

# **Sephardi Pride: Jewish Associational Networks and Ethnic Modernity in Interwar Sarajevo**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of the particular historical circumstances of the interwar period on the advancement of Sarajevo Sephardim self-awareness, and on the modernization of their associational networks in the domestic and international spheres. The structure of the thesis follows the associational construction on the three levels of their existence: the Bosnian, Yugoslav, and international. The great variety of the societies that the Bosnian Sephardim created indicates the beginning of the civic initiatives and the modernization of their community. The sentimental reconnection with Spain was yet another manifestation of their Sephardi self-consciousness. Moreover, Zionism incited a specifically Sephardi reaction, that is, the foundation of the Sephardi movement in the international realm, wherein the Bosnian Sephardim played a significant role. Their ideology, Sephardism, was not a form of separatism from their majoritarian brethren Ashkenazim but a different way of interpretation Zionism without rejecting it. The results reveal that the Yugoslav state was a useful case study of the divergent Jewish opinions because it had quite active both Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities. Re-evaluation of Sephardi associations in the interwar years is a necessary requisite. The Sephardi movement was a modern initiative, providing a democratic discussion platform and promoting a crucial demand for a cultural diversity within the Jewishness.

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## Introduction

Bosnia is the only European country, besides Spain, “where Sephardic Jewish culture is considered part of the common cultural legacy”, as historians assert.<sup>1</sup> Sarajevo was a Sephardi environment “par excellence”<sup>2</sup> as a result of the exceptional multinational and multi-confessional conditions these Jews lived in before the Shoah. Sarajevo Sephardim (Jews from Spain and Portugal) lived along Croats, Muslims, and Serbians, none of these three having an absolute majority or a decisive domination over the others, which reduced significantly the pressure on Jews to assimilate.<sup>3</sup> Thus Bosnian Jews had the rare opportunity of being distinct and maintaining what they considered their own culture, representing a fine paradigm for acculturation, in which the minority ethnicity accomplishes rather nuanced adaptation, while retaining its main characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

In such a peculiar *separate integration*, where being adapted meant being separated, viable only in the special Bosnian pluralistic setting, the Sarajevo Sephardi community explored its own distinctive path to modernity.<sup>5</sup> Even within Jewish history, the

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<sup>1</sup> Marko Attila Hoare, *The History of Bosnia from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (London: Saqi, 2007), p.195; Stephen Schwarz, *Sarajevo Rose: A Balkan Jewish Notebook* (London: Saqi, 2005), p.49.

<sup>2</sup> Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo- Spanish Community, 14<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> Conversely, elsewhere in Western or Eastern Europe, the dominant Christian environment had often manifested anti-Jewish behaviors demanding their immediate or gradual assimilation.

<sup>4</sup> See Marion A. Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 10-12.

<sup>5</sup> Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities” in *Multiple Modernities*, S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.) (New Brunswick and London: Transaction publishers, 2002), pp. 2-3 The author explains that the concept “multiple modernities” implies that modernity and Westernization are not the same, and that Western

Sephardim, due to their different experiences in the *galut*,<sup>6</sup> appeared as the holders and creators of a particular affinity to modernity.<sup>7</sup> I argue that the Sephardi pride,<sup>8</sup> that is, the awareness of Spanish-Jewish particularity, was an incentive for producing various modern associations on the national and international level. Some of these organizations look back to a continuity of the Sephardi traditional associational patterns,<sup>9</sup> others were entirely based on “invented tradition”<sup>10</sup>, however they unfolded an exemplary civic engagement between the two world wars, and functioned as the sound basis for a Jewish civil society.

When Sephardim first came to Bosnian territory, the latter was a part of the Ottoman Empire, and thus its Jewish population became a part of the *millet* system, which meant the possibility for a non-Muslim population to maintain religious autonomy and to preserve cultural traditions. It is highly probable that precisely the combination of religious autonomy in the *millet* system, along with the multi-ethnic environment in the Ottoman Empire led to a greater acceptance of Jews and much less discrimination than existed, for example, in the Habsburg or Russian Empires. They did not have to

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path to modernization is not the only “authentic” even “though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others”.

<sup>6</sup>Hebrew for “diaspora”.

<sup>7</sup>Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2000).

<sup>8</sup>Patai argues that Sephardim internalized the Spanish pride and considered themselves a superior class. See Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Mind* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), p.381.

<sup>9</sup>*Hevrah* was “a formal membership association in the framework of traditional Jewish community” but later the term indicated the associations of all kinds, such as religious, philanthropic and educational ones. The religious nature of the *hevrah* was its main difference from the modern organizations. Some other characteristics were: the powerful control over the religious and moral behaviors of the members, the general inadmissibility of women, and the fact that major benefits from membership were “the heavenly rewards” or the pray for the soul of the member. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica, second edition*, vol.9, Her-Int (Detroit; New York; San Francisco; New Haven, Conn.; Waterville, Maine and London: Thomson Gale, 2007), pp. 80-2, s.v. “Hevrah”

<sup>10</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (ed.). *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-15.

suffer pogroms nor were they confined to ghettos in the Ottoman Empire. For a good reason, Maria Todorova, considering the peculiarity of this Empire, suggests that

It was in this period of harsh interdenominational struggles and wars in most of Europe, that the toleration, albeit a subordinate status, of Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire made a great impression on the observers, especially on Protestants. The despotism of the sultans, in particular, was the object of somewhat ambiguous admiration where consideration and efficiency often took the upper hand in overall evaluations.<sup>11</sup>

The successive three decades of Austro-Hungarian rule (1878-1918) brought several benefits to the Jewish and general Bosnian society. The construction of public infrastructure, enhancement of public healthcare and the educational system, and a more effective bureaucratic system of country-running were among the most important. These circumstances created fertile ground for civil initiatives and various organizations with notably modern operational forms, and aiming to satisfy the immediate needs of the communities. Sephardi organizations followed the general trends of Europe in this time.

Emerging civil society was a part of the secularization wave, which became more obvious in most European countries throughout the nineteenth century. The Jewish and other religious communities sought to find other alternatives that could satisfy their changing needs in a rapidly modernizing and industrializing world. The interwar period was a time when those associations reached their peak, showing a rather high level of differentiation within the communal specialization. The associations created by Jews were charitable, educational, religious, sportive, Zionist and youth-oriented ones.

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Todorova, "The Discovery of the Balkans" in *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.69.



The body of research literature dealing with Bosnian and Yugoslav Sephardim is substantial, but still gappy in several directions. Firstly, overview studies of Sephardi historians such as E. Benbassa, S.A. Stein, and A. Rodrigue provide a comparative perspective of various communities.<sup>12</sup> More specifically focused, there are significant studies about the Bosnian variant of the Judeo-Spanish language and literature done by M. Nezirović, E. Papo, K.Vidaković-Petrov, and I. Vučina-Simović.<sup>13</sup> The most valuable amount of data for our purpose can be obtained from the general histories of the Bosnian Sephardim<sup>14</sup> and Yugoslav Jewry, such as those by H.P. Freidenreich, I. Goldstein, and M. Koljanin.<sup>15</sup> The voluntary self-organization of Jewish groups was examined with respect to some other countries, but, as A. Hofmeister noted, this topic has only recently started to attract historians' attention and requires more consideration.<sup>16</sup> The present study, which will look specifically at the impact of the Sarajevo Sephardi associational networks, has only few predecessors,<sup>17</sup> and will

<sup>12</sup> Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*. Also Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), and Bea Lewkowicz, *The Jewish Community of Salonika: History, Memory, Identity* (London, Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> See Muhamed Nezirović, *Jevrejsko-španjolska književnost* [The Judeo-Spanish Literature] (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1992), Krinka Vidaković, *Kultura španskih Jevreja na jugoslovenskom tlu* [Culture of the Spanish Jews on the Yugoslav Soil] (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1990). In addition, studies by Papo and Vučina-Simović provide an insight into the changes of the Judeo-Spanish language. See Eliezer Papo, "Serbo-Croatian Influence on Spoken Bosnian Judeo-Spanish", *European Journal of Jewish Studies*, 1,2 (2007): 343-363; Ivana Vučina-Simović, "The Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Sarajevo: From social, cultural and linguistic divergence to convergence", *Transversal* 13, no.2 (2012): 41-64.

<sup>14</sup> Moric Levi, *Sefardi u Bosni* [The Sephardim in Bosnia] (Beograd, 1969), and Avram Pinto, *Jevreji Sarajeva i Bosne i Hercegovine* [The Jews of Sarajevo and Bosnia-Herzegovina] (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia- A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979); Ivo Goldstein, *Židovi u Zagrebu 1918-1941* [The Jews in Zagreb 1918-41] (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2004), Milan Koljanin, *Jevreji i antisemitizam u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918.-1941.* [Jews and Anti-Semitism in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1918-1941] (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Alexis Hofmeister, *Selbstorganisation und Bürgerlichkeit: jüdisches Vereinswesen in Odessa um 1900* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), pp. 46-48.

<sup>17</sup> See the chapter by Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, pp. 144-153; and the list in Zvi Loker, ed., *Pinkas Hakehillot / Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities: Yugoslavia* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988, s. v. "Sarajevo".

largely be based on primary texts. The main sources for my analysis are various Yugoslav and Bosnian Jewish publications of the time (books, memorials, almanachs, and calendars), as well as relevant articles from the weeklies *Jevrejski život* [Jewish Life, 1924-27], *Narodna židovska svijest* [National Jewish Consciousness 1924-27], and, most significantly, weekly *Jevrejski glas* [Jewish Voice], published between 1928 and 1941. On this basis, I intend to make an original contribution to the elucidation of the intertwinement of community life, historical context, and the authors' and activists' awareness of their special, Sephardi background.

The mystification of Sephardi heritage and a certain attractiveness of its reputation already existed in previous centuries. In Western Europe, the myth of Sephardi cultural superiority was championed both by Sephardim and Ashkenazim from the late eighteenth century onwards. Historic personalities such as Benjamin Disraeli and Theodor Herzl proudly claimed Iberian background. Even fierce anti-Semites, such as Heinrich von Treitschke, would believe that Sephardi Jews were closer to German people than other Jews because their history was “more distinguished”. Jewish group of very different origin vindicated Sephardi tradition in order “to promote their own cultural, political, and social agendas”.<sup>18</sup> Endelman explains the Ashkenazi viewpoint

In the German states pioneers of Wissenschaft des Judentums and the leaders of the Reform movement constructed an image of Sephardi Judaism that stressed its cultural openness, philosophical rationalism, and aesthetic sensibilities in order to criticize what they disliked in their own tradition: its backwardness, insularity, and aversion to secular studies. In France, Austria, Germany, Hungary, and the United States communal and

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<sup>18</sup> Todd. M. Endelman, “Disraeli and the Myth of Sephardi Superiority” in *Broadening Jewish History: Towards a Social History of Ordinary Jews* (Oxford; Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), pp. 237-38.

congregational boards erected imposing synagogues of so- called Moorish design, assertive symbols of their break with the 'unenlightened' Ashkenazi past.<sup>19</sup>

Sephardim exploited the myth to distance themselves from other Jews who threatened their status. Nevertheless, by the 1920s, the situation was notably reversed: now Ashkenazim were the ones claiming superiority, in terms of wealth and education, in comparison to their Sephardi coreligionists from the former Ottoman Empire.

