish community. Thanks to him, Serbia was the second country after the United Kingdom to endorse the Balfour Declaration, which promised the establishment of a "national home" for the Jewish people in Palestine.²⁴

Bonds between the Yugoslavian and Jewish populations were strengthened even more during the early 1930s. Because the rulers of the house of Karađorđević actively endorsed Zionism, they received an homage in Palestine. Namely, in 1930, a memorial forest was planted for King Petar I the Liberator and, subsequently, for King Aleksandar I the Unifier, in 1934, after his assassination in Marseille. *Jevrejski kalendar* (The Jewish Calendar), an important annual publication that Yugoslav Jewry distributed throughout the kingdom, reported the event in the following year, providing a speech delivered by Menachem Ussishkin, a renowned Zionist leader and the head of the Jewish National Fund, at the ceremony. Ussishkin mourned the loss of both Yugoslav rulers, King Aleksandar I and his father, Petar I, stating that it was a tragedy for the whole cultural world and especially the Jews, since they had always been righteous and kind to them.

22 Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, 163, 180–82. Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam*, 68.

23 Mihajlo B. Milošević, *Jevreji za slobodu Srbije 1912–1918* (Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 1995).

24 Paulina Lebl Albala, *Vidov život: Biografija dr Davida Albale* (Beograd: Aleksandar Lebl, 2008), 135–51.

He reaffirmed that the government of King Petar had been the first one to officially recognize the Balfour Declaration and had constantly promoted Zionism and the righteous demands of Jewish people at the meetings of the League of Nations. Additionally, Ussishkin was confident that Yugoslav pioneers and their descendants would enjoy remembering their beloved King-Knight Aleksandar, during whose reign they had lived peacefully as equal citizens, in the shadow of those forests.²⁵ Indeed, a short time later, the conditions of the Yugoslav Jewry would deteriorate and be permanently altered, as they would everywhere else in Europe.

Another prominent person of Jewish origin who participated in the Great War along with members of the Serbian Army was Rudolph Archibald Reiss (1875–1929), a German-Swiss pioneer in the field of criminology, forensic scientist, professor, and writer (Figure 1). He was commissioned by the Serbian government, as an independent expert from the neutral party of Switzerland, to investigate war atrocities that had been committed by the invading Central Powers against the domestic Serbian civilian population. Reiss's detailed findings were published in two main reports²⁶ and in many articles in journals during and after the Great War.²⁷ He was overwhelmed by what he believed was the heroic Serbian struggle against a more powerful enemy. He, therefore, quit his successful professional career, joined the Serbian Army, and even decided to accept the king's invitation to live in postwar Yugoslavia. Archibald Reiss made precious contributions to the Yugoslav people: he was one of the founders of the Serbian Red Cross, he supported the creation and development of the police sector, and left a rather inquisitive and thoroughly political testament for the Serbian people, *Écoutez, Serbes*.²⁸ published posthumously. His sincere devotion to this country was reflected in his final request: he was buried at the Topčider Cemetery in Belgrade, while his heart, according to his wishes, was taken to

25 "Gora Kralja Aleksandra, Givat Meleh Aleksander u Erec Jisraelu" in *Jevrejski narodni kalendar*, eds. David A. Levi- Dale and Aleksandar Klein (Beograd – Zagreb: Biblioteka jevrejskog narodnog kalendara, 1935/36), 22–25.

26 R.A. Reiss, *Report upon the atrocities committed by the Austro-Hungarian Army during the first invasion of Serbia submitted to the Serbian Government* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., LTD., 1916); second report- R.A. Reiss, *The Kingdom of Serbia: infringements of the rules and laws of war committed by the Austro-Bulgaro-Germans: letters of a criminologist on the Serbian Macedonian front* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1919).

27 Zdenko Levental, *Rodoiphe Archibald Reiss, criminaliste et moraliste de la Grande Guerre* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1992), 18–78.

28 *Listen, Serbians or Čujte, Srbi* in Serbian. In this manuscript, he strongly praises the Serbian people, but also comments negatively on what he was convinced were their faults, advising them to be aware of themselves.



Fig. 1: Rudolph Archibald Reiss (source: Archives of Yugoslavia).

Kajmakčalan, a mountain on the border between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, and the site of the biggest victory the Serbian Army had achieved during the Great War. Lamentably, the urn containing his heart was later demolished by the Bulgarian Army during the Second World War.

