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## The Origin of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Wuhan

*We don't know yet. But contrary to recent reporting, science does not rule out a lab accident or even bioterrorism.*

**By Khaled Talaat**

After the exponential growth in coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infections, it is no surprise that the internet is full to the brim with all sorts of conspiracy theories regarding its origin. Strong claims often trigger similarly strong responses, such as accusations by conspiracy theorists of malicious intent and claims that the virus could not have been leaked from a laboratory. Loud voices from both sides overshadow calls to investigate a spectrum of plausible scenarios.

Recent studies suggested that the virus is not bioengineered. However, bioweapons and genetically engineered viruses are not equivalent, as the latter are used in peaceful applications in order to understand potential threats in the environment. These include studying the natural gain of function that happens in nature as viruses evolve or recombine, and their potential for use in drug delivery and vaccine development. On the other hand, a bioweapon used by a nonstate actor (i.e., a bioterrorist) could be an entirely natural virus, although a malicious state might be likely to seek a more effective weapon through bioengineering.

Given the novelty of SARS-CoV-2, it's unlikely to be a bioweapon. Recent research suggests that the virus is likely natural in origin, although the immediate natural reservoir of the virus is yet to be identified. Additionally, it would seem improbable that a bioterrorist would use an unknown natural virus as a weapon, unless they were involved in experiments that ascertained that such a virus or one of its ancestors could effectively bond to human receptors and efficiently infect human cells.

Coronaviruses, as well as flu and other viruses that pose a moderate health hazard, are studied at biosafety level 2, which is not very strict, with protective

equipment only worn as needed. It is unclear whether SARS-CoV-2 was known to any of the Chinese virology labs before the outbreak, but its close relatives, like RaTG13, have been known and studied since 2013. Contrary to the preponderance of recent media claims, studies that aim to trace the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 are not conducted with the intent to verify whether the virus is a bioweapon or not, but rather contribute toward identifying its natural reservoir. It is important to understand how the virus jumped from animals to humans, as this might happen again with the same or a different strain. By identifying related viruses, researchers also inform other studies that work toward identifying known molecules that may inhibit bonding between the virus' S protein and human protein receptors, or even ones that could potentially block the RdRp binding pocket. This could help identify drugs that could cure the disease or inhibit infection.

Recently, the authors of a much-reported-on *Nature Medicine* correspondence expressed their personal beliefs and speculations at the end of the correspondence. This is rather unusual in research, where only supported facts are typically presented. The authors stated: "Since we observed all notable SARS-CoV-2 features, including the optimized RBD and polybasic cleavage site, in related coronaviruses in nature, we do not *believe* that *any type of* laboratory-based scenario is plausible."

This conclusion is a logical leap and an unsupported generalization. There is no doubt that the correspondence provided useful analysis of the mutations from RaTG13, which was found in another study to exhibit 96% similarity to SARS-CoV-2. This 96% similarity suggests that SARS-CoV-2 is related to RaTG13, although the 4% could account for significant functional differences. The nature of the mutations suggests a natural origin of the virus but doesn't prove that a laboratory-based scenario is impossible, as the authors then claimed. A lab scenario may involve either a fully natural virus that is related to SARS-CoV 2, or even a chimeric virus which could have acquired random mutations due to being released into the environment a long time ago.

*KEVIN BLUMENTHAL*

For the conclusions by the authors of the correspondence (Andersen et al.) to be acceptable, they would have needed to identify the immediate natural reservoir of the virus and study how it evolved in that population and later spread to humans. This is a much more complex task than a genomic comparison that suggests a natural origin but does not explain how the virus jumped from animals to

humans. Another study published in *Nature* showed that SARS-CoV-2 exhibits greater similarity to Malayan pangolin coronaviruses in the receptor region, but exhibits greater similarity to RaTG13 in many other segments. The pangolin virus, however, is not the same as the human SARS-CoV-2 virus, but rather only a relative, just like RaTG13. The natural reservoir of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has yet to be identified.

However, malicious intent at the individual level is far less predictable than at the state level. Individuals, possibly even lab workers, could use sophisticated strategies to obscure the origin of the virus. At this point, whether the present outbreak is a result of bioterrorism or not is unsettled, and if it is, it is as of yet unclear when or how the release might have happened.

One compelling argument against the bioterrorist hypothesis for the COVID-19 outbreak that began in Wuhan is that malicious actors would have other options with much more predictable damage levels to suit their desired damage targets and political goals. Further, they would likely have introduced it far from Wuhan, which is the site of a lab known to study coronaviruses, to avoid attention. Nevertheless, these arguments assume we are dealing with somewhat rational thinkers, which might also not be the case. They may have even worked at another lab and introduced the virus in Wuhan to falsely implicate the lab located there. The psychology of terrorists is a sophisticated topic beyond microbiology studies. However, there is no hard evidence at this point that suggests an intentional release of the virus, and this claim remains an unsupported hypothesis. In my opinion, it is too early to make a conclusion, but I speculate that it is unlikely that the present outbreak is a result of an intentional release.

However, I also disagree with media assertions that it has been “proven” that the virus is not a bioweapon. To prove this, one would need to know exactly how patient zero was infected—not whether the virus is natural or bioengineered in origin. Given the overall significance of the problem, even unlikely scenarios should not be dismissed offhand and should be investigated.

A much less echoed, although less radical, scenario is that the current outbreak is related to a lab accident involving disease transmission experiments intended for peaceful purposes. As mentioned earlier, coronaviruses are generally studied at biosafety level 2 and sometimes 3, including the 2003 SARS-CoV. Coronaviruses are not typically highly hazardous—the dangerous ones are not highly infectious and the highly infectious ones are not deadly. SARS-CoV-2 happens to be an exception, although it is not extremely fatal, as many other viruses are.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology has been extensively studying coronaviruses since the SARS outbreak of 2002-03 in order to prevent a similar outbreak and potentially develop vaccines. A key challenge was identifying the natural reservoir of the SARS-CoV virus. Unlike what the public may imagine, scientists don’t go around in the wild sampling millions of random animals to identify a natural reservoir. In actuality, a much more efficient approach is to sample a few animals

from species that are known to host related viruses and investigate whether the human virus would bond to their protein receptors and cause infection or not. For an animal to be a natural reservoir of a human virus, the virus must be infectious to both species. If the virus does not transmit efficiently in the animal, then it is unlikely that a particular population of that animal is the natural reservoir. Bats carry many different types of coronaviruses including RaTG13, which is closely related to SARS-CoV-2.

The incredible diversity in bat ACE2 receptors complicates the search for the natural reservoir as sampling more bats and bat species becomes necessary. Bat coronaviruses typically do not bond to human ACE2 receptors. For this reason, there were concurrent searches at the Wuhan lab for an intermediate species. Civet cats were found to carry closely related viruses to the 2003 SARS-CoV such as the SZ16, civet007, and PC4\_13 viruses. The type of infectious disease transmission experiments mentioned in the previous paragraph were carried extensively in research published by the Wuhan lab using both natural strains of coronavirus and chimeric coronaviruses, which can simulate recombination scenarios in nature. Similar research on coronaviruses was also carried out in the United States and Europe, although the Wuhan lab studied coronaviruses more extensively than other labs after the SARS-CoV outbreak of 2003 and the MERS-CoV outbreak of 2012 in East Asia. This research is necessary in order to prevent outbreaks, as the incident of transmission from animals to humans can happen multiple times. These experiments involve a little risk but can reduce the overall risk of an outbreak as natural threats can be identified. The lab’s work may also contribute to the future development of vaccines.

Ideally, any animals or cells used in these experiments are cremated post-experiments to prevent a leak of the virus to the environment. Introducing the virus to a new species in a lab can result in the emergence of new strains. The virus can recombine with a related virus during coinfection of the host cell and exchange genetic segments, leading to an accelerated natural gain of function. If safety protocols aren’t properly followed, the virus may leak into the environment and potentially infect other animals. Different animals have different immune systems, which can again result in the emergence of more aggressive strains of the virus with human infection capabilities in densely populated cities like Wuhan. China’s widespread use of wildlife as a food source in “wet markets” amplifies the risk of transmission to humans.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology used RaTG13, a close relative of SARS-CoV-2, as evidence that the SARS-CoV-2 is natural in origin in order to respond to state-sponsored bioengineered weapons claims. The RaTG13 virus, a close relative of SARS-CoV-2, was discovered in 2013 in bats in Yunnan province, some 1,200 miles away from Wuhan city. It is unclear what experiments were conducted using the virus and other viruses related to SARS-CoV-2, such as the pangolin viruses. While the intent would not be to blame China in case of an accident scenario, releasing records that detail how RaTG13 was handled and what experiments were conducted using the RaTG13 virus and

related viruses could help accelerate the search for the natural reservoir and prevent another wave of infections. It would also help establish better safeguards in similar laboratories to prevent an accident or an intentional leak scenario.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that it is possible that the virus could have fully originated or evolved in nature without human intervention in the transmission. My article in no way intends or attempts to serve as evidence of an accident scenario and should not be used for that purpose. My intention is to explain the debate as well as my view that an accident scenario not involving malicious intent should not be prematurely dismissed. In fact, I think a lab accident scenario is more benign than a completely natural emergence. If the virus emerged naturally without connection to lab experiments, it may be harder to identify and isolate the natural reservoir and reemergence of the virus or similar viruses becomes likely.

While the COVID-19 crisis is unlikely to be a case of bioterrorism, the extent of the damage caused by the virus calls for stronger safeguards against bioterrorism, especially given continued advances in biotechnology. The advances in detection and testing capabilities need to be on par with the advances in bioengineering technology. I call on world leaders to implement additional safeguards against bioterrorism that are up to the same quality standards of the nuclear nonproliferation safeguards. This may include building statistically informed monitoring stations for infections at travel hubs, moving labs that deal with dangerous pathogens outside of densely populated cities where wild animals are consumed, and working toward banning the sale of live animals that could potentially be used as carrier vehicles to deliver viruses that would otherwise not be easily transmitted to humans.

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*Tablet*, April 07, 2020

## **Royal Yugoslav Army officers in the Jewish Historical Museum**

**By Vojislava Radovanović**

Organized by the Jewish Historical Museum, and in the premises of the very Museum in Beograd, a number of exhibitions were prepared, thematically so different between them that an attentive observer could ask – is this still the same museum, the same source of this kind of creative and educational endeavor!? Generally, exhibitions can be of artistic, or of scientific research – historical, ethnological - nature. However, now we speak about themes. In what manner professionals within one museum

select themes for an exhibition – it depends on a number of factors, and mostly on the interior approach to this sort of work, which is attained through mutual agreement, as well as based on expertise and professional aspirations of a small, mutual, very “museum-like” micro-universe, to present to other people, in an appropriate way, some historical event, some custom or rite, cultural specificity, or merely fine art dedicated to some issue. At least, it happens this way in our Museum.

Thus, in our Museum we decided to prepare the exhibition “Jews of Serbia – officers of the Royal Yugoslav Army”. We were encouraged to focus at this segment of the Serbian military history, in the context of the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WWI. The WWI, known as the Great War, presented, by all means, a period of incredible combination of two phenomena: horrific tragedy that brought Serbia to the edge of biological survival (more than million persons, citizens of Serbia, lost their lives in various ways, killed in military combat, victims of genocide upon civilians), and fantastic audacity, ability and bravery of Serbian people which lead to the eventual victory. Exactly on this subject, however, from the angle of view of a national minority that called itself “Serbs of Moses’ faith”, the Jewish Historical Museum, in 2014, prepared the exhibition on Serbian Jews in that Great War, the exhibition which attracted exactly the sort of attention that we desired to achieve. However, interest for further development of the Jewish Community’s position and understanding regarding the national army as a particular social stratum, along with the duties that derive from belonging to such a social environment, be it the duties of professional soldiers or reservists (maybe, even more the reservists), inspired our Museum team. The idea for this, basically complex project, proposed colonel Dragan Krsmanović, Master of historical sciences, former head of the Military archives in Beograd, and a friend and external associate of our Museum. His idea was to perform a research in the Military archive for identification of military files of Jews – Serbian officers, but also officers from other areas out of Serbia, who actively, or in the capacity of reserve officers acceded to the newly established state, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, that is the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The output of that idea, of that project, was expected to result with establishing of an electronic data-base on Jews - officers, whose personal files contain numerous personal data and could be used in various other research studies - historical, sociological, ethno - anthropological, etc. That part of the project has already been implemented – files were identified as files of the officers of Jewish origin, they were found, and access to those files was provided to our researcher, colonel Krsmanović, and consequently scanned in the Military Archive.

The very moment when this idea on a research study was accepted as a very interesting one, it immediately produced another idea – the exhibition! Starting from the data-base and several additional photos, prepare the exhibition! Maybe there was a need for it. Because the museum is a museum, and here we have the only Jewish museum in Serbia, which has to be as courageous as our ancestors, who are, in fact, mutual ancestors for all of us ... For we do not

perceive the need for divisions and discussions. Therefore, we prepared and installed the exhibition “Jews of Serbia – officers of the Royal Yugoslav Army”, with the same pride as we did the previous one.

Since the exhibition presents mostly the personal files of those reserve officers who in their civilian lives were doctors, professors, lawyers, merchants, clerks, etc., we wanted to inform the general public on what were the stances of the male population of the Jewish community of Serbia toward the State – the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, that is the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in which they lived. Professional soldiers and officers were also presented, however, to a much lesser extent. Only a few of them. To our opinion, the most interesting aspect of this exhibition is that it presents some ordinary and anonymous people. Only three of them could, potentially, be known to the general public: Dr. David Albala (who had been mentioned in both printed press and the Serbian Broadcasting Corporation TV), Ilija Baruh, father of the WWII heroes Bora and Isidor Baruh (where Bora Baruh was also an outstanding painter), and Henrik Fingerhut, Radio Beograd announcer before the WWII. Maybe someone still knows and remembers him as such. He has not been mentioned for a very long time and was killed in the April war in 1941, ardently fighting for Serbia and Yugoslavia, as a reserve officer of the Royal Army. Everyone else is so called “ordinary people”. Well, those ordinary people, Jews – officers of the Royal Yugoslav Army, were mostly deported to German military POW<sup>1</sup> camps. They were taken to *Oflags* where their life was difficult, but a “majority” of them survived as soldiers of the Royal Army, protected by the Geneva Convention. This “majority” needs to be emphasized for Germans were using every opportunity to not only mistreat them, but even kill, for violation of these or those rules. The exhibition encompassed them, too – the prisoners of war in the *Oflags*, who in “majority” survived, while German occupation forces slaughtered their families in Serbia. That same “majority” returned to Yugoslavia in 1945 and found destroyed homes – no one of their own kin and nothing of what used to make their lives existed. However, life goes on... and Serbs have a saying: “God save us from what the living man can endure.”

