

# IN SEARCH OF JEWISH BELGRADE



## IN SEARCH OF JEWISH BELGRADE

If a visitor to Belgrade were to ask whether there was a "Jewish Belgrade," their hosts would probably shrug, confused, shake their heads, and say they had never heard of anything of the sort. Only an older neighbor might be able to help, mentioning that Jews used to live in the Dorćol neighborhood, but who knows whether there were any Jews left in Belgrade.

However from an historical point of view the

Jewish presence in Belgrade is very visible; in the period leading up to World War II there was a much larger Jewish community. The year 1521 is usually taken as the beginning of a Jewish presence, for after that they are regularly mentioned in Belgrade population censuses, chronicles, and other documents. From then until today, for nearly five hundred years, the Jewish community has been a continuous part of the city.

---

Plate showing  
Jewish Street  
in Dorćol



A black rectangular street sign with a white border is mounted on a wall. The wall is severely damaged, with large sections of light-colored plaster or paint peeling away, revealing a rough, greyish-brown concrete or masonry surface. The sign contains the text 'УЛИЦА' on the top line and 'ЈЕВРЕЈСКА' on the bottom line, both in white, bold, uppercase Cyrillic letters. The overall scene suggests a state of decay or historical significance.

УЛИЦА  
ЈЕВРЕЈСКА

One of the signs of the large, and influential, presence of Jews in Belgrade is the many streets bearing the names of prominent Jewish Belgraders, artists, creative figures. There are streets named after famous writers such as Danilo Kiš, Hajim Davičo, Oskar Davičo, Stanislav Vinaver; after the painters Aleksa and Marko Čelebonović and Leon Koen, and after others, such as the Baruh brothers, Moše Pijade, Geca Kon and Rabbi Jehuda Alkalaj, progenitor of Zionism, Dr. Hugo Klajn, and actress Rahela Ferari. There are seventeen streets in Belgrade named after Jews who contributed in various ways to Serbian society and culture.

On a map of Belgrade it is easy to spot the three main points of "Jewish Belgrade." These are the

Belgrade Jewish Community (at 71a Kralj Petar I Street), the Sukat Šalom synagogue (19 Maršal Birjuzov St.) and the Jewish cemetery (1 Mija Kovačević St.). In a symbolic way these three points enclose the life cycle of Belgrade Jews: from birth, through instruction in their identity, to their lives' end. The fourth point, connecting the Jewish Community in Belgrade and Serbia to history, is the site of the camp at the Old Fairgrounds (Staro Sajmište) whence about 7,000 Jews, mostly women, children and the elderly, were led away and put to death in a mobile gas chamber in early 1942. Most of the Jewish men had been shot before that in reprisal

---

Memorial plaque to victims  
of the Nazi concentration camp  
at the Old Fairgrounds during WWII



NA PROSTORU STAROGA SAJMIŠTA NEMAČKI  
GESTAPO OSNOVAO JE 1941 GODINE LOGOR  
"SAJMIŠTE". U KOME JE, UZ POMOĆ DOMAĆIH  
IZDAJNIKA, SVIREPO MUČENO I UBIJENO PREKO  
40.000 LJUDI IZ SVIH KRAJEVA NAŠE ZEMLJE.

PREDSEDNIŠTVO MO  
UBNOR-A  
I DPO MZ ST. SAJMIŠTE

for the deaths of German soldiers, so only a few men lived long enough to be interned at the Fairgrounds.

This fourth point, the Fairgrounds camp, marks the spot where the historical vertical of Jewish presence in Belgrade intersects with us today. The data given in the first part of this publication explain how the tragic dwindling of the number of members of the Jewish community came about, which is now stabilizing at about 1300, a number that also includes non-Jewish spouses.

There are many monuments in Belgrade, testifying to the city's tragic history, which include the names of members of the Jewish community among the victims listed on them. It used to be that the Jewish inhabitants of Belgrade

lived mostly in Dorćol, and until World War II that part of Belgrade could rightly be called Jewish. A masterful sculpture by Nandor Glid stands in Dorćol, recalling their presence by symbolically filling the empty space of their absence. Equally exciting is Bogdan Bogdanović's piece at the Jewish cemetery in Belgrade, a sculpture which moves visitors to a poignant identification as they pass through it and reach the very back of the cemetery, strangely renewed and richer for the remarkable experience. There is also a monument at the cemetery to the Jews who fell in World War I, the work of architect Samuel Sumbul, and several others.