Commemorating Jewish patriotism

The Jewish contribution to the Serbian Army during the Wars for the Unification and Liberation (1912–1919)²⁹ was often utilized as an argument to strengthen Serbian-Jewish brotherhood. In memorials, both former and contemporary, as well as in spoken and written praise, this symbiosis is described in terms of patriotism, joint martyrdom, and extreme bravery. Beyond the usual narrative, the recurring thematic word that is often used in Serbian is *rodoljublje*, which is stronger in its sense than the term *patriotism*. The former term evokes a sense of a more profound bond between individuals, a love for one's family, blood kinship, equality, and fraternal connection. The dominant narrative and a major leitmotif highlighted the similarities between the Serbian and Jewish

29 The Balkan Wars (1912/1913) and the First World War are generally considered as integrally and mutually interconnected units.

fates, as two peoples that had endured many injustices and moments of suffering throughout their histories.³⁰

In 1927, a Monument to the Fallen Jews in the Wars for the Unification and Liberation (Figure 2 and 3) was solemnly erected at the Sephardi Cemetery in Belgrade, a ceremony that was attended by many state officials, members of the diplomatic corps, family members of the fallen soldiers, and other members of the Jewish community.³¹ The monument contains both Jewish (Magen David, lions, inscriptions in Hebrew, vase with burning *flame – ner neshama*) and Serbian (Cyrillic letters, Serbian military hat *šajkača*) symbols, representing their dual identification with their Jewish faith and Serbian fatherland. A two-headed eagle perches on the highest point of the monument with one head facing the sky, as a sign of victory, and the second one facing the ground, as a sign of mourning for the deaths of the soldiers. In addition, the complex contains the tombs of the fallen soldiers with their names and the places of their deaths. The dedication, in Serbian and Hebrew, is situated in the central part:

*To the Jews fallen for justice, liberty, and unification,
for the memory and glory of
Serbian Jews³²*

Beneath, there is a quotation from a renowned masterpiece of Serbian literature, a national epic poem *Gorski Vjenac* (Mountain Wreath) by Petar II Petrović Njegoš,³³ written in Serbian Cyrillic script:

Generation made for a song, fairies will reach across the centuries to wrap you in a decent wreath; your example will teach the poet how one should speak with immortality.³⁴

30 For instance, see: Rabbi Šlang's praise in Ignjat Šlang, *Jevreji u Beogradu* (Beograd, 1926), 106–20.

31 For more detailed analysis of this pantheon, please consult the article Vuk Dautović, "A Monument to Fallen Jewish Soldiers in the Wars Fought between 1912 and 1919 at the Sephardic Cemetery in Belgrade," *Acta historicae artis Slovenica* 18/2 (2013): 43–58.

32 In Serbian: "Јеврејима палим за правду, слободу и уједињење, у спомен и славу српски Јевреји".

33 Njegoš was a nineteenth-century Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, a philosopher, and poet. His work is rather influential among South Slavs, laying the foundations for Yugoslavism. Thus, it is, perhaps, one of the reasons for the aforementioned quotation election.

34 In Serbian: "Покољење за пјесму створено, виле ће грабит у вјекове да вам вјенце достојне саплету, ваш ће пример учити пјевача, како треба с бесмртношћу зборит."



Fig. 2: Monument to the Fallen Jews complex at the Sephardi Cemetery in Belgrade (source: author's private collection).



Fig. 3: Detail from the frontal side of the monument "Victims fallen for the Fatherland 1912-1919", on the ground: a Serbian military hat *šajkača* along with a saber and rifle crossed, symbolizing the Serbian Army (source: author's private collection).

This memorial, combining both sacral and profane elements, is designed as a continuous reminder of the Jewish sacrifice and devotion to the Serbian State and, consequently, it is often referred to when rekindling the memories of the Great War.

On the occasion of the Great War's centenary, the Jewish Historical Museum of Belgrade published a bilingual, Serbian-English monograph dedicated to the Jewish heroes of this epoch. It displays a modest but valuable collection of war photos that the museum possesses. Apart from the photos of the aforementioned personalities, it contains portraits of distinguished Jews, such as the Ashkenazi Rabbis Ignjat Šlang and Natalija Neti Munk, both of whom participated in the Balkan Wars and the Great War and were honored by the Serbian State with many decorations for their bravery. Particularly striking and authentic

Fig. 4: Neti Munk carrying a sick man (source: Jewish Historical Museum of Belgrade).



is the photo of Neti Munk, the first Serbian nurse volunteer in the Wars for the Liberation and Unification, who holds a sick and exhausted man on her back and is possibly depicted as taking him out of the tub after bathing him (Figure 4).³⁵ Neti, having survived wars and disease, died in 1924 and was buried with military honors.