The exhibition “Jews of Serbia – officers of the Royal Yugoslav Army” presents a total of 38 officers’ personal files formed into collages of selected documents, in combination with individual and group photos. The exhibited documents from the officers’ files originate from the period between the two world wars, from 1921 to 1940, while the photos prevalently derive from the WWII period, that is from the POW camps, although there are also some photos from the earlier period. The entire exhibited photo-material consists of reproductions deriving from three sources: from personal property of descendants of royal officers of Jewish origin; from the archive of the Jewish Historical Museum, and from the outstanding Memorial –

album *JEWS FROM YUGOSLAVIA – PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMANY*, which was prepared at the occasion of 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over fascism by Mrs. Ženi Lebl, historiographic expert, and was published by the Association of WWII Veterans in Israel, Yugoslav group, Tel Aviv 1995.

Explanations that accompany the exhibits are solely in Serbian language, since the basis of the exhibition are the personal military files – collages of hand-written documents in Serbian language and, most often, in Cyrillic script. Data contained in those documents, about the officers, their appearances, their disposition and character, their professions, wars in which they took part, if they were married, and how many times, the names of their children if they had any at the time when they made their oath and the file was opened - such data, in fact, represent the “soul” of our exhibition. The exhibition descriptions consist of short, basic explanations or information, therefore, in the case of an exhibition of this kind, translation into some of the foreign languages would not make much sense. For while you look at the officers’ photos you have to read about those men. It is more interesting than you would expect.

From the Memorial album *JEWS FROM YUGOSLAVIA – PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMANY*

## **Between Religion and Secular Ideology *Jewish Officers from Yugoslavia in German POW Camps\****

**By Krinka Vidaković-Petrov**

### *1. The capitulation of Yugoslavia and the POW camps in Germany*

The war in Yugoslavia began on April 6<sup>th</sup> of 1941. Before that, the Yugoslav government had signed a pact with Germany and Italy on March 25, following the example of its neighboring countries. The assessment was that Yugoslavia could not withstand the political and military pressure of Germany. However, on March 27 a group of Yugoslav officers, mainly Serbs, carried out a coup that was supported by massive popular demonstrations in Belgrade and other Serbian towns. The government was toppled, a new government instated and the pact abolished. The German response was the unannounced bombing of Belgrade on April 6<sup>th</sup>, followed by the military invasion of the country by German, Italian and Hungarian troops from several directions (Italy, Austria, Hungary, Rumania,

<sup>1</sup> POW – Prisoner of War

\* Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer Workshop for Holocaust Scholars, “Theological Contemplations and

Debates vis-à-vis the Holocaust in Real Time”, International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, July 2012.

Bulgaria). Although the Yugoslav army tried to resist the invasion, Yugoslavia capitulated on April 17th. The country was immediately dismembered: the greater part of the country was included in the Independent State of Croatia (proclaimed on April 10th), while the rest was divided into several occupation zones – German, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Italian.

Members of the Yugoslav army – soldiers, officers and many of those who had responded to mobilization either as reservists or volunteers – were immediately arrested by the German military authorities and deported to POW camps, most of them in Germany, but some also in Italy. Among them were 15,000 active and reserve officers, among them 200 generals. "They were sent to various camps, but after 400 additional officers were sent to Germany from Italy, they were concentrated in two bigger and one smaller camp, Nüremberg (later Hammelburg), Osnabrück and Stryj (later Strassbourg, Barkenbrügge). Around 200,000 imprisoned soldiers were interned in a great number of other camps and work commands".<sup>2</sup> These were the *Oflags* (officers' camps) and the *Stalags* (soldiers' camps)

Estimates of the total number of Yugoslav POW vary because of fluctuation in the camps due to the release of several thousand prisoners belonging to the Yugoslav 'minorities', deaths, escapes, etc.<sup>3</sup> J. Presburger indicates that in 1943-1944 there were around 156,000 Yugoslav POWs and that around 400 of them were Jews.<sup>4</sup> They were mostly officers interned first in Nüremberg, then transferred to Osnabrück, later to Strasburg and finally to Barkenbrügge.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Jews comprised only 0.25% of the total number of Yugoslav POWs (compared to 0.5% of the total population of Yugoslavia). However, considering the fact that most Jews were in officer camps and few in the *Stalags*, their relative percentage in the former was high.

The Yugoslav POWs were protected by the Geneva Convention. Nonetheless, the treatment they received was worse than that of the French, Poles and others (except for the Russians, who were not protected by the Geneva Convention). In addition, the situation in the *Stalags* was much worse than that in the *Oflags*.

Very early on the Germans decided to free Yugoslav POWs who were not Serbs. This applied to Croats, Hungarians, Macedonians, Rumanians and Bulgarians. These 'Yugoslavs' belonged to ethnic groups called 'minorities' by the Germans. 'Minorities' were associated with states identified as German allies and were therefore considered as not only hostile to Yugoslavia, but at the same time friendly with Germany. A small number of Serbs declared themselves as belonging to 'minorities' in order to

be released, but the overwhelming majority refused to take advantage of this opportunity. On the other hand, a number of Slovenians and a few Croats declared themselves as Yugoslavs and refused to be released. After the release of 4-5,000 members of the "minorities", the Yugoslav POW population consisted mainly of Serbs and Jews. Here is how a Jewish POW described the status of the Jews:

*...The whole Oflag now consisted of only 'Serbian' prisoners. At the same time, a number of our officers departed from the camp under various tricolor flags...I was appalled when I listened to them. Only the hunger and hardships of camp life could justify such foul behavior. Personally, I was utterly calm. I knew that as a Jew I could go nowhere since each call of the German command addressed to 'minorities' concluded with an emphatic statement: 'The above does not apply to Jews'.<sup>6</sup>*

There were several other segregations carried out by the Germans, but the answer to the question of whether the Jews were segregated is ambiguous: yes and no, depending on the specific time and place.

Following this first segregation, the German command referred to the remaining prisoners as 'Serbs', in contrast to the prisoners themselves – who made a point of referring to themselves as 'Yugoslavs', thus refusing to accept the abolishment of the Yugoslav state and the denial of Yugoslav identity (notwithstanding ethnic, religious and other differences). The next segregation implemented by the German command in the Nüremberg camp in January 1942 was based on race: Jewish prisoners were required to wear the yellow star so as they would be clearly identified and "avoided" by non-Jews. The resistance to this command included both Jews and Serbs: most Jews refused to carry out this order, while most Serbs expressed their solidarity with them.<sup>7</sup> After some time the yellow star became unnecessary because the Jews were concentrated in one block of the camp (VII B), separated from the rest by a fence manned with guards who were ordered to prevent contact between Jews and Serbs. Once again both Jews and Serbs protested segregation. Here is how a Jewish officer described it:

*The next day big groups from the main camp approached the fence one after the other: they talked to us, sang military and popular songs, organized joint cabaret performances, while we – on the other side of the fence – sang and played music with them. Thus so many people gathered there that you could hardly discern the fence. (...)*

<sup>2</sup> *Narodnooslobodilačka borba u zarobljeničkim logorima 1941-1945*, Beograd: Prosveta, 1945, 7.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the British bombing of the Osnabrück camp in December of 1944 killed 116 Serbian officers.

<sup>4</sup> An "almost complete" list of Yugoslav Jewish POWs is posted on the following website: <http://elmundosefarad.wikidot.com/skoro-potpuni-spisak-jevreja-ratnih-zarobljenika>.

<sup>5</sup> J. Presburger, "Oficiri Jevreji u zarobljeničkim logorima u Nemačkoj», *Zbornik Jevrejskog istorijskog muzeja*, Beograd, 1975, 3, 227.

<sup>6</sup> *Dnevnik Isaka Amara*, 26-27. All English translations from Serbian were done by the author of this article.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter addressed to the elder of Oflag XIII B (General M. Petrović), the elder of the "Jewish barracks" Isak Baruh argued that the Geneva Convention did not allow for religious discrimination, but the German authorities refused to discuss the issue (Presburger, 234).

*Our effort was successful – the camp remained united. We demonstrated our unity even to our enemies!*<sup>8</sup>

In May 1942, a group of 600 Serbian and 200 Jewish officers was transferred to Osnabrück (Oflag VI C), where there were other Yugoslav POWs. The Jews were at first dispersed in various barracks together with the Serbs. A few weeks later they were concentrated in two barracks, but not separated by a barbed wire fence from the rest of the camp. Then a new segregation took place, this time based on a combination of racial and ideological elements: Jews and "marked anti-fascists" (communists) were grouped together in four barracks (35, 36, 37 and 38) that had previously been added to the camp and were located on its periphery.<sup>9</sup> In August of 1944, several hundred Serbian and Jewish officers from these two barracks were transferred to Strassburg, where there were placed together in two camps: Fort Kronprinz and Bismark. Finally, in the fall of 1944 they were taken to the Barkenbrücke camp in Northern Germany, where Serbian and Jewish officers were not separated. Therefore, all efforts of segregation were followed by demonstrations of unity, which was a form of resistance. The restrictions and humiliation the inmates were subjected to fostered various forms of resistance. Armed confrontation was impossible, so active resistance assumed symbolic forms of subversion designed to show the German authorities that even though imprisoned, the Yugoslav POWs had not capitulated.

## *2. The heterogenous pre-war community in Yugoslavia reflected in the POW camp*

Yugoslav soldiers and officers – Serbs as well as Jews – were in no way homogenous groups. The Jewish POWs differed in age, social status, profession as well as regarding their political views. Camp conditions reduced the impact of social differences because all inmates were confronted with the restrictions and hardships of camp life. However, these same conditions were conducive to a strong impact of other factors of differentiation.

One of them was political. In the Jewish camp there were initially three groups in the political respect. The first consisted of those who were fairly indifferent to political ideas and involvement; members of the second group held certain political preferences, but had not actively participated in Yugoslav political life; the third group consisted of individuals who were politically profiled, active and organized. Those less involved in politics were more inclined towards moderate and centrist positions, while those adopting leftist ideology tended to be the most active. In wartime and in camp conditions, politics became a very a dynamic force involving even those who had previously been apolitical. The indifferent and passive were pressured into making active choices. Moderates were pushed into adopting and demonstrating clearly defined positions against German Nazism, while this in turn moved

them closer to the political left. At the same time, the political left became more militant as well as eager to assume a leadership role in the camp resistance movement. The process of political polarization itself favored clear-cut and extreme positions rather than vague centrist moderation. The wartime discourse of the Yugoslav communists (in general, not only in the POW camps) identified the political left as "anti-fascist", while the communists themselves labeled various center-right positions as "fascist". This simplified black and white distinction reflected the urgent need to mobilize resistance as well as the intention of the communists to lead the latter, while this would ultimately lead to their monopolization of the anti-fascist struggle. Whereas the political left was militantly anti-fascist, the political right included a variety of positions: not everyone in this camp was pro-German or pro-fascist, although they were labeled as such. In any case, the political right was polarized into two main factions. One of them adopted a clear anti-fascist stand, but was reluctant to accept the identification of anti-fascism and communism. The other faction was clearly anti-communist and inclined for that and other reasons towards compromises with the Germans.

This was the general political situation in the camps. Political discussions in the officers' camps began with the question of how and why Yugoslavia capitulated, then continued on a variety of issues: the role of political and military forces in the homeland<sup>10</sup> the fate of civilians and the prisoners' families, military operations in Europe, the prospects of the war, etc. However, the initial and most general polarization was between two groups. In one group were POWs, mainly from the higher military echelons, convinced that German military power was invincible and that the Axis powers were practically winning the war. Their view was that any resistance to the Axis powers would be futile. The other, much more numerous group (including a few generals and highly positioned officers) believed the Germans should by all means be resisted and that ultimately they would be defeated.

What was the perspective of the Jewish officers?

In order to better understand their response, one must have an idea of how the Jewish community of Yugoslavia functioned in the interwar period. In many ways, the twenties and thirties were a period of transition, when many issues were at play: the relationship between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim involving also the ways they addressed questions of religion, tradition and identity, then political involvement, Zionism, integrationism, Diaspora nationalism, etc. As mentioned above, Jews comprised only 0.5% of the total population of Yugoslavia, a new state established in 1918. The Ashkenazi group, living in regions of Yugoslavia that had previously been part of Austria-Hungary, was twice as large as the Sephardic group that for centuries lived in areas that had in the past been part of the Ottoman state. The two groups had

<sup>8</sup> A. Lebl, *Lutanja i saznanja*, Novi Sad: Institut za izučavanje istorije Vojvodine, 1975, 188-189.

<sup>9</sup> Presburger, 236.