If we compare the situation of Bosnian Jews with those who shared similar political circumstances, such as the Jews of Belgrade and Zagreb, we discover that the Bosnian community differed considerably. I argue that for these Jews, the climate for preserving their self-awareness was favorable, as they were in a unique position of sharing their country with three other ethnicities. The resulting posture of "situational ethnicity" would influence their self-perception as well. In such an environment where the main ethnic groups were at the same time separate religions and nations, the Sephardim likewise considered themselves as a separate nation.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, such a situation allowed them more freedom to maintain their own culture, since the other national groups were doing the same. Perhaps the following words of Moshe Rosman can best illustrate the understanding of Jewish communication with the overall society:

In short, what animates Jewish culture is the dynamic interplay of minority and majority in each particular place... Furthermore, being always a locally generated hybrid, it is so pluralist and protean that it defies definition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Moshe Rosman, "Hybrid with What? The Relationship between Jewish Culture and Other People's Culture" in *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford, Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), p.97.

Similarly, Bosnian Sephardism was a “locally generated hybrid”. One could therefore bear in mind that the notion “Sephardi” changes its meaning in accordance with its social settings.<sup>22</sup> There exists a rather widely-accepted consensus among scholars that one ought to examine *Sephardi* identities for each community, as the dialogue with the non-Jewish neighbors created their own peculiar concept of sephardicity. On the eve of the Second World War, Sarajevo’s population comprised Jews at a proportion of ten percent, most of them being Sephardim.<sup>23</sup>

The present study will find out in which way the peculiar historical conditions inflected upon the modernization of Sarajevo Sephardi community. It is divided into three chapters, which denote different levels of organized Sephardi existence, the Bosnian, Yugoslav, and international, each representing a different sphere of their engagement. The first chapter introduces the biggest Bosnian Sephardi organization, *La Benevolencija*, and other humanitarian-educational organizations that were active during the interwar period in Sarajevo. Any study of Bosnian Sephardim would be incomplete without them, since these associations were the framework of Jewish communal life, and the inevitable instruments for the realization of community goals. Moreover, these associations were an example of civil initiatives and a sign of the emerging civil society.

The second part sheds light on the relations between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews in Sarajevo, explaining their two concepts of the most influential Jewish idea of the époque, Zionism. This section investigates the clash between Sephardi and Ashkenazi

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<sup>22</sup>See in Harvey E. Goldberg, “From Sephardi to Mizrahi and Back Again: Changing Meanings of ‘Sephardi’ in its Social Environments” in *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2008), pp. 165-88.

<sup>23</sup>Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, p.215.

Jews over their respective conceptions of Zionism, since in the Sephardi interpretation it was intertwined with Sephardism, as reflected in the joint Sephardi-Ashkenazi weekly, *Jevrejski glas*.

The third chapter explores the international perspective of Sephardi networks, revealing their connection with the medieval Spain, where their glorious ancestors had lived before the infamous Alhambra Decree, as well as with the modern Spanish state. This section finally deals with the Sephardi world movement, as a reaction to the brand of Zionism propagated by their majoritarian brethren, the Ashkenazim, and the participation of Bosnian Sephardim in the trans-European Sephardi networks, which will be recognized as a consistent expansion of their local and Yugoslav association-building initiatives.

## **I. Sephardi Associations in Sarajevo**

Bosnian Sephardim in the interwar years were shaped by several crucial developments. These were their historical experience of the Sephardi diaspora in the Ottoman Empire, the influence of the modern Central European Jewry under the Habsburgs, and finally the new framework of the Yugoslav state. The legal system of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes protected especially religious, charitable and educational associations of its citizens. Hence the Jews in Sarajevo availed themselves of these possibilities and created a solid associational network, which was a powerful agent of social change, enabling the improvement of their overall social status.

### ***I.1. Jews within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes***

After the Great War, Bosnia became a part of a larger entity, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, proclaimed in December 1918. In September 1920 the National Council of Bosnia was transferred to the central government in Belgrade, which would announce the future subaltern position of Bosnia within the Kingdom, a fact that induced ethnic tensions, since it was perceived as a manifestation of Serbian dominance. Nevertheless, in all those ethnic disagreements, the majority of Jews stood aside and reiterated their loyalty to the King and dynasty.<sup>24</sup>

Given that the Kingdom was a multinational and multi-confessional state, one of the first proclamations of King Aleksandar concerned the equality for all the confessions, which had a purpose to eliminate the privileged position the Orthodox Church had in

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, in their press, every 1<sup>st</sup> of December they would praise the unification of the State and glorify the King. Likewise, the first pages of Yugoslav Jewry's annual publications, such as the Jewish Calendar or Almanach, were always dedicated to the King and royal dynasty.

Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>25</sup> What is more, the dictatorship proclaimed by the King in January 1929 was a “golden age” for Jews, since by prohibiting the work of all political parties and organizations, it repressed all anti- Semitic ones as well.<sup>26</sup> The same year, the Organic Law of the Jewish Religious Community would reaffirm the rights of Yugoslav Jewry.<sup>27</sup>

The Constitution of 1921 (*Vidovdanski*) proclaimed one citizenship in the Kingdom, the equality of all the citizens before the law, with the abolition of privileges that nobility once had.<sup>28</sup> The subsequent articles stipulated the freedom of belief and consciousness, legal equality of all recognized confessions<sup>29</sup>, and freedom of associations and gatherings.<sup>30</sup> Although these rights recognized *de jure* were not always *de facto* respected, it gave a legal ground for the creation of the various societies, including those established by the Jews.

The Constitution of 1931 introduced some novelties, but it would not affect the continuous operation of Jewish societies. Once again the freedom of association was confirmed, with the exception of those which had political and physical [*sic*]

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<sup>25</sup> Dejan Novaković, “Položaj crkava i vjerskih zajednica i ostvarivanje vjerskih sloboda u ustavima Srbije” in *Društvena istraživanja*, Zagreb, Vol.20, No.2, 2011 [The Position of Churches and Religious Communities and the Practice of Religious Freedom in the Constitutions of Serbia], pp. 524-25

<sup>26</sup> Ivo Goldstein, “The Jews in Yugoslavia 1918-1941: Antisemitism and Struggle for Equality”, p.5, see at [http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02\\_goldstein.pdf](http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02_goldstein.pdf) (Viewed April 21, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> *Službene novine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, No. 309, Year 1929 [Bulletin of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia].

<sup>28</sup> Article 4, The Constitution of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. See in “Ustav Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca”, *Službene novine Kraljevine SHS*, No. 142/a, Year 1921 [Bulletin of the Kingdom of SCS].

<sup>29</sup> Article 12, *ibid*. According to the widespread opinion, the recognized religions were Serbian Orthodox, Catholic and Greek- Catholic, Evangelic, Islam and Judaism.

<sup>30</sup> Article 14, *ibid*.

purposes.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the elementary school was made compulsory, and its education had to promote the state unity and religious tolerance.<sup>32</sup>

## ***1.2. Emerging Jewish Civil Society in Bosnia under Austria- Hungary and After***

As John Keane implies, civil society is

an ideal-typical category (an *idealtyp* in the sense of Max Weber) that both describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that “frame “, constrict and enable their activities.<sup>33</sup>

Although from the mid-nineteenth century to the last decades of the twentieth century the term “civil society” seemed to have disappeared from public discourse, the form of organization it describes indeed had various manifestations during the interwar period, depending on a local context. Across Europe, the years between the two world wars brought an outstanding variety of different movements and organizational types, for Jewish and non-Jewish societies alike. The importance of these associations lies in the different functions they fulfilled for the communities. Precisely the examination of these distinct ways of self-organization and self-help will reveal the changed model of behavior, one that announced new, modern times. The Sephardi civil initiatives in Sarajevo were legally protected, non-governmental, self-organized, being also rather secular and resourceful.

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<sup>31</sup> Article 13, the 1931 Constitution of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. See in “Ustav Kraljevine Jugoslavije”, *Službene novine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, No.200, Year 1931 [Bulletin of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia].

<sup>32</sup> Article 16, Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> John Keane, *Civil Society: Old images, New Visions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998),p.6.



In nineteenth century Western Europe, one of the most frequent excuses for social exclusion was religion.<sup>34</sup> This was undoubtedly an incentive for French and German Jews to establish their own voluntary organizations in the 1820s and 1830s. In the Habsburg Monarchy the spread of associational life was delayed, but after 1830s it flourished rapidly, although the authorities were suspicious of the societies. Prince Metternich, the conservative Habsburg state chancellor, considered them a “German plague”.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Hoffmann notes, the main difference between Western Europe and Austria-Hungary was the agrarian character of the Habsburg Empire and a “thinner associational density and network” in the latter monarchy.<sup>36</sup>

Like elsewhere in the Monarchy,<sup>37</sup> in Bosnia the societies for charity provided an unprecedented opportunity for Sephardi women to enter the public sphere, since they were generally excluded from the membership of the first associations founded in the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Through these charitable activities, women would piecemeal gain greater acceptance in public life, and eventually legal recognition of their political and civil rights. It was not a coincidence, then, that the first societies with modern operational forms were established in Bosnia during the Austro-Hungarian rule (1878-1918).

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<sup>34</sup> The segregation of Jewish welfare organizations could be perceived in the environments with endemic anti-Semitism as well, such as in Tsarist Russia where “separate Jewish welfare institutions could be both the impetus for anti-Jewish restriction and a consequence of such restrictions”. See Natan M. Meir, *Kiev, Jewish Metropolis: A History 1859-1914* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p.201.

<sup>35</sup> Stefan Ludwig Hoffmann, *Civil Society 1750-1914* (Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 35-9.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.38.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.39.

<sup>38</sup> Marion Kaplan highlights the importance of charities for the social life of Jewish women in Imperial Germany. See Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, pp. 192-228.

The 1920s were undoubtedly the period of most dynamic Jewish associational activity in Sarajevo. At least twenty different societies were established. These were cultural-educational (La Benevolencija, La Lira, Tarbut, Safa Berura), charitable (La Gloria, Ezrat Jetomim, La Humanidad, Sociedad de vižitar doljentes), sportive (Makabi, Bar Kohba), youth (Matatja), religious (Hevra Kadiša, Bet Tefila, Degel Atora), and Zionist (Betar, Poale Cion). It should be stated, though, that it would be misleading to strictly divide Sephardi undertakings since they multitasked, striving for overall social betterment.

Most of the organizations founded by Jews in Bosnia had predominantly either a charitable or an educational character. However, the local Jewish population was also influenced by the social and economic developments in contemporary Europe, which was reflected in some of their organizations (Makabi, Poale Cion, Matatja). These societies often had a rather strong ideological component, being Zionist, socialist or both.

Finally, these associations fulfilled relevant functions within society. Besides serving public interest by alleviating poorness and analphabetism, they offered a way for members and beneficiaries to display publicly their altruism and gain major social recognition. The latter function was particularly important for Sephardi women, since their societies such as *La Humanidad*, *La Gloria*, and *Sociedad de vižitar doljentes*, enabled their participation in public life for the first time. It was also a substitute of political engagement and the beginning of their empowerment. What is more, Jews in Yugoslavia did not found political parties but tended to express their political convictions through different Jewish organizations and weeklies. Especially politically

engaged were youth associations, and most distinguished in Bosnia was *Matatja*, which actively engaged in different spheres of Sephardi life.

Furthermore, the primary motive for the separate Sephardi associations in Sarajevo was not their factual exclusion from the general society, but the necessity to resolve the perpetual deprivation and precarious social and economic conditions. What is more, a look on the Jewish press and publications of the interwar period suggests almost total absence of anti-Semitism in Bosnia. It remains unclear whether Jews did not want to speak about it or they did not feel threatened. However, there were some occasional accusations against them in the local press and some disagreements with the local Muslims over the Jewish colonization of Palestine, but government sponsored anti-Jewish measures were not introduced until October 1940. Only then the local Sephardim would raise their voice against the government's actions<sup>39</sup> for it was the unambiguous announcement that Yugoslavia was not a secure place any more.

