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Hidden Jews of The Balkans

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Introduction

According to Jewish tradition, it is imperative that all Jews have a deep understanding of their history and roots. Unfortunately, after so many years, information becomes muddled. This project aims to take focus on just one small and misunderstood region. The Balkans showcase a rare combination of religions and ethnicities that are hard to find elsewhere. These are just a few of the many Jewish stories. Past, Present, and Future

Greek Jews Work to Keep Heritage Alive

In the crowded and chaotic Athens neighborhood of Monastiraki, there is an odd mix of local teenagers drinking coffee and tourists from all over Europe buying miniature Parthenon statues at exorbitant prices. It is also common to see groups of 30 or more Syrian refugees lying on tables in the sun.

The neighborhood also holds last remnants of the Jewish Community of Athens. Tucked away among back roads and car repair shops there is a litter free street named “Melodoni” where a security guard stands in a booth near the middle of the street.

On one side of the street is the only functioning Sephardic Synagogue in Athens. Built in “Greek Revival” style, it looks much older than it is and has towering concrete walls and a tall, intimidating black gate in front.

Directly across the street is another synagogue called “Etz Hayyim.” The blue painted synagogue is the last Romaniote Synagogue in Athens. It is only open on the high holidays, but functions as a getaway for Jews in need of re-visiting their heritage.

The Jewish community of Athens currently consists of about 4,500 people, a significantly higher number than in Sarajevo and Belgrade, but far below the norm for Europe. The Jewish community consists of Sephardic Jews who trace their heritage to the Spanish Inquisition, as well as Romaniote Jews who trace their lineage in Greece back 2,000 years.

The Romaniote community has preserved through countless tragedies beginning with their arrival in Greece in 70CE after their defeat in the First Jewish Roman-War and destruction of Jerusalem. The Romans burned the city to the ground and pillaged all they could from the Jewish population. This event is widely regarded as the beginning of the Jewish diaspora. The combined Romaniote and Sephardic community lost 85% of its Jewish population during World War II. Highly populated Jewish areas such as Thessaloniki and Ioannina lost upwards of 90% of their communities.

Jews from all over mainland Greece come to Melodoni Street to worship with the largest but still dwindling Jewish community in Greece. One of these Jews is Joanna Nahmias.

Joanna Nahmias is a board member of the Jewish School of Athens and an active member of the Jewish community. Greek Jews opened the Jewish School of Athens in

1960 as a way to educate the youth that lost their grandparents to the Holocaust. It exists solely as a place for young Jews (2-12) to get traditional schooling while also learning about their heritage.

Nahmia's story is a sad one, but not an unfamiliar one. Her father barely survived the Holocaust. He was living in the city of Thessaloniki, which lost the greatest percentage of Jews during the Holocaust. He married a woman from England and raised Joanna and her twin sister just north of Athens. Because of this Joanna speaks with an English accent, but has never forgotten her roots.

Nahmias was one of many children who were educated at the Jewish School of Athens. She says the school currently educates 75% of Athens young Jews. Currently the school has 124 children.

"I have a small family because most was lost," Nahmias says "The friends in school became our extended family. This is why I feel so strongly about this community because the role of the grandparents and the things that were passed down ended up happening from the role of the school."

Unfortunately, the threat of closure always remains close by. "Some years ago when Greece went through the financial difficulty and we had a crisis that hit us suddenly in 2011 we found ourselves in great difficulty," she says. "We could not sustain ourselves. We asked for help from large organizations. They responded and helped us tremendously."

The financial crisis in Greece came to a peak in 2010 when Greece received its first bailout by the European Union and International Monetary Fund, totally over 110 billion Euros (\$146 Billion). Harsh austerity measures were put in place, drastically cutting salaries and increasing taxes. Greece has since pushed back and threatened to leave the Eurozone, plunging the European Union into disorder as member states work to keep the fragile union in place.