<sup>10</sup> These included: the Milan Nedić government in Serbia, the Ustashas in the Independent State of Croatia, the

various occupation forces in Yugoslavia (especially the Germans in Serbia), the Yugoslav government exiled in London and its armed forces in the homeland (the Chetniks of Dragoljub Mihailović), and the Partisan armed resistance led by the communists (Tito).

different cultural traditions and were impacted by different experiences of assimilation. As emphasized by H. Pass Freidenreich, the question of identity of the Yugoslav Jews during the interwar period is a complex one:

*If the Jewish population is divided into three age groups, the older generation (born before 1880), the middle generation (born before World War I), and the younger generation (born during the interwar period), a definite pattern seems to emerge. The oldest group, especially in Zagreb and to a lesser extent in Belgrade, often tended towards integrationism – they considered themselves Serbs or Croats of the Mosaic faith – but this philosophy lost ground within the Jewish community by the interwar period. A large proportion of the middle group gradually began to adopt Zionism in its General or moderate socialist form, which meant belief in a Jewish nationality and hope for a future Jewish homeland in Palestine but a personal commitment to living in Yugoslavia. A splinter group of Sephardic intellectuals among this segment of the population stressed the Sephardic aspects of their Jewish national identity and of Zionism and evolved their own philosophy of Diaspora nationalism. The younger generation, however, frequently chose a more extreme solution, either within the Zionist context or outside it, emigration to Palestine and effecting a social revolution there or helping to create a revolution at home.<sup>11</sup>*

The Jewish community of Yugoslavia was legally defined as a religious minority, of which the vast majority, both Ashkenazim and Sephardim, were Neologue in their approach to Judaism. There was also a very small separate group of Orthodox Jews mainly in the region of Vojvodina. The interwar period features a generation gap regarding the degree of religious observance: while the elder generation adhered to tradition, many members of the young generation "turned away from religion entirely".<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the lack of religious dedication and observance did not translate into a lack of Jewish identity. Jewishness was identified with culture and tradition rather than with religious belief and observance. While the Sephardic youth was divided between integrationism, Diaspora nationalism, Zionism and communism, the Ashkenazi youth was mostly inclined towards Zionism, combined or not with leftist - socialist or communist – ideologies. All combinations were at play.

The positive policy of the Yugoslav government towards the Jews deterred the development of anti-Semitism and this encouraged further integration of Jews into Yugoslav society and culture.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the young generation responded to the realities they lived in by seeking new solutions that would address their needs. Although many Jews of the elder generation and also some of the younger generation were apolitical, others began to

respond politically. The two main political responses in the interwar period were Zionism and communism. Although Zionism was essentially a Jewish response to the crisis of identity and historically speaking a post-assimilationist ideology, it also had important political aspects. Zionism spread very fast in Yugoslavia, especially among the Ashkenazim and the Jewish youth, less so among the Sephardim, who had not yet reached the post-assimilationist phase and were therefore still interested in preserving the specific features of their Jewish cultural identity. On the other extreme was a purely political, internationalist ideology – communism. Very few Jews were active on the Yugoslav political scene. Since there was no Jewish political party, the interests of the Jewish community were advocated by its elite representatives (presidents of local communities, the chief rabbinate, the president of the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities of Yugoslavia, etc.). The involvement of the Jews, mainly members of the younger generation, in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia represents the first major participation of the latter in Yugoslav political life. The party and its youth section (SKOJ, Federation of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia) were established in Yugoslavia in 1919. However, two years later the CPY (Communist Party of Yugoslavia- KPJ) was banned. Nonetheless, the youth section attracted many young Yugoslavs, including Jews. "Jewish communists in the interwar period in general no longer took part in Jewish communal life, religious or national. Not denying their Jewish origins, they considered themselves primarily Yugoslavs rather than Jews."<sup>14</sup> Regardless of their ethnic origins, the communists deliberately turned away from religion, considering it at best a remnant of history and at worst an "opium for the people".

### *3. Diaries, notes and memoirs of the POWs*

In the *Foreword* to the memoirs of Hermann Helfgott prof. Arieh Tartakower pointed out why it is important to study the writings of Yugoslav POWs: I know of no other book of this kind. A man whose calling it is to meet the religious needs of the public, who fulfills this mission as an army man during the Holocaust, is certainly an unusual phenomenon; and when that man is from Yugoslavia, let us not forget that the Yugoslav nation was, for a long time, the *only* nation, save for the Jews, that rose against the Nazi adversary. With supreme courage. Jews and Yugoslav were *the* fighters in the camps of the victims, and only after some time were they joined by the French, the Poles and others, even though their power to rebel had, from the beginning, been infinitely greater. From this stems the spiritual bond

extent, was due to the tradition of tolerance of the Serbian Orthodox church and to the friendly relations maintained between the Serbian people and the native Sephardic Jews. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the government was essentially controlled by Serbs, and policy reflected their viewpoint." (Freidenreich, 179).

<sup>14</sup> Freidenreich, 179.

<sup>11</sup> H. Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia. A Quest for Community*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979, 169.

<sup>12</sup> Freidenreich, 87.

<sup>13</sup> "In general, the official attitude of the Yugoslav government toward the Jewish minority until the very end of the interwar period was sympathetic. This, to a large

between the two nations, which increases interest in reading a book that was written by a man who is both a Jew and a Yugoslav, and, over and above this, a rabbi and an officer, who describes what he went through as a prisoner of war, and the epic of his wanderings under the cruelest conditions of the Nazi regime, up to his final liberation.<sup>15</sup>

All the other authors (and co-authors) considered in this article were also Jews and Yugoslavs who went through the same ordeal in the same camps. They are: Stanislav Vinaver, Oto Bihalji-Merin, Evgenije Ženja Kozinski, Arpad Lebl, Isak Bata Amar, Sima Karaoglanović, Aleksandar Levi and Hermann Helfgott.<sup>16</sup> All of them wrote their original accounts in the Serbian language and most of them have been published. Two were published only a few years after the war: Vinaver's *Godine poniženja i borbe. Život u nemačkim*

<sup>15</sup> A. Tartakower, "Foreword" in Zvi Asaria-Hermann Helfgott, *We Are Witnesses*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Other authors also contributed their memoirs and notes published in various sources: N. Albahari (ed.), *Ratni zarobljenici*, Sarajevo, 1976; J. Bosnić (ed.), *Muzika iza bodljikavih žica: zbornik sećanja jugoslovenskih ratnih zarobljenika, interniraca i političkih zatvorenika za vreme narodnooslobodilačkog rata 1941-1945*, Beograd: Savez udruženja muzičkih umetnika Jugoslavije, 1985; R. Žižić, *Osnabrički zvuci i odjeci*, Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1981; also *Beleške iz zarobljeništva* by Žak Kalderon, from Bitolj, but we did not have access to this unpublished manuscript (see A. Šomlo, «Priča o Irit», *Politika*, April 6, 2013, 6).

<sup>17</sup> Zvi Azaria / H.Helfgott, *Edim anahnu*, Tel Aviv: Yavne, 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Isak Bata Amar (Kragujevac 1914 - Žabari 1985) came from a Belgrade Sephardic family. He graduated law in Belgrade in 1939, he was one of the founders of the Jewish Academic Choir and also sang in other choirs, including the Serbian-Jewish Singing Society. Amar joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1946. In post-war Yugoslavia he pursued a career in theater, especially in comedy, and served as director of the Contemporary Theater in Belgrade 1966-1973. He held political posts in various artistic associations and government bodies dealing with culture and was active in Jewish organizations, especially in the field of culture. He also taught at the School of Drama of the University of Belgrade. Amar was awarded three government decorations. (A. Rafailović, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 20-21).

<sup>19</sup> Aleksandar Levi (Jagodina 1915 – Belgrade 1999). Levi lived in Belgrade and graduated law at the University of Belgrade in 1939. He was one of the founders of the Jewish male choir. After his release from the POW camp, Levi joined the Partizan army and took part in the final military operations in western Yugoslavia. In post-war Yugoslavia he held the post of Assistant District Attorney of Serbia 1953-1977. Levi was very active in Jewish organizations and served twice as the president of the Jewish Community of Belgrade. He edited the *Jewish Almanac* and also published in mainstream Serbian periodicals. He revived the Braća Baruh Choir and served as its president for

'Oflazima' [Years of Humiliation and Struggle. Life in the German Oflags] in 1945 and Bihalji-Merin's *Doviđenja u oktobru* [Good-bye in October] in 1947. One was published in the sixties - *Dnevnik Ženja Kozinskog* [The Diary of Ženja Kozinski] in 1961 – and two in the seventies – *We Are Witnesses* by Zvi Asaria-Hermann Helfgott in 1970 (Hebrew language edition)<sup>17</sup> and *Lutanja i saznanja* [Wanderings and Insights] by Lebl in 1975. The diary of

Isak Bata Amar<sup>18</sup> (edited by A. Levi)<sup>19</sup> and that of Sima Karaoglanović<sup>20</sup> remain unpublished.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, the Jewish POWs were a heterogenous group: they came from all parts of Yugoslavia, belonged to various age groups, were engaged in different professions, featured different degrees of religious affiliation, had different political inclinations. However, the picture is quite different when we look at the relatively few accounts of camp experiences they left

several decades. Levi was awarded five government decorations. (A. Rafailović, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 134-135)

<sup>20</sup> Sima Karaoglanović (Belgrade 1910 – Belgrade 1982) lived in Belgrade and graduated law and literature. He was a member of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) since 1933 and as such arrested several times during the thirties. He was a contributor of the main communist periodical *Proleter*. During the war Karaoglanović was a member of the Camp Committee of the CPY in POW camps Nüremberg and Osnabrück. Immediately after the liberation of the camps, Karaoglanović edited the periodical "Voice of Liberated Prisoners" advocating repatriation to Yugoslavia. In post-war Yugoslavia he worked as a journalist and editor in the national press agency Tanjug, the official newspaper of the CPY *Borba* and was editor in chief of "Filmske novosti" (J. Romano, *Jevreji Jugoslavije 1941-1945. Žrtve genocida i učesnici Narodnooslobodilačkog rata*, Belgrade, 1980, 404; interview of K. Vidaković-Petrov with Ms. Mira Janković).

<sup>21</sup> Karaoglanović spent years gathering materials from the camp with the intention of writing a book about camp experiences and publishing some of the materials. He managed to publish only Kozinski's diary and write an article on the camp "press" (S. Karaoglanović, "'Štampa' u logorima za zarobljenike", *Zbornik Istorijskog muzeja Srbije*, Beograd, 1979, 15-16, 105-122). He passed away before he could write the indented book. His family donated part of his materials to the Museum of the City of Belgrade. Unfortunately, it was not possible to access them because the building of the Museum was under reconstruction at the time we were conducting our research. We were, however, able to see some of the materials courtesy of Ms. Biljana Stanić from the archives department of the Museum, and read Amar's 60- page handwritten text, edited and typed by A. Levi. The Museum organized an exhibition of prisoners' drawings from the Karaoglanović collection (B. Stanić and L. Petrović-Ćirić, *Likovni radovi iz zarobljeničkih logora. Zbirka Sime Karaoglanovića*, Beograd, 1997). Karaoglanović's own diary consisting of several notebooks is currently in the possession of his daughter Ms. Mira Janković, who plans to transcribe and publish it.



behind. All of the authors considered in this article come from one region of Yugoslavia – Serbia. Due to their age, two of them had previous war experiences (Vinaver and Lebl in World War One). Four were from Ashkenazi families, three of Sephardic background. Regarding profession, among them was one rabbi (Helfgott), one writer (Vinaver), one art historian and journalist (Bihalji-Merin), one historian (Lebl), one engineer (Kozinski) and several lawyers (Amar, Karaoglanović and Levi). With regard to political affiliation, three of them were members of the communist party prior to the war (Bihalji-Merin, Lebl, Karaoglanović), while the rest did not have any party affiliation. All except one (Kozinski) survived the camp. All except one (Helfgott) were repatriated to Yugoslavia after the liberation of the camps.<sup>22</sup>

*How did they write about their camp experiences?*

#### 4. The first testimony: Stanislav Vinaver

Chronologically speaking, the first testimony on the POW camps was Stanislav Vinaver's *Godine poniženja i borbe. Život u nemačkim 'Oflazima'*.<sup>23</sup> It was written immediately after his liberation and repatriation, and published in 1945.

At the time of imprisonment, Vinaver was already a 50-year old man that had experienced the Great War. He was an outstanding Serbian/Yugoslav/Jewish intellectual and writer, a journalist and a literary translator. Already at that time, he was a well-known public figure, unlike most of the other authors considered in this article. Today, he is still considered a key writer of 20th c Serbian literature. His book begins with a motto, a quote from "The land of the Dead", a section of the *Odyssey* (XI: 14). This is the land of the Cimmerians, a people enveloped in mist and darkness, which the protagonist must experience in order to be able to return home. The two paratextual elements – the title and the motto – are complementary. While the first one states the theme as a concrete reality, the second one provides a metaphorical reflection generated by a functional intertextual link. The identification of the German POW camp as "the land of the dead" and the experience of it as that of "humiliation and struggle" offers an effective introduction to the narrative that follows. It will basically evolve along the lines marked by two themes announced in the title. One is negative: the humiliation imposed on the

prisoners. The other is positive: their struggle to resist and overcome it.

Vinaver was a poet and writer, but this book should be considered as an example of documentary memoir prose rather than literature, although he often uses intertextuality as a tool for interpreting the reality he experienced.

The authenticity of Vinaver's rendering of camp life is unquestionable, especially considering the brief time interval between the experience itself and its description and interpretation.

Vinaver's book was not written as a diary, although it should be assumed that in writing it he relied not only on his memory, but also on notes as markers of key dates and events. Although the author presents concrete details, his basic perspective is interpretative rather than descriptive. His book is divided into 17 chapters. The titles of the latter focus on inmates and events - the officers' corps, the Nüremberg Declaration, the Yugoslav community, the Kronprinz Camp, camp conditions - but even more so on pertinent issues reflected in the latter, such as the question of why and how Yugoslavia capitulated, the position of the POW's, the attitude of the Germans towards the prisoners, polarization among prisoners, the organization of inmates and their activities. All these are wrapped up in the concluding chapter titled "The Meaning of the Camp Experiment". The overall interpretation is given in the following paragraph from this chapter:

...Events teach people, and it is not in vain that history is written in flaming letters on all walls and all sites of destruction in Europe, the death factories, the concentration camps, in the uncountable spaces fenced by cowardly barbed wire, which threatened to engulf the universe in its spikes and high voltage. New tendencies are conquering the horizons, awakening the human conscience and mind, and they are radiating. There were people in the camp capable of interpreting events. But, first and foremost, we could discern in the example of the drunk Helots and the former big shots the ultimate fall of everything they stand for with so much blunt hatred, unconsciousness and blindness.<sup>24</sup>

True to his literary vocation, Vinaver introduces two important references. One reference is to the *Book of Daniel*, i.e. the "writing on the wall", which only the prophet was capable of decoding as the inevitable fall of a

<sup>22</sup> Most Yugoslav POWs survived and were later repatriated. Some Serbian POWs refused to return to Yugoslavia because they did not agree with the new communist regime. Most Jewish POWs returned to Yugoslavia, although at least one of them (and there might have been more) declined to do so.

