PHILO-SEMITISM IN SERBIA 1940 AND AFTER

Filosemitizam u Srbiji 1940. godine i kasnije

APSTRAKT U članku se analizira srpski filosemitizam, odnosno izražavanje prijateljstva i pozitivnih stavova prema Jevrejima. U žiči pažnje nalazi se knjiga Naši Jevreji, antologija izjava u prilog Jevrejima koja se pojavila 1940. godine. U tekstu se takođe ispituje pojava filosemuitskih tema u radovima objavljenim posle Drugog svetskog rata. Glavna teza koja se u članku zastupa jeste da je filosemitizam igrao (i igra) korisnu ulogu u oblikovanju modernog srpskog identiteta. Konkretno, izrazi topline i prijateljstva prema srpskim Jevrejima služili su da se potvrdi uverenje kako su Srbi velikodušan i čestit narod. Istovremeno, filosemitski diskurs je sadržavao potencijalne protivrečnosti, kako u stavovima Srba prema Jevrejima uopšte, tako i u različitim reakcijama samih Jevreja na prijateljstvo koje im je ponuđeno. Ove dvosmislenosti se u tekstu takođe razmatraju. U zaključku se nudi jedna moguća procena značenja srpskog filosemitizma.

KLJUČNE REČI filosemitizam, Jevreji, Srbija, identitet

ABSTRACT This paper analyses Serbian philo-Semitism, or friendship toward and appreciation of the Jews. Its primary focus is on Naši Jevreji, an anthology of statements supporting the Jews that appeared in 1940. It also examines the recurrence of philo-Semitic themes in post World War Two writings. The main arguments is that philo-Semitism played (and plays) an instrumental role in the formation of modern Serbian identity. In particular, expressions of warmth and friendship toward Serbian Jews served to vindicate a conviction that Serbia was a virtuous and generous nation. At the same time, philo-Semitic discourse carried its own ambiguities with it, both in regard to Serbian attitudes toward Jews in general, as well as conflicting Jewish responses to the friendship offered. This paper also studies these ambiguities, and concludes with an evaluation of the meaning of Serbian philo-Semitism in general.

KEY WORDS philo-Semitism, Jews, Serbia, identity

The term “philo-Semitism” is easier to define than to explain or discuss. A neologism, coined as a counterpart and answer to “anti-Semitism,” its use has never caught on in the wider public, probably for the obvious reason that “love of the
Jews” or “friendship toward the Jews” has never been as organized, destructive or wide-spread as its opposite.\(^1\) Despite this, Philo-Semitism has indeed had a historical impact, and not only in the English-speaking and/or Calvinist influenced lands where its impact is most evident.\(^2\) Philo-Semitism has been one of the reasons that a small and embattled people have survived through the ages, and was (and still is) visible even in the most virulently anti-Jewish parts of the world, including central and eastern Europe. In particular – and this is the heart of the essay to follow – philo-Semitism played (and continues to play) an interesting role in Serbian and Yugoslavian self-understanding. Most significant, is the phenomenon whereby expressing warm sentiments toward the Jews (or toward certain kinds of Jews) served(s) as encoded and encapsulated way of expressing what one wished for Serbia as a whole.

To be sure, one could argue that anything done for the sake of another is not truly “philo” and hence does not deserve the name “philo-Semitic.” Yet, it helps to keep in mind that the “philo” in philo-Semitism is merely a modern linguistic convention.\(^3\) In the relations between social groups, and certainly in politics, disinterested, non self-serving, “love” hardly exists. Moreover, the ideal that minorities are to be appreciated for their distinctiveness is a fairly recent innovation. Only in the last decades has this ideal gained wide acceptance among the intelligentsia, and then only in sections of it. Hence, while “friendship toward or support of the Jews”\(^4\) may serve as a general description of philo-Semitism, it is helpful to distinguish four primary shadings of the term:

1. **Rhetorical philo-Semitism.** When a speaker concedes some virtue in the Jews as part of an effort to lend credibility to an overall attack on them, or when an anti-Jewish persecution is criticized, but only as a clumsy and ineffective way of eliminating the Jewish presence. The young Martin Luther advocating gentler treatment of the Jews as an aid in conversion is an example of the latter, while any number of anti-Semites punctuate their attacks with sentiments like “don’t get me wrong, some of my best friends…”

2. **Anti anti-Semitism.** When a writer dislikes the general worldview (and perhaps the personal traits) of anti-Semites without necessarily disagreeing with the specific jibes made against the Jews. Although Nietzsche did have some genuinely admiring things to say about

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\(^1\) For general background on Philo-Semitism see Edelstein 1982.

