

THE JEWS OF SERBIA

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The Jews of Serbia represent a branch of a large group of what is known as Oriental Jewry, who left Spain in 1492 or thereabouts, and settled in Turkey. Until the middle of the last century they were, in the main, living under the political protection of the Turkish Government. All their religious and social concepts were identical with those of the Oriental Jews. When, in course of time, the portion of Europe now known as Serbia freed itself from the yoke of the Turkish rule, an entirely new position was created for the Jews residing in the liberated portion of the Balkans. At first they spoke Ladino and a little Turkish; but with the formation of the Serbian Government, the Jews naturally found it very difficult to respond to the new environment and conditions, owing to the fact that they had to learn the Serbian language and to adapt themselves to a régime that belonged to the Greek-Orthodox Church, whereas formerly the Mohammedan faith had been predominant. As the Serbians at first considered the Jews loyal adherents of their former oppressors, they naturally made the Jews conscious of a civic or patriotic inferiority. In consequence, the first years under the new régime were not free from strife and struggle. But at no time did the Serbians openly display their antagonism or hatred towards the Jews, or accuse them of forming a distinct group which was not loyal to Serbia. For the Serbian Government, the rulers, and the princes not only found that the Jew

was in no way disloyal, but on the contrary discovered him to be most patriotic in every respect.

This process of readjustment lasted nearly a whole generation. During this time the Jew living in Serbia under Serbian rule had every opportunity to adapt himself to the new conditions. He learned to understand the manners and customs of his Serbian neighbors, and, what is most important, he learned the Serbian language. Thus the Jew of Serbia until the present war began had full opportunity to develop himself, and he became one of the important factors in the life of the State. It was not long before he proved his patriotism and loyalty by valor on the battlefield and by participating in the intellectual and economic progress of the State.

Before entering upon details, I wish to quote some figures of statistical interest. When the war broke out, there were from thirty-five to forty thousand Jews in Serbia. More than half of them were late arrivals, who, after the Balkan war, had been attracted to Serbia from the Turkish empire. These newcomers constituted an important addition to the Sephardic community of Serbia. They had enjoyed the freedom of Serbia for a period of ten months, when the present war broke out and their further development was thereby interrupted. They had been and were still undergoing a transformation. In the main they lived like their coreligionists in Turkey. When, therefore, the Jews of Serbia are spoken of, that expression is limited to the fifteen thousand Jews, who were in that country for many, many years prior to the outbreak of the Balkan war. Of these fifteen thousand Jews fully ten thousand were residents of Belgrade, the rest being scattered throughout the smaller towns of Serbia, such as Nish, Shabat, Leskovatz, Pirot, Pojarevatz, Smederevo, and Kraguyevatz.

They were mainly occupied with commerce, although, of course, they were also to be found among the various crafts. Not the least important was the position many of them occupied in the various liberal professions, in which fields they made themselves especially valuable, so much so, that they reflected great honor upon the rest of Jewry.

In consequence of the advantageous political position occupied by the Serbian Jews, which position they had earned for themselves, it was possible for every Jew to be proud of his religion and, at the same time, gain the respect of his neighbors. It was his chief pride to make his life an open book, especially in relation to his non-Jewish neighbors, for he noticed that in governmental affairs, as well as in social intercourse, no attempt had ever been made to belittle him on account of his religion. On the contrary, he noticed a genuine interest displayed on the part of his neighbors in his religious practices. The king attended Jewish services; and on certain occasions the leading ministers and diplomats of other faiths came to pay homage and respect to the ancient religion of the Jews. All this made such a deep impression upon the Jew, that he developed a high regard and loyal love for the traditional, as well as for the ceremonial phases of the Jewish faith, thus becoming a better Jew and a better Serbian.

The Serbian Jew is by nature deeply religious, and he is ever ready to make all personal sacrifices for the sake of Judaism, though he is far from being narrow-minded. He does not know the meaning of Reform in contra-distinction to Orthodoxy; but he happens to have developed a type of Judaism in which the two are very happily blended. As far as the spirit of the times permits, the Jews of Serbia stand fast by Jewish traditions; but in their daily lives and in their