<sup>23</sup> Stanislav Vinaver (Šabac 1891 – Niška Banja 1955) began writing poetry and prose during his youth years in Belgrade. He studied mathematics, physics and music in Paris and graduated physics at the University of Belgrade. Vinaver participated in the Balkan Wars and in World War One. He travelled to Britain and France in 1916 as a member of Serbian diplomatic missions; he was in St. Petersburg in 1917 during the Russian Revolution. After

World War One, Vinaver dedicated himself to his literary pursuits, becoming one of the leading modernists. Vinaver joined the Yugoslav ministry of foreign affairs in 1927 and later worked in the Centralni pres biro [Yugoslav national press agency]. He was posted as press attache in Geneva, Berlin, and Prague. During World War Two he was deported to a POW camp in Germany. Vinaver was one of the most important Serbian writers of his time and was also a prolific translator, journalist and editor. (M. Radovanović, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 56-57).

<sup>24</sup> S. Vinaver, *Godine poniženja i borbe. Život u nemačkim 'Oflazima'*, Beograd: Međunarodna knjižarnica Milinković i Mihailović, 1945, 75-76.

corrupt and evil power. Vinaver's book was in fact mostly motivated by the need to interpret and defeat the forces of hatred, immorality and blindness – to decode the "flaming letters" written on walls all over the continent. The image he evokes is expanded and multiplied to cover Europe caught in a human cataclysm of Biblical, universal proportions. The second reference is to Helots, an enslaved population in ancient Greece (Sparta). When Vinaver writes about enslaved men ("drunk Helots"), he does not refer to literal but to metaphorical enslavement – prisoners of war who could not and did not resist the Nazis, acting instead in the latter's interest due to arrogant blindness or in return for petty privileges.

Throughout Vinaver's book it is evident that he views the fundamental polarization among the inmates as an issue of defending or abrogating human values and integrity, of responding to humiliation and degradation by resisting it or succumbing to it, whether consciously or not. Vinaver describes this as a process. The first issue that polarized the inmates was the question of Yugoslav capitulation. Vinaver criticizes part of the inmates for believing German propaganda and accepting the idea of the invincibility of German military power and implementing German demands in a disciplined manner. When the German authorities released the Croats, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Rumanians and Italians (as these countries were their allies), retaining mostly Serbian and Jewish members of the Yugoslav army, some thought they too would achieve this privilege by conforming to German demands. The staunch anti-communism of others dampened their criticism of the Germans, while others were simply not capable of interpreting the complex reality they were confronted with. Still others were under the influence of the propaganda of the Nedić government in dismembered and occupied Serbia, which cooperated with the Germans.

All prisoners were treated as hostages "convenient for all kinds of retribution and camouflage during [Allied] bombings". However, compared to other inmates Yugoslav POW's were treated worse (except for Russian prisoner's who were not protected by the Geneva Convention). However, the worst treatment among the Serbs/Yugoslavs (the Germans called them "Serbs", while they referred to themselves as "Yugoslavs") was reserved for two groups: the Jews according to racial identity and the anti-fascists according to ideological orientation. At some point and in some camps, Jews were required to wear the yellow star and were segregated to special "Jewish" barracks, while in some instances they were grouped together with antifascists.

The first phase in this process was the polarization into two groups: those who opted for resisting German authorities and those who were more inclined to conform. The second phase was active confrontation of two groups. In the restrictive conditions of the POW camp, this was reflected in several events. The first and most important event is one Vinaver calls the "most shameful episode of our enslavement". This was the so-called Nüremberg Declaration that deeply polarized both Serbs and Jews. Several high-ranking Serbian generals had written a

"declaration" advocating two political positions: support for the Nedić government and strong condemnation of "communist Russia". Only a minority of inmates in the Nüremberg camp refused to sign:

Those who signed it contrary to their convictions, in a state mental depression or on disciplinary grounds, regretting their action later, would respond with rage if this was mentioned. However, their hatred towards the reactionaries who had tricked or pressured them into signing was by the same reason greater. (...) The discussion about the Nuremberg Declaration remained the most painful point in our prisoners' life.<sup>25</sup>

Vinaver's book provides not only a description of the life of Yugoslav inmates in German POW camps, but more importantly a lucid interpretation of many aspects of the latter. In the concluding chapter, Vinaver views political polarization in the POW camp as an aspect of a fundamental human and ethical question. The camp's internal reality is seen as a micro-cosmos of the world outside, a condensed version of the latter in which muddled reality becomes clear and transparent:

In the homeland, 'on site', in the density of action, the intertwining of events, basic threads are not discerned clearly, people not always realize what they are like completely. There is a multiplicity of relations. In the camp, however, under the most difficult conditions of enslavement, each individual is tested under pressure, everything appears cynically clear. Camouflage is ineffective, confusing nuances disappear. Everything is condensed, reduced to its essential formula. Thus, during four years of life in slavery one could appreciate each individual, see through deceptive veils like with X-rays, measure and gauge each individual. Rarely is it possible to see so many 'pretentious' individuals not only 'in their slippers', but without the Bengal fire of advertisement and legend, without the optical illusions that appear endlessly in contemporary life.<sup>26</sup>

Vinaver experienced the camp as a situation in which the integrity of each individual was tested, in which deceit was rendered ineffective as each person's true personality was uncovered together with the ugly reality usually covered up by thick layers of make-up. Inmates were confronted not only with humiliation and hardship, but more importantly with the truth about themselves and others as well as the values they stood for. For Vinaver, it was a question of integrity and ethics rather than political polarization. And although he was a writer *par excellence*, and although spiced with literary references and intertextual links, this book is an example of documentary prose providing a lucid insight into camp reality.

Vinaver's answer to a fundamental question posed by wartime reality is an uneasy one. In the pre-war period Vinaver was a prolific writer, one of the founders of Serbian expressionism, well known for his poetry books, anthologies, essays, etc. He had no leftist political inclinations. He criticized the Serbian surrealists both for

<sup>25</sup> Vinaver, 42-43.

<sup>26</sup> Vinaver, 73-74.

their literary and political ideas. Vinaver was also a journalist, one of the contributors of the Belgrade newspaper "Vreme", that had a centrist political orientation, leaning towards the political right. From the very beginning of the war, Vinaver was a staunch anti-fascist and this basic attitude moved him closer to the communists in the camp. In the memoirs of Arpad Lebl,<sup>27</sup> a pre-war member of the CPY interned in the same camp, Vinaver is described as "an incredibly lucid intellectual, with a first-rate style, witty, an excellent writer, philosopher and philologist", who had previously been a member of "a reactionary group that would later embrace fascism"; although Lebl in initially described Vinaver from a militantly communist position, he noted Vinaver's gradual shift towards the position of the communists i.e. "sympathizers of the PLS [People's Liberation Struggle or NOB, led by Tito], antifascists and communists" on realizing that "we are the true patriots, while the camp fascists and reactionaries are also barbarians and traitors"; Lebl described how in Vinaver was "a brave anti-fascist on the political center, but never a communist".<sup>28</sup> Lebl also presents a scene in which Vinaver and he are discussing the communists. Here we have an insight into Vinaver's view of the communists: "I know exactly, even without you telling me anything. You proceed blindly, like horses, you and your people see in front of you only your goal [revolution], without looking left or right".<sup>29</sup> Vinaver was an independent intellectual throughout his life, and although he supported the communist faction in the camp and the liberation of the country carried out by Tito's Partisans, he later became deeply disappointed with the post-war communist regime, above all with its anti-democratic policies (abolishment of political pluralism,

<sup>27</sup> Arpad Lebl (Kovačica 1898 – Novi Sad 1982) used several pseudonyms, one of them Žarko Plamenac. He studied at the School of Philosophy in Budapest, was recruited into the Austro-Hungarian army during World War One, became a member of the Social Democratic Party in 1917, organized a campaign against Austria-Hungary. After the fall of Austria-Hungary and the establishment of Yugoslavia, he returned to Pančevo in 1919, when he joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Between 1921-1924 Lebl held several teaching posts in Yugoslavia as he had graduated history at the University of Belgrade in 1924. Lebl continued his teaching career, was arrested as a communist activist, posted as a teacher in Bitola, and forced to retire in 1939. In post-war Yugoslavia he continued his teaching career, received his doctorate in 1957 and held various political posts. He wrote books and articles on the history of Vojvodina and also published literary works (poetry, prose, essays). He began his literary career as an expressionist and member of the Dada group in Yugoslavia, but ended up embracing social realism. He wrote in both Hungarian and Serbian. (A. Rafailović, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 129-130.)

<sup>28</sup> Lebl, 186-187.

<sup>29</sup> Lebl, 225.

<sup>30</sup> Vinaver, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Oto Bihalji-Merin (Zemun 1904 – Beograd 1993) studied at the School of Art in Belgrade and the Academy of Art in

rigid intolerance, overwhelming control). The regime, on the other hand, tolerated Vinaver's position because of his literary reputation and his impeccable wartime record. One more question remains regarding Vinaver: what was his attitude towards religion? His book on camp life contains almost no references to religion. In two instances he mentions the Serbian Orthodox Church and its priests, who were also polarized politically. He also mentions manipulation of religion, but there is not a word on the Jewish faith. Vinaver has no doubts about his Jewish identity, he writes about anti-Semitism, but he does not refrain from mentioning that even some Jews signed the Nüremberg Declaration. It seems that Vinaver viewed both religion and ideology as restrictive. The only true value, according to Vinaver, was freedom: "The nightmares and illusions, diabolic images and black magic, the poisoned camp dreams – will be dispersed by freedom, which has an effect stronger than any wine and awakens one more effectively than any call of reason. How not to believe in freedom?"<sup>30</sup>

## 5. Bihalji-Merin's novel

Unlike Vinaver, Bihalji-Merin<sup>31</sup> was a very active Yugoslav communist involved in illegal activities in the pre-war period. He participated in the Spanish Civil War as a journalist and published a book on this subject both in English (*Spain Between Death and Birth*, 1938) and Serbian (1946). He lived for a while in Germany, where he joined the German communist party and published articles in the latter's official newspaper. He also published art criticism in the journal *Linkskurve*, a mouthpiece of leftist

Berlin (1924-1927). In 1928 he assisted his brother Pavle Bihali in establishing a new (leftist) journal and publishing house called *Nova literatura* (Nolit). In line with his leftist political affiliation, he joined the German workers movement and became secretary of the Federation of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers; he contributed to the official organ of the German Communist Party (*Rotte Fahne*) and the journal for art and culture *Sturm*; he edited the journal *Linkskurve* and *Welt am Abend* (1932), and *Kultur und Kunst*, which was banned following Hitler's rise to power. Bihalji-Merin then transferred to Paris where he became secretary of the Institute Against Fascism. He attended the Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow in 1934 and participated in the Spanish Civil War as a journalist. Bihalji-Merin returned to Yugoslavia in 1940 and was deported to a POW camp in Germany in 1941 as a reserve captain of the Yugoslav airforce. (Arrested by the Gestapo in May of 1941, his brother Pavle Bihali was shot in Belgrade two months later.) Oto Bihalji-Merin returned to Belgrade after the war, worked as editor of books, journals and newspapers, also as curator of exhibitions. He authored numerous books, essays and articles on Medieval art, naive art as well as modern painting, sculpture, and literature. He became a member of the Royal Belgian Academy in 1977 (M. Radovanović, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 32-33).

intellectuals and artists (György Lukacs, among them). He studied art, but he is much more important as an art historian and critic than as an artist. In post-war Yugoslavia he published many outstanding books on Yugoslav art. As a veteran and experienced communist, Bihalji-Merin played a central role in organizing the Jewish communist circle, expanding it, planning its activities, coordinating them with the Serbian leftist officers, and maintaining contact with the communist party in the homeland. These activities culminated in the Osnabrück period, when the Jews and Serbian communists were located in the same part of the camp, lumped together so-to-say, but not completely isolated from the rest of the inmates. Barrack number 37 and especially room number 7 became, so to say, the "headquarters" of Bihalji-Merin's circle. The main goal was to organize subversion and obstruction to the German authorities, but also to expand the leftist circle in the camp, strengthen the general spirit of resistance, and secure the leadership role of the party and its ideology. Among his closest associates were Arpad Lebl and Sima Karaoglanović, also pre-war party members. In spreading the spirit of resistance, hope and belief in victory, communication was essential. The life in the camps was organized early on: various professional associations were established (lawyers, teachers, engineers, etc.) and courses were organized (of foreign languages and on a variety of topics), books were acquired (through international institutions such as the Red Cross and the YMCA). German radio was available to the inmates, but the German propaganda had to be countered. This was done by organizing "oral newspapers" and "publishing" handwritten newspapers, the means of spreading anti-fascist propaganda and news from non-German sources available thanks to radios smuggled into the camp. These Yugoslav, not specifically Jewish newspapers<sup>32</sup> were "published" sometimes in a single handwritten copy. One of the first was called "Sedmica" ["Number 7"]. It was launched on November 1942 as an organ of the communist party. Its title referred to room number 7, where it was edited, but also to the October Revolution. At first the group in this room would gather and listen to one person reading the "newspaper" out loud, then a discussion would follow. After 12 issues the newspaper changed its title to "Tridesetsedmica" ["Number 37"]. The latter was published until May 1943 and targeted a wider audience as an antifascist, not specifically communist newspaper. All the inmates from barrack number 37 were invited to the reading and discussion. As the number of newspapers grew, they became a security threat, so it was decided to establish a single publication advocating the views of the communist party. This weekly called "Vesnik" ["Herald"] was published in ten copies.<sup>33</sup> There were also "specialized" periodicals: "Kružok" ["Circle"] launched in 1943 dedicated to the Russian prisoners, humorous newspapers,

<sup>32</sup> S. Karaoglanović, "'Štampa' u logorima za zarobljenike", *Zbornik Istorijskog muzeja Srbije*, 1979, 15-16, 105-122.