\(^2\) On the topic of Philo-Semitism and Calvinism Leo Baeck has some brief but insightful remarks in Judaism and Christianity: Essays (Baeck 1958).

\(^3\) The Oxford English Dictionary gives its first example of philo-Semitism’s usage from 1936, and even then the term is ambiguously used: “1936 Social Forces 14 341/1 ‘Antisemitism and philosemitism represent exaggerations.”’

\(^4\) This is the exact definition in the OED.
Judaism and Jews, most of what he had to say on this subject best fits under the rubric of “anti anti-Semitism.”

3. **Imagined community philo-Semitism.** When friendship toward the Jews is seen as a valuable contribution toward a wider project revolving around the construction of national or supra-national identity. This is the aspect of philo-Semitism most deserving exploration.

4. **Multicultural Philo-Semitism.** The view that minority status of Jews and Judaism deserves support and or celebration because it adds diversity to a human mosaic, and because it deviates from perceived norms. This aspect of philo-Semitism is easily visible in contemporary Europe, but is only beginning in Serbia.

It is clear that these different shadings can blend into each other. By the same token, lumping them together impedes clear understanding. Especially in the case of Serbia, “imagined community” philo-Semitism played a revealing sociological and cultural role. The rest of this essay lays out the reasons why.

**Serbia and the Jews**

By definition, the Jews of the Diaspora are ‘sojourners.’ Still, there are lands where Jews are less outsiders than others. The Serbia created in the early 19th-century, existing in various incarnations until now, may be one of them. The reasons for this have to do with long-standing trends in both Serbian and Jewish history. Although there seems to have been Jews in what became Serbian lands in Roman times, the most recognizable and self-defined Jewish community in Serbia was the Sephardic one that developed under Turkish rule. This community was small and self-contained. Jews lived primarily in set areas like the Dorćol quarter of Belgrade, and confined themselves mostly to commerce and a limited number of crafts. Even centuries after the expulsion, they still spoke their own “Judeo-Spanish” or Ladino. Yet despite this separation, Sephardic Serbian Jews cannot be described as an outcast group, and they found occasion to participate in both Serbian social life, as well as political and military struggles against the Turks. This does not mean that there was no hostility directed against them. There was, particularly from the side of commercial rivals. But of the some 8,000 Jews who lived in Serbia before the First

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5 For a discussion of this issue see Yovel 1998.

6 Very helpful for understanding this situation are Lebl 2001 and Freidenreich 1979.

7 Predrag Palavestra in *Jewish Writers in Serbian Literature* (Palavestra 2003) pointed out that in the reconquest of Belgrade in 1806 “Jews experienced injustice, violence and persecution at the hands of the Serbs for the first time” (p. 30). But, noting themes that are stressed in philo-Semitic
World War, we can say that the possibility for building friendship between Jews and Serbs was certainly higher than many, perhaps most, countries in eastern Europe.\(^8\)

The situation in interwar Yugoslavia put new stress on this situation, but did not fundamentally change it. Before the Nazi invasion in 1941 there were some 78,000 Jews spread out through the south Slav lands. This was not a single community, and its “ethnic” make up was further variegated by an influx of Ashkenazic Jews from the Habsburg Empire. Over and above this—as is well known—the rise of fascism in central Europe gave a new impetus and virulence to anti-Semitism as a political movement and “worldview,” spilling over into all east European lands, including the Balkans.\(^9\) This undoubtedly created new barriers for Serbian-Jewish friendship. But at the same time, growing assimilation into Serbian society and a sense among some members of the public that Jews and Serbs shared common enemies provided new opportunities for Serbian-Jewish friendship.

The fascist genocide substantially destroyed the Jewish presence in Serbia and all of former Yugoslavia. Of the approximately 14,000 Jewish survivors in total about half were permitted to immigrate to Israel in the late 40’s and 50’s. After this point active members of the Jewish community in Belgrade numbered in the hundreds, and less than that in places like Novi Sad and Niš. Today, Jews as Jews are unlikely to ever play much of a role in Serbian life. Nevertheless, even in this highly diminished environment, the gain to be had from some version of Serbian-Jewish friendship attracts the attention of some members of the Balkan public, as well as a few Jewish and non-Jewish observers from the wider world. There is nothing especially surprising in this: although Jews and Serbs each have, at present, national homelands, the relations of these states to their neighbors remains conflict-laden, and the general question of both Serbian and Jewish identity remains vexed.\(^10\) Hence, while it is undoubted a small topic in the general study of history, the question of Serbian-Jewish friendship retains a degree of interest for those who want to study the efforts of embattled people to make sense of their own experience.