---

Monument to Jewish victims  
of Nazi genocide 1941-44.  
Danube Quay, Dorćol





Inside the Belgrade Jewish triangle are most of the residential and business buildings that were designed by Jewish architects. The first of these, a building designed by Sumbul at Kralj Petar I St., houses the three main institutions of the Jewish community in Belgrade and Serbia: the Jewish Historical Museum on the first floor, the Belgrade Jewish Community on the floor above, and the Federation of Jewish Communities in Serbia on the top floor. The large building with its ornate façade is visually related to another building designed by Sumbul, the Oneg Šabat building on Jevrejska Street. Richly decorated to a degree that is unusual among Belgrade buildings, it still draws the attention of passersby today.

Not far from the building of the Belgrade Jewish Community, on the corner of Kralj Petar I and Knez Mihailova streets, stands the building of the Nikola Spasić Foundation, designed by Josif Najman. Before World War II this was the largest apartment building in Belgrade with 38 apartments and four shops, and one of the finest buildings on Knez Mihailova. Architect Josif Najman designed a series of public buildings in Belgrade between 1930 and 1939, including the Mint, the Commercial Academy, and the Municipal Savings Bank.

Continuing on our way toward the Belgrade synagogue, we come to Hotel Palas at Topličin

---

Monument to the Jewish victims of Fascism, work of Bogdan Bogdanović  
at the Jewish cemetery





venac, the work of Talvij Leon. The hotel was built in 1927 as luxury-category accommodation and it upholds this standard today. From here one quickly reaches Maršal Birjuzov Street where the synagogue stands; it was probably designed by Milan Šlang, son of Rabbi Ignjat Šlang, author of the book *The Jews in Belgrade (Jevreji u Beogradu)*, published in 1926.

Set back in a courtyard and sheltered by trees, the Belgrade synagogue is somewhat tucked away from the eyes of the public. This is why many Belgraders don't know of it and they are surprised when they learn that it is right in the heart of the city, not far from Hotel Majestic. In the years following World War II the synagogue continued to hold services, but only for a

small, aging congregation. Now the synagogue plays a much larger role in the work of the Belgrade Jewish Community, although its activity is hampered by a lack of funds. Aside from the regular Friday and Saturday services and the services held during the Jewish holidays, the synagogue holds classes and lectures on Judaism, they provide instruction now in hazanut, and the kosher kitchen works from Monday through Friday. The synagogue could contribute more to the Belgrade Jewish community, but to satisfy all the needs of the community there would have to be significantly greater investment, especially because now it

---

Detail of building of the Jewish  
Community of Belgrade (JCB)  
at 71a Kralja Petra I Street







is a place where members of different generations converge.

Let's leave Belgrade center for a moment to cross over to Zemun, which has a Jewish story all its own and which, today, is a proud part of greater Belgrade. A synagogue building has survived here but sad to say it is not used for religious purposes. It is on Rabin Alkalaj St. in the center of old Zemun. Rabbi Jehuda Alkalaj, a descendant of Sephardi Jews expelled from Spain, was the Zemun rabbi for fifty years. He is thought to be the first to have put forth the idea of the return of Jews to Palestine that was realized by Theodor Herzl, the founder of the modern Zionist movement, whose family was also from Zemun. The house in which Theodor Herzl's grandfather

and father were born is at 17 Gundulićeva Street, only a few steps from the Zemun synagogue.

Returning to our walk through Belgrade and following one of the sides of the imaginary triangle, we come to the former Center for Engineering and Architecture on Knez Miloš Street, built from designs by Miša Manojlović (a Belgrader of Jewish descent) and Isak Azriel. The building still catches the eye with its modern appearance and pure architectural lines. Manojlović and Azriel and a number of other Jewish architects designed buildings all over Belgrade, but regrettably we haven't the time to view them all.

---

Building of the Nikola Spasić  
Foundation, designed by  
Josif Najman, from 1930.