<sup>33</sup> "Vesnik" had a hundred issues. However, due to security reasons, most of them were destroyed. Only three issues have been preserved (Karaoglanović, 109). Most of the other newspapers were also destroyed.

literary and other almanacs. The last newspaper was "12. čas" ["The Twelfth Hour"], launched in Barkenbrügge and published until January 1945. Its editor in chief was Sima Karaoglanović, while the contributors, as in other periodicals, were both Serbs and Jews (among the latter: O. Bihalji-Merin, A. Gams, A. Lebl, L. Levental, A. Heron). Another form of resistance and subversion were the various cultural activities organized by Serbs and Jews together: instrumental and vocal music events, theater, literature, lectures, and especially comic cabaret performances. They were designed to attract as large an audience as possible. Cultural events were not only an expression of resistance, but also of the creative potential of prisoners. They provided amusement and more importantly consolation, a cure for depression and a source of hope. The prisoners who were members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia established a body they called the illegal "Anti-fascist Popular Council" designed to involve anti-fascists who were not communists, as well as a "Cultural Board" which functioned as a legal branch of the latter. Here is how Lebl interprets the thinking behind this effort: The main reason for this organization was understandably derived from the fact that in Europe of 1941 only the Yugoslavs, led by the CPY, were fighting a war of liberation. Only the Yugoslav soldiers and officers in the camps were organized in illegal party cells and anti-fascist groups all the way up to the camp and inter-camp committees, establishing at the same time contacts with the Party in Yugoslavia. Only they proceeded with obvious – although banned – activities. Only they adopted and propagated the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, delivered lectures, held concerts and theater performances, edited and 'published' newspapers and journals, etc. in the spirit of the party ideology and anti-fascism, under the guard towers, watching the machine guns on the tower, which at times – even for no reason at all – 'spoke up' by killing our comrades.<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding certain exaggerations, it is true that the communists were the major organized anti-fascist force among the Yugoslav prisoners. Lebl's memoirs, however, show very clearly that for the Yugoslav Jewish communist the bond with fellow-communists was much stronger than the bond with fellow-Jews. Ideology was primary, Jewish identity came only in second place, and there was no place for religion. Therefore, collaboration with the enemy and appeasement of the German camp command, by Serbs and Jews alike, was strongly condemned. Here are a few examples from the memoirs of Arpad Lebl. Lebl criticizes a certain Horovic, who "surrounded himself with fascists, Jews like himself, as well as Serbs", just as he denounces colonel Mevorah for considering that the Jews might be making their position even more difficult by engaging in overt political activity.<sup>35</sup> The third example refers to

<sup>34</sup> Lebl, 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> Moša Mevorah (Beograd 1890 - Israel 1982). As a young man Mevorah joined the Zionist organization "Gideon". He studied at the Trade Academy in Belgrade and the Export Academy in Vienna, where he joined the "Bar Giora" organization of Jewish students from the

religion. Lebl describes how Bihalji-Merin and other Jews in barracks number 37 organized various cultural events and realized they needed to find a space that would serve as a reading room and discussion forum, a cultural "corner". When a small room was designated for this purpose, Gustav Gavrin (Švarc)<sup>36</sup> was asked to paint the walls imitating sculptures and paintings by Rodin and other masters. A group of 10-15 elderly and religious Jewish officers thought that the room would be appropriate for religious services, but the first time they went in, they immediately ran out, shouting how "the communists" had desecrated their temple. The discussion that ensued, between the atheist communist Jews and the apolitical religious Jews ended in a compromise: whenever the room was used for services, the wall paintings would be covered with white sheets that would be removed for other cultural events. Lebl describes this as a positive achievement:

*Thus we achieved unity within the 'camp in the camp' [the camp in which the Jews were segregated], so we could proceed to organize our events as the Jews accepted them as joint events. So, since in 1942 May First coincided with a Saturday, we first gave a bigger room in the barracks to the 'religious' for their holy service, and when it was over, we began the celebration of May First with militant speeches and songs. The 'old' Jews first withdrew to their own rooms, but later returned one by one and participated in our celebration....<sup>37</sup>*

Here we see an interesting phenomenon. The grouping of Jewish officers in a single separate barracks created a Jewish 'micro-unit' in which all factions would be in contact: young and old, atheists and believers, leftists and rightists, Zionists and integrationists, those who were politically committed and those who were apolitical. Lebl's attitude is clearly profiled. It is in fact coded in his discourse: 'we' are the communists, 'they' are the religious, but also others in the category defined as 'non-

Balkans. He studied art with the Serbian painter Mihailo Petrović, worked for two years in Trieste and later in his father's trade company based in Belgrade. Mevorah participated in the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and World War One, and was awarded several medals. He graduated law at the University of Belgrade and during the twenties and thirties worked in the trade business. Following the capitulation of Yugoslavia in 1941 he was deported to a POW camp in Germany, where he continued painting, making 600 portraits of his fellow inmates. In 1949 Mevorah emigrated to Israel, where he continued his artistic pursuits, painting portraits of Israeli writers and other outstanding personalities. (M. Mevorah, "Autobiografske beleške Moše Mevoraha", *Zbornik Jevrejskog istorijskog muzeja*, Beograd, 1992, 6, 442-447.; J. Petaković, "Moša Mevorah", *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, Beograd, 152-153). Lebl, 211-213.

<sup>36</sup> Gustav Gavrin (Švarc) from Zagreb was a film director. Gavrin and Kosta Hlavaty directed the first post-war film on the Jasenovac death camp operated by the Ustashas in Croatia (1945), a 16-minute documentary including footage from Ustasha archives. Later he directed a feature film based on Bihalji-Merin's novel *Good-bye in October*.

communists', including Zionists. Lebl also comments on another fellow prisoner – Evgenije Kozinski – who is in a dilemma: whether to move closer to the Zionists or the communists. Kozinski has conversations with Albert Vajs,<sup>38</sup> whom Lebl characterizes as "a pre-war and post-war leader of the Yugoslav Jews and professor at the School of Law in Belgrade, who began his activities in the camp with a series of lectures on Zionism, speaking ever more convincingly, eloquently and frequently as he observed that our camp was against Zionism and against the focus on Palestine, a separate 'Eretz' Israel."<sup>39</sup> For "us" (characteristically, Lebl writes as a representative of the communist collective rather than as an individual), he wrote, the homeland was Yugoslavia, where "we" wanted to build a new and better life, while Vajs remained "a Jew", albeit "a good and active anti-fascist". Vajs returned to Yugoslavia after liberation and unlike half of the Yugoslav Jews who survived the Holocaust and made *aliyah* to Israel after the establishment of the Jewish state, Albert Vajs remained in Yugoslavia. Compared to other Yugoslav communist Jews, Lebl was perhaps the most militant, fitting quite well the profile given above by Vinaver (in his conversation with Lebl). His negative attitude towards being "a Jew", a religious Jew and a Zionist was not shared by all of his ideological comrades. On the contrary, most of them adopted a moderate stance on these issues. Even Bihalji-Merin, the *spiritus movens* of the Jewish communist group was moderate in this respect. Although Vinaver was completely immersed in literature, he wrote about his camp experience in a book of documentary prose. On the other hand, Bihalji-Merin, who was not a poet or prose writer, decided to express his camp experiences in a literary genre – a 500-page novel titled *Good-bye in October*.

At the end of the novel is a note explaining how Bihalji-Merin began this project:

<sup>37</sup> Lebl, 190.

<sup>38</sup> Albert Vajs (Zemun 1905 – Beograd 1964). Before the war, Vajs was vice-president of the Ashkenazi community of Belgrade and a member of the Yugoslav Zionist Federation. In the camp he was chief editor of "Number 37", one of the editors of "The Twelfth Hour" and also a prominent member of the Antifascist Council. In post-war Yugoslavia he was a member of the State Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the Occupying Forces and their Collaborators. He participated in the preparation of the Yugoslav materials for the Nüremberg Trials, the extradition demand for Ustasha police minister Andrija Artuković (who was an immigrant in the USA), and for the Eichmann Trial. He held many other important positions in government bodies associated with war crimes and international law. Vajs was vice-president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia (1945-1948) and later president of the latter until his death. He was also a member of the Executive Board of the World Jewish Congress. (A. Rafailović, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 50-51).

<sup>39</sup> Lebl, 191.

- Here are Ženja's [Evgenije Ženja Kozinski] notes, - said Sima [Karaoglanović] placing three notebooks on my desk. - If you add them to your own notes from the camp years, you could write the book you so often talked about. - I will, I replied.<sup>40</sup>

It took Bihalji-Merin a few years to write the novel based on real events stored in his own memory and that of his comrades. Most of the notes and diaries prisoners had written during detention were destroyed due to censorship or lost in the final march they had to endure after leaving Barkenbrügge. Little was preserved and that little thanks to Sima Karaoglanović. When the exhausted prisoners were throwing away their coats and everything else in order to survive the march, Karaoglanović had the strength to carry one diary - that of his close friend Kozinski. It was as if he were paying his debt to Kozinski, who had not betrayed his comrades under torture and who died at the hands of the Gestapo.

Only the diary of Kozinski, wrote Bihalji-Merin, was completely preserved.<sup>41</sup> Bihalji-Merin explicitly states that his novel is based on Kozinski's written account and the memories of a certain Jovan Vidak called Buljooki, who is in fact Bihalji-Merin.<sup>42</sup> The author is careful to indicate that the novel intertwines reality and fiction. Although he pleads with the readers to resist the urge to identify the "mostly imaginary" characters, the latter are only superficially disguised if at all: the real Ženja Kozinski appears as Ženja, his wife Klara as Klarisa, Rafailo Blam as Blum, etc. Nonetheless, Bihalji-Merin seeks to distance himself from autobiography by presenting himself as one of the characters rather than the narrator. Dissociating himself from the narrator (switching from "I" to "he") he seeks to enhance the "objectivity" of the narrative. In fact the only time the narrator proceeds to speak in the first person ("I") is in two chapters indicated as the original "notes of Ženja By stressing the fictional nature of the Kozinski". characters the author wants to reduce the responsibility of being a 100% truthful on every step of the narration. Bihalji-Merin's goal was not to write a documentary account, but to provide a literary interpretation of the documentary material or what had been preserved of it in memory, and to highlight the subjective drama of the prisoners' experience.

There are, however, several problems with this novel. This was the first and only novel Bihalji-Merin wrote and his lack of experience with this complex genre are obvious. The novel is too long and less than perfectly structured. Although from beginning to end Kozinski is one of the main protagonists, there are too many digressions, topics, and characters, so the author cannot avoid a loose structure and having a hard time keeping all the narrative threads and pieces together. The novel is certainly an

<sup>40</sup> O. Bihalji-Merin, *Doviđenja u oktobru*, Beograd: Prosveta, 1947, 518.

<sup>41</sup> This was what Bihalji-Merin knew at that moment. However, other diaries have also survived the camp as well as their authors, among them Helfgott and Amar.

<sup>42</sup> Bihalji-Merin's nickname was Buljooki, the "goggle-eyed".

<sup>43</sup> Lebl, 248.

interesting example of the combination of documentary material and fiction, but its literary merit is questionable. In 1950, only three years after its publication (1947), there was an attempt to transfer the novel to another medium - film. Several former POWs participated in this project: Karaoglanović wrote the screen-play, Aleksej Butakov composed the music, the title of the feature film, "Red Flower", was taken from a song composed by Rafailo Blam in the camp, the director was Gustav Gavrin. Prominent actors played the roles of POWs. We have no data on the reception of the movie by the audience, but Lebl in his memoirs (1975) comments that both the novel and the film have "long been forgotten".<sup>43</sup> This might have been the indirect result of a tendency in the sixties to marginalize the POW narrative. The historical narrative fed into public memory favored the armed struggle of the Partisans in the homeland, while the resistance in the POW camps was a secondary element of the war narrative. Vinaver had passed away, Bihalji-Merin was writing and publishing outstanding studies on Yugoslav art, Karaoglanović was a film producer, Yugoslavia was looking forward and away from its wartime past except for the mainstream war narrative promoted in domestic public memory, but also seeking international resonance. Interest was focused on feature films describing the epic struggle of the Partisans, Richard Burton playing the role of Tito in one of them. Bihalji-Merin's novel, written quickly and published only two years after liberation, contains many interesting details regarding camp life, individual officers, activities of the communists, cultural events, etc. However, the Jewish issue seems tucked away in the myriad details of the 500 page long narrative. As a staunch communist, Bihalji-Merin did not have strong interest in this issue. Nonetheless, it appears overtly in the narrative segments based directly on Kozinski's manuscript.

Thirteen years after Bihalji-Merin's novel and ten years after its film version, Sima Karaoglanović,<sup>44</sup> thanks to whom Kozinski's three notebooks had been preserved, decided to publish them under the title *The Diary of Ženja Kozinski* (1961). However, the book contains not Kozinski's original notes, but an edited version of the latter done by Karaoglanović. Since the original has seemingly been lost, we may never be able to check the extent of Karaoglanović's intervention in Kozinski's text: whether he suppressed some parts or not, changed others, etc. We assume he edited Kozinski's "notes" only to turn them into a fairly consistent narrative. Karaoglanović might have also complemented them with information from his many conversations with Kozinski.<sup>45</sup> Semantically, the Kozinski segments in Bihalji-Merin's novel essentially coincide with the segments dealing with the same topics in

<sup>44</sup> For Sima Karaoglanović's biography, see note 19.

<sup>45</sup> According to Karaoglanović's daughter Ms Mira Janković, he complemented the original notes with information from his many conversations with Kozinski in the camp. The two were close friends sharing the same room in the barracks. Karaoglanović added a segment to Kozinski's text in which he described why and how Kozinski was killed.

Karaoglanović's edited version, although they differ in the specific wording.

