

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

Sephardim and the Holocaust

Aron Rodrigue

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Sephardim and the Holocaust

Aron Rodrigue

INA LEVINE ANNUAL LECTURE
19 FEBRUARY 2004

The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council or of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

First printing, July 2005

Copyright © 2005 by Aron Rodrigue

The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies annually appoints a distinguished specialist in Holocaust studies to pursue independent research and writing, to present lectures at universities throughout the United States, and to serve as a resource for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Center, government personnel, educators, students, and the public. The Ina Levine Scholar-in-Residence Award has been endowed by William S. Levine of Phoenix, Arizona, in memory of his wife, Ina.

On March 24, 2003, a new plaque was unveiled at the Memorial Monument in Auschwitz-Birkenau. On it was inscribed the following text in Ladino: “*Ke este lugar, ande los Nazis eksterminaron un milyon i medyo des ombres, de mujeres i de kriaturas, la mas parte djudyos de varyos payizes de la Evropa, sea para syempre, para la umanidad, un grito de dezespero i unas sinyales. Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940–1945.*”¹ This installation occurred thirty-six years after memorial plaques in twenty other languages had been placed at the same monument. Sephardi survivors and others had petitioned for the installation of the Ladino inscription to the International Auschwitz Council, which accepted the addition of the new plaque in a resolution adopted in 2002.

That most of the Jewish victims in southeastern Europe were Sephardi is rarely mentioned in all but the most specialized studies. It has been too widely assumed that few Sephardim were affected by the Holocaust. Even the most broadly valued literary works on the Holocaust do little to alter this perception. For example, Greek Jews appear quite frequently in arguably the most widely read survivor narrative of the Holocaust, Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, with an occasional reference to their

¹ The text of the plaque, which appears in twenty languages, reads: “For ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered one and a half million men, women, and children, mainly Jews from various countries of Europe. Auschwitz-Birkenau 1940–1945.” The English-language plaque was displaced to make room for the new one in Ladino.

speaking “Spanish” as well as Greek. However, the word Sephardi is never mentioned. Primo Levi, of course, had no obligation to use this identifying term. But unless the reader already knows something about Sephardim, he or she might overlook in Levi’s account their presence in Auschwitz.

The decades of delay in the erection of a Ladino plaque is representative of the oblivion that surrounded and largely continues to surround in general memory the place of Sephardim in the Holocaust. One can think of a variety of reasons why this is so:

- General popular usage of the word Sephardi has come to denote all non-European Jewry. As a result, because the Holocaust is perceived as a European affair, by definition the Shoah is thought to have had little if any effect on Sephardi Jewish communities. The Sephardim of the Balkans have been conflated in popular imagination with Jews of Muslim lands in general, and are thought of as equally distant and “exotic.”
- The size of the Sephardi population in southeastern Europe before 1939, around 150,000 if one excludes those of Turkey, has made these communities seem relatively inconsequential in comparison with the Ashkenazi communities that numbered in the millions. In absolute numbers, Sephardi survivors have constituted a very small group, both in Israel and throughout the world, and have gone frequently unnoticed.
- Until recently, the prominence of perpetrator history in Holocaust studies has focused most historians’ attention on places that have appeared central to the events, both in terms of the populations affected and where mass exterminations took place, thus marginalizing other regions.
- The study of the Jewish victims has mirrored the emphases of established narratives of modern Jewish history, focusing on Western and Eastern European Ashkenazi Jewries as the central actors in trends such as emancipation, assimilation, religious change, and nationalism that transformed the Jewish world. Very little of the history of Sephardi communities after the expulsion from Spain and after the Sabbatean phenomenon of the seventeenth century (which also had a major impact on Ashkenazi communities) has been integrated in these narratives. The main forces

have been seen as occurring elsewhere. Sephardim have reappeared in the story mostly after their arrival in Israel in the middle of the twentieth century.

- Additionally, Sephardi Jewry has not emerged as a distinct object of Holocaust studies because much of that historiography has implicitly adopted the nation-state perspective. We read about what happened to Jews in each nation-state, and focus on Polish Jewry, German Jewry, French Jewry, and others. Of course, in which country and under which state Jews found themselves very frequently determined their fate during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the exclusive adoption of the nation-state as the principle of categorizing victims has serious shortcomings if one is to understand their very rich and diverse cultures and trajectories, and indeed their behavior during this time of crisis. The “national” designation flattens the intricacies of their respective histories. For example, what is called “Polish” Jewry had lived under Polish rule in the modern period only since Poland’s emergence as a new nation-state at the end of World War I. The same was true for the Jews of the Baltic states, which emerged at the same time. Neither the Eastern European Ashkenaz nor the Balkan Sepharad fit neatly the nation-state optic. The long non-national and transnational histories and cultures of Jews of these areas are largely obscured by a strict twentieth-century perspective.

When observed from the vantage point of long-term Jewish history in Europe, clearly the process of the “nationalization” of the Jews was uneven and indeed for many a relatively recent affair. This reality is frequently ignored by much of Holocaust historiography, which starts only in the 1930s and adopts the nation-state paradigm as an unproblematic given. Furthermore, this scholarship constitutes for many if not most readers their only contact with aspects of Jewish history and they likely adopt by reflex the same categorization. Here the historian coming to the Holocaust from the standpoint of Jewish history can contribute another perspective. To understand the Jewish victims and to tell their histories with all of their complexity, the historian has to situate them in the broader, much more *longue durée* contexts that can excavate other paths, reveal more than one register, and reintroduce into the picture a different Jewish geography.

