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**COLLECTION OF OLD HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS  
IN THE JEWISH HISTORICAL MUSEUM IN BELGRADE  
(SUMMARY)**

The Belgrade Jewish Historical Museum has a collection of old Hebrew manuscripts which is unique in Yugoslavia. It came into being as a result of the Museum's long-standing efforts to collect and preserve at one place all the Hebrew manuscripts which were not destroyed during WWII. The Nazis had a special service called "Action Staff of State Leader Rosenberg" which was authorized to search for and seize each and every Jewish object of historical and cultural value. This service was in charge of implementing an elaborated precise plan and did, in fact, "process" every Jewish community on the territory of the occupied Yugoslavia. Immediately after WWII the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia initiated, through its Historical Department which later became what is today the Jewish Historical Museum, a drive aiming at tracing, collecting and preserving objects of historical and cultural value which the occupier has taken out of the country and no trace of them was available those days.

Nothing was published on this collection so far. This paper may be called the first attempt to depict in some details and to point to its importance. Most of the exhibits which make the collection were created on the Yugoslav territory during a period of time which started in the first part of the 17th century and lasted until the first decades of the 20th century. Our Museum has not succeeded so far to lay hand on any older Hebrew manuscript although efforts are being invested in that direction.

In our Museum the Hebrew manuscripts belonging to this collection

are divided in three basic groups:

- Scrolls having religious, legislative, legendary—historical, literary and *apotropaic* contents;
- Manuscripts having literary, religious, legal, philosophic and medical contents, preserved in form of single pages, notebooks, copy-books or hard cover books.
- Administrative books which were kept by Jewish communities or humanitarian, religious and cultural institutions acting within Jewish communities.

In the Jewish Historical Museum there are today ten Torah scrolls out of which seven are well preserved, while the others are rather fragmented. Most of them come from the 19th century and are written on parchment or leather. One is an outstanding piece. It is of unknown origin, comes from the 18th century, its handles are incrustated with ivory and there is a dedication on them.

There are scrolls — Megiloth — with the text of the Book of Esther. The oldest one of these is from the 17th century and comes from Portugal. Only one scroll has on it painted ornamentation. Its origin is unknown and its writing is on leather. Along the whole length of this scroll there is around the text an unbroken ornamental strip with floral and geometric ornamentation.

In this collection of scrolls there is one with the text of mezuzah. It is of unknown origin and its text is on parchment.

Among the amulets we find a few written in scroll form on paper or parchment. However, in the collection of our Museum there are also a few amulets engraved in metal or semi-precious stone.

Until the beginning of the 20th century the rabbis were the best educated people in nearly all Yugoslav Jewish communities. They used to write books, religious or profane ones, and the field of their interest was very wide, from phylosophy and religion to poetry, astrology, medicine, natural and social sciences. In keeping with tradition they wrote in Hebrew, Ladino and Yiddish with both square and cursive letters. The most typical examples of this kind of literature are *Kuntreses*, or notes which rabbis recorded when studying the Torah and the Talmud. We have in our Museum one such example which comes from the first half of the 19th century and its title is "Beth Sefer". It contains short examples with texts from

natural and social sciences, a Hebrew – Yiddish dictionary with a few grammatical explanations, poems with religious contents in German with translation in Hebrew, sayings, proverbs and a short story on the creation of the world. In our collection of Kuntreses there is a group of manuscripts which comes from Senta, the town in which one of the few orthodox communities in Yugoslavia once existed. The following manuscripts are in this group: Jichak Shalom Fajn's Comments on Talmud recorded at the end of the 19th century, a Kuntres, titled *Hidushe Agada* (Words of Haggadah) of unknown author who lived in the 19th century, two hectographed Kuntreses coming from 19th century, in which the sermons Rabbi Shmuel Rosenberg and Rabbi Natanel Schpitzer had delivered in the synagogue on Saturdays were collected.

Among the manuscripts one book of songs titled *Pizmon* particularly stands out. It comes from Split and contains songs for the Simhat Torah holiday composed specially for the Split synagogue. Another outstanding book of songs is the one written 1870 by David B. Ruso from Belgrade in Rashi cursives.

In addition to trade, craft and other professions, Yugoslav Jews were engaged for many centuries in medicine, too. There are in our collection two medical handbooks, one from 1820 and the other from 1840. They contain first of all prescriptions on how to prepare medicine for various illnesses and advises how to cure them, but one finds in them also religious songs and prayers, Spanish love songs and Bosnian folk songs. They are written in Ladino and in Rashi cursive.

Another interesting piece is a hand-written book which comes from Morocco. It was written at the beginning of the 20th century in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. It has five chapters. The first one has three Megilloth, then comes an eternal calendar for the years from 1903 through 1942, a Pesach Haggadah, a dream book written by Rabbi Haj Gaon and then songs for Succoth and Hoshanah Rabbah.

