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SARAJEVO AS I KNEW IT

Sarajevo was always considered a center of Sephardic Jewry in the Balkans and it was only second in this respect to Salonica. It was the capital city of Bosnia. Some centuries ago, Bosnia was an independent state, and it was the Turkish armies that put an end to its independence, which it has only recently reclaimed. The first Jews seem to have already settled in Sarajevo in 1565 and both the local Muslims and the Turkish authorities welcomed their presence, as they did everywhere else in the Turkish Empire. Siavus Pasa, who was the local representative of the Sultan in Sarajevo, was sympathetic to the Jewish people and built them a special quarter in one of the districts of the town, making it possible for them to acquire good residences at fair prices.

The Sephardic exiles first came to Sarajevo through Salonica. In 1818, the Austrians occupied Bosnia, and with the Austrian army came some Ashkenazi Jews. They founded the Ashkenazi community of Sarajevo, which had its own synagogue. (Today, this is the only remaining synagogue in which prayers are held every Shabbat in Sarajevo.) The Sarajevo community was able to develop very quickly because it had great spiritual leaders. Among them were Rabbi Shemuel ben Barukh of the seventeenth century and also Haham Zvi Ashkenazi, a Hungarian Jew who had been educated in Salonica and adopted the name of Haham instead of Rabbi. Other famous rabbis were David Pardo, born in 1719, and Moshe Danon, a nineteenth century figure whose name is connected with the Meggila of Sarajevo. Rabbi Eliezer Papo, author of the *Pele Yoets*, lived and taught in Sarajevo, and among his students was Rabbi Yehuda Alcalay, famous for his endeavors on behalf of a Jewish settlement in Palestine. Many call him the predecessor of Theodore Herzl, and some claim that Herzl was indirectly influenced by him

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because Alcalay was a rabbi in Zemun (in Serbia) where Herzl's grandfather resided. Rabbi Alcalay taught that Hebrew was essential for the redemption of the Holy Land and emphasized the necessity of making the Hebrew language a living language among all the children of Israel. He traveled throughout the Jewish communities making great propaganda for the return of the Jews to their homeland.

In 1918, Bosnia became part of Yugoslavia, but very little change came in outlook and in structure as far as the Jewish community of Sarajevo, and indeed of the whole of Bosnia, was concerned. In newly formed Yugoslavia, the Jewish communities retained their religious autonomy. Dr. Isaac Alcalay, a Sephardi, was elected Chief Rabbi of Yugoslavia. He lived in Belgrade, and all the Jewish communities in the land were under his religious jurisdiction. All districts also had their own Chief Rabbis and Beth Din. Litigations in cases of inheritance, marriages, and divorces were handled by the Jewish courts. This was simply the continuation of the position as it existed under the Turkish rule. All Jews, even those educated in the Austrian and German universities, spoke Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) at home. Many Jews who held responsible places in the provincial or local governments kept their minutes in Judeo-Spanish; and the correspondence, business as well as private, among Sephardic Jews was always carried out in this language. The minutes of Synagogue meetings were also written in Judeo-Spanish, and announcements in the synagogue were exclusively done in that language. Many non-Jews who wanted to obtain a good position in Jewish businesses or in Jewish households learned Ladino so that they could be of greater use to their employers.

It was quite common in Sarajevo to serenade girl friends. A Sephardi Jew always serenaded his beloved with Spanish romances, expressing his love for her in the language of the old Spanish troubadours. The Judeo-Spanish romances became not only popular among the Sephardi youth, but also among the non-Jewish people. One who walked through the streets where the Jewish people lived, would always hear many songs of ancient Spain being sung, sometimes in a melancholy way and sometimes in a very happy mood.