This approach is particularly salient in the case of Sephardi Jews. The distortion of the nation-state paradigm for understanding the cultures and histories of the victims

becomes immediately apparent when one pauses to think of, for example, the Salonican Jews, who, after centuries of Ottoman rule, came under Greek rule for a scant three decades before deportation to Auschwitz. Most Salonican Jews still spoke Ladino at home. The older generations, especially women, did not speak Greek well, if at all. It is certainly legitimate to think of the Jews of Salonica as Greek Jews. They were indeed juridically Greek, and many, especially the younger generations, were well advanced on the path of Hellenization. But the national category of Greek in this case obscures as much as it illuminates.

Two core areas of the Jewish world began at the end of the Middle Ages as a result of migrations and expulsions from the west: the Judeo-Spanish Sephardi one in southeastern Europe and the Ashkenazi one in Eastern Europe. The Holocaust and its impact largely destroyed and then dislodged the remnants of both communities.

I would like to put the spotlight on Sephardi Jewry as a specific and distinctive cultural unit, and to present a brief overview of its fate during the Holocaust. I aim to foreground by using a different optic a largely forgotten or neglected landscape of a part of the Jewish world that ceased to exist by the middle of the twentieth century.

With the migration of thousands of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula after the expulsions at the end of the fifteenth century (replenished periodically by Marranos returning to Judaism over the following two centuries), a new, reconstituted Sepharad came into being in Ottoman lands. Sephardi Jews settled in major cities, such as Istanbul (Constantinople), Salonica, Edirne (Adrianople), and Izmir. They also created communities in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Skopje, and Bitola (Monastir) along east-west trade routes in the Balkans linking Salonica with Central Europe and the Adriatic, and in Plovdiv (Philippopolis), Sofia, Varna, and Burgas along north-south trade routes linking Edirne and Istanbul with the Danube. The river formed the northern boundary of Sephardi Ottomans, with Ashkenazim predominating on the other side. They also settled in Eastern Thrace, in the western hinterland of Istanbul, and in western Asia Minor in the rich hinterland of the port city of Izmir. The Sephardim also lived in much smaller numbers farther east, in the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire, but with the exception of Jerusalem and for a while of Safed in the seventeenth century, they did not form the principal Jewish presence in these areas. Hence, the core Sephardi heartland

consisted of the various urban centers around the Aegean Sea, the capital, and in the Ottoman Balkans (called Rumeli by the Turks). Here the Sephardim constituted a cohesive Jewish group, swamping in numbers (with a couple of exceptions, such as in the town of Ioannina in the Epirus) the demographically much smaller autochthonous Greek-speaking Jewish communities, the Romaniotes, and absorbing the smaller numbers of Ashkenazim who arrived periodically from Eastern and Central Europe.

The Ottoman Sephardim acquired their distinctiveness from the relative communal autonomy granted to them by the Ottoman rulers; from a common cultural heritage going back to the Iberian Peninsula; from a rabbinic leadership with its own traditions that, like other Jewish communities elsewhere, maintained religious law and local custom in close consultation with each other; and from most notably Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language written in Rashi Hebrew script, that evolved from the Spanish dialects brought from the Iberian Peninsula. Living in close proximity with various ethnic and religious groups, such as Greeks, Armenians, Turks, and various Slavic populations of southeastern Europe, Sephardim adapted many elements of the language, foodways, and music of the surrounding cultures, and absorbed them into their Judeo-Spanish world. In daily contact with various Muslim and Christian groups, the Sephardim emerged as an integral part of the Ottoman social reality. The Ottoman Levantine context shaped them profoundly over the centuries and they themselves in return were a significant element in its making.

The Sephardim experienced many turbulent times, including the rise and fall of their economic position by the seventeenth century; the messianic crisis of Sabbateanism that followed; and the local conflicts, fires, epidemics, and earthquakes that affected Ottoman society. However, the set of challenges they faced in the nineteenth century were altogether more dramatic and transformative. The growing military and economic domination by European powers introduced a corrosive new element that had profound consequences. The Ottoman state embarked upon an era of Westernizing reform to rationalize and centralize the administration of the Empire. The non-Muslims of the Empire began to gravitate towards powerful European influences, and in the process acquired new political privileges and rights. While the Sephardim were not politically engaged, they partook in this process of realignment to the West, and benefited from the new economic opportunities provided by the growth of trade and commerce in this period. Now in closer touch with European Jewry, they increasingly acquired French as the language of education and higher culture through

the mass educational efforts of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French-Jewish organization that created a vast network of schools among the Jewish communities around the Mediterranean basin. At the same time, this period also saw the rise of a flourishing print culture in Ladino with the emergence of a secular Ladino literature and of the Ladino press.