Ignjat Šlang (Figure 5), a Polish-born Ashkenazi chief rabbi came to Belgrade at the beginning of the 1900s and apparently soon became a supporter of the Serbian national cause, given that he had fought in all three wars between 1912 and 1918. Well-educated and respected in Yugoslav society, he published his scientific research and experience in an important book, *“Jevreji u Beogradu”* (Jews in Belgrade), which appeared in 1926. Chapters XVIII.-XIX. depict the first decades of the twentieth century, emphasizing the patriotism and bravery expressed by the “Serbians of the Mosaic Faith” in the Great War and providing examples of Jewish personal sacrifice and courage. Considering the almost complete annihilation of Serbian Jewry in the Shoah, this book – although it is a slightly romanticized ode to Serbian-Jewish relations – presents a significant testimony that bridges the gaps within Serbian Jewish historiography and represents a necessary reference point for the investigators. Rabbi Šlang shared the

35 Milan Koljanin and Vojislava Radovanović, *Serbian Jews in World War One* (Belgrade: Jewish Historical Museum, Federation of Jewish Communities of Serbia, 2014), I.-XVI.



Fig. 5: Rabbi Ignjat Šlang (source: Jewish Historical Museum of Belgrade).

sorrowful fate of most of his co-religionists, perishing in Belgrade's extermination camp of Banjica in 1942.

Conclusion

Serbia emerged as a triumphant party from the Great War, choosing to continue its sovereignty by forming a larger entity of South Slavs. The framework of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes offered Austro-Hungarian Jews a sense of continuity, allowing them to shift from one multinational state to another. Likewise, the bonds between Orthodox Serbians and Jews were fostered through the joint suffering and victory they experienced in the Great War. At the same time, although Yugoslav Jews made up a rather small minority – slightly more than 0.5 percent of the population – their positions within the state were affirmed by legal regulations.³⁶ Both constitutions that were published during this period proclaimed Judaism as an official religion, and the law enacted in 1929 that concerned Jewish religious communities confirmed their status.

Even though it was evident that Jews and Zionism enjoyed a greater level of acceptance in Yugoslavia than in other European countries, the explanation

³⁶ Freidenreich, *Jews in Yugoslavia*, 189.



Fig. 6: Serbians of the Mosaic Faith – volunteers taking a military oath while Chief Rabbi Isak Alkalaj blesses them, 1914 (source: Yugoslav Film Archives, Belgrade).

for this is still somewhat unclear. Several factors entwined in a complex way, endorsing this acceptance. The traditionally fond relations between the Serbian Jews and members of the Royal Family of Karadžević, reinforced by the Jewish contribution to the Serbian Army in the Great War, continued during the era of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and included other Jewish communities as well. The reason why Zionism was conceived as complementary to Yugoslavism still needs to be clarified. Obvious differences existed in the ways soldiers who participated in the Great War were commemorated. While Jewish soldiers who had been members of the Austro-Hungarian Army were neglected, Serbian soldiers were venerated for their heroism and contribution to the Serbian, and later Yugoslavian, cause.

Nevertheless, Europe headed in the opposite direction during the 1930s as fascistic ideas rapidly spread across the continent, eventually arriving in Yugoslavia. After antisemitic laws were enacted in 1940, the Nazis and their allies occupied the country in the subsequent year, the side on which the Jews had fought in the Great War became irrelevant, because they all became victims of the Final Solution. More than eighty percent of the Jews of Yugoslavia perished in the Holocaust. Some of those who survived stayed on in the region and sup-

ported the reconstruction by the socialist Yugoslavia, while more than half chose to emigrate to Israel.

Among the many political and economic explanations provided for Yugoslav disintegration, one intrinsic explanation stands out: *der Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen*, that is, the narcissism of small differences.³⁷ Despite numerous challenges, Yugoslavia helped the Slavic peoples, and equally its heterogenic Jewish communities, forming associations with their slightly different brethren. Finally, in the State of Israel, Yugoslav-Jewish survivors and their descendants are still connected by an appealing but non-existent notion: Yugoslavia.

37 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works, Volume 12* (London: Penguin, 1991), 131.