But what exactly is being studied here? There are two overlapping questions, both of them “multidisciplinary” in the sense that the historical, and sociological

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\(^8\) This situation is hard to measure because apart from Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria and Greece, east European Jews lived under the domination of the Romanov, Hapsburg or Hohenzollern Empires. Jews in Serbia were not subject to the pogroms and depredations that they were under the Czars, nor did they have to contend with anti-Semitism as a mass political movement, like in the German-speaking lands.

\(^9\) Several aspects of Serbian anti-Semitism deserve consideration. A recent full-length study is Byford 2008.

questions of how peoples organized themselves and why is inseparable from psychological questions of how people felt about themselves and defined their relation to others. First, focusing on the past, there is the question of what appeal this friendship held for those that expressed some variant of it. Second, from a more, “presentist” perspective, the fact that conflicting versions of Balkan history express the conflicting goals and desires of different political and social factions makes the portrayal of Serbian-Jewish friendship another opportunity to ask ourselves why some versions of the past are highlighted – particularly in the direction of imagined – and others not.

A word about the particularities of Serbian history should be kept in mind: attitudes toward the Jews ought to be seen in the context of opinions held about other nations. The fact that anti-Jewish feelings never were as strong as “anti” feelings held toward other neighboring and regional peoples meant that in Serbia Jews were not as much identified as the primary enemy. Yet, and this is the key point, what made the Jews a “principal enemy,” a “less than principal enemy” or even a “friend” depended as much, or more, on the symbolic significance ascribed to them as it does on the empirically measurable data of their place in society. Thus, though it is a happier topic, considering the logic of philo-Semitism shares something with a study of anti-Semitism. In both cases the Jewish minority, regardless of what it might have wanted otherwise, meant something broader and more symbolic to the majority public. For this reason, though the nature of philo-Semitism is indeed a political question, it is inextricably bound up with the issue of what emotional needs are gratified when people take a strongly favorable or hostile attitude toward the Jews. To link these themes together, I would like to look more closely at some philo-Semitic literature.

**Our Hebrews**

What exactly did one say to defend the Jews? And, what was said in favor of the Jews when there was a certain cost to doing so; when anti-Semitism was strong and pressing enough that a defense of the Jews would have to take up the specific charges leveled by those who hate them? To place this in a specific context: what could someone say to defend the Jews circa 1940? Luckily, we have a document that can shed some light on this issue. It is a practically unknown book. Titled, *Naši Jevreji: Jevrejsko pitanje kod nas* (Our Jews: The Jewish Question Here; see Dimitrijević ed. 1940), the slim book is an anthology of short statements by public figures, primarily Serbs, defending Jews and the Jewish presence “among us.”

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11 With justice, Alan T. Levenson deliberately studies the symbolic significance of the Jew in both philo- and anti-Semitism. See his *Between Philosemitism and Antisemitism* (Levenson 2004).
Holding a copy of volume one in your hands (volume two was never published), it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the book was intended as what we would now call a “public relations effort.” Indeed, in January of 2008, the prominent historian of Serbian Jewry, Ženi Lebl, told me that the Jewish Community had paid for the book, implying that the payments covered more than the printing costs. She suggested that I discount the sincerity of anything written there.

Although I can easily imagine writers taking money for telling people what they wanted to hear, I do not think that the pro-Jewish sentiments voiced can be dismissed altogether. First, in the run-up to the Nazi invasion (until an anti-German coup in March of 1941), the Yugoslav government took a number of steps to conciliate the Germans, and satisfy local anti-Semites. Associating yourself publicly with a Jewish cause, even if done out of self-interested motives, involved some risk, and probably would be mostly appealing to those who (also) genuinely wished to express some disapproval of anti-Semitism and the pro-Axis tilt. Furthermore, the themes sounded in this volume are the ones that reoccur in Serbian philo-Semitism. Looking at what they had to say reveals the basic content of the philo-Semitic case, as well as the feelings they wished to evoke.