European intervention in Ottoman affairs—through a new assertive stance of “protection” of the Empire’s Christian groups, especially in the Balkans, and the uprisings and wars that accompanied new demands by these groups—began to alter irrevocably the Ottoman world that the Sephardim had known for centuries. The triumphant political model of the nation-state eventually led to the demise of the Empire. Leaders of the various peoples under Ottoman rule began to construe them as “nations” with demands for independence, which they achieved through warfare with the help of European powers. The Serbian state emerged in the first decade of the nineteenth century, to be followed by Greece in the 1820s, and Bulgaria in 1878. Bosnia-Herzegovina came under the rule of Austria-Hungary in the same year. The Balkan wars of 1912–1913 led to the Ottomans’ loss of the rest of the Balkans, including Salonica where Sephardim constituted more than half of the population, with only Eastern Thrace and its capital city of Edirne remaining under their control. Defeat and capitulation after a few years at the end of World War I brought about the total collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

As a result of these developments, the Sephardi world that had formed a cohesive Ottoman unit fragmented. Although this process started in the early nineteenth century, it initially affected only the relatively small Sephardi communities under Serbian rule and in the newly independent Greece (confined to the southern part of the Greek peninsula). The major turning point was 1878, when Bulgaria emerged as a new state, and Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina. Major Sephardi centers, such as Sofia, Plovdiv, and Sarajevo, left the Ottoman orbit. The coup de grace occurred during the Balkan wars of 1912–1913, when Greece annexed Salonica, which had the most important of all Sephardi communities in the Balkans, and arguably the world. The Ottoman debacle at the end of World War I presaged the end of the Empire, with Turkey, the final successor state, emerging in 1922. Since their arrival from the Iberian Peninsula as of 1492, the Sephardim had lived in one polity as part of a complex Ottoman mosaic of religions and peoples. They had now entered the modern world of the nation-state, with its project of nationalization of the citizens. This

Ottoman community now had to reorient itself in the face of new realities, and to learn to adapt to new circumstances.

Antisemitism was present in the Balkan successor states, but was not particularly virulent, certainly not when compared to the lands north of the Danube. Nevertheless, the Sephardim, long associated with the Ottoman Muslims and the Ottoman rulers, were perceived among the new majorities with considerable suspicion. While nominally liberal and democratic, the new nations were rather exclusivist in nature, and did not consider the Jews true members of the nation. Still, first in Serbia and then in Bulgaria, the Sephardim certainly embarked on a path of cultural integration by the first decades of the twentieth century, while still maintaining elements of their Ladino cultural heritage. This process was less advanced in the centers, such as Salonica and the Macedonian cities of Bitola and Skopje, that had left Ottoman rule only recently. And indeed, the same was true for the Sephardim in the newest of the successor states, Turkey, where the nation-state had made its appearance most recently. Although the Ottoman experience was receding, it had by no means disappeared from memory or from lived social reality.

Even though friction with governments and various elements of civil society appeared periodically, it would be fair to surmise that had the Nazi cataclysm not occurred the Sephardim would have eventually adjusted and moved from the state of *modus vivendi vis-à-vis* their new post-Ottoman contexts to one of greater integration. But this was not to be.

The Balkans became part of the theater of war with the Italian attack on the Greeks in the autumn of 1940, and the German attacks on Yugoslavia and Greece in April 1941. By the end of the spring of 1941, all the Sephardi Jewish communities of the Balkans, with the exception of those of Turkey, which did not enter the war, lived in lands occupied by the Axis powers or under the control of their allies and satellite regimes.

The process of the destruction of these communities was in many ways a microcosm of the larger unfolding of the Holocaust, with varied development and outcomes that depended on multiple factors. We can identify three paths of mass annihilation: deportations to death camps by the Germans, local mass murder by Germans, and local mass murder by local, non-German forces. Escaping annihilation,

apart from a few hundred that joined partisans in Greece and Yugoslavia, was possible only when those in power refused to hand over the Jews or dragged their administrative feet, as was the case in Bulgaria.

Deportations to Death Camps by Germans

The communities annihilated through deportations by Germans were those in Greece, first in the German zones of occupation, and later in the Italian zone after the fall of Mussolini. The communities of Thrace and Macedonia, lands given to the Bulgarians in reward for their help as German allies, suffered the same fate when the Bulgarians deported their Jewish populations. The same was true for about 7,000–10,000 Jews, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, handed over by Croatia.

In Greece the catastrophic turning point occurred in March 1943 when the deportations from the German zone began. Here the most significant community was that of Salonica, with a Jewish population of about 56,000 before the war. Unlike in other countries overrun by Germany, the Salonican Jews had been left alone for quite a while after the arrival of the Germans in April 1941, apart from individual harassments and confiscations of property, communal records, and archives, as well as the closing of Jewish newspapers. Memoirs and diaries indicate that for about one year the community lived not much differently from its Christian Greek neighbors, suffering in the same way from insufficient food, a lack that threatened the whole population.

July 1942 brought the first serious blow, the drafting of 2,000 men into labor battalions after all the adult men of the Jewish community had been summoned to the central square and made to stand and be humiliated for hours. The community, under the controversial leadership of the Chief Rabbi Zvi Koretz, who presided over what in effect became a Judenrat, eventually ransomed these men. But at the same time it also had to give up the centuries-old Jewish cemetery, coveted for decades by the Salonica city government, and which now was demolished as part of the municipality's project to remake the urban landscape. Matters accelerated at the beginning of 1943, when Eichmann's collaborators came into the city and initiated the same anti-Jewish measures seen in Eastern Europe, including the wearing of the yellow star and ghettoization. In March of that year, the community was told that they would be moved to Krakow where their fellow Jews would help them resettle. Almost everyone believed this story, since they had received no news of the happenings in Poland. The first train

left on March 15, 1943, and arrived in Auschwitz Birkenau on March 20. Of 2,800 on board, 2,191 were gassed immediately.