ЗАДУЖБИНА НИКОЛЕ СПАСИЋА

All of us are chronically short of time, a sign of the fast pace of our age, a pace which shows no likelihood of slowing down. This lack of time has a number of consequences, and one of them is that we have less time to read. That is a real shame because Jewish writers have written enough in Serbia to fill the shelves of a whole library. It is, in fact, incredible that a Jewish community as small as the one in Serbia has produced so many writers, such as Stanislav Vinaver, Žak Konfino, Julija Najman, Aleksandar Tišma, Đorđe Lebović, Danilo Kiš, Ana Šomlo, Judita Šalgo, David Albahari, Gordana Kuić, Ivan Ivanji, Filip David, Erih Koš, to name a few. Most of these are counted among the most celebrated writers of Serbian literature, and many have received major

literary awards.

Much the same can be said of other realms of artistic expression. Everywhere we find an impressive array of creative figures of Jewish background, among actors (Nada Blam, Jelisaveta Seka Sablić, Predrag Ejdus), musicians (Sandra Belić, Andrija Preger, Miša Blam), and artists (Nandor Glid, Radovan Hiršl).

---

Detail of the facade of Hotel Palace  
at Topličin venac, work of  
Talvij Leon from 1927.







This is a good moment to say that the Jewish community in Serbia is mainly secular, committed to the values of the Jewish tradition, but also to the right of each individual to choose his or her own religious affiliation. In the years to come young people are likely to show a growing interest in the traditions implicit in religious worship, and the managing bodies of the Belgrade Jewish Community support this, but further growth in this direction will require extensive funds to establish the services needed to prepare young people for entering the world of worship and tradition: a Jewish nursery school, a Jewish school, regular

Hebrew instruction, and the revival of all the other bodies and organizations (charitable institutions, burial societies, and so forth) that make a Jewish community Jewish.

Despite the lack of funds, the Belgrade Jewish Community organizes important programs for instruction, artistic expression, social work, and preservation of tradition. The Community center offers lessons in Hebrew and Spanish, folklore classes, culture and art programs on Jewish subjects, and the Golden Heart club brings together the elderly members for socializing. The Baruh Brothers (Braća Baruh) chorus, one of the finest in

---

Interior of Sukat Šalom  
synagogue, finished in 1926,  
19 Maršala Birjuzova St.







Serbia, is housed here, as is the King David (Kralj David) Theater, all the Jewish holidays are observed and celebrated, and there is special attention given to the upkeep of the Jewish cemetery.

Although much has been accomplished over the last twenty years, there is still much for the Belgrade Jewish Community to do to attain the standards of the Jewish communities of the Diaspora. Of course one of the wonderful aspects of the world Jewish community is precisely its variety and the great differences that exist among its many segments. The Jews in Belgrade used to wear Turkish costume, and later dressed as the Serbian city dwellers did, for example. The external differences, however, are not as important as the

internal similarities. One might say that, in the years to come, the Belgrade Jewish Community will be undertaking a journey inward, into the depths of the human being and soul. It is a major undertaking and will require resources beyond the means of the Belgrade Jewish Community. This is why we are turning to you, counting on your understanding, and placing our trust in the longstanding tradition of Jewish solidarity. In short, the Belgrade Jewish Community wishes to grow and move forward. We wish to remain who we have been while becoming what we truly are.

---

Detail of the Monument to Jewish Victims of Fascism and Soldiers Who Fell in World War I, Jewish cemetery



David Albahari  
IN SEARCH OF JEWISH BELGRADE

Publisher:  
Belgrade Jewish Community  
71a Kralja Petra I St.  
www.jobegrad.org

For publisher:  
Jakov Alba

Executive Editor:  
Ivan Hercl

Copy Editor:  
Ph. D. Jovan Elazar  
Ivan Hercl

Design:  
Vladimir Zagorac

Translation:  
Ellen Elias-Bursac

Print:  
Lion

Circulation:  
500 copies

Belgrade, 2012.



Printing sponsored by Vlatacom

---

Cover page:  
detail of the facade of Sukat Šalom  
synagogue, the only active Jewish  
place of worship in Serbia