The following year, the Nazis invaded the Kingdom of Yugoslavia dividing it among the Axis powers. A Nazi puppet-state, the Independent State of Croatia, occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina, promptly beginning the mass deportations of Serbians, Jews, Roma, and political opponents to the death camps, among which Jasenovac, a Balkan Auschwitz, was the most notorious one.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> "Povodom uredbi protiv Jevreja u Jugoslaviji" [On the Occasion of the Enactments against Jews in Yugoslavia], *Jevrejski glas*, issue 634, October (1940):1.

<sup>40</sup> Efraim Zuroff, a director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, estimates at least 90,000 Serbians, Jews, and Roma people perished in Jasenovac, the biggest death camp in Croatia. See in Efraim Zuroff, *Lovac na naciste* [The Nazi Hunter] (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2009), pp. 62-73.

### ***1.3.La Benevolencija<sup>41</sup> as a Corner Stone of Sephardi Civil Society in Interwar Sarajevo***

The biggest and most influential Sephardi organization in Sarajevo was *La Benevolencija*, founded in 1892 during the Austro-Hungarian period. The idea was to establish a humanitarian organization to stop the traditional, now deemed unfortunate practice of impecunious Jewish beggars seeking food on Thursdays and money on Fridays from the local houses. The most prominent and wealthy members of Sarajevo's Sephardim wanted to end such a dehumanizing custom, find a constructive solution to ease their hardships and help them celebrate the Sabbath with dignity.<sup>42</sup> This was an inception of the modernization process by Jewish charity institutionalization.

The great importance the founders gave to this matter was reflected in the fact they congregated every week and none of them would miss a single meeting. One of the first steps was to offer regular monthly financial support to the poor on the condition they would not beg. Afterwards, they provided free health care for the sick by the famous Sarajevo physician, Dr. Grinfeld.<sup>43</sup> The founders knew they needed rabbinical support in order to promote the new society, and indeed, Haham Rebi Avram Papo, a

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<sup>41</sup> Bosnian Judeo-Spanish for "benevolence".

<sup>42</sup> The founding members were Izashar Z. Danon, Ašer Alkalaj, Ješua Daniel Salom, Jozef M. Izrael, Avram Daniel Salom, Salomon Albahari, Isak Salom, Bernardo Pinto, Avram Isak Papo, Rafael Majer Altarac, Ezra Rafael Atijas, Avram Levi Sadić and Leon Juda Levi. See *Jevrejski glas, 120 godina La Benevolencije, vanredno izdanje* 55 (2012):. 4-5. [Jewish Voice, 120 Years of La Benevolencija, a special issue].

<sup>43</sup> At the time, most of the Jewish doctors were Ashkenazi.

Sarajevo rabbi, would advocate for the cause in his sermons in the Temple and yeshivas.<sup>44</sup>

La Benevolencija became an umbrella organization, which coordinated the activities of other societies but it was also very active in the social life of Sarajevo itself, cooperating with the other ethnicities and their societies. Starting from 1908 it expanded its activities to all Jewish communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, its main goal became education, and charity passed to the second rank. Precisely in the field of Sephardi education, *La Benevolencija* would make its most decisive contribution. The organization introduced different apprentice courses and subsidized the education of young, impoverished Sephardim (mostly male), it even managed at the turn of the century to send some of them to the Universities of Vienna, Graz and Prague.<sup>46</sup>

The Great War halted the activities of this society for a while, but after it ended and the new state of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was created, La Benevolencija resumed its activities. The society even continued to grow, both in terms of its membership and influence on the societal circumstances. After 1918 this organization operated in the whole territory of the new state, becoming the major

<sup>44</sup> *Jevrejski glas*, 120 godina *La Benevolencije*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> Avram Pinto, "Jevrejska društva u Sarajevu" [Jewish Societies in Sarajevo] in *400 od dolaska Jevreja u Bosnu i Hercegovinu* [400 Years from the Jewish Arrival into Bosnia-Herzegovina] (Sarajevo: Odbor za proslavu 400-godišnjice dolaska Jevreja u Bosnu i Hercegovinu), p. 175.

<sup>46</sup> Those students who returned to Sarajevo became the first Bosnian Sephardi intellectuals and prominent members of the local society. In the first and second generation, these were rabbi Moric Levi, Vita Kajon, Kalmi Baruh, Braco Poljokan, Samuel Romano, and others.

association of not only Sephardi but also Ashkenazi Jews, who were a majority in the Kingdom. When it came to stipends, it made no discrimination among Jews.<sup>47</sup>

On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of this society in 1924, an Educational Conference was held in the City Hall, where the representatives of all major cultural and social Jewish societies from Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb were present. The secretary of La Benevolencija, Vita Kajon, exposed the program for future cooperation and main points of the Conference agenda were:

1. Planned and studious educational policy- the necessity for redirecting Jewish students from law and medicine, wherein they were overrepresented, to more needed occupations such as teachers, professors, musicians, journalists, financial, chemical and textile experts, to name but a few;
2. To establish one publishing house, which would publish translated works of the most famous Jewish authors in the field of popular culture, science, art and philosophy;
3. To publish textbooks and manuals from Jewish history, literature and philosophy;
4. To publish a dictionary and grammar of Hebrew language;
5. To establish a Jewish press and publications, and the formation of a solid and highly educated journalist body;

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<sup>47</sup>Although La Benevolencija was created by Sephardi Jews to help their socio-economic improvement, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews could benefit from its work under the same conditions. See Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, p. 117.

6. To establish a theological seminar;
7. To found a Jewish Museum;
8. To open a home for apprentices;
9. To create a solid economic cadre and to redirect the youth towards productive occupations;
10. The necessity for the politico-citizenly education of the Jews.<sup>48</sup>

The points 2-5 of the program advocated a greater integration of local Jewry into the new Yugoslav framework. It was an effort of enhancing the educational prospects of local Jewry, but also of creating a linguistically and culturally integrated Jewish identity. However, point 4 concerned the learning of Hebrew language, which was also an important issue for society members. Occasionally, as a reminder, on the pages of the *Jevrejski glas* the question “Are your children learning Hebrew?”<sup>49</sup> would emerge.

The main directives from La Benevolencija’s program should have been realized with the launching of a new pan-Jewish Yugoslav Congress, which would synchronize the activities and financial means of all Jewish societies in the Kingdom. Nonetheless, Yugoslav Jewry did not manage to create such an institution, mainly because of the various disagreements among the communities, and most notably because of the different approaches to Zionism that Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews had.

Even during the split between the two Sarajevo Jewish communities 1924-28, La Benevolencija stayed equally important for both of them, which was clearly proclaimed

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<sup>48</sup> Pinto, pp. 176-77.

<sup>49</sup> See *Jevrejski glas*, No.139, December (1930): 2.

in the weeklies *Jevrejski život* (Jewish Life) and *Narodna židovska svijest* (National Jewish Consciousness), respectively the Sephardi and Ashkenazi newspaper.<sup>50</sup>

La Benevolencija started as a humanitarian society of Sarajevo Sephardim in the end of the nineteenth century. In spite of its local and sub-ethnic origins, it gradually extended its range of activities and sphere of influence first to local Ashkenazim, then to all Bosnian Jews, and eventually, to all Yugoslav Jews.

### **I.3.1. A Network of Solidarity in the Jewish Community**

A number of associations for social relief operated alongside La Benevolencija among the Sarajevo Jews. Their funding statutes were rather standardized and had basic information about the organization, such as purpose, range of activities, membership requirements and fees, and other common procedural issues. In addition, all of them explicitly excluded any political engagement from their statement of purpose, even though some of them had political issues on their agenda. Sometimes their purposes and membership overlapped, moreover they all worked closely with La Benevolencija to achieve a common goal: an improvement of Sephardi socio-economic conditions. All these societies were open only to Jewish members, but they formally included women, although the latter had not been yet legally emancipated in the Kingdom nor were they perceived as equals in Jewish society.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Both weeklies dedicated issues to the thirty-year anniversary of La Benevolencija. See in *Jevrejski život*, issue 9, May 23, 1924 and *Narodna židovska svijest*, issue 9-10, May 23, 1924.

<sup>51</sup> The legal equality of genders was not achieved until 1945 in the Yugoslav countries. The 1921 and 1931 Constitutions of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/ Yugoslavia left this question open but the National Assembly preferred not to grant women full political rights.



A notable exception from the above mentioned rule of an exclusive Jewish membership was the society for the care of the sick, Kanfe Jona – Bikur Holim<sup>52</sup>. An interesting idiosyncrasy of this organization was its inclusive membership. It was open to the members of any gender, religion or nationality, as long as they were citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Austria or Hungary.<sup>53</sup> Notwithstanding, the leading roles in the society were reserved for Jews, since only they had active and passive suffrage.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the alleged openness of this society applied only to the potential benefactors and not to the beneficiaries nor to the key positions in its structure. Kanfe Jona's purpose was to nurture "sick and poor Jews of Sephardi rite"<sup>55</sup> by providing them medicinal, financial support and human comfort. Furthermore, their goal was to obtain free health care and medicines for their protégés from the city authorities. As stated in the 1914 Statute of the society, it had a tradition of two hundred years, which made it the oldest continually operating Sephardi one in Bosnia. For that reason this Statute consists of some pre-modern elements, which could be due to a continuity with the traditional *hebtot*,<sup>56</sup> as is shown by the insistence on beneficiaries of "Sephardi rite" but it had modern features as well, especially the flexibility when it came to gender, religion and nationality.

Humanitarian societies, in addition, made up for the lack or insufficiency of government assistance in the alleviation of the First World War consequences. Another such organization for the mitigation of precarious social conditions was Ezrat Jetomim,<sup>57</sup> a

<sup>52</sup> Hebrew for "the wings of the dove" and "visit of the sick".

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, Article 6.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, Article 17.

<sup>55</sup> Article 2, the 1914 Statute of Kanfe Jona (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

<sup>56</sup> See the Introduction.

<sup>57</sup> Hebrew for "aid to orphans".

humanitarian society for the support of Jewish orphans. It underwent a regionalization process similar to La Benevolencija. Firstly, it operated only in Bosnia-Hercegovina but later it helped all orphans in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>58</sup> Article 2 of the Regulations of 1919 stipulates the main aims: support of poor fatherless children, care of their upbringing until they would reach secondary school age or become apprentices. Afterwards, the article proceeds, those children should be taken care of by the society of students and scientists of La Benevolencija. Another intention of the founders was to raise funds to build an orphanage for these unfortunate children.<sup>59</sup> The Regulations of 1936 included the possibility of supporting motherless children as well. Article 2 specifies that either an allowance should be paid every month or children should be placed in an orphanage. Moreover, this society not only gave stipends but wanted to provide more support for its protégés. Ezrat Jetomim provided free health care and medicines, bought books and clothes, and ran a canteen. The society had the desire to provide “replacement for a warm parent’s nest” and was very dedicated to educating the children properly.<sup>60</sup> Another society, Misgav Ladah,<sup>61</sup> had a similar aim, that is, caring for the clothing of poor children going to elementary school. Once a year, the society would buy clothes for impoverished Jewish elementary school children. It had a seat in Sarajevo but was engaged in the whole of Bosnia-Hercegovina.<sup>62</sup>

While maintaining their independence, these societies devoted themselves to complementary tasks and coordinated their activities without excluding overlapping of

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<sup>58</sup> The Regulations of Ezrat Jetomim from 1936 expanded the range of activity to whole country (Regulations are courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

<sup>59</sup> The Regulations of Ezrat Jetomim 1919 (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

<sup>60</sup> Pinto, “Jevrejska društva u Sarajevu”, pp. 184-85.

<sup>61</sup> Hebrew for “refuge for the suffering”.