Some Christians protested the deportations, especially in Athens, most notably Archbishop Damaskinos. But many profiteers used the situation to help themselves to Jewish goods and property. A few Jews managed to join the resistance or to flee to the southern, Italian zone. Jews who had acquired Spanish nationality during the preceding decades—511 in the city before the war—were not deported to Auschwitz. Some managed to flee for the south, but 367 were taken to Bergen Belsen and then eventually to Spain. Jews from smaller towns in northern Greece, under German control at that time, were transferred to Salonica and were added to the Auschwitz-bound transports. In all, nineteen or twenty transports carrying about 48,000 Jews left the city; by August 1943 Salonica was virtually emptied of Jews. About 37,000 were gassed upon arrival. Jewish Salonica, the jewel in the crown of the Sephardi world, ceased to exist.

It was difficult for the Jews to flee. Most still had Ladino as their mother tongue and many spoke Greek with an easily identifiable accent. Moreover, many Greek refugees, who had been settled in the city after the Greek-Turkish population exchange of the mid-1920s, resented the Jews. Although some Jews received help from neighbors and friends, the city offered few opportunities to hide. And most of course did not consider fleeing, preferring to remain together and with their families.

At exactly the same time, the Germans were handed over the Sephardim from Bulgarian-occupied Thrace, Macedonia, and a small area of eastern Serbia. Since occupying these areas in 1941, the Bulgarians had mistreated the Jews living there, plundering Jewish property and applying the strict antisemitic measures adopted in Bulgaria-proper. In fact, the situation was so bad that some Jews from Thrace had chosen to move to the German zone to escape this persecution.

In early February 1943, Bulgaria agreed with German demands initially to deport 20,000 Jews from all the lands it controlled. Like Vichy France and Romania, Bulgaria decided to deal first with Jews it considered foreign. Jews in the newly acquired lands fell into this category.

The Bulgarian police arrested about 4,000 Jews of Thrace in March 1943 and sent them to camps in southwestern Bulgaria. Two weeks later, two trains took them, together with 158 Jews brought from the town of Pirot in the area annexed from Serbia, to the city of Lom on the Danube in northwest Bulgaria where they were handed over to the Germans. There they were put on four barges and taken along the Danube to

Vienna. The fate of one of these barges remains shrouded in mystery. Some claim that it never arrived in Vienna and that it sank in the Danube, others maintain that mechanical problems delayed it, but it eventually reached Vienna. The Germans then took the deportees to Treblinka by rail where all were killed immediately. No one survived these Thracian deportations.

Again in March 1943, Bulgarian police arrested the 7,400 Jews of Macedonia. They were taken to makeshift camps at tobacco warehouses in Skopje to await deportation. Their houses were pillaged and their remaining property was taken from them in the camps. One hundred sixty-five, including sixty-seven pharmacists and physicians needed by the Bulgarian state as well as foreign nationals, were released. The rest were handed over to the Germans and deported on transports in late March to Treblinka where almost all were gassed upon arrival.

Next came the turn of the Italian-occupied areas. Although they were allies of the Germans, and had themselves passed extensive antisemitic legislation in 1938, the Italians behaved towards the Jews in areas that fell under their control in ways different from those of their senior Axis partner. The Italians did not agree to deport the Jews, and indeed many did all in their power to nullify German demands for this action. There were many reasons for this behavior. The Italian authorities and army resented the overbearing Germans, and not complying in this area came to signify their independence. Furthermore, Nazi-style antisemitism did not seem to have much appeal and did not become a guiding ideological principle in Italy as it did in Germany.

The Italian zone on the Dalmatian coast along the Adriatic provided a safe haven for thousands of Jews fleeing the Germans and the Croatian fascist regime. Approximately 5,000 Jews, many of them Sephardim from Croat- and German-occupied Yugoslavia, fled to this region, and lived under Italian protection. While some were captured when the Germans overran most of Italy after the fall of Mussolini in July 1943, most survived thanks to their location in areas the partisans controlled.

During the period 1941–1943, the Jews of Italian-controlled Athens and of central and southern Greece lived in relative tranquility. The Italian zone became a refuge for Jews fleeing the German-occupied regions, and the Jewish population of Athens swelled to almost 10,000 by 1943.

Conditions deteriorated rapidly in September 1943. The Germans lost no time in taking control of the Italian zone after the Italian surrender to the Allies on September 8, 1943, and all the antisemitic legislation in place in the North was introduced in the

South. Chief Rabbi Barzilai refused to cooperate, and fled after destroying the communal records. The Germans ordered the Jews to register in October. Initially, few responded. In time, however, more obeyed the German directive, having been lulled into a relative sense of security by the SS's lack of further action.

In 1944, the machinery of destruction became operational once again, the Germans having resolved to deport the remaining Jews of Greece. In March of that year the Germans arrested 800 Jews in Athens. The Jews of the various Greek mainland towns, such as Ioannina, Arta, Preveza, Volos, Larissa, and Trikala, were seized during March and April. In some localities, such as Volos, many Jews managed to escape with the aid of the Greek population, including secular and religious leaders. Those captured by the Germans were initially sequestered in the notorious Haidari Camp in Athens. From there, 5,200 Jews were transported to Auschwitz in April 1944. The Jews from the islands of Corfu and Rhodes were deported in June and July 1944. By the end of the summer of 1944, very few Jews were left in Greece.