The main theme is announced in a brief introduction to the collection. Stressing that what sparked the editors to embark on this project was nothing more than objectivity and the search for objective truth, they declared that the Serbian nation is “in our own eyes, and those of others” a “prisoner of justice” (Dimitrijević ed. 1940: 3). Consequently, the editors assert that they are unable to hate the Jews, or another nation different from their own “flesh and blood” (p. 3). Whether this self-description can, in fact, be called objective is one question, but another question—and one that is equally important to ask—is why it was desirable for participants in this exercise to present themselves as “prisoners of justice,” and why, a paragraph later, they suggested that the Serbs were second only to the Jews in suffering the most injustice in history.

To get an answer, we can identify two underlying tropes that appear like leitmotifs through the contributions to the anthology. They are:

1. The principal metaphor for understanding anti-Semitism is as an epidemic. It is something that blows in from the outside of the country, and that fellow citizens only express it because they have “caught it.”

2. The contributions that Jewish Serbs have made to their nation were not motivated by the needs of an out-group. Rather, they were made with the same spirit that animates the patriotic contributions of the Serbs.

A few examples of these leitmotifs can be provided, keeping in mind that similar arguments were made by various contributors in slightly different forms.

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12 Ženi Lebl, interview, Tel Aviv, Israel, January 2008.
A piece by one Mihalo Kujunčić (former vice-president of the National Assembly) sought to study the Jewish presence in south Serbia dispassionately, only using what it can present as unquestionable facts. After laying out statistics revealing that there are not many Jews in his region anyway – 7500 out of 1.6 million, he notes the fact that most employed Jews work in small enterprises, and make local contributions to the economy. “Can they really be that dangerous” (p.44) he asks rhetorically. “They do not represent foreign capital,” he declared. (Ibid.)

Stepping back from the specific claim Kujunčić made, we should think about whom he wanted to reach and how he might have understood himself in the process. While a great deal cannot be read into a single comment, it does not seem farfetched to suggest that Kujunčić presented emotional appeals as being something as foreign to himself as to his region. Consequently, his claim that the Jews represent no threat is also a way of reasserting that the Serbs can take care of themselves; that they are not susceptible to the manipulative efforts of others; and that Serbs can rely on themselves not to overreact. This is not the only moment in the book where this message of self-control is conveyed.

A Certain Derviš Korkut, curator of the state museum in Sarajevo, also declared that anti-Semitism could only be brought into the country from the outside. And if you do happen to see something that looks like native anti-Semitism, it actually has to do with business competition, and has nothing to do with current, European, anti-Semitism. He also says that that, in other countries, anti-Semitism serves as a “lightning rod” (p.53) for the signaling of more serious problems.

Stepping back from this claim (often made by Jews themselves), we see a further assumption that Serbian society is more cohesive than other places, as is thus not as susceptible to mass delusions as others are. This notion is also suggested in various forms throughout the book. It suggests that philo-Semitism was, in part, attractive because it allowed Serbs--typically on the defensive--to draw favorable comparisons between themselves and other nations. Finally, this defense of the Jews contains an element of psychological projection. Anti-Semitism in Serbia also served a lightning rod function in that attacks on Jews were safer and easier to make than attacks on more powerful and established native groups. Saying that other peoples do this “worse” changes the topic of discussion.

A certain Vojislav Nenadić, former Secretary of the National Assembly, noted that Serbian Jews not only consider themselves Serbs, but proved it in struggles for national liberation against the Turks. As he put it, “during the entire period of our national-revolutionary labor, a situation where some Jews informed to the Turkish government did not occur. Nor did they testify against us. Examples of treason on the part of the Jews did not
exist.” (p.62) Along the same lines, Serbian Jews could also be enlisted in the ranks of national martyrology. A Vasa Macerević, tells the story of one David Koen. Captured by the Bulgarians and condemned to a painful death, Koen was asked if he was author of the book Bog čuva Srbiju (God Protect Serbia). Macerević recorded Koen as responding “I am. God protect Serbia and that which shall become Great Serbia!” (p.67)

Stepping back from this sentiment--also echoed elsewhere--we not only see the common theme in defenses of the Jews that, if Jews are treated well they become loyal citizens, but also the implication that not every minority would acquit itself so well, and not every host people would show itself so grateful as the Serbs. In this respect, philo-Semitism serves as a means for praising the spirit of a people, strengthening its sense that it need not rely on internal coercion. Instead, through generosity it can incorporate others into its collective action. Moreover--and perhaps more glaringly--the depiction of Jews and Serbs as brothers in arms in “south Serbia” is a simpler and easier subject than a discussion about Serbs with Macedonians and Kosovars. Likewise, the advocacy of a “Great Serbia,” whether vis-à-vis the Bulgarians, or any other neighboring people, prevented the Jews from seeking out a non-confrontational nationalism. In this respect, friendship toward the Jews was conditional on the Jews playing a combative role in the ongoing nationality struggle.