In any case, the *Diary of Ženja Kozinski* published in 1961 by Karaoglanović is one of the most interesting testimonies on the POW experience and also exceptional in several ways. Unlike Vinaver, Bihalji-Merin and Lebl, Kozinski's text is a diary rather than a memoir: his writing coincides with the described events in real time. Also, while Helfgott had the advantage of hindsight in the process of adapting his diary many years after the events, Kozinski's text remained closer to its original form. Finally, unlike the other authors considered in this article, who were born in Yugoslavia and had more or less profiled identities on arrival in the camp, Kozinski was an outsider with more complex identity issues. What is most interesting about Kozinski's text is that it is first and foremost a very personal quest of identity unfolding in specific, extraordinary and hostile camp conditions. It is the drama of a man, a Jew born in Russia and raised in Yugoslavia, moving through the camp experience, making choices at every twist and turn, and ultimately paying for his decisions with his life. Only Kozinski's testimony was concluded by death rather than liberation, by final closure rather than a rebirth in freedom. The final chapter Karaoglanović added to Kozinski's text describes how Karaoglanović read through Ženja's diary after his arrest, as if searching for an answer to the question: will Ženja betray his comrades under Gestapo torture? Karaoglanović quotes the following passage from Ženja's diary: "I want to work, struggle, give everything I have for it. Yes, but how much is everything? Will I give up my life after so many years of enslavement and suffering, at the very moment when the war is coming to a close, when the wish for life is so overwhelming? Will I give it up for something important to me? And is it so important as to give my life for it?"<sup>46</sup> Kozinski was the only one of the authors confronted with this final dilemma that hovers like a shadow over the interpretation of his diary.

## 6. The diary of Ženja Kozinski

Who was Ženja Kozinski?<sup>47</sup> He was born in Russia (Kiev) in a Jewish fairly wealthy family. However, his uncles had married Russian wives and converted to Christianity. His father remained a Jew and married a Jewish wife. His parents were professionals – an engineer and a medical doctor – and were to some extent assimilated. They spoke only Russian and were not religious: "We celebrated family holidays", wrote Kozinski, "instead of religious ones". The

<sup>46</sup>Kozinski, 280.

<sup>47</sup> Evgenije Ženja Kozinski (Kiev 1912 – Osnabrück 1944). He came from an Ashkenazi family from Kiev. His father was a civil engineer, his mother a medical doctor. His mother managed to obtain a job in a sanatorium located in Slavuta, a town in Western Ukraine located on the border with Poland, which enabled them to flee the country. They settled in Yugoslavia at the urging of Ženja's uncle Yevsey, also a medical doctor, who had come to Serbia as a volunteer during the First Balkan War (1912) and had stayed in Serbia. Ženja Kozinski lived and studied in

family fled to Yugoslavia after the Revolution. During Kozinski's youth, his best friends were children of white Russian emigrants in Belgrade. However, he had a problem with them due to their anti-Semitism, so later he identified much more with his Serbian friends. After graduating civil engineering, he married a medical doctor from a Sephardic family, whose traditions seemed to him "archaic" and "slightly smelled of mold".<sup>48</sup> He was apolitical and his social status did not encourage any sympathy for leftist ideologies, which he viewed as "fuzzy utopias".

The pressures of camp life forcefully posed the question of Kozinski's self-perception. His quest of identity went through four phases: probing his Russian identity, exploring the Judaic faith, considering the Zionist option, finally identifying with communist ideology.

The Russian element of his identity was put to the test at the very beginning of his camp experience. Since he declared himself as a Russian rather than a Jew, Kozinski was automatically grouped with the Yugoslav Russians. Although he identified with them on a linguistic and cultural level (especially because his birth and earliest memories were associated with Russia), their anti-Semitism naturally distanced Kozinski from them. When the Germans offered the Yugoslav Russian officers freedom in exchange for their commitment to fight against "the Bolsheviks", Kozinski refused, realizing at the same time that further "life with these czarist Russians that hate and despise me will be difficult".<sup>49</sup> Kozinski saw Russia as a cultural rather than a political entity, a lost homeland, but not a homeland for the future.

He then applied for transfer to the main camp. When he came to Nüremberg, the Jews were required to wear the yellow star. Although he was not registered as a Jew, he realized that some right-wing Serbian officers had anti-Semitic attitudes. This raised doubts as to whether Yugoslavia could be his true homeland, leading him to consider the Zionist option. He then declared himself a Jew, but once again he felt estranged, this time in the Jewish environment: "They were my brethren only by misfortune. Otherwise, they were alien to me, foreign. I felt much closer to the Serbs and Russians. Frankly, I never appreciated Jews".<sup>50</sup> One of the elements of estrangement was religion. Kozinski was raised in a secular Jewish environment in which ethnic identity did not coincide with religion. Here is how Kozinski described his attitude towards religion:

*I began thinking of god. I was not raised in a religious spirit. My liberal mother told me when I was a boy: "When you grow up you can choose the religion you like". I never*

Belgrade, graduated civil engineering, married Clara (a young medical doctor from Belgrade, from a Sephardic family). In 1941 he was deported to a POW camp in Germany and was tortured and killed by the Gestapo in 1944. (Kozinski's biography reconstructed by K. Vidaković-Petrov from data included in his diary).

<sup>48</sup> Kozinski, 109.

<sup>49</sup> Kozinski, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Kozinski, 72.

attended classes in religion. Nevertheless, I had a god of my own. I spoke to him in ordinary language. I addressed him when I wanted something my parents could not do for me or when I wanted to achieve something. I could not understand why people go to church, why they pray to god in a language incomprehensible to them. I never prayed in war or in the toughest moments of imprisonment. But now I needed help. I could not go on living. Without doubt, without thinking, I addressed the gentle god of my childhood. Later I remembered my thoughts on religion. 'Only weaklings, only the defeated needed to believe in something supernatural. (...) When man cannot endure, he prays to god, the earth, his father or his mother.' All of that was now gone. I've been speaking to god for days.<sup>51</sup>

Kozinski's secular family environment influenced his view of personal faith and institutionalized religion: the former was accepted as necessary, but the latter was rejected as superfluous. He described the Jewish camp in the following way: "A few days later I found myself in the same cage with two hundred people of all sorts, united only by one thing – the imaginary faith of Moses".<sup>52</sup> However, although he maintained his distance from the Jewish faith, Kozinski did overcome a problem he had felt for a long time – that of feeling uneasy about his Jewishness. Thus he stated that for many years the fact that he was Jewish was "embarrassing", while now when he was surrounded by Jews he could be comfortable with his Jewish identity.

The next phase of Kozinski's quest of identity involved Zionism. When cultural activities developed in the camp, there were many courses and lectures the prisoners attended. Albert Vajs, mentioned above, held a course in Jewish history and spoke about anti-Semitism. Kozinski was especially receptive to Vajs's lectures. It seemed, he wrote, that Vajs spoke his language and read his thoughts, clearly presenting what he had felt as a nightmare in his heart and mind. "We Jews", said Vajs, "will always suffer from anti-Semitism because it has existed in the past and will be there in the future. The only solution is: to build our own country, our own home."<sup>53</sup> Thus Kozinski was introduced to Zionism, which he was ready to adopt, essentially as a response to anti-Semitism. This prompted him to enroll in a Hebrew language course held by the rabbi (whose name he doesn't mention): "Parallel to the course in socialism, I continue attending the course taught by the rabbi. I'm studying Hebrew. My decision to emigrate to Palestine after the war is still in place".<sup>54</sup>

However, once Kozinski was transferred to room number 7 in Osnabrück, he came under the direct influence of Bihalji-Merin's communist group. Gradually he distanced himself from Zionism as he began adopting ideas of the communist ideology. Here is an indication of the initial step in this process:

<sup>51</sup> Kozinski, 67-68.

<sup>52</sup> Kozinski, 74.

<sup>53</sup> Kozinski, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Kozinski, 159.

<sup>55</sup> Kozinski, 172-173.

<sup>56</sup> Kozinski, 191.

<sup>57</sup> Kozinski, 192.

I didn't give up learning Hebrew. They laughed at me, asking:

- What do you need that for?

I responded with jokes. Then I told them seriously:

- Perhaps in the end I will go to Palestine. Who knows?

Actually, I felt the effort I had already invested in this was wasted.

Then things worked out for me. The course was temporarily interrupted. Our Serbian comrades were being moved into the barracks where the courses were held. So I could discretely drop out.<sup>55</sup>

There is another interesting episode in Kozinski's text. It is a reference to Moša Mevorah (mentioned above in Lebl's memoirs). Kozinski describes how the communists mocked Mevorah's apolitical stance. Later on, however, Kozinski thought that perhaps Mevorah was right in thinking that the Jews should keep away from politics and not get involved: "I haven't yet cleared this up in my mind. The thing about going to Palestine, that seemed to have been partly clarified. But the Jews getting involved in politics..."<sup>56</sup> However, this issue was resolved in his conversations with Lebl: "He convinced me completely. Never again did I ask myself: why we, the Jews?"<sup>57</sup> This opened the way to Kozinski's gradual identification with the Yugoslav Jewish communists.

Bihalji-Merin and his closest associates in room number 7 identified as Yugoslavs/Serbs rather than Jews. They saw the solution of the Jewish issue in revolution rather than Zionism, and they scorned religion, including Judaism, because they viewed religion as such as "opium for the masses". Kozinski would adopt all three elements of the communist ideology. It is important, however, to note that Kozinski absorbed the latter through two channels. One was rational, while the other was emotional. The latter was involved in his quest of identity, which essentially boiled down to a question of belonging to a group, a collective body, the need to not be alone like an excommunicated individual.<sup>58</sup> In Kozinski's previous life, the primary social group he belonged to was the family. Separated from his parents and his wife, of whom he had little or no news, Kozinski yearned for a "family" in the camp, and he finally found one. It was the communist cell of room number 7: "Everything has changed. My strength has grown a hundred times. Now I am part of something, part of my friends' circle (...) Each day I feel closer and closer to my friends and their views."<sup>59</sup> Camp conditions divided Kozinski's life into past and present. What his family was in the past, the communist cell was in the present. This feeling was reinforced when the Serb anti-fascists were joined with the Jews, when "cultural" (political) activities were intensified and Kozinski became more involved in them: "What we

<sup>58</sup> Unlike Kozinski, who yearned to be part of a group, Vinaver appreciated being an independent individual, often confronted with "groups". The difference between them can be explained by discrepancy in age, experience, maturity, personality, etc.

<sup>59</sup> Kozinski, 178, 208.



predicted finally happened. They have fenced us in, surrounded us with barbed wire, posted special guards. Our comrades the Serbs are now with us. The best among them. The Germans have established an elite camp. Only anti-fascists were in it."<sup>60</sup>

This sealed Kozinski's identification with the communists. In the last episode of his life in the camp, Kozinski took on the responsibility of maintaining liaison with the Russian prisoners in the other part of the camp. Now the latter were overwhelmingly Red Army officers. Kozinski viewed them as ideological comrades rather than Russians because his quest of identity had been completed.

## 7. *The diary/memoirs of Hermann Helfgott*

Hermann Helfgott (Zvi Asaria)<sup>61</sup> was born in Yugoslavia in a traditional Ashkenazi family. His father, a rabbi, had migrated from Poland to Vojvodina, a region of Austria-Hungary that after World War One became part of Yugoslavia. After graduating from the Jewish Theological Seminary in Sarajevo, Helfgott received a grant to continue his studies in Vienna. After the Anschluss, he moved to Budapest where he completed his studies, received his doctorate, and returned to Yugoslavia to assume the post of rabbi in Veliki Bečkerek (Zrenjanin). At the moment of capitulation, he was the only Jewish officer posted in Štip, a small town in Macedonia. Together with other Yugoslav officers and soldiers he was deported to a POW camp in Germany. After liberation, he was among a group of former inmates selected by the new Yugoslav government to act as liaison officers with the Allies in Germany. Having heard about the horror in the just liberated camp of Bergen-Belsen, he went there and initially worked on the repatriation of Yugoslav survivors of the camp. Unlike many other Yugoslav Jewish POWs, he did not return to Yugoslavia, but stayed in Germany instead. During 1945-1948 he acted as chief rabbi in the British Occupation Zone in Germany. That was the point when he parted ways with his fellow Yugoslavs from Osnabrück and Barkenbrügge, and more importantly, with the new Yugoslav government: "On July 11, 1945", wrote Helfgott, "the document given to him by the Yugoslav Command, appointing Hermann as liaison officer, was taken from him through a ruse. That same month, he received a letter from the Anti-Fascist Council, signed by Sima Karaoglanović (a Jew), saying that Hermann's work was contrary to Marshal Tito's orders".<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Kozinski, 229.

<sup>61</sup> Zvi Azarija / Hermann Helfgott (Beodra/Novo Miloševo 1913 – Savion, Israel 2002). Helfgott became a POW as a captain of the Yugoslav Army. Being a rabbi, he organized a small synagogue in the camp and held Hebrew language courses. Helfgott emigrated to Israel in 1948 and achieved the rank of major by 1953, when he was involved in the work in the committee for reparations and the latter's negotiations in Germany. Later he assumed the post of rabbi in Köln. «During 1956 there were negotiations with the Jewish community of Yugoslavia regarding his return to Yugoslavia. Both parties were interested, but the transfer did not happen because in 1958 the Yugoslav authorities issued an official paper saying they could not consent to his engagement. He returned to Israel, where he became rabbi

Helfgott's meeting with the Jewish Brigade sealed his new position:

The meeting with the men of the Jewish Brigade was a meeting with Eretz Israel itself. Their mission was one of confidence and unity. It breathed new spirit into the *She'erit ha-Pleita* and gave back to the Magen David its true connotation. This Shield of David, which in the days of the Holocaust had become a symbol of shame and death, now became a symbol of courage, honor, hope, and aspiration for a new life. Every meeting with the Brigade was a kind of redemption.<sup>63</sup>

Remaining in Germany for four years, "he worked among the surviving remnant, contributed to locating children, and facilitated the survivors' immigration to Eretz Israel"<sup>64</sup>. After making *aliyah* to Israel, where he changed his name to Zvi Asaria, he served in the army until 1953, later served as rabbi in Köln, returned to Israel where he assumed the post of rabbi in Savion, then again served as rabbi in Germany. He published various books on the Jews in Germany, Jewish holidays and customs, philosophy.<sup>65</sup> *We Are Witnesses* was first published in Hebrew (1970). It is a book of memoirs encompassing the period from 1941 till 1967, when Helfgott began writing it. Therefore, the POW experience is only a part of Helfgott's biography covered by the memoir. That specific part was described in a diary he had written during captivity in the camp (the original diary is housed in the archives of Yad Vashem). However, the part of *We Are Witnesses* describing the camp experience – the section titled "In Captivity" consisting of 100 pages out of a total of around 280 - is not the original diary, but a version of the latter rewritten more than twenty years later from a new perspective. "The waiting period prior to the Six-Day War, days of battle and victory," wrote A. Shalev in his *Foreword* to Helfgott's memoir, "intensified for Rabbi Dr. Zvi Asaria – Hermann Helfgott thoughts about the path of his life and the life of his people...(…) Now, through the new perspective in the Land of Israel this awareness comes into clear focus – we must bear witness, and this became an existential compulsion since 'You are my witnesses'"<sup>66</sup> Helfgott's diary stands apart from all the other texts considered in this article because of the profile of the author: he was the only rabbi among the Yugoslav POWs. On arrival in the camp, he immediately organized religious

in Savion». He later moved to Germany, where he was rabbi until 1970. For many years he was president of the Yugoslav section of the Veterans' Association of World War Two and vice-president of the Hitahdut. (T. Spasojević, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 5-6).