<sup>62</sup> Articles 1 and 2 in the 1922 Statute of Misgav Ladah (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

assignments in certain areas. Most of these associations had both traditional and modern elements, being intermediaries between the traditional organizational forms, such as *hebrot*, and more flexible, modern ones.

### I.3.2. Female Initiatives

Sarucha was reasonable. Since the day she started to work in the house she never thought about getting married. She forgot about herself. She ran across the house and she was a mother, housewife, maid and washerwoman.

Female neighbors praised her.

Four years went by like this.

Twins grew up. Sarucha felt a relief. She started occasionally to think about herself. She acquired a perfumed soap and a small, round mirror.

Isak Samokovlija, *Samuel the Porter*<sup>63</sup>

In this story, Isak Samokovlija portrays the commitment of a Sephardi lower-class woman bearing significant domestic responsibilities but only hesitantly developing signs of self-esteem. Sephardi women in Bosnia before the twentieth century received very little or no formal education, and were hardly respected as individuals unless they fulfilled their roles as wives and mothers.<sup>64</sup> However, at the turn of the century, the gender roles slowly began to change as these women entered the public arena, mostly with the foundation of their humanitarian organizations.<sup>65</sup> These societies played an essential role in Jewish life for they not only helped the children, elderly, poor, sick and uneducated, but they also advanced a “communal spirit of solidarity and cooperation”

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<sup>63</sup>Isak Samokovlija (1889-1955) was a prominent Bosnian Jewish writer who wrote stories in the Serbo-Croatian language describing faithfully the life of Bosnian Sephardi Jews. He was a physician by profession and one of the few ones from his generation to survive the Holocaust. The story *Samuel the Porter* (Nosač Samuel) portrays the hardships of Bosnian Sephardim, with a special emphasis on the female perspective. See “Nosač Samuel” in *400 Years from the Jewish Arrival in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, pp.337-50.

<sup>64</sup>Harriet Freidenreich “Yugoslavia.” in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 20 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on May 29, 2014)  
<<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yugoslavia>>.

<sup>65</sup>See Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, pp. 192-228.

by organizing numerous charitable events and promoting both Jewish and secular culture.<sup>66</sup>

Promoting Judeo-Spanish language was an important part of preserving the Sephardi heritage. It was mostly an undertaking of the *Matatja*, the working youth association. Their drama section offered numerous plays in this language, most notable being the works of Laura Papo Bohoreta,<sup>67</sup> a Sarajevo born writer ,philanthropist, and one of the first educated Sephardi women in interwar Sarajevo.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, being a former student of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, she understood the importance of female education for women's empowerment and thus committed herself devotedly to raising their self-reliance.

The three major female humanitarian organizations in Sarajevo were *La Humanidad*,<sup>69</sup> *La Gloria*,<sup>70</sup> and *Sociedad de vižitar doljentes*.<sup>71</sup> The alleviation of poverty was the task of *La Humanidad* and *La Gloria*. *La Humanidad*, existed since 1894 and took care primarily of poor women and children. It operated as a day-care center for poor children and endorsed welfare contributions to new mothers, people with disabilities, orphans and girls' formation.<sup>72</sup>

In the 1919 Regulations of *La Gloria*, two main aims are mentioned. Firstly, its vocation was "to increase the intellectual and moral condition of Jews in general" through the

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See Eliezer Papo, "Entre la modernidad y la tradición, el feminismo y la patriarcado: Vida y obra de Laura Papo 'Bohoreta', primera dramaturga en lengua judeoespañola" [Between Modernity and Tradition, Feminism and Patriarchy: Life and Work of Laura Papo Bohoreta, the First Female Dramaturge in Judeo-Spanish], *Neue Romania* 40 (2010): 97-117.

<sup>68</sup> Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>69</sup> Judeo-Spanish for "humanity".

<sup>70</sup> Judeo-Spanish for "glory".

<sup>71</sup> Judeo-Spanish for "society for the visit of the sick".

<sup>72</sup> Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, pp. 115 and 127.

organization of various thematic lectures, courses and gatherings, with a special emphasis on Jewish topics.<sup>73</sup> Secondly, the task of La Gloria was to support poor Jewish girls by promoting their formation and work empowerment and by providing dowries for them.<sup>74</sup> On some accounts, it provided annually the stipends for about fifty female students.<sup>75</sup> Gradually, the society would assume only the second function, that is to say, the humanitarian aspect of its purposes. Education became the almost exclusive concern of La Benevolencija.

By the 1930s La Gloria no longer existed, as can be concluded from the report about female education in La Benevolencija's Yearbook of 1933.<sup>76</sup> The writers of this text manifestly supported the actual gender inequality. La Benevolencija had indeed provided stipends for young female scientists<sup>77</sup> but suggested to "reduce stipends for girls so that they could be transferred to more useful, practical and manual occupations".<sup>78</sup> What is more, the report concluded, based on a survey with the representative of female societies, that "they [Jewish women] are not ready to assume a healthy and socially constructive role in our society. Their activities are mainly connected to charity and humanitarian considerations".<sup>79</sup> The latter remark shows how unrecognized female humanitarian work was, though it was essential in such an impoverished community as that of the Sarajevo Sephardim. Nevertheless, apart from showing gender discrimination, this shift from school scholarship to vocational training

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<sup>73</sup> Article 2, paragraph 1 in the 1919 Regulations of La Gloria (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, paragraph 2.

<sup>75</sup> Pinto, "Jevrejska društva u Sarajevu", p.186.

<sup>76</sup> Godišnjak La Benevolencije i Potpore [The Yearbook of La Benevolencija and Potpora] (1933), pp. 15-17.

<sup>77</sup> In the period 1923- 1933, 65 girls received stipends for secondary school and 9 for the university education in *ibid*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p.16.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*.

was at the same time another aspect of the modernization of poor relief, one that would produce more permanent benefits for the economically deprived men and women.

“Jewish Women’s Humanitarian Society” or Sociedad de vižitar doljentas had several goals. Its members supported sick and poor Jewish women by the following means: medical care, medicines, improvement of their diet and taking care of any other need they may have while in hospital. A special task, which implies a religious dimension of this society, was to supply all sick Jews in the hospitals with *kasher* meals.<sup>80</sup> The founding membership of the Sociedad was restricted to adult females who were citizens of Bosnia- Hercegovina, with a remark that a supporting member can be also any male person.<sup>81</sup> The connection of this society with La Benevolencija was pronounced through the stipulations about its dissolution. In this case, the possessions of La Sociedad would be placed under La Benevolencija’s guardianship and if in the following three years a new similar society would not be established, these assets would formally become the property of La Benevolencija.<sup>82</sup>

The small Sarajevo Ashkenazi community had its own humanitarian organizations. Alongside the Hevra Kaddisha (burial fraternity), operated the Ashkenazi Women’s Society (who took care of women and children), Hachnuses Kalu (helped poor brides), and Ahdus, which gave assistance to everyone in need but also served religious, social and cultural ends.<sup>83</sup> At the turn of the century its membership mostly comprised

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<sup>80</sup>Article 2 in the 1919 Regulations of the Sociedad de vižitar doljentes (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

<sup>81</sup>Ibid, Article 5.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid, Article 31.

<sup>83</sup>Freidenreich, p.116.

Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews, recent immigrants from small towns of Galicia, Bukovina, Silesia, and Moravia. After the Great War, Ahdus became a service club for the Neologue community, the Hungarian variety of the Jewish reform movement, which at the time prevailed among Ashkenazim in Bosnia.<sup>84</sup> The Ashkenazi affiliation of the Ahdus was apparent in the 1920 Regulations of this society. The first article declares that the languages of the association are the local and the Jewish ones, with the remark in brackets that the latter means Yiddish.<sup>85</sup> The two Jewish communities, the Sephardi and Ashkenazi, as a rule had separate societies, and this separation was maintained until the Holocaust.

### **I.3.3. Promoting Culture and Education**

Two main Sephardi societies in Sarajevo, *La Benevolencija* and *La Lira*, realized a fruitful collaboration with non-Jewish society in the field of culture. *La Lira*, a choral society of Sephardi Jews, founded in 1901, nurtured both profane and synagogal music. It represents a fine example of inter-ethnic cooperation, having regular contacts and exchange of ideas, musical scores, and members with Serbian, Croat, and Muslim choral societies alike. Perhaps the words of Branislav Nušić, a director of Sarajevo's National Theatre in the 1920s and a famous Serbian writer, can best express the popularity of *La Lira* in the Interwar period. On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of that society he wrote

A quarter of a century of a persistent love for song, a noble expression of a man's soul and feelings, a quality that has always ornamented Jewish people... Lira today

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Article 1 in the 1920 Regulations of the Ahdus (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

celebrates not only one date of its internal history but also a date of our general cultural history. Glory to the Lira!<sup>86</sup>

Members of *La Lira* travelled across Bosnia and after 1918 across the Kingdom. In the late 1920s, they visited Salonika and received rather positive critiques for their performance in the local press.<sup>87</sup> The peak of their activities came in 1934 when they went to Palestine and visited Haifa, Nahalal, Tel Aviv, and several kibbutzim.<sup>88</sup> Afterwards, deteriorating economic conditions led to decreased activity and finally the end of this organization on the eve of the Second World War.

The educational organizations such as *Tarbut* and the *Jewish Club "Union"* fostered social networks with non-Jewish society, while the others such as *Safa Berura*, a society for learning Hebrew, and *Or Hadaš*, a Pan-Jewish cultural club, built the bond between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities. For instance, *Tarbut* organized lectures about world history, philosophy, literature and culture for both Jews and non-Jews, having annually about four thousand attendees.<sup>89</sup> For Bosnian Sephardi intellectuals, a crucial task of the education was to modify people's behavior and eradicate superstition, a common concern among Bosnian Sephardim.

*Or Hadaš*,<sup>90</sup> a Jewish cultural society had both profane and religious elements in its statement of purpose. Its aim was the "moral and intellectual progress of the members and their families" but also "the awakening of their interest for the religious-humane

<sup>86</sup> Avram Pinto. "Jevrejska društva u Sarajevu" in *Spomenica 400 godina od dolaska Jevreja u Bosnu i Hercegovinu*, (Sarajevo: Odbor za proslavu 400 godina od dolaska Jevreja u BiH, 1966), p. 182.

[“Jewish Societies in Sarajevo” in Memorial 400 Years of Jewish Arrival into Bosnia-Herzegovina]

<sup>87</sup> Pinto, "Jevrejska društva", p.180.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p.183.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>90</sup> Hebrew for "new light".



obligation of man”.<sup>91</sup> The membership was open for any unblemished adult Jew, citizen of Bosnia-Hercegovina, of any gender or rite.<sup>92</sup> In case of the organization’s liquidation, all its property should be given to the Judeo-Spanish religious community in Sarajevo so that another similar society could be founded. If the latter would not happen, the resources should be applied as a support to poor Jewish students of the rabbinical studies.<sup>93</sup>

The purpose of *Jewish Club “Union”* was to “nurture sociability, to support and enhance science and art, and to raise the awareness of everything that is good, fine and noble”.<sup>94</sup> The means of achieving these goals were the establishment of a club’s library and reading area, the organization of various gatherings such as meetings, lectures but also parties, concerts and tea-parties.<sup>95</sup> Pinto stresses that the Union had an excellently supplied library with the subscription to approximately fifty dailies, weeklies and other publications in Serbo-Croatian, German, French, Yiddish, Spanish and Bulgarian languages.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the word “Jewish” appears only in the title of this organization and no explicit demands were made for Jewish-only membership, which could indicate that there were no legal obstacles for any Serbian, Muslim or Croat to join this club.