According to Nahmias, during the financial crisis the situation became so bad that families sold whatever they could to support their children's education at the Jewish school. They were sure that the school would be shut down, but several international Jewish organizations came forward to keep the school alive. Because of the help, more than 40 families were able to continue to send children to the school. Without the help, the school would have probably shut its doors.

"We are such a small community we cannot even risk losing even one child. Everyone makes a difference, says Nahmias. "Being able to maintain every child makes a big difference for us."

Nahmias' children have long since graduated the school (her son lives in Tel Aviv), but she continues to be an active member. A unique aspect of the school is that volunteers run the entire school board. Many of these volunteers are adults who previously

graduated the Jewish School. Those who have graduated can see the benefit of the school and the price that the community could pay for letting it all fall apart.

“Because we are such a small community, the biggest risk for communities like ours are indifference and assimilation,” she says, “I think that if the children come to the Jewish school, they get the Jewish education needed to feel special.”

Currently, Greece is battling with its reputation for anti-Semitism. The Neo-Nazi political party “Golden Dawn” recently won 18 seats in parliament after coming in third in national elections. The party rode on the wave of ultra-nationalist and anti-immigration that has been prominent in the past few years. The Golden Dawn flag consists of a reimagined black swastika on a red flag.

According to the Anti-Defamation league, Greece is the most anti-Semitic country in Europe. A poll from 2015 showed over a quarter of Greeks believe that the Holocaust was “exaggerated”. The same poll showed 90% of Greeks surveyed believe Jews have too much power in the business world.

Even though statistics show the majority of Greeks to hold anti-Semitic views, the actions of Greece does not reflect these views. Unlike other areas of Europe, Greece rarely experiences any physical attacks on Jewish citizens. Jews practice their religion openly and without discrimination.

Some critics of the Anti-Defamation league have pointed out that Greeks in general are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories due to the corrupt nature of Greek politics. Many Greeks have turned towards right wing political views because of the financial crisis and on going struggle with the European Union.

“They need to graduate and go to a new school and stand in a room of thirty new kids where they can say they are Jewish,” Nahmias says, “and explain what it means to be Jewish to people who have probably never met another Jew.”

While Greek Jews have persevered through countless disasters, they are struggling to survive amidst the Greek financial crisis. With over 46% of Greek youth unemployed, many are leaving the country for better opportunities. Although the Jewish community is holding steady, they are slowly diminishing as students leave the country for Israel or better opportunities.

For Nahmias, the most important thing is that they maintain a form of their Jewish identity, and continue to succeed in life.

“Naturally, as any parent, I want my children to be close to me,” Nahmias says “I want them to have Jewish families and be happy, but it’s something very difficult in this country because we are so few. I don’t know what to say. I just want them to be happy.”

Bosnian Jews and Muslims Work Side By Side

For a building of its large and historic nature, the Sarajevo Synagogue is not easy to find. To locate it from the city center, you must cross the Miljacka River and walk past a seemingly endless row of newly constructed buildings. Their shiny glass exteriors blend unevenly with old hotels riddled with bullet holes, and the oddly themed “Coliseum Club” casino, which seems more reminiscent of 1960’s Las Vegas than the Balkans today.

The synagogue itself is massive, built in Moorish fashion consisting of four large pillars and smooth concrete walls. When you walk inside, several different hallways and entryways where you can easily lose your way greet you.

Although the building mostly is filled with rooms for events, there is a small synagogue on one of the upper floors. What the room lacks in size, it makes up for in decor. The ceiling is filled with intricate tiles of red, green and gold. Hebrew lettering encircles the altar.

What makes the synagogue special is its continued existence throughout the 20th century in a country that has seen several wars — most of them ethnically based. The Jewish population in Bosnia is roughly 1,000, with most congregating in Sarajevo.

Nationwide, Bosnia is a predominantly Muslim country with a population of almost four million. In other areas of the world, that could be a statistic that would make Jews worry, but in Bosnia, Jews and Muslims have experienced centuries of positive relations.