An active Greek resistance movement existed, and Greek collaboration with the Germans remained weak throughout the war, though profiteering from Jewish property ran rampant in many places. Still, relatively few Jews could flee and manage to survive. According to statistics compiled by the Central Board of the Jewish Communities of Greece immediately after the war, almost 87 percent of the prewar Greek Jewish population of 75,357 died during the Holocaust, one of the highest percentages of loss suffered by any Jewish community. The disaster in Salonica was one of the worst.

Sephardim met incomprehension when they first faced other Jews in Auschwitz; the former spoke Ladino and could not communicate, and initially had difficulties being accepted as Jews. Still, this impression was dispelled soon. The Nazis used some Jews from Greece to clear the rubble left behind after the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. About 200 Sephardi Jews from Greece played active roles in the famous Sonderkommando uprising in Birkenau in September 1944. A small remnant managed to survive the death camps.

To the list of Sephardim deported by the Germans to the extermination camps by the Nazis we must also add those among the 7,000–10,000 Yugoslav Jews, Ashkenazi as well as Sephardi, already in camps in Croatia and handed over by the Croats to the Germans in 1942 and 1943.

Local Mass Murder by Germans

In April 1941 Germany defeated Yugoslavia. This area had historically constituted the border zone between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi worlds, and the two communities lived side by side in many of its cities and towns.

The Germans established a puppet regime in Belgrade and ran Serbia with an iron hand. The Serbian capital had a Jewish population of approximately 11,000, most of whom were Sephardi. Unlike in Salonica, here the Germans took action against Jews almost immediately after arrival, instituting all of the classic antisemitic measures such as economic spoliation, the obligation to wear yellow armbands, and the limitation on freedom of movement. All male Jews between the ages of sixteen and sixty were drafted into forced labor battalions. Anti-German resistance by Serb partisans met with ferocious response, with the shooting of 100 hostages per each German killed, and of fifty hostages per each German wounded. Jews in labor camps were systematically among those selected as hostages and killed. Eventually, all the Jews in the labor battalions were exterminated by early 1942; members of the Wehrmacht, aided by the SS, did most of the killing.

Jewish women, children, and old men were incarcerated en masse in October 1941 in a camp, Sajmiste, in the town of Zemun, just outside Belgrade across the Sava River. The number of Jews in this camp grew with new arrivals in the following months, reaching 7,500 by early 1942. By then the decision had been taken for their elimination as part of the overall German “Final Solution.” They were not deported to a death camp, but in a case unique outside German-occupied Eastern Europe, they were killed in situ by the utilization of a gas van. The latter method already had been used in the East for several months. One gas van carried about 100 inmates of Sajmiste on a sinister trip from the camp through downtown Belgrade to their mass burial site on the south side of the city. Executed with minimum manpower, the project of liquidating the Jews of Sajmiste was completed by 1942. Almost all of the Jews of Serbia were thus killed in their country, and very early in the Holocaust.

The historian of Jewish history will immediately recognize some of these tragic sites. For centuries, the river Sava had constituted the border of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. And the town Zemun was known by its German name, Semlin, under the Habsburgs. The famous nineteenth-century Sephardi “proto-Zionist” rabbi Judah Alkalai lived and wrote here.

Local Mass Murder by Locals

Some of the worst massacres in Europe during World War II occurred in the newly “independent” state of Croatia, which came to include Bosnia and Herzegovina within its borders. The fascist Ustasha regime under Ante Pavlović embarked upon massacres of Serbs, leading to the death of about 800,000 by the end of the war. Almost all of this was done through face-to-face killing, either through exterminations in towns or villages, or in camps such as Jasenovac, which became a byword for horror and cruelty. Although Croatia was a satellite regime allied with Nazi Germany, the causes of this genocide were largely local. These episodes reveal once again that in certain conjunctures and under right circumstances simple tools such as guns, axes, and farm instruments were enough to perpetrate mass murder, as has been alas confirmed in our own days in places such as Rwanda.

Although the Ustasha were primarily motivated by hatred of Serbs, they were also fiercely antisemitic, and the Jews soon became targets as well. Most Sephardi Jews lived in Sarajevo and in various towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The prewar Jewish population of Sarajevo consisted of about 9,000 Sephardim and 1,000 Ashkenazim. A Croatian pogrom followed the arrival of the German army in Sarajevo; the Germans destroyed the city’s Sephardi synagogue, and arrested and executed hundreds of Jews. Croatia introduced Nazi-style antisemitic legislation, expropriated Jewish property, and made compulsory the wearing of yellow armbands. Many Jews from Bosnia managed to escape to the Italian-occupied Dalmatian areas along the Adriatic, but many could not flee. In the fall of 1941, most of the men were deported to camps such as Jasenovac, where they were worked to death or brutally murdered. Jewish women were transferred to this camp and others in early 1942 and met the same fate. Those remaining were handed over to the Germans in 1942 and 1943, and deported to occupied Poland.

Uneasy Survival

The only major Sephardi community that survived in the areas of the Balkans controlled by or under the influence of the Germans was that of Bulgaria. In 1943 Bulgaria did hand over to the Germans the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia—territories that it had been given as an ally of Nazi policy—a combination of circumstances prevented the Jews in Bulgaria proper from being deported.

The Jews comprised only 1 percent (about 50,000) of the country’s population. They were visible mostly in the capital city, Sofia, where half the Bulgarian Jews lived.

Bulgaria became an ally of the Germans in March 1941, and extreme rightists became part of the government. Already before this date, because of the rapprochement with Germany, antisemitic legislation based on the Nurnberg laws had been passed in February of the same year, in spite of protests by church leaders, medical and bar associations, and writers. This law severely restricted the place of Jews in public life, universities, and the economy. Jewish males between the ages of twenty and forty (later extended to forty-six) were drafted into special labor battalions, and made to work under extremely harsh conditions.