In the archive of the Jewish Historical Museum one can also find the most heartbreaking documents which stand in witness of the sufferings of Jews during the Nazi occupation. Here is first of all the original German made list of Skopje Jews who were transported to Treblinka death camp. Among the other documents are the card file with the names of the Jasenovac camp's inmates, a book showing the name of deceased Jewish inmates of the Dakovo camp, and also a

great number of letters and cards sent by inmates of camps in Jasenovac, Banjica, Sajmište and other camps. There is also a notebook in which Dr. F. Sende from Apatin registered the names of Jews who died or were killed in the camp Bergen-Belsen during the years of 1944 and 1945. In all cases of death the illness is also recorded. In the same notebook one finds also the names of children who were born in the camp.

In the collection of manuscripts there is also a group of marriage contracts, Ketuboth. The oldest piece is, in fact, the most valuable one. It belongs to the 17th century and comes from Ancona. Its decoration is very rich and hand painted. Its style places it in the group of most representative Ketubas of the 17th century. There is also an interesting Ketuba from Sarajevo which is written on paper in the year 1746. Its form stands in witness of a combination of Muslim influence and Sephard tradition.

Pinkas is one of the oldest community books. In our collection we have a particularly interesting piece which was kept in the Skopje synagogue from 1749 until 1913. The entries are in Ladino in Rashi cursive. We find in it data on the economic situation of the Jewish community in Skopje, on the social work in the community and on the contacts with other national groups, as well as with Palestine.

The registers are also considered to belong to the oldest community books. A valuable piece is the "Giornale", the birth, marriage and death register of the Split community in which we find entries for the years from 1817 till 1866. There is another one titled "Registro delle famiglie della Comunita Israelitica di Spalato" for the year 1837. A special register is the so called "Registry of Prospective Marriages". One such register comes from Stari Bečej and contains entries for the years from 1870 till 1893. Its entries are in German and in Hungarian. Another one comes from Vinkovci with entries in Serbo-Croatian for the years from 1892 till 1942.

Community statutes were introduced to have the life and work of the communities regulated by legal provisions. The oldest one is from Stari Bečej. It comes from 1862 and its title runs: "Statuten der Israel. Cultus Gemeinde in Alt Becze". Another one is titled "Statuto della Comunita Israelitica di Spalato" and is dated 1873. while a third one dated 1882 and titled "Statut por la keila spanjola israelit en Saraj" is also of particular interest.

Minutes as brief summaries of proceedings of sessions and annual assemblies are of great importance, too, as we learn from them which were the questions Jewish communities had to deal with. One such document which is considered to be of certain importance is in our collection. Its title is: *Contrati della Comunita Israelitica di Spalato, dal 12 april 1853 e Protocoli sedute*, i.e. minutes of sessions and assemblies of the Split Jewish Community held in the year of 1853. The Register of Arrivals of the Split Jewish Community, i.e. the *Atti della Comunita Israelitica dal 1662 al 1875* is about the oldest administrative book preserved in Yugoslavia. In this Register one can find brief summaries of what were the contents of letters, documents and other records dealt with by the administration of Split community. The Register is therefore of particular value as it offers a host of data on the life and activity of the Split community from the 17th till the 19th century.

Jewish communities used to put always great emphasis on social and humanitarian works. Benefaction was considered to be the duty of every Jew. Within a Jewish community there were various humanitarian institutions which extended help in money, food or clothing, when a child was born or support was needed for a student, when newly married ones were in need of help or when death occurred in a family in need, etc. The oldest and most influential institution of this kind was the Hevrah Kaddisha.

Among the administrative books of this institution one particularly stands out, the Register of Arrivals of the Senta Hevrah Kaddisha for the years 1858–1884, in which the entries are in German and in Hebrew cursive letters. Another valuable piece is the Minutes of sessions and assemblies of the Đakovo Hevrah Kaddisha for the years 1861–1941 which are in Hebrew, Yiddish, German and Serbo-Croatian.

Within the Split Hevrah Kaddisha the "Brotherhood of Compassion" institution took upon itself certain special activities. Its statute is dated 1836 and is still preserved. Another valuable book, "Contributions for Eretz Israel", also comes from the Split Community. Between the pages one can find small slips, which are, in fact, receipts left behind by Palestine travellers who received cash from the Community.

There were many ways for a community to get its income. The main

sources were: *Gabela*, *Mitzvoth*, rental fee for seats in the synagogue, contributions, etc. All these items were recorded in financial books. Preserved are several such books of the Skopje Jewish Community: the book on the *Gabela* payments for the years 1929–1933, the book on the *Mitzvoth* payments for the years 1936–1937. Preserved are also two books with the names of members who paid rental fee for their seats in the synagogue. One of them is from Vršac for the year 1886 with entries in German, while the other is from Stari Bečej for the years 1894–1935, with entries in Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian.

The question of language the Jewish communities used in their administration is a rather interesting one. Those books which had to be authenticated by governmental agencies were kept in official language of the respective region. In Dalmatia that language was the Italian, in Bosnia during the Austro-Hungarian rule the German, on the territory of Serbia Serbian, etc. On the other hand, the old languages the Jewish settlers brought with them when they came to these areas, the Ladino, Yiddish and Hebrew, remained in use within the community for everyday conversations, bookkeeping, tuition in community schools and writing of text, both religious and profane.