<sup>62</sup> H. Helfgott, *We Are Witnesses* [English edition], The International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 167, 291-294.

<sup>63</sup> Helfgott, 167.

<sup>64</sup> A. Shalev, "Foreword" to *We Are Witnesses*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> T. Spasojević, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 5-6.

<sup>66</sup> Shalev, 9.

services for the Jewish officers. In his original diary, the segmentation of time is given in the form of a chronological sequence marked by Sabbath and religious holidays. Unlike the other authors, who stressed the tendency of the Jews to organize or participate in activities of resistance together with the Serbs, Helfgott's diary highlights the opposite tendency – of Jews distancing themselves from the Serbs into a sort of voluntary withdrawal to an exclusively Jewish circle. The comparison of testimonies regarding the camp suggests that there was a polarization of Jewish officers: on one extreme were those directly involved in the activities of the communist resistance (centered around Bihalji-Merin), on the other were religious Jews (centered around Helfgott) and then there were those in the middle, who participated in the activities of both or none.

One example of a member of the middle group was Rafailo Blam, one of the main protagonists and organizers of very popular music events in the camp.<sup>67</sup> Helfgott mentions him in the context of organizing a choir for religious services. At one point Helfgott records a conversation with Blam, who asked for his consent to organize a big choir that "a few non-Jews would join".<sup>68</sup> Blam's account<sup>69</sup> of these events is much more detailed. Blam, who was in the same camps as Helfgott, described numerous music events – concerts of the small and big orchestras, "operas and symphonies", cabaret performances, the participation of professional and amateur musicians and singers, many Serbs as well as Jews. In Helfgott's account there is no record of any of these events, except for the singing performed at the religious services. Another member of the middle group was Isak Bata Amar. All the authors who have written on music activities in the camp mention him as an excellent singer. Indeed, before the war he was one of the founders of the Jewish Academic Choir in Belgrade and one of the outstanding singers in the Serbian-Jewish Singing Society. In his unpublished diary Amar describes how "the rabbi" (whose name he doesn't mention), having heard about this, asked him to attend religious services regularly and sing in the choir. Amar responded that he was not religious, but would come to sing for Sabbath and the holidays.<sup>70</sup> It seems that members of the middle group attended religious services (although they might not have been religious in the strict sense of the word), just as they attended events organized by the communist Jews (although they might not have been communists, strictly speaking).

<sup>67</sup> Rafael (Rafailo) Blam (Belgrade 1910 – Belgrade 1991). Blam lived in Belgrade, worked as an electrical engineer, graduated from the School of Music (violin), was a member of the Jewish music society "Lira". He established the first jazz band in Belgrade and became a member of the Belgrade Philharmonic. After Yugoslavia capitulated, he was deported as a POW to Germany. Blam was awarded a medal for his activities during the war and also received a medal from the Serbian Orthodox Church. After the war he continued his music career as a member of the Belgrade Radio Orchestra and Belgrade Philharmonic (M. Radovanović, *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. Biografski leksikon*, 36-37).

There were two centers of exclusively Jewish activities: an improvised prayer room for the religious, and the "Hebrew Circle for Language, History and Literature" that organized courses of Hebrew, lectures on Jewish history, and other specifically Jewish topics for the Zionists. Whereas the Zionists (religious or not) identified themselves primarily as Jews (from Yugoslavia), the communists identified themselves primarily as Yugoslavs (of Jewish background). The coordinates set by ethnicity, culture, ideology, and religion established a dynamic space in which individuals moved towards or away from one extreme or the other. Many former "ardent Zionists" became communists, many "could not make up their minds", which led to "friction, quarrels, and insults".<sup>71</sup> Among some of them, there was little or no contact at all. Bihalji-Merin, for example, doesn't mention "the rabbi", while Helfgott mentions Bihalji-Merin only once, recording the following conversation on socialism, communism and Zionism:

*Bihalji takes a walk with the Rabbi, and explains, "I was a communist even before the war, and yet I am not at all opposed to a socialist Jewish state." "Bihalji," remarks the Rabbi, "one must stress the idea of a state. It is difficult to say in advance what precise form that state will take..." "That's right! But what will happen if the Revisionist-Fascists come to power?" "I don't like the term 'Fascist' in connection with the revisionists. I have never been a member of the party and I am not afraid of chauvinism. The people of Israel, in its long history and national consciousness, have prevailed over many kinds of philosophies and over prejudices. Party differences, kingship, priestly rule – all these are archaisms. Does any one really need to teach us socialism? Do you not remember that in one of our talks, you praised the Prophet Amos as the first socialist in the history of mankind?" "Yes. I don't deny my words. But let's not forget that was religious socialism." "And I am convinced that Marx and Lasalle imbibed not a little of that socialism. And even more, let me tell you, Bihalji, you have often praised the Germans and their culture, and the pre-war communists, too. Where are they today, these men of culture and progress?" "Rabbi! Even if it will take time, in the end the great day will come. Don't forget that we are living in a world cut off by barbed-wire fences, and our powers of*

<sup>68</sup> Helfgott, 101.

<sup>69</sup> R. Blam, "Sećanja iza bodljikavih žica", *Muzika iza bodljikavih žica: zbornik sećanja jugoslovenskih ratnih zarobljenika, interniraca i političkih zatvorenika, za vreme narodnooslobodilačkog rata 1941-1945 godine* Jelena Bosnić (ed.), Beograd: Savez udruženja muzičkih umetnika Jugoslavije, 1985; see also <http://elmondosefarad.wikidot.com/secanja-nazarobljenicki-logor>).

<sup>70</sup> Amar, 35.

<sup>71</sup> Helfgott, 72.

judgment have been affected. You'll see what the communists will do in Germany!"

"For now, I see that they do everything the Fuehrer commands."<sup>72</sup>

Kozinski mentions "the rabbi", without naming him, in association with the Hebrew language course he attended for a while. Helfgott mentions Kozinski only once, and it is in connection with his work with the Russian prisoners:

*The prisoners study the Russian language as well as Russian songs, from the Soviet prisoners whom they encounter at the clinic. This place serves as a center for the secret dissemination of information. J. Kosinsky is an expert at this, since Russian is his mother tongue, and he faithfully carries out the duties given him by the 'Technical Council' composed of a few members. This council draws the lines for different activities. In the Hebrew classes, the students learn Hebrew and history and prepare programs for the festivals, while the 'progressives' study the theory of Marxism in their more limited groups.*<sup>73</sup>

Most of the Jewish names appearing in Helfgott's account are not found in the testimonies of the other authors, and vice versa. Which of these groups was "more limited" is hard to determine. What is beyond doubt is that the activities of the group of "progressives", planned and carried out together with the Serbs, are far better documented. Almost all the Jewish POWs were repatriated to Yugoslavia, where the revolution had been victorious and the communist regime established. Although in the post-war period the position of Jews was much better in Yugoslavia than in other socialist countries,<sup>74</sup> the official general policy was to stem rather than encourage religious activity.

Confronted with the reality of the POW camp, the humiliation and hunger, the final 38 day and 400 kilometer long march from Barkenbrügge to Alexisdorf, and then further south, coupled with the news coming in about the death camps, massacres and suffering of their loved ones in the Holocaust, many prisoners questioned the basic tenets of their beliefs, secular as well as religious. From the first days in the camp, rabbi Helfgott was approached by fellow inmates who expected from him not only solace, but assistance in their effort to understand these realities. At that time, the rabbi, who had only just begun his career, was at a loss to explain these events even to himself. He realized, as did other prisoners, that they had become "slaves", and not only "slave to the Germans, but slave to the senses" – hunger, thirst, cold, sleep deprivation, etc.<sup>75</sup> Prayers, writing (of diaries, poems, stories), discussions,

establishing organizations, holding and attending courses, performing (plays, concerts, operas and cabarets), painting and drawing, lectures – all these were forms of resisting reality and providing a temporary escape from the latter. However, they could not answer the essential questions regarding evil and the human response to it.

The POW camp environment was not one in which a rabbi could write theological treatises. On the contrary, it was a situation in which all the theological treatises he might have read previously were put to a serious test. In addition, the rabbi was a spiritual leader who was expected to interpret the tenets of faith to others less erudite than himself.

Early on, a fellow Jewish officer asked the rabbi if he believed in fate. Before the rabbi could respond, another prisoner offered his own interpretation: fate was the reaction of an individual or nation to the tribulations they were confronted with, this was so since the times of Abraham and that is because "the people of Israel are a nation in perpetual dialogue with its Creator".<sup>76</sup> The first prisoner admitted this was "beyond his grasp".

Another discussion between two prisoners dealt with the same issue, but in connection with the Maccabees:

- *The Maccabees fought for a lofty idea, more exalted even than the idea of the Homeland, as one of the Church Fathers Aurelius Augustus (354-430) wrote: 'For liberty, faith and truth'. That is why the Maccabees to this day earn the admiration of other peoples, and serve as a model of freedom, and even churches have been built to commemorate them.*

- *Cut the pathos, Comrade! Where are the Maccabees in our times?"*<sup>77</sup>

One time, overwhelmed by hunger and stench, Helfgott was reading the *Ethics of the Fathers*. These were his reflections: "In spirit, he is hovering near Rabbi Akiba, near Hillel and Shammai. 'Everything is foreseen yet freedom of choice is given.' Hermann repeated the words, reflecting, 'What freedom of choice is given to me, in this situation?'"<sup>78</sup> The issue of predestination and man's freedom to act was posed over and over again, but to the imprisoned rabbi it seemed that the spiritual strength of an individual was powerless to change reality: "You have freedom of choice and willpower, and yet you must sit by helplessly, and go on living in the knowledge of being powerless. You are logical and strong but are still a mere leaf driven from the tree!"<sup>79</sup>

In his prayer Helfgott recognized that the world of the Creator was not the world of man, but this only led to

opposition to Israel, but these restrictions have thus far not proved seriously debilitating." (H. Pass Freidenreich, "The Jewish Community of Yugoslavia", in *The Balkan Jewish Communities*, Laham - New York - London: University Press of America, 1984, 12-58, p. 57).

<sup>75</sup> Helfgott, 39.

<sup>76</sup> Helfgott, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Helfgott, 83.

<sup>78</sup> Helfgott, 37.

<sup>79</sup> Helfgott, 63.

<sup>72</sup> Helfgott, 81.

<sup>73</sup> Helfgott, 87.

<sup>74</sup> "Since the 1950's the Yugoslav Jewish community has maintained itself intact with little change. It is unquestionably the freest Jewish community in any of the Communist countries, no doubt because of the nature of Yugoslav Communism under Marshall Tito. The community is to some extent limited in its activities, on the one hand, by the subtle pressures that flow from the general disapproval of religion common to Communist systems and, on the other hand, by the official government

the next question: "But have You no connection with all this? (...) Are You, none other than a Supreme Power, an abstract concept, that exists and creates but has no further interest in Your creatures? Are we then condemned to live in captivity in Your world, trapped in the chain of causes, in the struggle for survival and control?"<sup>80</sup>

The two essential questions imposed by the prisoners' condition were: how to understand the force of evil in a world created by the Supreme Power and how to interpret man's purpose in such a world? These would haunt Hermann Helfgott not only in the POW camp, but even more so after liberation, when he fully realized what had happened in the Holocaust. He was able to provide an answer only many years later and in the epilogue of his memoirs. "Judaism", he wrote, "has its own answer to that, and it is most original and convincing: Revelation. Not experience, not the senses, not even the intellect are capable of giving us an answer".<sup>81</sup> Helfgott adopts a specifically Jewish answer:

*I no longer wish to know the whys and wherefores, but this only: Am I walking the path of my people's distinctiveness and particular destiny – the historical uniqueness that our people has maintained ever since we became a nation, until the present....(...) More than 4,000 years of our history testify to this, and our generation can only confirm it. For we are witnesses to this on our own soil, revelations of the Spirit of Israel in every soul in Israel. (...) We must not be mute witnesses but witnesses of light. Our generation is a generation of witnesses, whose duty it is to give testimony to every revelation of our lives; to be a 'witness unto the nations', to be witnesses – witnesses of the Lord.<sup>82</sup>*

This is why Helfgott's memoirs are titled *We Are Witnesses*. Nonetheless, his camp diary projects questions rather than answers, just like the other writings of POWs. Many of his answers date from the post-war period and are based on new experiences and hindsight. This explains the disparity between his unpublished original diary written in real time and his memoirs published many years later.

## 8. Conclusion

All the POWs sought to understand their situation as a real experience, but also as a reality viewed in the broader framework of their lives prior to captivity, their convictions, emotional ties, self-perceptions and world views impacting their interpretations of individual and collective identity - ethnic, religious, social, political, cultural. They approached these complex issues from various angles depending on their age, experience, convictions, professional interests, talent, and personality profile. Their writings reflect the ambiguity and variation of their responses to an experience probing their concepts of life and death, integrity, sacrifice, system of values. Their experience of POW camps, although much less excruciating than those of inmates in death camps, tested their perceptions of self and others, opening a process of

change, adaptation, and resistance. All the currents regarding identity, culture, religion and political ideology present in the pre-war Jewish community of Yugoslavia were reflected in the camp.