In sum, these societies were the beginning of the modern civic initiatives and the secularization process in the Bosnian Sephardi setting. The extraordinary variety of voluntary organizations is due to several reasons. Firstly, there existed an old Sephardi

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<sup>91</sup>Article 2 in the 1910 Regulations of the Or Hadaš (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

<sup>92</sup>Article 4 in *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup>Article 11 in *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup>Article 1 in the 1926 Regulations of the Union (courtesy of the Jewish Library in Sarajevo).

<sup>95</sup>Article 2 in *ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>Pinto, “Jevrejska društva”, p.186.

tradition of organizing community on the basis of congregations, dating back to medieval Spain. Further, the legal framework of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia provided a favorable ground for these associations, as long as no political goal was pursued. However, an insufficient social policy by the state and economic needs triggered the self-organizational activities of the Yugoslav Sephardim as well. Of no less importance were some intrinsic circumstances of the Jewish community. Namely, the internal divisions based on rite, gender, and economic status were rather conspicuous, thus calling for the diversification of these organizations in order to perform different functions within the Jewish context.

## II. Zionists without Zionism?<sup>97</sup>

Hangman! Here's a neck- come kill!  
Crop me like a dog, you have the axe-arm.  
and all the earth is to me a block-  
and we- we are the few in number!

*On the Slaughter*, Hayim Nahman Bialik, 1903 <sup>98</sup>

The failed emancipation and rising anti-Semitism in Europe around the turn of the century led to the emergence of the most decisive Jewish movement, Zionism. The idea made such a powerful impact that no Jewish congregation stayed indifferent. Notwithstanding, the various communities had different experiences in their respective countries and therefore their interpretation of Zionism differed. These conflicts took a particular shape in such countries where Sephardi and Ashkenazi groups lived side by side, and this was precisely the case of the Bosnian Jewish population. My main argument is that Sephardim did not discard Zionism, but rather chose to practice it in the *Galut* (diaspora) in their own way, combining the universal Jewish with a particular Sephardi element. In contrast, the Ashkenazi counterpart condemned such a viewpoint, claiming that it was a separatism that could not be allowed inside the Zionist movement.

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<sup>97</sup> The concept of Zionist without Zionism is taken from the chapter "Zionist without Zionism under the Ottomans" in Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, pp. 121-34.

<sup>98</sup> Atar Hadari (trans. and ed.), *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p.11.

Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934) was one of the pioneers of the modern Hebrew poetry and a lasting inspiration for the Zionist movement. His poems powerfully criticized Jewish passivity in front of pogroms and anti-Semitism. Bialik's literary works were commonly published in *Jevrejski glas* and he was often praised by the Bosnian Sephardim.

The constitutions of the new state, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, formally granted legal equality to Jews with other ethnicities. Nevertheless according to some accounts, at least in the first few years, the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim received a rather different treatment from the new government. The Bosnian Sephardim were regarded as an autochthonous element having lived four centuries in the region. Likewise, the Serbian Sephardim were called “ours” and their loyalty was never questioned since they fought with the Serbian army in the First World War. Conversely, the Ashkenazim were mainly considered “foreign” because their mother tongue was German or Hungarian.<sup>99</sup> Even though some of them had lived for decades in Croatia, Vojvodina and Bosnia, the government “felt that they had not gained the right to acquire citizenship”, and some of them were deported as foreigners.<sup>100</sup>

In addition, some inconsistent and paradoxical phenomena could be observed in the examined country. The Sephardim lived in relative isolation from the non-Jewish society while keeping their customs, and thus conversions and intermarriages were very rare. By contrast, the Ashkenazim from Croatia and Vojvodina adopted the local language very quickly and were more assimilated in national, religious and cultural terms. And yet, they were perceived as more foreign than the Sephardim. With the creation of the new state, they no longer belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and they had to find a solution for the aforementioned antagonistic position.<sup>101</sup> Zionism and the creation of the Jewish state emerged as a solution not only for them, but for many

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<sup>99</sup> Ivo Goldstein “The Jews in Yugoslavia 1918-1941: Antisemitism and Struggle for Equality”, p.1, see at [http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02\\_goldstein.pdf](http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02_goldstein.pdf) (Viewed April 21, 2014).

<sup>100</sup> Goldstein, p.2.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.1.

European Jewish congregations living in the parts of the former Austria-Hungary and Russian Empire, where anti-Semitism was more pronounced.

Lastly, from the period of the Austrian occupation, the occupational distribution of the two communities differed. Although there are no reliable data for the interwar period, one can assume that the difference remained. Namely, the Sephardim were mostly merchants and artisans, while the Ashkenazim entered mostly middle class occupations, such as large and medium scale trade, medicine, law, and administration. Compared to the Sephardim, in the Ashkenazi group there was a lower percent of poor and unskilled.<sup>102</sup>

Those circumstances were undoubtedly yet another reason for their dissimilar conceptions of Zionism since the level of acceptance inside the non-Jewish environment was unequal for the two Jewish groups. Therefore, from the very beginning of the Kingdom the Ashkenazim felt more threatened and were more receptive to the radical forms of Zionism.

## ***II.1. The Clash of the Two Zionisms: The Sarajevo Dispute 1924-1928***

*Un buen pleito traje buena paz.*<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Freidenreich, *Jews of Yugoslavia*, pp.18-9

<sup>103</sup>Judeo-Spanish for "A good quarrel brings a good peace". See in Regina Kamhi, Jakov Papo (eds.), *Sačuvano od zaborava, usmena baština sarajevskih Sefarda* [Taken From the Forgetfulness: Oral Heritage of Sarajevo Sephardim] (Zagreb: Židovska općina Zagreb, 2000), p. 6.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the advent of Zionism and Theodor Herzl's concept of One people produced a specifically Sephardi reaction, which was reflected in the Sephardi Movement. This movement, while protecting the Sephardi interests, did not mean the rejection of Zionism per se but rather a different interpretation as to what Zionism represented. However, the stress of the latter movement was on preservation of a distinctive Sephardi identity in the melting-pot idea of One people. In fact, the Sephardim considered themselves more Zionists than the Ashkenazim, given that they had been raised in this tradition and not merely adopted it later in life.<sup>104</sup> Conversely, the Ashkenazi Zionists were against the special treatment for the Sephardim because they thought it was a form of separatism.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, historians Benbassa and Rodrigue pointed out that Sephardism, as a movement of preserving their Sephardi identity, appeared among the Sephardim of Bosnia "in the emancipatory context of Central Europe", and "was a specific response to the West".<sup>106</sup>

In one publication from 1925, Dr. Vita Kajon, a famous Sarajevo Sephardi and former Vienna student, would write that Sephardi Jews were once the teachers and generous providers of cultural values to their Ashkenazi brothers, and now after five centuries,

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<sup>104</sup> The Sephardim proudly remembered their Sarajevo born nineteenth century rabbi, Yehudah Solomon Alkalai (1798-1878), a pioneer of political Zionism. Since he was a rabbi in Semlin (Zemun), there are opinions that his works made a direct influence on young Herzl through rabbi's friendship with Herzl's grandfather. See "Pionir političkog cionizma-Sarajlija" [A Pioneer of a Political Zionism, From Sarajevo], *Jevrejski glas*, no. 153-54(1931): 7-8.

<sup>105</sup> Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, p. 147.

<sup>106</sup> Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, pp. 146-47.

Sephardim themselves were receiving from the other Jewry a new path and orientation.<sup>107</sup>

The Sephardi character was well explained by Samuel Kamhi, an active member of the Sephardi Students' organization *Esperanza* from Zagreb and a fervent proponent of the Sephardi cause. He pointed out

In the first place, the Orient has provided such an atmosphere for the Sephardi newcomers that their mentality changed over the centuries, so it became a separate mentality not only from the Ashkenazim in Poland or Germany but from the Spanish life as well. This way, in the co-relation with the Oriental mentality, it became a kind of, so to speak, mental amalgam. It is enough to see a Sephardi Jew when he is doing something, and one would see the succession of his oriental lethargy with his southern vividness and impulsivity, and without any problem, his Jewish distinctiveness.<sup>108</sup>

Sephardim did not consider themselves less Zionist than the Ashkenazim, but believed that the latter did not understand their needs. On the other side, the Ashkenazi leadership, with its center in Zagreb, disapproved of their choice of Diaspora-style nationalism.<sup>109</sup> These disagreements culminated in a controversy of the 1924-1927 period, known as *Sarajevski spor* (Sarajevo dispute). The disagreement was clearly pronounced in Sarajevo, however both Sephardim and Ashkenazim from Belgrade and Zagreb, two major centers of the new state, participated in mutual accusations as well.

On some accounts, a mutual distrust began in 1919 when the appointed chief rabbi of the Kingdom was Jichak Alkalaj, a Sephardi. He was elected by the Rabbinical Federation but another organ, the Federation of Jewish Communities, should have participated in the elections, too, as was remarked by the president of that body, Dr.

<sup>107</sup> Vita Kajon, "O Jevrejima na Balkanu, naročito u Bosni" ["About Jews in the Balkans, Especially in Bosnia"] in *Kalendar Almanah Prosveta* (Belgrade, 1925), p. 146.

<sup>108</sup> Samuel Kamhi, *Sefardi i Sefardski pokret* [The Sephardim and Sephardi Movement] (Zagreb: Biblioteka Esperanza, 1927), p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> Aron Rodrigue, Esther Benbassa, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 148.

Hugo Spitzer, who was also the president of the Zionist Federation. This reaction provoked great dissatisfaction among the Sephardi leaders, who claimed that Spitzer protested only because the new chief rabbi was a Sephardi. Although Spitzer declared he did not have anything against the choice of Alkalaj, and the leader of the Zionists, Dr. Aleksandar Licht, even congratulated the new rabbi, the Sephardim felt offended.<sup>110</sup>

Another public mutual accusation happened in a meeting of the Zionist Federal Council in Belgrade in July 1924. This meeting was attended by 17 Sephardi delegates who spoke against the Zagreb Zionist branch and its followers in Sarajevo. The Sephardi side reminded that Dr. Spitzer protested the election of rabbi Alkalaj, which according to Dr. Poljokan “disqualified him”. Dr. Licht replied that everyone had the right of his own opinion and that Spitzer’s protest was not connected with the Zionist Federation. Moreover, he complained against the Sarajevo Sephardim because, at one meeting of the Sarajevo branch of Poale Zion, they called the present Ashkenazim “Horthyans”. It was obvious that the two factions could not come to an agreement. However, some of them attempted to calm down the situation. Such was the intention of the speech of Dr. Kalmi Baruh, who pointed out the necessity of working together, but also the specific position of Sephardim, who are worldwide in a process of decadency and needed relief.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Cvi Loker, “Sarajevski spor i sefardski pokret u Jugoslaviji” [The Sarajevo Dispute and the Sephardi Movement in Yugoslavia], *Zbornik Jevrejskog istorijskog muzeja* 7 (Belgrade, 1997), p.73.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid, p.74.