The Bulgarian government created a Commissariat for Jewish Questions to deal with these Jewish-related affairs, with the antisemite Alexander Belev at its head. He worked closely with German representatives and signed the February 1943 agreement with them to deport the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. Since the agreement called for the deportation of 20,000 and the Jews from these areas numbered 11,000–12,000, Belev decided to deport 8,400 other Jews from Bulgaria proper, from the town of Kiustendil in the southwest of the country, and leading personalities from Sofia and Plovdiv.

However, before these deportations could proceed, word got out. Jews interceded with the highest officials to no avail, until Dimitur Peshev, the right-wing vice president of the Parliament, was approached by his Jewish classmate and friend Iako Baruh (the Jewish Agency's representative in Bulgaria) and others. Peshev raised the issue in the Chamber of Deputies, maintaining that these deportations constituted an illegal act. The minister of the interior meanwhile had agreed to delay deportations in response to an appeal on behalf of the Jews. Peshev continued his efforts and obtained the support of forty-two deputies who signed a protest manifesto. The chorus of opposition and the hesitation of King Boris III made future deportations increasingly problematic. In the meantime, at Stalingrad the tide of war had begun to turn. Nevertheless, Belev returned to the charge and prepared two plans, one for deportation to Poland and an interim one for the deportation of Jews of the capital to the provinces. The King approved the latter and, in spite of protests by Jews, the opposition parties, and the Holy Synod under Metropolitan Stefan, these deportations took place at the end of May and the beginning of June. About 20,000 Jews were forced to leave the capital and live in homes of local Jews in the provinces.

The death of the king in August altered the political landscape. The government, mindful of the consequences of the now likely defeat of the Germans and under

pressure, repealed the anti-Jewish measures in August 1944. In September of the same year, the Soviets entered Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian attitude towards the Jews in this period was complex. There was little radical, racist antisemitism except among a few ideologues such as Belev. On the other hand, many opportunists were all too ready to profit from the situation by robbing the Jews. Others believed in the rule of law and in humanitarian action, and took a stand against outright persecution. A relatively open political process allowed opinion to be heard and to influence policy. Although some property was returned to Jews, the economic damage was great, and most of the community, never particularly wealthy, was seriously impoverished by the measures taken during the years of persecution. Nevertheless, unlike most of their coreligionists in other lands, Bulgarian Jewry survived the Holocaust. Still, Bulgaria was complicit in the murder of the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. The overwhelming majority of Bulgarian Sephardim, traumatized and impoverished by the antisemitic onslaught, and already largely Zionist before the war, chose to leave the country en masse for Israel in 1948–49.

The old Sephardi heartland in southeastern Europe and around the Aegean littoral; the historic communities of Salonica, Belgrade, and Sarajevo; and the hundreds of smaller Jewish centers in Greece, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Thrace disappeared during World War II. Those areas under direct German control suffered the greatest destruction. The Jews of Bulgaria, while not deported, faced severe antisemitic legislation and action, economic spoliation and displacement, and emerged traumatized and pauperized from the war. Neutral Turkey also saw the worst antisemitic excesses in its history during these years. The discriminatory acts and legislation during this period impoverished the community, leaving it disoriented, mistrustful, and cowed. Large numbers chose to leave for Israel after 1948.

For many of the region's Sephardim who survived the experiences of the war years, the old moorings in these lands had disappeared. The destruction of Salonica, the center of Judeo-Spanish life and creativity, and the last remaining large Judeo-Spanish center that had preserved its distinctiveness and had continued to influence the whole Judeo-Spanish diaspora, heralded the end of the old world. For many of the survivors and the communities that had not undergone the horrors of the Holocaust but had

nonetheless faced harsh antisemitism at home, emigration appeared as the logical next step. The Sepharad that had reconstituted itself in the Balkans, together with Judeo-Spanish language and culture, like so much else of European Jewish life, did not survive the cataclysm of the Holocaust.

Symbolic of this demise was the German's closing of *El Mesajero*, the last Ladino newspaper in Salonica, upon their arrival in 1941. While other Ladino newspapers, most notably in Turkey, had switched over to the usage of the Latin alphabet in the preceding decades, *El Mesajero* was the last one anywhere using the old Rashi Hebrew script, in which all Ladino publications had appeared until the twentieth century since the Sephardim's arrival from the Iberian Peninsula (*La Vara* in New York was published in square Hebrew letters and ceased publication after World War II). After the Holocaust, no other Ladino publication of any importance was printed in Rashi script again. The continuity with the past was broken irrevocably. Apart from a handful of publications dedicated to the preservation of the language (all written in Latin characters), Ladino is now rarely used as a written language. While the older generations know and speak it, almost no young Sephardim employ it for daily communication. There is no real cultural production of significance in the language.

Ladino probably would have declined in all the post-Ottoman nation-states engaged in the process of nationalizing minorities. The conditions that allowed it to flourish over the centuries no longer existed. Still, the Holocaust dramatically accelerated this decline. A central component of Sephardi culture for centuries, it received a deathblow as a result of the destruction and dislocation of the Balkan Sephardi world during World War II.