- Speaking of expectations placed on the Jews, a contribution by a Dr. Dragoljub Aranđelović (senator and former minister) tells us something about the conditional limits of philo-Semitism, that is, the point where friendship offered toward the Jews might be withdrawn. Aranđelović’s piece levels some accusations against the Jews; for instance, that they are highly involved in corruption and dirty financial dealing. What makes this piece philo-Semitic is Aranđelović’s willingness to ascribe great talents to the Jews as well. However, he is not sure that present day Serbia is ready to absorb the Jewish element that came with the founding of Yugoslavia. He explains: “And though our Serbian nation and our society does not approve of persecution of the Jews as a race, nevertheless, it feels that those Jews who have come in are not at all those who are our domestic Jews, with whom we have co-existed, worked together, who speak our language, who together with us feel that they are in their fatherland (otadžbina). (p.6)

Stepping back from this we can see in Aranđelović’s philo-Semitism an element of nostalgia for a time when Serbia was ostensibly more unified and dedicated to common goals.

We can also reflect on some of the limits of Serbian philo-Semitism circa 1940. This was a time when Jewish refugees from central Europe were desperate to
find any shelter. Yugoslavia did allow some 50,000 transit (Palavestra 2003: 48). However, the increasing terror imposed by the Nazis, combined with the closing off of escape routes in Palestine and the West ensured that welcoming even larger numbers of desperate refugees would impose even greater strains on Yugoslavia. Here, the philo-Semitism shown toward Serbian Jews could not be expanded beyond its original object. It was indeed possible to defend Jews as a positive element in Serbian society, but not refugee Jews, and perhaps not even any Yugoslav Jew tainted with the suspicion of “foreignness.”

But, it should not be surprising if the support offered Jews was conditional. The government which in the 1930’s regularly reassured Jewish deputations that “nothing could happen to the Jews in Yugoslavia and that their government would always protect them” (Freidenreich 1979: 181), was itself riven and fragmented, to say nothing of the wider society. The forces that would befriend Jews had a complex and pressing array of voiced and unvoiced wishes and needs. These needs demanded satisfaction. Thus, the fate of philo-Semitism was inextricably bound up with what benefit it offered to those who professed it.

Post-War Continuities and Transformations

The Nazi genocide and the emigration of at least half of the Serbian Jewish survivors put an end to most of the “non-symbolic” problems of Serbian philo-Semitism (and anti-Semitism too). From 1945 onward, Jews were (and are) such a small presence in Serbian life that hardly any attention would be paid to them had not the phenomenon of anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism retained an “explanatory power” in defining Serbia’s relation to itself and the outside world. There is no wonder in this, since the social/political question of how the Jews were to be treated became less relevant than the historical/philosophical question of how the Jews were to be remembered and recognized as part of Serbian society. Ongoing philo-Semitism, in this context, serves as a conceptual counterpart to ongoing anti-Semitism, sometimes opposing and supplanting it, sometimes minimizing or ignoring it (see Byford 2007). In every case, however, established intellectual patterns of philo-Semitism were elaborated and expanded upon.

Yet to say that philo-Semitism demarcates “imaginary relations” between communities does not mean that history can be defined simply on a whim. All questions of remembering in post-war Yugoslavia and its successor states were (and remain) vexed longstanding (and ongoing) historical conflicts. The very mention of

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13 A certain Dr. Dušan Popović, lawyer, drew special attention to the situation of the Jews in Vojvodina, saying he thought they could be expected to prove their loyalty to Serbia, implying they were foreign if they did not (Dimitrijević ed. 1940: 60).
the Jews evokes these conflicts. For instance, it is beyond question that both Jews and Serbs were victims of German inhumanity. The Nazi massacre of some 7,000-8,000 civilians at Kragujevac and another 1,500 at Valjevo are only a few examples of what was inflicted on the Serbs. At the same time, remembering Jews and Serbs as equivalent victims not only downplays the totalitarian thoroughness of the Shoah, it makes it harder to find a place in historical memory for Serbian collaborators with the Germans, such as Milan Nedić, or for the faceless Serbs who took advantage of Jewish suffering for their own ends. Furthermore, with the exception of those who were protected by the Italians, the bulk of Yugoslav Jewish survivors were either part of Tito’s Partisans, or sheltered by them. This means that “Serb--Jewish memory” cannot be entirely separated from the memory of Communist Yugoslavia’s creation, and all the problems that go with it.¹⁴