Sarajevo had four synagogues. The two old buildings were in the middle of the business quarters and were always very well attended. The afternoon prayers (*Minha*) would start some time before the evening and there were usually three or four *minyanim* going on at the same time in different parts of the building. Morning prayers started very early. Already at four o'clock in the morning, one could hear people going to synagogue and reciting *Tikkun Hatsot*. When the first light ap-

peared on the horizon, the morning prayers would begin. In the summer, by five o'clock in the morning people came out of synagogue and went to a Jewish cafe where they had black coffee and some sweets. That was not their real breakfast. Breakfast would always be taken an hour or two after the morning coffee. Besides these two synagogues, there was La Synagogue de la Byelava. This was in the district where most Jews lived. Walking through the streets of this district on Friday evening, one could not help being inspired by the Sabbath lights shining from every home and hearing the prayers sanctifying the Sabbath (*Kiddush*) being recited by the father of the family.

The Byelava district was not a ghetto in the accepted sense of the word. There were many non-Jews who lived there, but the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were Jewish.

In that synagogue there were quite a number of people who were experts in Turkish *hazzanut*. The people of this synagogue were so learned that one could not read the *haftara* there unless one was able to read it from the *Sefer Haftarot*, the scroll in which the *haftarot* were written without vowels.

The pride of Sarajevo Sephardim, however, was the new synagogue. A beautiful building with a dome, it could accommodate over two thousand people. It was built in the early 1920's, when the Sarajevo Sephardi community reached its peak. The synagogue had excellent acoustics, and in whichever part of the synagogue one sat, one could clearly hear the reader and the preacher. This synagogue was almost entirely destroyed during World War II.

The Muslims, who were mainly responsible for the destruction of that synagogue, could not topple the walls, but they destroyed the dome and the furniture of the synagogue. The Nazis took all of the precious manuscripts and the books which were in the synagogue library. One of the generals stole the famous Pincas, the book of records, in which the history of Sarajevo Sephardim was recorded. After the war, investigations were made in order to retrieve this book, but all of the attempts to recover this irreplaceable record were unsuccessful. A thesis by Dr. Maurice Levy on the Jews of Bosnia was almost entirely based on the information that he obtained from this record book. Fortunately, Dr. Levy's book survived the destruction of Sarajevo Jewry. After the war, it was translated from German into Serbian. The great synagogue, which was used as a stable during the war, is now divided into two parts: the upper part is the concert hall of Sarajevo, and the lower part is a center for physical education.

The two synagogues in the middle of the town have now become

museums where the past of the Jews of Sarajevo can be exhibited. However, so many old documents have been destroyed that it is really impossible to gather from the exhibits the true nature of the life of Sarajevo Jews. The synagogue of Byelava has now become a club for the workers of Sarajevo.

Each of the synagogues had its own *hazan* (cantor) and its own rabbis. These rabbis had different titles, which were bestowed upon them by the Chief Rabbi of the district. The Chief Rabbi was *HeHaham haKolel*. His deputy was called *HeHaham haShalem*. The other members of the Beth Din were called *HeHaham haMeromam*. The title *HaMaskil veNavon* was given by the Chief Rabbi to people who were pious and who were able to expound the Torah on different occasions. As a rule, this title was also given to *hazanim* of the community. In my days, Sarajevo had two famous *hazanim*: Cantor Alkalay and Cantor Altaraz. Cantor Alkalay was an old fashioned *hazan* whose interpretation of the prayers was so sincere that people used to go to hear him in order to be inspired. Altaraz was a modern *hazan* who was educated in the Ruschuk Yeshiva in Bulgaria. Ruschuk was a well known academy for *hazanim*. Altaraz was an accomplished musician. He was a student of the Musical Academy of Vienna and was able to interpret the *hazanut*, as was required in Sarajevo, in a contemporary musical form. He established the children's choir in the big synagogue. This choir performed every Friday night and Saturday morning. On special occasions there was a choir led by a professional choir master. It gave performances on different occasions in Sarajevo, but also in other parts of the country. Very often, this choir performed on Friday evenings in the great synagogue.