Salonica, Sarajevo, and many other cities each frequently were called the Jerusalem of the Balkans. These Jerusalems disappeared forever. Just as the Holocaust destroyed the Ashkenazi heartland in Eastern Europe, it also played a central role in the demise of Sepharad in the Balkans.

Select Bibliography

- Apostolou, Andrew. “‘The Exception of Salonika’: Bystanders and Collaborators in Northern Greece.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 14:2 (Fall 2000): 165–97.
- Benbassa, Esther, and Aron Rodrigue. *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th–20th Centuries*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Bowman, Steven B. “Greece.” In *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. 2, ed. Israel Gutman, 610–16. New York: Macmillan, 1990.
- . “Jews in Wartime Greece.” *Jewish Social Studies* 48 (1986): 45–62.
- . “Salonika.” In *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. 4, ed. Israel Gutman, 1324–326. New York: Macmillan, 1990.
- Bowman, Steven B., and Isaac Benmayor, eds. *The Holocaust in Salonika: Eyewitness Accounts*. New York: Sephardic House, 2002.
- Browning, Christopher R. *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution*. Rev. ed. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991.
- Carpi, Daniel. *Italian Diplomatic Documents on the History of the Holocaust in Greece, 1941–1943*. Tel Aviv: Chair for the History and Culture of the Jews of Salonika and Greece; Diaspora Research Institute; Tel Aviv University, 1999.
- Chary, Frederick B. *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940–1944*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.
- Elazar, Daniel Judah. *The Balkan Jewish Communities: Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984.
- Freidenreich, Harriet Pass. *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979.
- Hassiotis, I.K., ed. *The Jewish Communities of Southeastern Europe*. Thessaloniki: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1997.
- Kerem, Yitzchak. “The Confiscation of Jewish Books in Salonika in the Holocaust.” In *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*, ed. Jonathan Rose, 59–65. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.

- . “The Fate of Greek Sephardic Cultural Personalities in the Holocaust.” In *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century II* (1999), *Proceedings of the 6th EAJIS Congress, Toledo, July 1998*, ed. Judit Taragona Borrás and Angel Sáenz Badillos. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
- . “Forgotten Heroes: Greek Jewry in the Holocaust.” *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 6 (1995): 229–38.
- Keshales, Haim. *Korot Yehudei Bulgaryah*. Tel Aviv: Davar, 1969.
- Loker, Zvi. *Pinkas ha-kehilot: Yugoslavyah*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988.
- Manoschek, Walter. “Serbien ist judenfrei”: *Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42*. Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1993.
- Matkovski, Aleksandar. *A History of the Jews in Macedonia*. Skopje: Macedonian Review Editions, 1982.
- Mazower, Mark. *Inside Hitler’s Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–44*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Molho, Michael, and Joseph Nehama. *In Memoriam: Hommage aux victimes juives des Nazis en Grèce*. 2nd ed. Thessalonique: Communauté israélite de Thessalonique, 1973.
- Novitch, Miriam. *Le passage des barbares: Contribution à l’histoire de la déportation et de la résistance des juifs grecs*. 2nd ed. [Israel]: Ghetto Fighters House Publishers, 1982.
- Pierron, Bernard. *Juifs et chrétiens de la Grèce moderne: Histoire des relations intercommunautaires de 1821 à 1945*. Paris: Harmattan, 1996.
- Plaut, Joshua Eli. *Greek Jewry in the Twentieth Century, 1913–1983: Patterns of Jewish Survival in the Greek Provinces before and after the Holocaust*. Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996.
- Recanati, David A., ed. *Zikhron Saloniki*. Tel-Aviv: ha-Vaad le-hotsaat sefer Kehilat Saloniki, 1971.
- Rivlin, Berakhah. *Pinkas ha-Kehilot: Yavan*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1998.
- Rodrigue, Aron. “The Ottoman Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of Ladino Literary Culture.” In *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale, 863–85. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.

Rozen, Minna, ed. *The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1808–1945*. Vol. 2. Tel Aviv: The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Center, 2002.

Steinberg, Jonathan. *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust, 1941–1943*. London; New York: Routledge, 1990.

Tamir, Vicki. *Bulgaria and her Jews: The History of a Dubious Symbiosis*. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press for Yeshiva University Press, 1979.

<http://www.sephardicstudies.org/jea.html>

ARON RODRIGUE is Professor of History, and Eva Chernov Lokey Professor in Jewish Studies, and Co-Director of the Taube Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford University in California, and 2003–2004 Ina Levine Scholar, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in history from Harvard University. Professor Rodrigue is author of “The Mass Destruction of Armenians and Jews in the 20th Century in Historical Perspective,” in *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern und die Shoah* (Hans-Lukas Kieser and Dominik J. Schaller, eds., 2002) and coauthor (with Esther Benbassa) of *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th–20th Centuries* (2000), which has also appeared in Bulgarian, French, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, and Turkish, and will soon be available in German and Ukrainian.