These difficult matters are rendered even more troubling when the national conflicts in former Yugoslavia are considered in more detail. It is undeniable that Serbs, Jews and Roma were all common victims of the Ustasha. There is no “Myth of Jasenovac” if by that is meant a denial that Croatian fascism did not have as its aim the “removal” of these peoples from the large territory it claimed. Simultaneously, propagandists for the “greater Serbian” side can easily misuse the memory of Jasenovac. Talking about friendship toward the Jews in any of these contexts, brings with it the overt or covert expectation that one take a side and--at its worse--show indifference or callousness to the suffering of others. On top of all that, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990’s brought with it a PR efforts by Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims to show that they were genuine friends of the Jews. Though these efforts were in part driven by an anti-Semitic belief that Jews have some secret power over US foreign policy and public opinion, the examples presented of friendship toward the Jews were typically genuine--albeit selective. But at their most virulent, especially during Serbia’s isolation in the Milošević years, these (ostensibly) pro-Jewish opinions blended into a defensive advocacy of the greater-Serbian side. Marko Živković (2000) listed some of the most belligerent of these correspondences:

- Both Serbs and Jews are the "chosen peoples" – slaughtered, sacrificed, denied expression, yet always righteous, always defending themselves, never attacking.

- The Kosovo Albanians stand to the Serbs as the Palestinians stand to the Israelis.

- Serbs are the ones who should say "Never again" like Israel, and rely on their military power to defend their brethren wherever they happen to be living in

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¹⁴ There is a large and expanding literature on the memory of the Holocaust. The issues raised in these studies cannot be separated from the general question of historical memory, even if the number of issues becomes “unmasterable.”
Yugoslavia, bringing them together into a unitary state which alone can guarantee them safety in a hostile world.

Though much of this, particularly the most chauvinist, veers into mere “rhetorical” philo-Semitism, whereby the example of the Jews is simply seized upon to legitimate an already chosen course of action. For this reason, it is necessary to ask what distinguishes recent philo-Semitism from that of the pre-Holocaust era.

The answer is not the content. The main tropes and themes of Serbian philo-Semitism remained similar to the world of 1940. They were just subjected to new inflections of meaning, and different, sometimes severe, ideological strains. To give a few instances of this I want to start with a work published in 1965, a time when Serbian nationalism was officially suppressed and had to express itself indirectly. It is dr Mihailo B. Milošević’s Srpski Jevreji u ratovima Srbije za slobodu i jedinstvo Jugoslovena, 1912-18 (Serbian Jews in the Serbia’s Wars for the Freedom and Unity of the South Slavs). In his introduction, Milošević does not imply, but openly declares, the affinity between the two peoples: “In spite of all the differences in the conditions of historical development of the Jews and Serbs, as well as the proportionately different attention paid by the world to their role and influence, the tragic national fate of the Jewish nation and the Serbian nation show great similarities” (Milošević 1965: 2). To demonstrate these similarities Milošević listed catastrophes in Jewish history like the destruction of the Second Temple, the expulsion from Spain and the Holocaust. For the Serbs he noted the Battle of Kosovo Field and subsequent terrors under the Turks and later the Germans and Croatians (p.16-17).

It should be noted that Milošević did not want to ignore historical differences. His main point was to show that “this similarity in their tragic historical fates characterized by terrible persecutions and painful migrations called up a spontaneous mutual sympathy between Jews and Serbs” (p.19). Integrating Jews into a version of Serbian national history was a way of demonstrating this sympathy. Seen in the post World War II context, it also was a way of using older philo-Semitic tropes to enlist Jews as a symbolic ally in what some Serbs were starting to experience as a lonely battle against enemies near and far. In the last 1980’s, as Yugoslavia went into its terminal crisis, the British journalist, Richard West, visited Kosovo, and noted the Serb self-understanding as a nation alone and maligned, “Over and over one hears that ‘the Albanians and the Croats hate us, but we don’t hate them’ or: ‘All the world hates us, us and the Jews” (West 1994: 348). In a situation like this, the Serbs have a certain interest in highlighting what Jews have done for Serbia and how Serbs have noted and appreciated this. Although the argument does not work fully on a logical plane, on an emotional level it can hold a strong appeal: two special, highly moral and isolated peoples would be friends with each other.
Thus, as much as the times have changed, something about philo-Semitism remained the same. The friendship offered toward the Jews, as a minority people, was put forth on the condition that they, genuinely or metaphorically, share in the battles, suffering and perhaps disasters of another people. Mihaol Milošević’s book by its nature would not put the Jews on the side of the Albanians, Bulgarians, Macedonians and more. Nevertheless, to give it its credit, it did indeed express appreciation of the Jews. And even in the post-Holocaust world, it is not true that the Jews find everywhere tolerance and friends. Still, with the undoing of Yugoslavia a different geo-political situation brought changes and a certain degeneration. By the 1990’s, however, the kind of philo-Semitism that stresses common suffering and martyrdom could not be *anything but* a part of nationalist victimization-tropes. A “Society for Serbian-Jewish Friendship” expressed the culmination point of this politicization openly. In an interview, the writer Filip David explained how this sort of ideologically inspired Serbian-Jewish friendship functioned:

In the beginning of the war you had a philosemitic temperature. They said that we had the same destiny. From the first moment I must say that I was against the Society for Serbian-Jewish Friendship because, as I said to some of my friends who were members of the Society, that kind of society must produce anti-Semitism, because the aim was not real friendship. I had always said that I was part of Serbian culture. What does it mean to be a friend of myself? The aim of this Society was to explain to the Jews, especially the Jews in America, the Serbian aims in this war. They really believe that there exists a [central command post] and the Jews are on top of it. In [this] way they believed in the existence of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.\(^\text{15}\)

However, the story of Serbian philo-Semitism would be incomplete if it ended here. Not all Serbs wanted or want to see Jewish-Serbian relations that way. Likewise, though Jews do not feel completely at ease in present-day Serbia, the Jewish side is no longer as dependent on gestures of good will as it was in the past. If, in this new situation, philo-Semitism perseveres, it will because Jews will be regarded as a valuable component of a diverse and even “multi-cultural” Serbia. A prominent 2008 article in Politika, one of Serbia’s oldest and most important newspapers, illustrated some of the conceptual opposition that a simple repetition of traditional philo-Semitism would face. The front-page headline was “Serbia was good to the Jews when it was difficult.” From this title one expects another account about how Serbia did not have anti-Semitism, and jointly fought the Nazis. Yet, even though *Politika* often takes a nationalist line, this piece did not attempt to exploit philo-Semitism for that purpose. There was one reference to Klara Mandić, the founder of the Jewish-Serbian Friendship Society, and her belief that Jews and

\(^{15}\) Recorded in conversation with Paul Benjamin Gordiejew in *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry*, p. 279.
Serbs possessed a “spiritual tie in the common experience of genocide,” but the bulk of the article turned out to be an admiring interview with the Israeli politician, Tommy Lapid. It is not surprising that Lapid was chosen, since he was born Tomislav Lampel in Novi Sad, and certainly had something to say to a Serbian newspaper. But maybe because Lapid controlled the discussion more, the piece took up another side of the similarities between Serbian and Jewish history. Instead, of dwelling on what philo-Semitism demonstrates about the Serbs, Lapid focused on what Serbs could learn from Jewish problems. This message took a blunter tone than other Serbian-Jewish parallels. Lapid stated:

As a child I learned that Kosovo was the heart of Serbian culture and identity, just as Jewish children for twenty centuries learned that in Hebron Avram sealed a holy contract with God. But, in Kosovo, as in the so-called occupied territories, 95 percent of people hate us from the bottom of their souls. We understand the Serbian problem very well because we are confronted with a Muslim enemy. But, despite that I wish the Serbs the best, I am afraid that they must come to the same conclusion as us. In the final analysis, you cannot keep territory when the obvious majority does not want you. (Ibid.)

Lapid, who was a minister in Sharon’s government, certainly is not condemning Serbian nationalism on moral grounds. However, he is offering a different kind of Serbian-Jewish friendship. Up until this point, although Jews could be held up as models for Serbian behavior, they could not really tell Serbs what to do. This has been an unspoken, but vital, assumption throughout the history of Serbian philo-Semitism, namely that Jews are not powerful enough to ask for Serbian identity to be seen one way, rather than another. It remains to be seen whether this shifting of roles will diminish Serbian Philo-Semitism or deepen it.

Conclusion: For What it is Worth

What should we make of this whole story? Though it may seem like a denunciation of Serbian philo-Semitism to say it had self-interested motives, it should be kept in mind that friendship between nations has always been a matter of “higher egoism.” The fact that there was an instrumental aim in appreciating the Jews is something that can be accepted as a matter of course. What needs discussion is whether Serbian philo-Semitism made any difference in behavior, and whether this change should be seen as positive. In my opinion, the answer to both questions is “yes,” though, naturally, in a qualified sense.