La Benevolencija

Sitting at a large wooden table in the Sarajevo synagogue, Elma Softic is stone faced. The best-selling author places her hands firmly on the table and her reddish hair seems to float above her head. Softic slowly blows smoke across the table. After a few minutes of silence she says, “Maybe I should get us some soda.”

Softic is currently the Secretary General of “La Benevolencija” a Jewish Humanitarian group created by Holocaust survivors. The organization died in the late 1940’s, but was revived in 1991, a year before the Bosnian war began. During the war, the group stayed in the besieged city of Sarajevo and distributed food and supplies to those in need. The Jews of Sarajevo didn’t need to stay in the city, as neither side had targeted them, but many stayed anyway.

Softic herself only has one Jewish grandparent, but she still joined the community during the war. Her diary “Sarajevo Days, Sarajevo Nights,” about her experience during the war, became a best seller. She had two children while Sarajevo was under siege, Hannah and Ivo. Elma wrote her diary by candlelight while artillery shells fell around her and electricity was non-existent.

Elma talks about the history of Bosnian Jews as if she has rehearsed it a thousand times. “The first Jewish Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina was established in Sarajevo in 1565 by Sephardim who fled from persecution in Spain in 1492,” Elma says, as if she was reciting a page from a history textbook. “Most of the Sephardim arrived to Sarajevo through the Ottoman Empire, while some took other routes through Italy and Dubrovnik.”

By the end of the 19th century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had annexed Bosnia and Ashkenazi Jews then settled into the country, according to Softic. 12,000 Jews lived in Sarajevo before World War Two, but after, only 2,000 remained. Only the Jewish Community of Sarajevo truly survived.

The Bosnia War of the 1990s was an interesting time for Jews because they were unfamiliar with not being an enemy. La Benevolencija was able to stay neutral and help both sides of the conflict.

Although the community faces many struggles, they recently celebrated 450 years of continued existence. And some Sarajevo Jews credit their good relations with Bosnia’s Muslims for helping make that possible.

One of them Igor Spaic, a Sarajevo-based journalist, grew up during the Bosnian War. Tall, with long brown hair and a strong chin, Spaic was only two when the conflict began. When artillery began to land ever closer to his apartment, his mother went into the basement with him and his neighbors to hide from the explosions, he says.

His parents joined the army and convinced the military to give them rations as pay for their service. While she was away, Igor lived in the basement with neighbors whom he describes as “mobsters.” He slept on a pile of coal.

Now, Spaic has an incredible thirst for history and has a special fascination in the Jewish history of Bosnia.

“I just don’t understand why people in the world think Jews and Muslims don’t get along,” he says. “We just have never had a problem here.”

For much of the Western world, the idea of Jews and Muslims living together in peace would be considered odd. In Bosnia, that is the only history they know, according to Spaic. The partnership between Jews and Muslims was put to the test first during World War II. When the Nazis invaded Yugoslavia they ended up in Sarajevo searching for Jews.

“They were just hunting them down,” Spaic says, “They hunted them down like animals.” During the war, Bosniak Muslim hid Jews in the back rooms of their shops. According to Spaic, old Ottoman era shops have vast back rooms that are hard to find so it was easy for Jews to stay hidden.

During the Bosnian war, between 1992-1995, that favor was repaid. Not only did La Benevolencija help to distribute food and supplies, but according to Spaic, Jews did much more.

According to Igor, Jews created fake documents for Muslims and were able to pass some families off as Jews, thus saving them from certain death. In other instances, Jews appealed to Israel to save their neighbors.

One famous example documented by the official Holocaust memorial and museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, is that of the Hardagas and Kavilo families. During World War Two, the Muslim family of Mustafa Hardaga, his wife Zejneba, his brother Izet and his brothers wife Bachiyra took in the Jewish family of Josef Kavilo, his wife, and two children.

Josef knew the Nazis were after them after he discovered his bookkeeper was a Nazi collaborator. The Hardaga family were observant Muslims but removed their veils in the presence of the Kavilo family to show that they were truly one family now.