Professor Rodrigue’s numerous other works include *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860–1925* (1990). His *Jews and Muslims: Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Modern Times* (2003), an earlier version of which received the National Jewish Book Council’s Honor Award in Sephardic Studies, also received the Samuel Toledano Prize, awarded by the Misgav Yerushalayim Institute for Research on the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage, Jerusalem. Dr. Rodrigue is the coeditor of the journal *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society*, a member of the American Sephardic Federation’s Academic Advisory Board, and a member of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Jewish Research. Dr. Rodrigue has been a fellowship recipient of the American Council of Learned Societies, the Stanford Humanities Center, the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

Available Occasional Papers

“Lithuania and the Jews,” CAHS symposium presentations, 2005

“The Path to Vichy: Antisemitism in France in the 1930s,” by Vicki Caron, 2005

“Sephardim and the Holocaust,” by Aron Rodrigue, 2005

“In the Shadow of Birkenau: Ethical Dilemmas during and after the Holocaust,” by John K. Roth, 2005

“Jewish Children: Between Protectors and Murderers,” by Nechama Tec, 2005

“Anne Frank and the Future of Holocaust Memory,” by Alvin H. Rosenfeld, 2005

“Children and the Holocaust,” CAHS symposium presentations, 2004

“The Holocaust as a Literary Experience,” by Henryk Grynberg, 2004

“Forced and Slave Labor in Nazi-Dominated Europe,” CAHS symposium presentations, 2004

“International Law and the Holocaust,” by Thomas Buergenthal, 2004

“Initiating the Final Solution: The Fateful Months of September-October 1941,” by Christopher Browning, 2003

“On Studying Jewish History in Light of the Holocaust,” by David Engel, 2003; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/engel_02/engel.pdf

“Past Revisited: Reflections on the Study of the Holocaust and Contemporary Antisemitism,” by Steven J. Zipperstein, 2003; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/zipperstein_03/zipperstein.pdf

“From the Holocaust in Galicia to Contemporary Genocide: Common Ground—Historical Differences,” by Omer Bartov, 2003

“Confiscation of Jewish Property in Europe, 1933–1945: New Sources and Perspectives,” CAHS symposium proceedings, 2003

“Roma and Sinti: Under-Studied Victims of Nazism,” CAHS symposium proceedings, 2002

“Life After the Ashes: The Postwar Pain, and Resilience, of Young Holocaust Survivors,” by Peter Suedfeld, 2002

“Why Bother About Homosexuals? Homophobia and Sexual Politics in Nazi Germany,” by Geoffrey J. Giles, 2002

“Uncovering Certain Mischievous Questions About the Holocaust,” by Berel Lang, 2002

“World War II Leaders and Their Visions for the Future of Palestine,” by Gerhard L. Weinberg, 2002

“The Conundrum of Complicity: German Professionals and the Final Solution,” by Konrad H. Jarausch, 2002; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/conundrum.htm, 2002

“Policy of Destruction: Nazi Anti-Jewish Policy and the Genesis of the ‘Final Solution,’” by Peter Longerich, 2001

“Holocaust Writing and Research Since 1945,” by Sir Martin Gilbert, 2001

“Jewish Artists in New York during the Holocaust Years,” by Matthew Baigell, 2001

“The Awakening of Memory: Survivor Testimony in the First Years after the Holocaust, and Today,” by Henry Greenspan, 2001

“Hungary and the Holocaust: Confrontations with the Past,” CAHS symposium proceedings, 2001

“Facing the Past: Representations of the Holocaust in German Cinema since 1945,” by Frank Stern, 2000

“Future Challenges to Holocaust Scholarship as an Integrated Part of the Study of Modern Dictatorship,” by Hans Mommsen, 2000

“Moritz Fröhlich—Morris Gay: A German Refugee in the United States,” by Peter Gay, 1999

“Jewish Resistance: A Working Bibliography,” by CAHS staff, 1999; third edition 2003; web version www.ushmm.org/research/center/resistance/biblio.htm, 2000, third web edition, 2003

“Profits and Persecution: German Big Business and the Holocaust,” by Peter Hayes, 1998

“On the Ambivalence of Being Neutral: Switzerland and Swiss Jewry Facing the Rise and Fall of the Nazi State,” by Jacques Picard, 1998

“The Holocaust in the Netherlands: A Reevaluation,” a USHMM-RIOD conference summary by Patricia Heberer, 1997

“Jewish Resistance: Facts, Omissions, and Distortions,”
by Nechama Tec, 1997

“Psychological Reverberations of the Holocaust in the
Lives of Child Survivors,” by Robert Krell, 1997

“The First Encounter: Survivors and Americans in the
Late 1940s,” by Arthur Hertzberg, 1996

“The ‘Willing Executioners’/‘Ordinary Men’ Debate,” by
Daniel Goldhagen, Christopher Browning, and Leon
Wieseltier, 1996

“Preserving Living Memory: The Challenge and Power of
Video Testimony,” by Geoffrey H. Hartman, 1995

“Germany’s War for World Conquest and the Extermination
of the Jews,” by Gerhard L. Weinberg, 1995

Single copies of occasional papers may be obtained by addressing a request to the Academic Publications Branch of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. A complete list of the papers is also available on the Museum’s website at www.ushmm.org/research/center.

The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum promotes the growth of the field of Holocaust studies, including the dissemination of scholarly output in the field. It also strives to facilitate the training of future generations of scholars specializing in the Holocaust.

Under the guidance of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Center provides a fertile atmosphere for scholarly discourse and debate through research and publication projects, conferences, fellowship and visiting scholar opportunities, and a network of cooperative programs with universities and other institutions in the United States and abroad.

In furtherance of this program the Center has established a series of working and occasional papers prepared by scholars in history, political science, philosophy, religion, sociology, literature, psychology, and other disciplines. Selected from Center-sponsored lectures and conferences, or the result of other activities related to the Center's mission, these publications are designed to make this research available in a timely fashion to other researchers and to the general public.



CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW • Washington, DC 20024-2126 • www.ushmm.org