Baruh, a member of the Sephardi elite, Vienna's former student and one of the first Hispanic specialists in the Balkans, reflected rather well the Sephardi viewpoint. He wrote

In the Zionist world, the predominant opinion is that the Sephardim stood aside and that the three decades of Zionism passed without them. This is not true. In all the Sephardi communities Zionism appeared... Nevertheless, in no country they build stronger and more developed Zionist organizations, except in Bulgaria. The reasons for that should be searched for in their history.<sup>112</sup>

As Baruh explains, the rather favorable position that Sephardi Jews had in the Ottoman Empire led to their political inactivity. However, he proceeds, they are now mature for the synthesis with other Jewries because "Zionism is the only historical path for them, too".<sup>113</sup>

Zionism had initially been the main connecting point of the local Ashkenazim and Sephardim. However, the conflict between Sephardists and Zionists emerged in 1924. A group of Sephardi intellectuals opposed the unitary philosophy of the Zionists and demanded a stronger Sephardi representation on the national level, in their local joint organization, the Jewish Nationalist Society, and in its newspaper, *Židovska svijest* (*Jewish Consciousness*).<sup>114</sup> The Jewish Nationalist Society refused to accept a list submitted by the prominent Sephardi, Dr. Sumbul Atijas, of some three hundred

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<sup>112</sup>Kalmi Baruh, "Sefardski Jevreji i Cijonizam" ["Sephardi Jews and Zionism"]. In *Jevrejski život* (April 23, 1926), no. 163, p.2.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid.

<sup>114</sup>Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, p. 148.

Sephardim for membership. The reaction of Sephardi side was to have the association's property and paper confiscated by a police decree.<sup>115</sup>

Consequently, prominent members of Sephardist allegiance, such as Dr. Vita Kajan, Dr. Braco Poljokan, Dr. Kalmi Baruh, Dr. Josip Pepi Baruh and others, renamed the society the *Sarajevo Local Zionist Organization*. They had the support of the Sephardi population, a majority in Sarajevo. In protest, the old guard Zionists reorganized themselves into the *Jewish Club*. The latter consisted of both Ashkenazi (Oskar Grof, Dr. Žiga Bauer, Adolf Benau) and Sephardi members (Mihael Levi, Silvio M. Alkalaj, David Levi-Dale), and had the sympathy of the Zionist Central in Zagreb. Beside the ideological disagreements, these two opponents contested the leadership in the local Zionist institutions, but also disputed the annual *shekel*<sup>116</sup> and the trusteeship of the Jewish National Fund.<sup>117</sup>

The two sides published their respective views in the two Bosnian Jewish weeklies. *Jevrejski život* (Jewish Life) was mainly Sephardi while *Narodna židovska svijest* (Jewish National Consciousness) was predominantly an Ashkenazi journal. While each of them claimed to defend the real Zionist position, Zionism itself was in a stagnation in Sarajevo. In the next five years, both sides published vicious attacks against one another in their respective weeklies and no side wanted to compromise.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>115</sup> "Spor medju Sarajevskim Jevrejima u svijetlu istine", *Jevrejski život*, vol.1, no.1, 28. Mart (1924), pp. 2-4. ["A dispute among Sarajevo Jewry in the light of the truth"] .

<sup>116</sup> Shekel was the individual membership contribution to the World Zionist Organization, mainly destined for the colonization of Palestine. Nowadays, it is the currency of the modern state of Israel.

<sup>117</sup> Eli Tauber, *Jevrejska štampa u BiH 1900- 2011* ( Sarajevo: Mediacentar, La benevolencija, 2011), p. 34. [Jewish Press in Bosnia- Hercegovina, 1900- 2011].

<sup>118</sup> Freidenreich, *Jews in Yugoslavia*, p.148.

The Ashkenazi Zionist faction made some typical accusations, and some circumstantial ones as well. A Belgrade's Zionist, David Alkalaj, writing in 1924 in the journal *Židov*, a Zagreb-based Zionist weekly, criticized the writings of *Jevrejski život* condemning its “romanticist phraseology and separatist tendencies” and concluded that “there is no such thing as a separate Sephardi Zionism”. The Sephardi counterpart reacted immediately publishing counterattacks against the “stigmatization of Sarajevo Jewry as destroyers of Jewish unity” and the “bad policies of the Zionist Federation” led by the Ashkenazim.<sup>119</sup>

Both journals, *Jevrejski život* and *Narodna židovska svijest*, were issued until 1928 when the two communities finally reached an agreement, which was embodied in their joint journal *Jevrejski glas* (Jewish Voice), first published in January 1928. It contained all the topics of concern for Yugoslav Jewry, but also a lot of articles dedicated to the destiny of Jews elsewhere, actively following the developments in Europe and Palestine. In addition, every issue of *Jevrejski glas* had some contributions in the Judeo-Spanish language or about the history of Sephardi Jews. The president of the new joint Jewish body was the Sephardi chief rabbi, Dr. Moric Levi, who was also an eminent Zionist.

## ***II.2.After 1928***

Even after the two factions had decided to work together for the common cause, some quarrels would occasionally arise and their common weekly would become a battleground over the current communal issues. They expressed not only their opposite views on the matter but also a fair dose of irony and mockery on the

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<sup>119</sup>Tauber, *Jevrejska štampa u BiH*, p.35.

opponent's account. One of such disputes happened over the establishment of the Sarajevo's theological seminar. In July 1928, an article appeared on the front page of *Jevrejski glas* an article appeared with the title "Against the Establishment of a Theological Seminar",<sup>120</sup> signed by the editor in chief and one of the Sephardi leaders, Braco Poljokan. Among other arguments, the author expressed the concern for the different rite and interpretations of the codices that the Sephardim and Ashkenazim had. Additionally, Braco confirmed that Sarajevo was a traditionally strong Jewish center however it would be better to send candidates to the foreign Jewish centers in the *galut* or Palestine, where teachers were more experienced.

In the following issue of this weekly, the article "For the Establishment of a Theological Seminar"<sup>121</sup> came out, signed by Oskar Grof, a prominent member of the Ashkenazi community. He ironically expressed his regret that Poljokan, instead of enjoying his "deserved vacation" on the mountain Vlačić, made an effort to write an article to undermine such a significant action as the establishment of the Seminar. Grof did not estimate Poljokan's arguments as valid, emphasizing that Poljokan was not well informed. He reiterated that in 1924 it was a joint decision by the most distinguished members of Yugoslav Jewry to found a Theological seminar. The two factions inside of Sarajevo Jewry apparently continued to exist but the divergence between them no longer had the intensity of the period 1924-28.

In Bosnia-Hercegovina, neither the Sephardi nor the Zionist Movement became popular in the wide masses of people but was only championed by the elites.

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<sup>120</sup>Braco Poljokan, "Protiv osnivanja teološkog seminara" ["Against the Establishment of a Theological Seminar"] in *Jevrejski glas* [Jewish Voice], issue 28 (1928): p.1.

<sup>121</sup> Oskar Grof, "Za osnivanje teološkog seminara" ["For the Establishment of a Theological Seminar"] in *Jevrejski glas*, issue 29 (1928): p.2.

Nevertheless, the Sephardi Movement had a very relevant function in the particular moment of Jewish history. Namely, it reminded Zionist leaders of the cultural diversity that existed among Jews living in different settings and developing their respective self-awareness. It should be stated, though, that even during the dispute, the Sephardim did not reject the idea of joint Zionist actions or the significance of Zion, but rather wanted to preserve their separate identity, incarnated in their distinctive customs, language and culture inside the Zionist movement.

During the 1930s, Jews in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were actively working for the Zionist idea, favoring the agricultural colonization of Palestine, which was a powerful trend at the time. It can be observed from the various journals, calendars, yearbooks and almanacs published in that period that it was the most relevant issue for them as well. The Sephardim joined their brethren in a common task while not renouncing their particular identity either. They embraced the achievements of other Jewries while merging them with their own memory of the famous ancestries *Sefarad*. However, as historian Harriet Pass Freidenreich would confirm, “The Sarajevo Sephardim never became particularly ardent Zionists, preferring a more Sephardic approach to Jewish nationalism”.<sup>122</sup>

The settlement of their debate was interpreted by local Ashkenazim as the triumph of Jewish unity and Zionism. Nevertheless, the Sephardim had never tried to question these two premises and therefore probably a better explanation would conclude that Jewish solidarity had triumphed. After all, it seemed that the idea of the Jewish people’s solidarity prevailed and not only in Bosnia. Indeed, the interwar period saw

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<sup>122</sup>Freidenreich, *Jews of Yugoslavia*, p.149.

the greater cohesiveness of many Jewish communities across Europe, which was a necessary development for the difficult time that was yet to come, when Nazism was rapidly spreading across Europe.

### III. Beyond the National Framework

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Sephardim of Bosnia and other Balkan states, developed an awareness of mutual dependence and common interest. The initiative was a counter-reaction to a two-fold challenge. On the one hand, given that most of them lived in the newly created nation-states, the process of their gradual integration began, influencing a piecemeal loss of some distinctive features of the Sephardi identity. On the other hand, the Zionist Executive wanted no particularism within their movement. This chapter examines two main directions that Bosnian Sephardim took as an answer to this identity crisis. They sought to reconnect with their medieval homeland, Spain, and to rebuild the linkage with their coreligionists of the Sephardi rite from other countries.

#### III.1. A Reconnection with Sefarad?<sup>123</sup>

What Spain could be to all of us, is clear. Besides language and historical memories, mostly very sad ones, there is nothing that would bond us to contemporary Spain...We do not want to be the basis for its cultural and economic expansion, nor do we want to serve any other tendency of the new Spain in the East.

Šabataj Djaen,<sup>124</sup> Sephardi rabbi, in *Jevrejski glas*, 1931<sup>125</sup>

<sup>123</sup> The Iberian Peninsula, as named by the Sephardim.

<sup>124</sup> Šabataj Djaen (Sabbatai Dyaen), a rabbi and writer, was a very colourful personality. He was born in Bulgaria around 1886, but spent most of his life in different Serbian and Bosnian cities. He was chief rabbi of Bitola in 1924-28, but in the late 1920s he went to make Zionist propaganda across South America and became chief rabbi of Argentina and Uruguay. Afterwards, from 1931 he performed the same function in Romania. During the Second World War, Djaen went back to South America and died there in 1935 or 1947. See Muhamed Nežirović, *Jevrejsko-španjolska književost* [Judeo-Spanish Literature] (Sarajevo: Svjetost, 1992), pp.537-48. Also see *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije, biografski leksikon* [The Prominent Jews of Serbia, a Biographical Lexicon] (Belgrade: Savez jevrejskih opština Srbije, 2011), pp.263-64.

<sup>125</sup> "Reparijacija Sefarda" [Repatriation of the Sephardim], *Jevrejski glas*, No. 180 (1931):4.

Around the turn of the century, the Spanish intellectual circles began to take more interest in the destiny of Spanish Jews, expelled from their homeland centuries before. The main figures in the historical venture of reconciling Spain and the Sephardim were Angel Pulido<sup>126</sup>, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Manuel Manrique de Lara, and in the interwar years, Ernesto Giménez Caballero.<sup>127</sup> The Balkan Sephardi communities were particularly appealing to them since they were the rare ones to preserve their Judeo-Spanish language, brought four hundred years before from Sefarad.

By the interwar years, the Spanish government certainly realized that Sephardi communities from all over the world expected that Spanish officials would finally break the silence in the matter of what Sephardim believed to be a terrible historical injustice done to them by *los Reyes Católicos* (Catholic Monarchs Isabela and Fernando). The Bosnian Sephardim anxiously and regularly followed the statements of the Spanish officials and reported them in *Jevrejski glas*.

Conversely, the Spanish literary magazine, *La Gaceta Literaria*,<sup>128</sup> showed interest in Sephardi topics, writing especially about the Balkan communities. The issue of 1928 published an interview with Dr. Kalmi Baruh from Sarajevo,<sup>129</sup> who was in Madrid at the time. Baruh befriended the editor of *La Gaceta*, Ernesto Giménez Caballero, a Spanish writer, diplomat and politician, who expressed admiration for Sephardi Jews, a subject that frequently appeared in his magazine pages. Shortly after, Giménez

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<sup>126</sup> Angel Pulido was the author of the renowned study, which included contributions by the Balkan Sephardim themselves. See Ángel Pulido. *Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardí* (Madrid, 1905).