Fifty years later, long after the Kavilo family had emigrated to Israel, the war in Bosnia broke out. In 1994, the Kavilos appealed to Yad Vashem to save the family that had once saved them. After an appeal to the Bosnian government, the Hardaga family escaped to Israel and was welcomed at the airport by the Kavilos. Yad Vashem claims over 40 stories like this one occurred in Bosnia.

One of the most cherished possessions in Bosnia is the Sarajevo Haggadah, a Jewish prayer book brought to Bosnia from Spain during the Spanish Inquisition. It is filled with colorful imagery and embossed gold lettering. It is barred from public display and is hidden away in the National Museum of Bosnia & Herzegovina.

“Bosnia protected the Haggadah like I don’t think it protected anything else,” Spaic says. “During this last war, in the safe of the national bank, the President Alija Izetbegović, slept there with the Haggadah and the bones of the last Bosnian king.”

The Current Struggle

Despite its strong relationship with Bosnian Muslims, Sarajevo’s Jewish community never fully recovered from World War II and the Holocaust and has lost many of its traditions.

“After World War II and the Holocaust, the Jewish population was reduced to less than 15%,” she says, “One of the results of the enormous reduction was a big number of intermarriages.”

Elma believes the intermarriages that occurred after World War II are not a problem but a challenge. Anyone who could prove they had a Jewish relative was granted status in the community and during the Bosnian War, the Jewish community grew to 700. It became

that anyone who wanted to join the community could join and was granted lessons in Jewish education and practices.

The community currently does not have a rabbi. Israeli professor Eliezer Papo comes once a year to perform services during the high holidays.

The community of Sarajevo has struggled to maintain membership. Like Bosnia non-Jews, young members of the community are fleeing the country to avoid the country's high unemployment. Over 55% of Bosnian youth are unemployed according to the World Bank. Bosnia has an overall unemployment rate of 43%. Even with a large unemployment rate and a decreasing population, Softic still sees hope.

"We had 10 babies born in 2014," she says. "Nine were born in Sarajevo and one in Zenica. In 2015 three babies were born, all three in Sarajevo." Softic is immensely proud of the community and wants to see it thrive. The last Bar Mitzvah was in 2009, showing the extent to which the community is shrinking.

The Jewish community is still struggling in Bosnia. The signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995 ended the war, but set up a system that is unsustainable. The constitution currently only recognizes three groups in Bosnia; the Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Everyone else is referred to as an "Other."

Anyone left in the other category are considered "non constitute" people. People like Igor who are a result of a mixed marriage are considered "others." The category also includes all minorities in the country. If you refuse to state your religious and ethnic identity, you are also put into the "other" category.

Although the Dayton Accords stopped the war, members of those left out feel unheard. The most famous "other" in Bosnia is Jakob Finci. Finci is currently the president of La Benevolencija, and is also a campaigner of minority rights in Bosnia. Finci is descended from Sephardic Jews who left Spain during the Spanish Inquisition.

Finci has a long history of struggle starting with his birth in an Italian concentration camp in 1943. Finci grew up in a religious household. Later, he helped thousands escape persecution during the Bosnian war, organizing convoys that hid Muslims and Croats, and Serbs. From then on Finci participated in several peace commissions and found himself as an ambassador to Switzerland.

After the war, Finci found himself in a precarious position. He wanted to continue his political career, but under the newly created Dayton Accords, minorities were not allowed to run for president.

Jakob Finci on behalf of the Jewish population, and Dervo Sejdic on behalf of the Roma population, sued Bosnia for discrimination at the European Court of Human rights in December of 2009. They won the case by an overwhelming majority and in 2011 a decision of constitutional reform was set, but still nothing has been done.

Bosnia is currently trying to get EU membership, but cannot get it without first acknowledging the court decision and reforming the constitution. Throughout Bosnia, minorities have to battle every day for rights they say they never should have lost in the first place. People like Elma Softic and Jakob Finci will continue to work hard, but until the constitution is reformed, they will always be fighting the tide.