social relations they are absolutely up-to-date and modern in every sense. Their homes are thoroughly Jewish in spirit, as well as in practice. Every Jewish festival is strictly observed in accordance with the ritual. The most important phase of Jewish life, however, is brought out in the ceremonials of the synagogue, to which the Jews come dressed in their best and in which they deport themselves with all the dignity and respect that a house of worship should command. The liturgy has not changed from the accepted traditional form. In all the synagogues there are choirs. In Belgrade there is one synagogue with a mixed choir, which, in quality and in artistic merit, compares favorably with the best choirs to be heard in any Jewish house of worship. Of course, all the singers are Jews and Jewesses. Many of the melodies rendered in the Serbian synagogues have come down to us from the time when our ancestors resided in Spain, and are the same as in Holland, New York, Montreal, and the West Indies, although these are separated from the Serbian Jews by four hundred years of history and by many thousand miles. In addition, however, the latter have adopted some Hebrew melodies written by Sulzer, Lewandowski, and other modern Jewish religious composers. The organ is never played on Sabbath or on festival days. It is only at patriotic and private festivities, occurring on week-days, that the peal of the organ ever resounds. The prayers are mainly read in Hebrew, but some are translated into old Castilian or Serbian. In addition to festival sermons, special sermons are delivered on Sabbaths, once a month, dealing invariably with ethics, history, and other subjects, including every modern question of Jewish interest. The sermons are delivered in the Serbian language, and attract not only Jews, but also many

persons belonging to other denominations, who come to hear the addresses and appear to be moved by the music. On Saturday afternoons services are arranged for the young folks, especially for the students of the Hebrew classes, which are attended by young men and young women, by boys and girls. These take an active interest in the services. The boys and young men render some of the prayers. Special sermons for the young people are delivered, calculated to develop in the young folks a sense of pride in matters Jewish. The services held on the king's birthday are made so attractive that the leading dignitaries attend the synagogue and display a feeling of friendship and respect made stronger because of the whole-hearted spirit in which services of this type are conducted.

The education which the Jewish youth of Serbia receive in the city schools is of a fairly high standard, and it may be asserted that these schools compare well with educational institutions in the most enlightened countries. Education in Serbia is compulsory. The Jewish children, however, are not satisfied with the public school education alone; they continue their studies in high schools and other advanced institutions. Even children whose parents wish to have them take up a business career enter special commercial schools. Accordingly, the mercantile class contains men of high intellectual attainments. Apart from the young men who attend the Belgrade University, which, by the way, offers courses also to women, several Serbian Jews take courses at leading universities of other countries. During the ten years of attendance in the public, elementary, and high schools, every Serbian child is compelled to take up religious instruction as well. The Jewish boy must furnish proof that he is receiving religious instruction, and unless he brings a certificate of special merit

in that respect, he is not allowed to be promoted. This has helped the Serbian Jews to perfect their religious schools to such an extent that they really constitute the foundation of Jewish life. Every Jewish community has its religious school which is in charge of men who, in addition to their knowledge of Hebrew, have a thorough modern education. The Jewish children, during the first four years of attendance at public school, are expected to take eighteen hours of Hebrew instruction a week. While at the high school, they must necessarily curtail their Hebrew studies, so that they can devote only six hours to them. The hours for religious instruction never conflict with those for secular education, and that is why the scholars are able to take advantage of both to the fullest extent. The children acquire a correct Hebrew pronunciation, a thorough knowledge of the Bible, both in the original language and in a Serbian translation, and a familiarity with Jewish history from the beginning down to modern times, including modern social movements. All of the traditional and ritual observances are explained to the child, so that he does not follow them blindly, but practises them intelligently and sincerely. The provincial schools have from one to two Hebrew teachers, but in Belgrade, where the number of Jewish children in the public, elementary, and high schools amounts to seven hundred, there are seven male teachers and one female teacher for Hebrew; the principal, who is usually a university graduate, also presides over certain classes which receive his personal instruction. The teachers are for the most part graduates of the Belgrade Jewish Seminary, which was supported by all of the Jewish communities of Serbia. Many of these teachers also taught in the regular public schools. However, since this Seminary has been closed, due to the

inability to attract candidates for this special field, it has been necessary to draw upon Palestine for teachers. The Bible is taught in Hebrew. Every other subject of Jewish instruction is imparted in Serbian.

The manner in which these religious schools are conducted has greatly helped to make the Jews of Serbia a highly cultured element in the country. There is a very large group of Jewish young men who occupy splendid positions in the political as well as in social life. For example, there are over thirty-five Jewish physicians in Serbia, though the Jewish population amounts to only fifteen thousand. This compares favorably with the general community, for in the entire population of Serbia which, before the war, amounted to three millions, there was but one physician for every seven thousand souls. In every other branch of the professions the quota of Jews is in the same proportion. Three Jews have occupied positions as under-secretaries in the State Department, one of them having been appointed consul-general in one of the leading European cities. There is a Jewish officer in the army who has worked his way up to the position of colonel, and considering that he is only thirty-six years old, there is every reason to hope that a still higher military rank will be reached by him.