The Ladino language was the language of communication and very often of prayer among the Sephardim of Sarajevo and of Bosnia in general. It is a most interesting realization that even the intellectuals who were educated in the universities of Central Europe and Yugoslavia, when at home always spoke in Judeo-Spanish. They somehow felt that by using that language, they were continuing the great tradition of their ancestors in Spain. They felt that by communicating in old Spanish they would be able to retain the standards, intellectual and cultural, that the Jewry of Spain possessed. By retaining the language of the country from which they were expelled, they hoped that they and their children would not yield to the cultural level of the people among whom they lived, but that they would remain outstanding by their cultural and spiritual outlook.

Judeo-Spanish was also the means through which especially

women offered their prayers to the God of Israel. I well remember that my late mother, of blessed memory, prayed every day in Ladino and it was in that language that she always communicated with her Creator. In addition, many of the prayers in the synagogue were recited in Ladino. Thus, for instance, on the New Year and Kippur, many of the prayers were chanted in that language. Nobody would ever have thought of translating those prayers in the vernacular Serbo-Croatian or Greek or Turkish, but only Ladino, which was considered a language which held sanctity only second to Hebrew. No rabbi was allowed to preach in the synagogue in any other language but Ladino. This tradition continued until the second World War, when the community was destroyed by the Nazis.

Ladino was maintained not only by ballads and songs that were sung on almost every occasion, but also by the dramas which were presented every year especially by Matatia, a workers' club. I believe that most of these plays are still preserved in Belgrade by the museum, but I know that many of them were destroyed by the Nazis when they invaded Sarajevo. In addition to these plays, concerts were given by Matatia every Shabbat night.

In Sarajevo was the central religious court for all of Bosnia. Divorces (*gittin*) could be granted only by this court. Many towns had competent rabbis but did not have a *Bet Din*. Therefore, people had very often to travel a long distance in order to obtain a divorce. I remember a prominent rabbi saying that this was a good arrangement, because when people had to undertake a long journey, they made up their minds that their divorce was not worthwhile. Speaking of divorces, I always remember my saintly teacher, Dr. Maurice Levy, the Chief Rabbi of Bosnia, who was the head of the *Bet Din*. He had in his office a beautiful mirror which served a special purpose. Whenever a couple came to him and asked to be granted a divorce, he would put the couple in front of the mirror and would tell them to look at themselves. "You are such beautiful people," he would tell them, "so full of life. Why do you want to bring an end to your marriage?" On many occasions, he was successful in keeping couples together in their married life.

Dr. Levy was the first university-trained rabbi in Sarajevo. He studied in Vienna and obtained his rabbinic training in Vienna and Sarajevo. He was an orphan at birth, on whom the community took pity. When they discovered his exceptional talents, the Benevolencia, the benevolent society of the community, sent him to the university in Vienna, and there he finished his studies in philosophy as well as his rabbinic studies. Dr. Levy never kept secret the fact that he was a stu-

dent of the Benevolencia. On the contrary, he was very proud that it was his own people who gave him a chance to become the Chief Rabbi of Bosnia. The Benevolencia was a society that gave grants to poor students who were talented, enabling them to undertake university studies not only in Yugoslavia, but also in famous universities abroad. Many professionals owed their careers to the generosity of the Benevolencia.

Dr. Levy, however, although university-trained, had great respect for the local rabbis in Sarajevo and in other towns. We who were his students very often heard him say that universities are not the only way to obtain knowledge and education. He emphasized: "You should look at your rabbis, how humble they are, how learned they are, and how inspiring they are." He used to mention especially Haham Bohor Maestro, who was known to be the greatest authority on the *Bet Din* and who rarely took part in any public affairs. He was a rabbi who devoted all of his time to his studies, and he was greatly influenced by the Kabbala. He was my maternal grandmother's brother, and on many occasions he visited our home in Travnik, a small place near Sarajevo where I was born and where my parents and grandparents lived. On such occasions Haham Bohor would inspire us all by his humility, by his kindness and, above all, by his knowledge. He would interpret different verses from the Bible or passages from the Talmud. He would point out to us how important it was to live a life of true piety, always trusting that the Almighty would guide us. Dr. Levy had great admiration for this man and whenever he met him would kiss his hand with great reverence. Haham Bohor, however, always gave Dr. Levy the greatest respect as the Chief Rabbi of Bosnia.