Serbian Jews Struggle to find Momentum

When entering the Jewish Community Center of Belgrade it is easy to imagine a more prosperous time. The building is enormous, sitting in the city center near an H&M clothing store and several new cafes that blast American pop music from 8:00am until closing.

Inside, the building feels like a museum. A security guard sits in a dimly lit booth and watches TV. He wears a Yarmulke for good faith, but he isn't Jewish. There is an old elevator from the late 19th century. It is covered in spider webs, but still gleams brightly. On the second floor two beautiful but empty rooms greet you. The first room has photos on the wall from the Jewish community before World War II. The other room is filled with chairs facing an empty stage and a piano. The rooms have furniture that looks too elegant to sit on.

Upon request, Daniel Bogonovic proudly gives tours of the building. At 32, Bogonovic became the youngest president of the Belgrade Jewish Community, the largest Jewish Community in Serbia. Before that, he was the Vice President and the President of the Jewish Youth of Serbia as well. He was also President of the Maccabee Association of Serbia.

Like many members of the community, Bogonovic is actually only half Jewish (on his mother's side) but his commitment to helping the community runs deeper than blood. Bogonovic has a wide smile, and still looks very young. He has a girlfriend in Belgrade and is currently helping organize sports and activities for young Jews. When Bogonovic is not volunteering with the Jewish community he is working as a director of a tennis club in Novi Sad, and also plays tennis on a semi-professional level. Bogonovic helped reestablish the Maccabee club in Belgrade and has been working diligently since.

Bogonovic once described being Jewish as a "privilege" and has tried to instill that idea into the Jewish youth ever since.

Yet the Jewish Community Center is so empty that every sound echoes around the many cavernous rooms. Dusty photos hang on the walls. Bogonovic shows off one during his tour. "These photos are from the Maccabi games in Yugoslavia," Bogonovic says. "Right before World War II began."

His reference to the war creates a clearer picture. The community center isn't a museum, but a mausoleum. Its elegance and style is frozen in time before the Holocaust. Inside, it is easy to imagine the building filled with Jewish families gathering for holidays and

services. Looking into the dark auditorium filled with dusty red chairs, is reminiscent of looking at photos of the sunken Titanic and trying to imagine life before the disaster.

Seeking Revival

Since becoming active members of the community, Bogonovic and other volunteers have been working tirelessly to keep the Serbian Jewish community afloat. It has been an uphill battle.

A 2011 census put the number of Jews in Serbia at 787. On top of their struggle to maintain their Jewish identity, young Serbians of all ethnicities are leaving the country in record numbers to find better economic opportunities in Western Europe.

“We have big unemployment,” says Bogonovic. “When younger people have a chance to go abroad, they do.”

The Holocaust in Serbia

During World War II, the Jews of Serbia narrowly escaped annihilation.

“Before WW II, we had 33,000 members in Yugoslavia. Almost 90% of the Jewish Communities were destroyed during the holocaust,” Bogonovic says. “After the Holocaust they came back but it was a terrible, terrible time. It was a wonder they survived.”

“They had two ways to survive,” he added “They changed their identity to Christianity or they ran to the forest to be with the partisans. If they stayed in the city they would not survive.”

In March of 1941, Serbia allied with Nazi Germany, but a coup d'état quickly overthrew the pro-Nazi government. In April, the Nazis began an intense bombardment of Belgrade, forcing many members of the new government to flee.

The Nazis then invaded Yugoslavia, and with the help of the new puppet of Croatia, Jews and Roma were quickly persecuted, first with the wearing of yellow stars, then with the taking of property, and finally death.

According to Yad Vashem, over 16,000 Jews lived in the part of Yugoslavia that is now Serbia. After a failed Serbian uprising in July of 1941, The Nazis decided that 100 Serbians would be killed for every one German killed with another 50 killed for every German injured. In an effort to not antagonize the Serbian population, they chose mostly Jews who they hoped the Serbians would view as expendable.