The same is the case in the field of literature; the Serbian Jews have made their mark in prose as well as in poetry. The very same consul-general, alluded to above, Mr. Chaim Davitcho, was a writer of distinction, whose original contributions and translations of foreign dramas, principally from the Spanish, have made him one of the most prominent figures in the National Theatre and in the leading literary circles of Serbia. But apart from having devoted himself to general literature, he has also written on subjects of Jewish interest.

For example, he has produced a series of novels dealing with the life of the Belgrade Jews, beginning with the period when Serbia was under Turkish rule and bringing his material up to date. Throughout all of these novels, his special object was to bring out very forcibly the loyalty of the Jew to his God and the love that he bears his fellow-men. The incidents in congregational and home life are treated by him with such grace and elegance as to make them stand out like gems beautifully set. The brother of Chaim Davitcho, Mr. Benko Davitcho, who fell in action during the Balkan war, has also earned for himself a reputation as a *littérateur*. A score of others whose contributions to modern literature are most valuable might be mentioned. All these prominent men are not only conscientious Jews, but are ever ready to give up their time in facilitating the progress of Jewish communal affairs, in their respective towns, in the fields which have a particular attraction for them.

The rabbis of Serbia have various functions. They are not bound to the synagogue alone, but also devote part of their time to the Jewish social life. It often happens that some families owe their social and economic well-being to the active endeavors and the practical aid rendered them by their spiritual leaders. These diversified labors are greatly facilitated by the recognition, aid, confidence, and authority that the rabbi enjoys on the part of the Government, as well as his community. A rabbi in Serbia, in addition to a diploma from a seminary, must, of necessity, have a university education, or must give proof of his Hebrew and talmudic learning by a document signed by one of the recognized spiritual leaders of Europe. He is elected by a committee consisting of the Executives of the community and of twenty-five delegates

elected by the Jews who hold a special meeting for their election. The Government is always advised of the appointment of a rabbi, and it usually sanctions the choice of the Jewish community. This sanction carries with it the privileges accorded the rabbi. Then follows the installation of the rabbi with all due pomp and ceremony. Three days are devoted to this special celebration, in which non-Jews also participate as a mark of their respect to the newly elected religious leader. The celebration begins with services in the synagogue, and a prayer is offered for the well-being and the success of the rabbi. Banquets, receptions, and concerts are included in the three days of festivity. The rabbi is in more senses than one a state official, for, apart from performing religious and social duties, he has to discharge state functions according to the demands of the constitution.

The Greek-Orthodox Church is related to the State to such an extent that it plays an important rôle in the life of the Government. The State is, therefore, compelled, in a sense, to allow the Jewish religious community to play a similar rôle. For example, marriages and divorces in Serbia are recognized mainly and chiefly as Church or religious functions. The laws of the State recognize only such marriages and divorces as have had the sanction of a religious authority, and do not require any separate license. Further, in all Government functions, such as taking the oath of office for military or civil service, or in legal proceedings, a religious leader must be present, in accordance with the provision of the law. The Jews have naturally developed the laws regulating marriages and domestic relations in such a way that they enjoy not only the religious sanctity and privileges accorded them by the State authorities, but also executive power to carry out

decisions. They are even able to invoke the aid of the police.

As a mark of the cultural development of Serbian Jewry, it is perhaps well to dwell upon the excellent work achieved by several organizations. First among these organizations, and perhaps the most important one, is the one devoted to the spreading of the knowledge of Judaism and Jewish history among the Serbian Jews. The second in importance is a Fund Organization, which has for its aim the grant of fellowships to Jewish young men who are desirous of pursuing higher studies in foreign universities but are economically unable to do so. Due to the efforts of this organization, many young men have returned to Serbia, and have repaid the sums spent on them not alone with actual money, but with the manifold services they are rendering. Then there is the Zionist organization in Serbia which has succeeded in uniting the various elements of Jewry. The Serbian Jews have always made it a point to send their delegates to the Jewish National Congress, have paid their shekels, and in every other respect have shared in all undertakings of the National Fund Organization. All this has been done despite the fact that in Serbia the Zionist movement has never been very strong; but one thing must be remembered: we have never had an anti-Zionist movement.