<sup>127</sup> Krinka Vidaković, *Kultura španskih Jevreja na jugoslovenskom tlu* [Culture of Spanish Jews on the Yugoslav Soil] (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1990), p.74-5

<sup>128</sup> *La Gaceta Literaria* was a Madrid based magazine founded by Ernesto Giménez Caballero in 1927, which promptly became a reference point for the Spanish avant-garde, having such contributors as Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, to name but a few.

<sup>129</sup> "Transéuntes literarios: Kalmi Baruh, sefardita" [Literary Passerbys: Kalmi Baruh, a Sephardim] in *La Gaceta Literaria*, No.46, November 15(1928):4.



Caballero was sent by the Spanish Prime Minister Primo de Rivera on a Balkan tour with the task of fostering Spanish-Sephardi amity. He arrived in Sarajevo in the late 1929 and was warmly welcomed by the local Sephardim.<sup>130</sup> In his report to the Spanish government, after he had visited major Yugoslav cities, he proposed the endorsement of a subject “Spanish Language and Literature” at Yugoslav universities and the foundation of the Spanish-Yugoslav society, on a model that already existed in Romania. He singled out Sarajevo as the home of a vivid Spanish heritage and the purest Judeo-Spanish language. Moreover, Caballero accentuated Baruh’s capabilities and education, believing he was the most distinguished Sephardi intellectual in the Balkans. The same year, Baruh became the first Sephardi from the Balkans to receive a stipend from Spain.<sup>131</sup>

News from Spain were reported even more frequently after the creation of the Second Spanish Republic in April 1931. Without concealing its enthusiasm, *Jevrejski glas* often introduced articles about the alleged readiness of Spanish authorities to invite back and reintegrate Sephardim into the national society. Although it may seem that after centuries the apology was outdated, for the Sephardim it was a perfectly reasonable expectation. The government of Miguel Primo de Rivera issued a Decree in 1924, allowing every Sephardi to claim Spanish citizenship. However, Jews apparently have never used that right en masse, except in urgent situations, such as during the Second World War or the Bosnian conflict in the 1990s. Moreover, the Spanish functionaries during the 1920s and 1930s did not have a clearly articulated and transparent attitude

<sup>130</sup> “Jedan prijatelj sefardskih Jevreja iz Španije u Sarajevu” [One Friend Of the Sephardi Jews from Spain in Sarajevo], in *Jevrejski glas*, No. 83, 1929, p.1. On this occasion, Giménez Caballero held a lecture in Jewish Home on the topic “Panorama de España” in the Spanish language.

<sup>131</sup> Vidaković, *Kultura španskih Jevreja na jugoslovenskom tlu*, p.76-7.

towards Sephardi Jews. This does not come as a surprise considering that the state itself was experiencing a turbulent period in its internal affairs. Oscillating between republicanism, monarchy and dictatorship, it was certainly *La España Invertebrada* (Invertebrated Spain), as a contemporary Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset suggested in his renowned essay of the same title.<sup>132</sup> Some Sephardim felt the urge to participate in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which attracted at least several dozen volunteers from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>133</sup>

During that period, in 1935 the city of Córdoba celebrated the eight hundredth anniversary of the birth of Moses Maimonides, a preeminent Sephardi philosopher, physician, astronomer and one of the most influential Torah scholars of the Middle Ages. The chief rabbi of Bosnia, Moric Levi, participated as well, which was documented in detail in the *Jevrejski glas*.<sup>134</sup> This was the occasion, and rabbi Levi was no exception, to display Sephardi nostalgia and pride, reaffirming once again the particularity of the Sephardi Jews. However, those glorious memories of Spain belonged a distant past, and Sephardim had to turn to distinct future in order to improve their status in the international realm.

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<sup>132</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *España invertebrada* at <http://ebookbrowse.net/gdoc.php?id=93993658&url=3133e4a5c30e1cb0b0480b204e137a92> (Viewed on May 11, 2014).

<sup>133</sup> ZviLoker, "Balkan Jewish Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War" in *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, Vol.6, No. 2, (1976):71-82.

<sup>134</sup> "Impozantna proslava Majmonidesa u Španiji"[A Spectacular Celebration of Maimonides in Spain], *Jevrejskiglas*, issue 340, April (1935):1-2. La Benevolencija published a Memorial book dedicated to this event, see *Maimonides Rambam: spomenica povodom osamstogodišnjice od rođenja 1135-1935* [Maimonides Rambam: a Memorial of the 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1135-1935](Sarajevo: La Benevolencija, 1935).

### **III.2. From Local to Trans-Europe Sephardi Associations**

The Spanish background and, for the major part of them, the Ottoman heritage were the common denominators for Europe's Sephardim. After the creation of national states in the Balkans and their greater acculturation to their respective local environments, the cohesion among these communities began to fade. Nonetheless, the circumstances brought forth a necessity for Balkan Sephardim to reunify. The interpretation of Zionism that their majoritarian Ashkenazi brethren followed, left them unsatisfied since it did not take into account the specific Sephardi element. Sephardim thus tried to rebuild their transnational structures by new means.

#### **III.2.1. The Two Esperanzas**

At the end of the nineteenth century, Bosnian Sephardim first went to study at Vienna University. In 1898 they founded the Sephardi student club *Sociedad Academica de Judios Espanioles*<sup>135</sup> or *Esperanza*,<sup>136</sup> along with other Sephardim from the Balkans. The purpose of this club was to enhance their Sephardi heritage by studying Judeo-Spanish language and Sephardi history. Among the most active members were Moric Levi, Vita Kajon, Isidor Sumbul and Isak Samokovlija. Based on the same concept, in 1925 a Sephardi student organization by the same name was established in Zagreb, the members of which were diligent Sephardists as Samuel Kamhi, Avram Pinto, Ješua Kajon, among others.

The younger *Esperanza* from Zagreb took the succession of the Vienna club when its members carried on the torch of Sephardism throughout the interwar years. They

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<sup>135</sup> Judeo-Spanish for "Academic Society of the Spanish Jews".

<sup>136</sup> Judeo-Spanish for "hope".

believed in the revitalization of the Judeo-Spanish language and Sephardim themselves. In 1927 Esperanza published a Sephardi Manifesto, in which S. Kamhi and J. Kajon formulated the main points of the Sephardi movement. Kamhi emphasized that this movement was a consequence of the dissimilarities between the two Jewish groups, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, which manifested themselves not only in their respective rites, but also on a deep psychological level. Thus the Sephardi movement had the assignment to defy the uniformity and stiffness in the fulfillment of the Zionist duties. The Sephardim, Kamhi believed, could contribute to Zionism and common Jewish concern only in their own way, as Sephardi Jews. "Why not permit nuances within Jewishness?", the author inquired.<sup>137</sup> He stressed that Jewishness was not homogenous but included various distinct elements.<sup>138</sup> Precisely this affirmation was a basic Sephardi argument for the legitimacy of maintaining their own movement.

### **III.2.2. Debates at the Belgrade Conference**

In June 1930, at the initiative of the Serbian Sephardi organization, the Balkan Sephardi Conference was held in Belgrade. Representatives from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia attended the event, but the Sephardim from big centers- Paris, Vienna, Milan and Jerusalem- were represented as well. The event demonstrated all the heterogeneity of the Sephardi community Europe-wide and was the forum for sharp debates about their future. In the rather democratic exchange of opinions among Sephardim several nuances appeared, even among those who were representing the same country. The conference was a microcosm of Sephardism,

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<sup>137</sup>Samuel Kamhi, "Sefardi i sefardski pokret" [The Sephardim and Sephardi Movement] (Zagreb: Esperanza, 1927), pp. 12-3.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid, p.12.

mirroring all the diversity of the standpoints that existed in the Sephardi world of the time.

An article by Benjamin Pinto, a Sarajevo Sephardi intellectual, reported the event in *Jevrejski glas*.<sup>139</sup> The president of the Sephardi Confederation, Moise Picciotto, was among the first speakers. He demanded a stronger Sephardi presence in a decision-making process of the World Zionist Organization and more material support for the Sephardim in Palestine. Likewise, he emphasized that the Sephardim themselves had to be better organized in order to achieve these goals. A representative from Salonika, David Florentin, disagreed with him and often made comments while Picciotto was speaking.

The general debate of the following day brought all the diversity of Sephardi opinions into the light. Leon Coen from Bulgaria admitted that the difference between the Sephardim and Ashkenazim was evident, however when it comes to Zionism there should be no separatism. The chief rabbi from Sarajevo, Moric Levi, pointed out that indeed the Sephardim had their individuality and that they needed a common weekly. However, he expressed his disagreement with the tactics of the World Sephardi Confederation, which protested too much. Conversely, the subsequent speaker was Jakov Čelebonović from Belgrade, who from very beginning said that he was not a Zionist and this it did not make him a bad Jew. Čelebonović favored loyalty to the country where Jews lived, the enhancement of religious aspects and gave preference to the improvement of the economic and cultural prospects of the Sephardi people. His speech, expectedly, provoked a strong opposition in the audience, most of who wanted

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<sup>139</sup> Benjamin Pinto, "Beogradska sefardska konferencija" [Belgrade Sephardi Conference], *Jevrejski glas*, issue 112, June (1930): 1-3.

to silence him. It was an act of brave single-mindedness of a Jew to publicly reject Zionism in the year 1930 and, what is more, at the Sephardi conference, where most of the other delegates favored Zionism in some form.

The delegates from Bucharest, Arie and Pinkas, stressed their concern for the preservation of the Sephardi rite. Arie believed the conference should not discuss Zionism, since it was clear that all of them were “good Zionists”, but rather deal with the position of the Sephardim themselves in the past and contemporary perspectives. Pinkas pointed out that some Sephardi communities in Romania were rather impoverished and yet they donated to the Jewish national cause: no reason why they were treated as stepchildren by the Zionist Executive.

Another spokesman from Sarajevo was Braco Poljokan, a distinguished intellectual, owner and editor in chief of *Jevrejski glas*. He started his communication by reading the letter of the two other members of the Sarajevo Sephardi elite, Kalmi Baruh and Vita Kajon, which proposed several important things. Namely, they proposed the foundation of a local Sephardi organization in every Sephardi community, which would have its own fixed annual contribution to the Confederation. In addition, Kajon and Baruh suggested the establishment of a bureau for propaganda, editing a monthly or three-monthly magazine in French or Spanish that would inform a Sephardi audience, serving as a spiritual connection and public opinion tribune of all the Sephardim. Poljokan proceeded with his statements and emphasized that the Sephardim still did not have an ideology, being in evolution. Also he agreed with Picciotto in matters of budgetary consistency, insisting that Sephardim should pay more regularly their fee to

the Confederation. His main point was that Sephardi work was twofold, for it was directed to Palestine as well as to the *Galut*.

The standpoint of David Florentin, a delegate from Salonika, was that there should not be any difference between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and that the World Zionist Organization was right in making no difference between them. The Jewish world, he believed, needed unity more than anything. Picciotto, the president of the Sephardi Confederation, replied that he loved his Ashkenazi brothers, but he had to defend the Sephardim as the group to which he (Picciotto) belonged and that was neglected. He added that the common cause needed more cooperation, personal sacrifices and compliance with the decisions made at the previous Sephardi Conference in Vienna. Furthermore, the president supported his claims with the words of Haim Nahman Bialik, the eminent Hebrew poet and Zionist, who had told the Sephardim to maintain and not to forget their tradition because regionalism existed everywhere. Sephardi culture was enriching a big Jewish body, and Jews needed this diversity.<sup>140</sup>

In the article reporting from the Conference, Benjamin Pinto concluded that despite some shortcomings of this event, such as, for instance, the lack of time in the general debate, it was a real step forward for the Sephardi cause. The conclusions drawn by Poljokan in the following issue of *Jevrejski glas*<sup>141</sup> were that the Sephardim needed better organization in order to have greater influence within the World Zionist Organization. He believed this meeting was particularly important for the Sephardi

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid, p.2. Furthermore, for the relation between Bialik and the Sephardim see Sara Feinstein, *Sunshine, Blossoms and Blood: H.N. Bialik in His Time, a Literary Biography* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: University Press of America, 2005), p.261-62.