In December 1941, the Nazis turned the former Sajmiste Fairgrounds of central Belgrade into a concentration camp. Over five thousands Jews were brought to the camp where they had no heat and had to crawl on their hands and knees to their living quarters. Five hundred died during the winter from the cold.

In April 1942, the Nazis brought in gas vans from Berlin to quickly exterminate Jews and make way for partisan/political prisoners at the camps. Jews were told they were being moved to Poland, but were suffocated in the vans and disposed of in mass graves. By the end of the Second World War, 14,500 Jews had been exterminated. After just a year, Serbia was declared “Judenfrei” or “Free of Jews.”

After the war, families like Bogonovic’s quickly moved back to try to reinvigorate the community. “They re-established the Jewish communities because all of those things were destroyed,” said Bogonovic. “They rebuilt the Jewish life here. It was a very difficult time.”

In 1948, Israel gave Jews the opportunity to return to Israel and begin a new life there. For the Jews of Serbia, it was a difficult decision. They had just begun to reestablish their community, but for many the opportunity to leave was too good to pass up.

The Serbian government told Jews that if they wanted to return to Israel they would have to give up all of their property to the state. Not only that, but many Jews returned from World War II to find their property had already seized by the Communist government. The property taken amounts to over 3 billion Euros today, according to the current Jewish community.

“From 1948, the Jews go a chance to move to Israel to make Aliyah and during that time we lost a lot of Jews,” Bogonovic says. “Now we are working to return some of those things.”

In February of 2016, Serbia finally passed the “Heirless Property Restitution Law” which would hand property confiscated back to family members or the Association of Jewish Communities. Those communities will rent out the building at a low cost with all proceeds going to education, supporting holocaust victims, and holocaust memorials. The government of Serbia also has agreed to pay 950,000 Euros annually for 25 years to help the community.

When Yugoslavia began to violently break apart in the 1990’s the Jewish community had grown to 2,500 members. Although Jews had little to do with the war, many fled for safer places.

Bogonovic is proud that the community has somehow survived. “We are small in membership but in activities we are one of the most active in this entire region,” says Bogonovic. “We have activities for the kids, the children, the teenagers and the youth and the holocaust survivors.”

Because the community has been decimated, the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities, to make sure it does not disappear. For Holocaust survivors, Bogonovic helped create the “Gold Heart Club.” On Thursdays, busses pick up members and bring them to the community center where they are treated to lectures by a rabbi, haircuts, massages, and sometimes a bazaar where they can buy things they need.

Keeping young Jews in Serbia is a major concern for the community. The country's higher education system is struggling. In August, the president of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts claimed Serbia ranked number one in "brain drain" and warned that in 15 years there could be a deficit of resources for higher learning.

In 2010, Serbia ranked 139 out of 140 for countries suffering from brain drain. As Serbian nationalist groups have risen in power, educated Serbians – including many Jews – have left at an increased rate.

In 2014, Serbian Finance Minister Dusan Vujevic told medical workers to "find another country if they are not satisfied with this one." Vujevic, who allies himself with current Prime Minister and former ultra-nationalist Aleksandar Vucic, has vowed to slash salaries and greatly reduce the public sector. Both Vujevic and Vucic have been accused of ignoring the "Brain Drain" problem.

With half of Serbians unemployed, Serbian media estimates that at 32,000 young people per year are leaving for western Europe. A more conservative estimate is 12,000 per year.

The situation became so bad that in 2015 US Ambassador Michael Kirby commented that Serbia's largest export was "young people."

Despite those challenges, Bogonovic remains hopeful about the future. He says Jews will stay and the community will grow if they work to make the country better than before.

"In September, we will start with the Jewish kindergarten," Bogonovic says. "That is the first step, after that maybe we will own a primary school. Who knows? I am optimistic."