However, the war, camp conditions and the urge to resist had the general effect of strengthening the leadership role of the communists and their vision of the solution of the Jewish issue: revolution in the homeland identified as Yugoslavia. Thus Vinaver moved from the political center towards the left; so did many Zionists who supported the Jewish State, but remained in post-war Yugoslavia; and the apolitical such as Amar and Kozinski, who at the end joined the CPY (Amar) or died protecting the communist conspirators in the camp (Kozinski), while the communists (Bihalji-Merin, Lebl, Karaoglanović) returned to Yugoslavia as staunch supporters of the new Yugoslavia reconstructed by the regime imposed by the war triumph of the armed resistance led by Tito and the CPY. The close association of religion and Zionism coupled with the resistance towards leftist ideology represented by the only rabbi in the camp, Helfgott, was a minority position, or so it seems from the diaries and post-war memoirs of the POWs.

In post-war Yugoslavia there were even ways to reconcile religion and leftist ideology. An interesting example was Cadik Danon, long time Chief Rabbi of Yugoslavia. He came from a Sephardic family of Sarajevo and, like Helfgott, he graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary a few years prior to the war. He was posted as rabbi first in Priština (Kosovo and Metohija) and later in Split (Croatia). Like Helfgott, he was arrested as a POW in Macedonia (Skopje). However, he managed to escape while the POWs were on Bulgarian territory on their way to the German POW camp. Having acquired false Bulgarian ID papers Danon managed to reach Split. He spent most of the war years in Split and camps in Italy. After the war he returned to Yugoslavia and worked in the Yugoslav ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following his retirement, Danon served as the Chief Rabbi of Yugoslavia (1972-1998). As a young rabbi in Priština, Danon had been attracted to the political left and later, during the war years in Split, he became actively engaged in the resistance organized by the Yugoslav communists. He explained the reconciliation of religion and communism on a personal level in the following way: "I considered my rabbinical vocation as an obligation to my parents and a duty, while the other thing, the idea of revolution, was exclusively my personal choice".<sup>83</sup>

Holocaust survivors – POWs, death camp survivors, Partisan fighters – who adopted the communist ideology or at least sympathized with it, assumed a fairly privileged status in post-war Yugoslavia, while the survivors - with stronger Zionist inclinations, some less prone to ideas of the political left, some even more on the left than the Yugoslav mainstream after the 1948 split between Tito and Stalin, but also some who had lost all the members of their families and felt a strong need to compensate this with a new Jewish

<sup>80</sup> Helfgott, 63.

<sup>81</sup> Helfgott, 268.

<sup>82</sup> Helfgott, 271, 277.

<sup>83</sup> C. Danon, "Životni put jednog rabina"

(<http://elmondosefarad.wikidot.com/zivotni-put-jednog-rabina>)

expanded family (society) – decided to make *aliyot* to Israel mainly between 1948 and 1952, but also later. Yugoslavia had supported the creation of the Jewish State and did not hinder emigration to Israel. Thus the heterogeneous pre-war Yugoslav Jewish community was not only decimated in the Holocaust, but also to some extent politically homogenized in the post-war period.

In the first post-war period the POW story was part of the general war narrative promoted in public memory. By the sixties, the POW story somehow slipped out of the mainstream narrative. At that time, it was mostly the Jewish communist POWs who made an effort to retain it in public memory. In the post-Yugoslav period, the war narrative dominant in the previous period became subject to questioning, while the POW story had been relegated to oblivion.

Our research has been focused on texts – diaries, notes, memoirs – written by Jewish Yugoslav officers in the Oflag. However, it should be noted that in addition to these written documents, there were many other forms of documents pertaining to visual art, music, theater, sculpture. We owe to Sima Karaoglanović the existence of a valuable collection of items saved from the POW camps – documents, art, posters, letters, poems, music scores, décor for theater performances, photographs – and it is commendable that his family donated the collection to the Museum of the City of Belgrade. Part of the visual art from this collection was presented to the public in 1997 at the exhibition titled *Artwork from the POW Camps. The Sima Karaoglanović Collection*.<sup>84</sup> Among the exhibits were drawings, watercolors, cartoons, etc., and the most numerous, according to subject matter, were portraits and self-portraits made by both trained and untrained artists.<sup>85</sup> However, only two Jewish artists (Bihalji-Merin and Janusz Alchimowicz) were included in this exhibition.

In 2003 the Jewish Historical Museum held the exhibition *From the Prisoner of War Camps. The Collection of Drawings and Watercolors of the Jewish Historical Museum in Belgrade* at the Multicultural Center, presenting its own collection<sup>86</sup>. This year (2015) the Jewish Historical Museum organized another exhibition reviving the memory of Jews in the POWs. It was dedicated to a single artist, Moša Mevorah, and titled *Officers of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – Portraits from the German POW Camps 1941*<sup>87</sup>. The current exhibition, *Jews of Serbia – Officers of the Royal Yugoslav Army*, offers additional and important data on Jews in POW camps, as well as new

<sup>84</sup> Biljana Stanić, Lidija Petrović-Ćirić, *Likovni radovi iz zarobljeničkih logora. Zbirka Sime Karaoglanovića*, Muzej grada Beograda, Katalog izložbe – 48, Beograd, 1997. A year earlier there was an exhibition focusing on theater in the POW camps: Mirjana Gaković, *Pozorišta jugoslovenskih zarobljenika u Drugom svetskom ratu*, Katalog izložbe, Muzej pozorišne umetnosti Srbije, Beograd, 1996.

<sup>85</sup> B. Stanić, L. Petrović-Ćirić, “Likovni radovi iz zarobljeničkih logora iz zbirke Sime Karaoglanovića”, in *Likovni radovi iz zarobljeničkih logora. Zbirka Sime Karaoglanovića*, 9.

perspectives on their experiences that are in fact part of the turbulent and complex history of Yugoslavia, providing first and foremost an insight into personal, individual dramas repeated in history, posing over and over again questions on the forces of evil and deception, faith and hope, values and illusions, sacrifice and freedom. The fate of the inmates of German prisoner of war camps remind us today, when «fences» around us have not disappeared, that freedom «has an effect stronger than any wine and awakens one more effectively than any call of reason”.

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<sup>87</sup> Vojislava Radovanović, Branka Džidić, Barbara Panić, exhibition of drawings by Moša Mevorah *Officers of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – Portraits from German Prisoner of War Camps*, author of text B. Panić, Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, May of 2015.

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From the Memorial album *JEWS FROM YUGOSLAVIA – PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMANY*

Krinka Vidaković-Petrov was born in Belgrade in 1949. She received her pre-university education in Chicago, Cairo and Havana. She studied at the School of Philology at the University of Belgrade, graduating in 1969 from the Department of English (minor in Spanish), receiving her M. A. in 1972 from the Department of World Literature, and her PhD in 1982 from the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Zagreb.



Krinka Vidaković-Petrov

She began working in the Institute for Literature and Art in 1970. During the years 1980-1982, 1991-1994 and 1996-2001 she taught at several universities in the USA (University of Kansas, University of Indiana, Ohio State University, University of Pittsburgh). She spent two years (1994-1996) affiliated with the Instituto de Filología in Madrid thanks to a grant from the Consejo Superior de

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As a visiting professor she was invited by several universities, among them Berkeley, University of Pittsburgh and Chapel Hill in the USA; Oxford University, Hebrew University in Jerusalem and University of Tel Aviv, and Yad Vashem; University of Basel and the EuroBalkan Institute in Macedonia.

Krinka Vidaković-Petrov published literary translations from Spanish and English to Serbian and from Serbian to English and Spanish. In 1987 she received the "Miloš Đuric" prize awarded by the Association of Literary Translators of Serbia for best poetry translation (*Selected Poems by Rafael Alberti*).

With Dr. Biljana Šljivic-Šimšić she co-authored three Serbo-Croatian language textbooks in the framework of a special project at Ohio State University (OSU Slavic Papers, 1986).

She was editor of the English Section of *The American Srbobran* (2000-2001), wrote a column for this section (1997-2003) and is a regular contributor of the Serbian Section of this paper published by the Serb National Federation in Pittsburgh.

She participated in international conferences held in the UK, Italy, Spain, Israel, Austria, Holland, Portugal, USA and published chapters/articles in books, conference proceedings and academic journals in Yugoslavia/Serbia as well as abroad (UK, USA, Italy, Spain, Israel, Australia).

Her fields of interest are: Hispanic Studies, Judaism, folklore, comparative literature, literary translation, Holocaust Studies, foreign affairs.

She was chairman of the editorial advisory board of the journal *Relations (Serbian Literary Quarterly)* published by the Writers' Association of Serbia and is currently a member of the editorial advisory board of *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* published in Jerusalem by the Israel Council on Foreign Relations and the World Jewish Congress.

Krinka Vidaković-Petrov is a member of the Association of Literary Translators of Serbia, the Writers' Association of Serbia, Journalists' Association of Serbia, World Congress of Jewish Studies, and was a member of the Association of Conference Interpreters of Serbia and the Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas

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# Israeli Arabs Reject Becoming Citizens of Palestinian State, as Suggested in Mideast Peace Plan

By Ariel Ben Solomon / JNS.org

Israeli Arab citizens flatly reject the idea floated in the recently released US “Peace to Prosperity” plan that envisions the possibility that borders would be redrawn and some Arab cities and villages could become part of a future Palestinian state.



*The Israeli Arab city of Umm al-Fahm.  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.*

While the discussions over settlements, annexation and Palestinian statehood have drawn headlines, one controversial aspect that has gained less attention is the proposal of land swaps, specifically transferring Arab towns in Israel into a future Palestinian state. Shaheen Sarsur, who has been involved in Arab politics for more than 12 years and served as a parliamentary consultant for three previous Knesset members, the last one being Talab Abu Arar of the Islamic Movement’s parliamentary party, told *JNS* that Arabs in Israel received the Trump administration plan with cynicism and sarcasm. Arabs in Israel know “that a land exchange won’t happen, and that the towns in the Triangle area will not become part of Palestine,” he said, adding that no one will agree to exchange their Israeli passport for a Palestinian one—and that, in fact, no one is worried about this actually happening. They say, “We were born here, and we are not going anywhere. And for sure, we will not agree to be under the sovereignty of a Palestinian state.” Sarsur attributes this to various reasons, including the fact that Israeli Arabs have a good socioeconomic position in Israel, and that this would suffer if they move to a Palestinian state. Like other minority

groups in Israel, Israeli Arabs enjoy full citizenship and equal rights under the law.

The Trump administration’s peace plan provides only a brief mention of the idea of transferring Israeli-Arab areas close to the West Bank, known as the Triangle region, in the center of the country, east of Kfar Saba, and turning the residents into Palestinian citizens.

The plan names the Arab villages in the Triangle area: “The Triangle Communities consist of Kafr Qara, Ar’ara, Baha al-Gharbiyye, Umm al-Fahm, Qalansawe, Tayibe, Kafr Qasim, Tira, Kafr Bara and Jaljulia.”

It continues: “These communities, which largely self-identify as Palestinian, were originally designated to fall under Jordanian control during the negotiations of the armistice Line of 1949, but ultimately were retained by Israel for military reasons that have since been mitigated.”

The plan then goes on to say that these areas could become part of a Palestinian state depending on negotiations between the parties.

“The Vision contemplates the possibility, subject to agreement of the parties that the borders of Israel will be redrawn such that the Triangle Communities become part of the State of Palestine,” it said.

The proposal by the Trump administration is not a new one. Former Israeli Defense Minister and Israel Beiteinu Party leader Avigdor Lieberman has long championed the idea of transferring these Israeli-Arab towns—in the case of Umm al-Fahm, it’s a city of some 55,000 people—into a future Palestinian state as part of a peace deal.

However, Lieberman’s proposal, which would result in a significant drop in Israel’s Arab minority, which currently stands around 21 percent of the country’s total population of 8.9 million, has long been viewed skeptically by both sides in Israel.

Even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu weighed in recently and dismissed the idea. “There will not be any population transfers under any circumstances: I oppose it in principle,” *The Jerusalem Post* reported him stating.

Sheikh Safwat Freij, deputy leader of the southern branch of the Islamic Movement who lives in Kafr Qasim, told *JNS* that Trump’s Mideast peace plan “is so unserious it does not even deserve a response.”

“For us, it is completely irrelevant. We would respond to a plan if it was serious, but this is not,” he said. Over the years, public-opinion polls demonstrate that Israeli-Arabs reject trading in their Israeli passports for Palestinian ones.

According to the Arab-Jewish Relations Index survey compiled in 2017 by Professor Sammy Smootha of the University of Haifa, 77.4 percent of Arabs are not willing to move to a Palestinian state if one were established.

A majority of Israeli Arabs (61.9 percent) think Israel is a good country to live in, with 60 percent preferring to live in Israel than in any other country in the world. Another survey carried out in 2008 found that this number is as high as 76.9 percent.

A poll by the Haifa-based Mada al-Carmel Arab Center for Applied Social Research in 2004 found that more than 91 percent of Arab residents in the Triangle region opposed land-exchange plans floated at the time.

*'Disconnected lives, with the heart and mind on different tracks'*

Some observers see the Israeli-Arab stance on this subject as hypocritical; on one hand, they identify with the Palestinians, but on the other, they prefer to remain Israelis.

Addressing this issue, Daniel Pipes, president of the Middle East Forum, observed that the Arabs in Israel are "living disconnected lives, with the heart and mind on different tracks."

Pipes said that Palestinian nationalism has to be sustained with money and other forms of pressure. "I can imagine it collapsing one of these days," he predicted.

In an article published in early February, he wrote that the transfer idea is infeasible because Israeli Arabs overwhelmingly oppose it and therefore will avoid transfer by moving to other parts of Israel. Yet he raised the prospect that Trump's peace proposal may "make them a touch more realistic, sober and loyal to their country."

Khaled Abu Toameh, writing for the Gatestone Institute, said that Arab Israelis living in the Triangle strongly oppose the idea of becoming part of a Palestinian state because they see how Palestinians living under the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip "are subject to human-rights violations on a daily basis."

While the idea of a land swap between Israel and a future Palestinian state seems extremely unlikely to be carried out, it does demonstrate that Arabs in Israel do not view the Palestinian state-building as a project they want to fully take part in.

*Algemeiner, February 25, 2020*



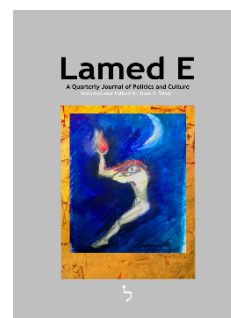
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