<sup>141</sup>Braco Poljokan, "Rad sefardske konferencije u Beogradu" [The Work of Sephardi Conference in Belgrade], *Jevrejski glas*, issue 113, June (1930):1.

movement, because some Sephardi communities participated for the first time in such a Pan-Sephardi event,<sup>142</sup> while others as of now would be less suspicious and have less prejudices.<sup>143</sup> His overall impression was that the Sephardi cause was progressing rather well and it was “in good hands”.

Ultimately, it remained unclear whether the Sephardi movement was or was not a kind of separatism within Zionism, since delegates had significantly different standpoints on the matter. The fact that passionate debates existed among Sephardim at this Conference does not diminish the relevance of this meeting. It served as a common Sephardi trans-Balkan basis for the interchange of opinions, a *sine qua non* requirement for the further development of the Sephardi movement, that is, a renaissance of Sephardism as a harbinger for the revival of Sephardi culture.

### **III.2.3. “*Sépharadim au travail!*”<sup>144</sup>: The Evolution of the Sephardi International Organization**

The Sephardim shared a joint concern to improve their socio-economic conditions of and, in the same time, to work together on the preservation of their heritage. The idea of founding a World Sephardi Organization was born on August 1923 at the Zionist Congress in Carlsbad, and at the Congress held in Vienna in 1925, the 62 Sephardi delegates from 15 countries established the World Sephardi Confederation. Structurally, it had two Central Committees, one in Jerusalem for Eretz Israel and the

<sup>142</sup>Romanian Sephardim and representatives of the Sephardi Youth.

<sup>143</sup>For instance. Bulgarian representatives.

<sup>144</sup>A slogan from the first issue of *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi*, a monthly organ of the Universal Sephardi Confederation, see *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi*, Paris, no. 1, July (1932):5.



other in Salonika, for the Diaspora. The Yugoslav Sephardim had an important part in the initiative leading to the establishment of the Confederation, especially at the Vienna Congress.<sup>145</sup> The seat of the Yugoslav branch of the Confederation was not in Sarajevo, as may have been expected, but in Belgrade, which became a relevant center for the Sephardi movement.<sup>146</sup>

The Committee in Salonika apparently had operational difficulties and during a first period the work of the Confederation was directed to Eretz Israel, wherein the main activities were immigration, colonization, and credits for immigrants.<sup>147</sup> In 1931, the Central Executive Committee for the Diaspora was relocated to Paris. Besides the obvious advantage of the French capital's ubication in Western Europe that would enhance the possibility of the Sephardi movement's impact, the election of this city was justified for several additional reasons.

First of all, France had become home for more than fifty thousand Sephardi immigrants, mostly from the spaces of the former Ottoman Empire, during the first decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, most of them already spoke French, since they had learned it in the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle<sup>148</sup> and therefore these Sephardim rapidly adapted to the local circumstances. Finally, France, having both mandate and colonies, had influence in different ways on other Sephardi communities in Syria and Northern Africa.

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<sup>145</sup>Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, p.149.

<sup>146</sup>Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, p.149.

<sup>147</sup> "Historique de la fondation de la Confédération" in *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi*, no.1, July (1932):3.

<sup>148</sup> Alliance Israélite Universelle is the first modern Jewish international organization, founded in 1860 in Paris, with the aim to help the emancipation non-Western Jewries and especially of Ottoman Sephardim. The Alliance established thousands of schools for boys and girls throughout the Ottoman territory, with French as their main language of instruction. Hence, it produced a domination of French language and culture in most of the Sephardi world.

From its first issue in summer 1932, *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi* became the official monthly organ of the Universal Sephardi Organization. This bulletin had a clear secular and assimilationist position, praising the ability of Sephardim to adapt to France. However, the need for the creation of a distinct Sephardi platform was expressed in the journal's opening manifesto emphasizing the absence of a collective Sephardi voice from the general Jewish debates. The Confederation's porte-parole called for the rekindling of the old Sephardi flame and pointed out that

Il faut que le Sépharadisme vive.

Il faut qu'il reprenne son rôle historique au sein de judaïsme, il faut qu'il lui apporte le bénéfice de son activité organisée, de ses vertus propres. Il faut que les descendants de Chiprout, de Negrela, de Ben Gabriol, de Halévy, de Crescas, de Maïmonide, des Kimchides, des Tibbonides, d'Abravanel, de Spinoza, de Montefiore, d'Adolphe Crémieux, etc... se remettent à l'œuvre, se rendent dignes de tels aïeux, enrichissent le judaïsme et l'humanité du produit de leur travail organisé.

Sépharadim, au travail!<sup>149</sup>

These lines reiterated the urge of maintaining a special Sephardi identity, and a particular Sephardi pride for their distinguished ancestors. The monthly was praising, on the one hand, the assimilatory ability of Sephardim and their affinity to French culture. On the other, it called for the preservation of Sephardi distinctiveness. What is more, it supported the colonization of Palestine as well.

Despite the economic crisis and increasing anti-Semitism in Europe during the 1930s, the Sephardim continued their enterprise. In 1935 another Pan-Sephardi conference was held in the British capital and more than 30 delegates from 12 countries decided to found the World Sephardi Union. The last meeting of the Union before the Second World War took place in Amsterdam in May 1938, which had 42 Sephardi participants

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<sup>149</sup> *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi*, p.5.

from 14 countries.<sup>150</sup> Even though these encounters were not of a greater frequency, they showed the continuity and a clear intention to gradually expand the influence to more Sephardi communities. The Yugoslav Sephardim devotedly participated at these conferences. At the conference in Amsterdam, Braco Poljokan and Lazar Avramović were delegates of the Sarajevo and Belgrade communities respectively, wherein they were named as members of the World Sephardi Union's Central Committee.<sup>151</sup>

The success of these Sephardi trans-national initiatives is differently evaluated. Some historians, such as Freidenreich<sup>152</sup>, Benbassa and Rodrigue<sup>153</sup>, were prone to conclude that they did not yield any palpable results. However, the latter viewpoint oversimplifies the Sephardi issue, quite often qualified it as a mere separatism, underestimating the organizational task of creating a common Sephardi consciousness and the achievements of the Sephardi associations of the interwar period actually realized in this direction on the local, regional, and finally the international level.

The Sephardi Confederation, when it evolved into the Union, obtained a firmer organizational structure the center of which gravitated from the Balkans towards big European metropolises in order to exert a greater influence upon the decision-makers for the Sephardi and joint Jewish cause. Clearly, the sépharadisme that they proposed was an *all-inclusive* ideology, which allowed different choices and lifestyles to its proponents. This was an obvious sign of a secular and modern thought, which

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<sup>150</sup> Michael Studemund-Halévy, "Salvação no longínquo distante: O Congresso Sefardita de Amsterdãoem 1938, Portugal e os portugueses de Hamburgo," *Revista de estudos judaicos* 3 (1996): 61-82, see p. 67.

<sup>151</sup> "Druga konferencija Svetske Unije sefardskih opština u Amsterdamu"[The Second Conference of the World Sephardi Union in Amsterdam], *Jevrejski glas*, No. 527, June (1938): 1-5.

<sup>152</sup> Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia*, pp. 150-51.

<sup>153</sup> Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, p.149.

endorsed and supported the heterogeneity of the adherents. Even though Sephardism emerged from the Zionist movement and showed the cultural features of an ethnic nationalism, it had no separatist national agenda but praised the insertion into a French-style secular republic. The Second World War and Holocaust destroyed “the old Sephardi heartland”<sup>154</sup> in the Balkans, annihilated most of its Sephardi elite, changing forever the local demographic landscape as well as the global face of Sephardi Jewry.

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<sup>154</sup> Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardim and the Holocaust* (Washington: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005), p.15.

## Conclusion

The core of the Balkan Sephardi community was destroyed in the Holocaust.<sup>155</sup> Ten thousand Bosnian Jews perished, more than two thirds of the prewar Jewish population. Most of the intellectuals mentioned in the present study were among the victims. It meant a hardly recoverable loss for the Bosnian Sephardi community, a sudden break of the flourishing associational initiatives, as well as the extinction of their trans-national connections.

As should be recognized, Jewish history in the Yugoslav kingdom allows for a particularly precious case study, as the state had both Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities in approximately even proportions, which can lead the historian to more encompassing conclusions about the relationships between these two Jewish cultures. Each of them had a dissimilar historical experience, so that both also brought forth divergent interpretations of Zionism in the interwar period. As the debates between these two Jewish ethnic communities persist even nowadays, the Yugoslav experience of their perceived differences, their cultural negotiation and its often inventive institutional solutions remain relevant to this day.

This study has reflected the dynamic interplay between the modernizing organizational structures of Sephardi Jewry in interwar Bosnia on the one hand, and its self-awareness on the other. The eventful time in the domestic and international affairs was reflected in communal life, by a peculiar compound of the rich Sephardi heritage, the cohabitation with other Balkan ethnicities, and Zionism.

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<sup>155</sup>Rodrigue, *Sephardim and the Holocaust*, p. 17.

The associational network that Sarajevo Sephardim generated was based on self-help and included wider layers of society among its activists, enabling the participation of women as well. The competitive coexistence of Jewish groups defined by gender, rite, and wealth stimulated the proliferation and differentiation of these societies. Among the most important roles these societies performed was alleviating impoverishment and analphabetism, the two greatest concerns of the community. The advent of Zionism even expanded the complexity of their social life, for they were now torn among the three homelands: imaginary Spain from the past, Bosnia of the present, and Palestine of the future.

Bosnian Sephardim diligently followed the world's developments and participated in all the major Sephardi initiatives of the interwar period. Their awareness of common Europe-wide interests prompted the foundation of international bodies, which were pioneering institutions of a modern and democratic spirit.

With these considerations in mind, one has to regret that there are still many lacunas in the lives of the Bosnian Sephardi intellectuals that require further considerations. One important desideratum would be to investigate the academic studies of young men and women at the foreign universities, especially in Vienna, Paris and Graz, since at the moment we hold very few data about that period. As the findings of this study suggest, the discovery of some unrevealed linkages with other Jewries could lead scholarship to more advanced conclusions about this remarkable community, providing a more complete picture of the Bosnian Sephardim and their both Jewish and non-Jewish environment.

The re-evaluation of the Sephardi movement in the interwar period is today a necessary task. Historians tend to overlook or at least underestimate the significance of these Sephardi initiatives that the Shoah discontinued in their further development. Balkan Sephardi associations were proponents of a cultural pluralism that enriched the common Jewish heritage with a variety of new interpretations of what Jewishness might possibly mean. In this understanding, the Sephardim of Bosnia were indeed champions of modernity, since at the core of their cultural and institutional endeavors was an essential contemporary requirement: the freedom of choice.

Finally, my hypothesis was that an exceptional pluralistic setting such as Bosnia produced a special path to modernity of the local Sephardi Jews. However, it is recommended to conduct a further investigation in order to shed light on the particularity of the Bosnian Sephardi case in a comparative perspective. Additionally, inter-ethnic dialectics in the interwar Bosnia, especially the relation between Jews and other ethnicities, remained mainly undiscovered and thus represent an important assignment for the future exploration of the Bosnian Sephardim.

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