The leading social organization in Serbia is known as the Serbian Lodge of the I. O. B. B. at Belgrade. That organization practically shapes the policy of social relations among Jews. This Lodge has been able, in the course of three years, to perfect its functions in such a manner as to play a part in the social and economic welfare of Serbian Jewry and to shape the political opinions of the Jewish community. Every member of the I. O. B. B. considers it a privilege and an honor to belong to it, and only such are admitted as are deemed

satisfactory in every respect. The sessions of the Lodge are strictly formal, and the order of business is very carefully worked out.

It is hardly necessary to point out that the Serbian Jews, as all other Jewish communities, take care of their poor, who are mostly strangers that have come to Serbia because of unfavorable conditions in other parts of Europe. Whenever special collections are made in order to provide Matzoth, clothing, or other articles for the poor, the amount gathered is always in excess of the need. The surplus money thus raised is not laid aside as a permanent fund, but is at once transmitted either to Palestine, or to neighboring Balkan states, toward which a special kinship is naturally felt. The Jew of Serbia has never sought aid from his coreligionists outside of his country. When the Balkan war was declared, a special commission, under the leadership of Dr. Paul Nathan and Dr. Kahn of Berlin, and of Mr. Elkan N. Adler of London, who also represented the American philanthropic organizations, asked what could be done for the Jews of Serbia by the Jews of America, England, and Germany. The reply was: "We accept your greetings and kindly offer, and you may return with the satisfaction of knowing that we always have looked after our own and will continue to do so." But apart from the charitable aid rendered, the Jewish leaders in Serbia made it a point to afford help to their coreligionists, who were temporarily in need, in a most dignified and honorable manner, by having founded for them what is known as the Jewish Bank. This institution is maintained by a membership, and also enjoys bequests specially left to it. It is not a free-loan society, because all transactions are based on strictly commercial lines; it differs from other banks only in the fact that the rate of

interest is lower than in other financial institutions, and that credit is extended to many who could not secure a loan from any other source.

The relationship between the Jew and non-Jew in Serbia is most amicable, and this is manifested not only between the hours of nine in the morning and five in the evening, but also in private gatherings. Many of the larger concerns in Belgrade have Jewish and non-Jewish partners, and when it is remembered that many of these firms have carried on business for over thirty years and that the partnerships have never been dissolved because of disputes or through legal proceedings, one may well realize how harmonious the relationship is. The question of religion never enters into the ranks of society. During all Jewish holidays and festivals the leading church dignitaries make it a point not only to visit the synagogue, but also to offer their congratulations in private by calling at the home of the rabbi and conveying their personal, as well as their church's congratulations. Whenever the king holds a reception, many Jews are specially invited.

Although Jew and non-Jew live very harmoniously together, cases of intermarriage or conversion are extremely rare. Either act would be severely criticised on all sides, and the party guilty of such a misdeed would be boycotted by society at large. The Serbian Jew is eminently proud of his Judaism, and feels especially dignified by virtue of the fact that he, coming from Spain, can trace his ancestors without admixture for many, many generations, during which time they have happily been subjected to less cruelty and oppression than have been many of the Jews who have settled elsewhere.

Because the Jews of Serbia have strictly observed their religious practices, they have been able to retain many customs

that the Jews in other parts of the Orient have perhaps abandoned to a large degree. For example, during the seven days of *Shiva* the friends and relatives who visit the house of mourning concern themselves with all of the needs of the mourners. All food required is brought from without, and the mourners are spared the trouble of providing any. On the Sabbath following a wedding the groom has a special seat of honor in the synagogue, which is usually decorated with flowers, and during the reading of the Torah he is given the honor of holding another scroll in his arms. As a final mark of honor, the entire congregation rises, and sings a chant, inviting him to read Genesis 24, 1-7. As he steps forward from his seat to the *Tebah*, flowers and candies are thrown from the ladies' galleries by young and old. As he returns to his seat, a similar ovation is accorded him.

This is but a brief outline of the religious, cultural, and social life of the Serbian Jews. Naturally, because of the terrible results of the present great war, all these facts, recollections, and associations come to the writer like the memory of a dream. The Serbian Jews have lost all they possessed, and will be compelled to begin anew when the time comes to re-establish themselves. Their only consolation in their sorrow is that Serbia has been able to come into closer contact with America, and is better known by the Americans. They firmly believe that the Allies, Serbia among them, will be victorious in this war. They believe that Serbia will be restored to her independence and her place of honor among the nations. They are certain that, when the Serbian nation is restored and united, the Jews will again resume their happy life of the past, the horrors of the present will be forgotten, and, with the blessing of God, a yet brighter future will be opened up for all the Jews.