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16 Politika, January 10, 2008, p. 7. Klara Mandić’s career deserves a fuller discussion than can be offered here.
First, the most “self-serving” elements of philo-Semitism may, in fact, have been the ones most useful to Serbs and Jews in the long run. This is because philo-Semitism provided both minority and majority communities with a predictable means of fraternizing. Jews would know what they needed to do to evoke the “generous” elements in their host community and Serbs would know what they could expect when they made magnanimous efforts toward the Jews. That this process was not so easily repeated in other European nations only served to make the bond between Serbs and Jews feel more meaningful and permanent. If individuals thus felt that they were doing something valuable by cultivating Serbian-Jewish ties, their behavior would change, even if their interests were material, or outright suspect.

Still, a social process that succeeds on one level may cause unsolvable problems on another. The ongoing declarations that Serbian Jews were not different from Serbs emphasized the fault line that anti-Semites exploited, namely the ease with which the Jews could indeed be distinguished from the rest of the population. One of the sad ironies of a very sad story is the fact that the very efforts to imagine the Jews as part of the nation also illuminated the conditions with which they would be rejected. Serbian philo-Semitism is essentially the Serbs asking the Jews to fill a role assigned to them, (even if this asking was sometimes done on Jewish instigation). In this respect, philo-Semitism is anti-Semitism turned on its head. Jews were assigned to play a symbolically favorable role, and as long as they remain a dependent minority, there is no certainty that this role will not be “turned back.” In addition, Serbian philo-Semitism, whatever fantasies it may have expressed about Jewish power, contained the typically unspoken assumption that the Serbs would be the ones doing the assigning. There is also no certainty that this love would survive the acquisition of genuine power by the Jews.

Jovan Byford, in a well-argued essay “Serbs Never Hated the Jews: The Denial of anti-Semitism in Serbian Orthodox Culture” makes the point that it is not enough to accept the simple aversion of philo-Semitism at face value, since “if tolerance is promoted as a national trait, then mounting a challenge to enduring prejudices is made much more difficult” (Byford 2006: 180). Putting this case directly, he argues:

Once the notion that there is no anti-Semitism in Serbia or within the Orthodox Church is accepted as common sense, there is little to discuss…All who challenge the nationalist common sense are simply dismissed as ‘Serbophobes’ or ‘Euro-wimps’, members of the ‘spiteful circle’ of ‘petty Belgraders’ unwilling to accept the ‘truth’ about the unblemished history of Serbian benevolence toward Jews. (Ibid.)

In this specific context, Byford’s logic is unassailable. If a philo-Semitic theme is only taken up as a rhetorical gesture, and if its sole purpose is warding off criticism chauvinism and aggressive nationalism, then philo-Semitism is nothing
more than a “cover.” The question should be how much of Serbian philo-Semitism fits this description.

While some Serbian philo-Semitism is undoubtedly phony, that should not make us dismiss the genre altogether. Rather, what is necessary is greater candor about the friendship between Serbs and Jews, particularly about the underlying needs – ranging from political to personal – that drives it. The complex motives that cause some Serbs to express friendship with the Jews are probably similar to the needs that drive others to seek friendship between un-equals, or allies in a common battle. Friendship between groups who are struggling – to say nothing of nations – entails by its nature an effort to cast the other in a useful and gratifying role. Hence, while there are some cases where it is best to doubt the friendship, there are others where it is not. The best course is to inquire into the suitability and durability of the role assigned, bearing in mind that those vulnerable enough to need friends very rarely are able to hold out for a role that is completely dignified or completely honest. There is undoubtedly something to lament in this, and philo-Semitism loses its value if the falsification of the historical record involved in it spills over into outright propaganda. In this respect, a parallel with private friendship holds: most people are quite open about the fact that their friendship is conditional on your not voicing any painful truths.

This condition is acceptable to an extent, but if it turns into flat out censorship the value of the friendship is questionable. But there is no reason to assume that Serbian philo-Semites always or mostly reached this point. Moreover, the very invocation of a stronger Serbia generously offering tolerance and affection toward a minority could serve to legitimate wider notions of tolerance and friendship. To be sure, the friendship offered the Jews is typically ambiguous. And Jews, like all minority peoples, must make difficult choices with what is offered them. Sometimes ambiguous friendships can be better than sincere and genuine hatred.

References


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