When the Association of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia decided that the time had come to train young men for the ministry in different parts of Yugoslavia, they resolved that a special seminary was to be established in Sarajevo. They pointed out that Sarajevo was chosen because it had a true religious atmosphere. Although the majority of the Jewish inhabitants of Yugoslavia were Ashkenazim, the largely Sephardic Sarajevo was chosen, knowing that those who would attend the seminary would be influenced by the Sephardi atmosphere and outlook of Sarajevo. Some people did object to Sarajevo being the seat of this new seminary, arguing that Zagreb and Belgrade had greater claim. But Dr. Isaac Alcalay insisted that Sarajevo be the place where the young men should be trained; it was only in Sarajevo where they could be inspired by a true religious atmosphere. I well remember one occasion when there was a public discussion as to the place where the seminary should be established. Dr. Alcalay pointed out that Nahum

Sokolov, one of the great leaders of the Zionist movement, had visited Sarajevo the year before. Sokolov had pointed out that Sarajevo had a true Jewish atmosphere, which he had never seen before. In fact, Sarajevo was popularly called the Jerusalem of the Diaspora. Dr. Alcalay said this was the place where the young people would be inspired to work not only for themselves, but for their people and for the glory of the Almighty and of the Torah. Dr. Alcalay made a proclamation that the young Jews of Yugoslavia should come to this seminary in order to become useful Jewish citizens who would raise the standard of Jewish education and of Jewish life in the land.

Many of us who had intended to go to the universities to study for different professions decided that we should answer the call of Dr. Alcalay. We realized that there was a need for a new generation of teachers and rabbis. Most of the rabbis of the time spoke the Serbo-Croatian language very badly and their outlook was narrow. We believed that the time had come when we should try and help our communities. I well remember the first day when we arrived at the seminary. Dr. Levy assembled us and gave one of his short speeches which always remained in our minds. He said, "My young men, if you want to be rich, I ask you now to leave this place, because the rabbinate will not afford you opulence and material prosperity. If, however, you want to be happy and satisfied in your life, then remain here and decide here and now that you will serve your God, your heritage of the Torah, and your people." Throughout our studies, Dr. Levy followed our progress not only from the point of view of knowledge, but also as far as our character was concerned. He was a father and a teacher to us all. We all tried our best not to disappoint him.

To those of us who were its first students, the seminary provided an opportunity to learn Jewish history, Hebrew, and Torah subjects in general. The secular studies, however, were not neglected. We were taught philosophy, general history, the language of the country. Special emphasis was placed on psychology, since our teachers believed that without knowledge of psychology we could not be true leaders of the communities we were to serve, nor could we be competent teachers.

Sarajevo was the center for Zionist activity for all the Sephardim of Bosnia. The majority of the leaders of the Zionist Federation were Sephardim and they had considerable influence on the Zionists of all Yugoslavia. Quite a number of Sephardi youth joined the Halutzim movement and went to *Hakhshara* immediately after having graduated from the secondary school. These men and women, who now live in different Kibbutzim in Israel, are the remnant of the previous younger

generation of Yugoslavia, as very few young men and women survived the Holocaust.

It is sad going back to Sarajevo and to my hometown, Travnik. The communities have been wiped out by the cruel, heartless Nazis. Travnik, like Sarajevo, was full of joy and singing. And now we have only memories of a civilization that has vanished. May those memories help us to create new Jewish vitality.