

JENNIE LEBL, CHRONICLER OF THE HOLOCAUST IN THE BALKANS -

REVIEW ARTICLE

By Paul Mojzes

Publications under review:

Jennie Lebl, *Plima i Slom: Iz Istorije Jevreja Vardarske Makedonije* [High Tide and Crash: From the History of Vardar Macedonia] (Gornji Milanovac, Yugoslavia: Dečje Novine, 1990), 440 pp.

Jennie Lebl, *Do "Konačnog Rešenja" Jevreji u Beogradu 1521-1942* [Until the "Final Solution": Jews in Belgrade 1521-1942] (Belgrade, Yugoslavia: Čigoja, 2001), 471 pp.

Jennie Lebl, *Do "Konačnog Rešenja": Jevreji u Srbiji* (Until the "Final Solution": Jews in Serbia) (Belgrade: Čigoja, 2002), 353 pp.

Jennie Lebl, *Hadž Amin i Berlin* [Hajj-Amin and Berlin] (Belgrade: Čigoja, 2003), 331 pp.

Jennie Lebl, editor, *Jevreji iz Jugoslavije Ratni Vojni Zarobljenici u Nemačkoj* [A Memorial of Yugoslavian Jewish Prisoners of War] (Tel-Aviv, Israel: Technosdar, 1995), 137pp.

While the literature on the Holocaust is not completely devoid of the history of the genocide of Jews in the Balkans (usually includes Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and the former Yugoslavia) it is clear that it has not received a proportionate coverage in English or other major languages. Nor has the general population of the Balkans become aware of what transpired in their midst. Of course, most people in the Balkans learned about the suffering of their own nation during WWII, but a lot less about others, and practically nothing about the Jews aside from a vague cognition that Jews were targets of the Nazis. Fewer Jews inhabited these countries than, say, Germany, Poland, Hungary, or Soviet Union, nevertheless the extermination of Jews was so ferocious and complete that one might almost say that Jewish history ended in the Balkans in 1942 or 1943 except for Bulgaria.

One woman scholar, Jennie (pronounced Zhenie) Lebl (or Lebel), has done much to remedy the situation but her work is mostly in Serbian or Hebrew and therefore I have endeavored to point out her great merit to the English language reading public. The first three books are comprehensive histories of Jews in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, Serbia (not inclusive of the province of Vojvodina), and Serbia's capital city of Belgrade, where most of the Jews resided. The book about the (in)famous Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj-Amin el-Huseini and his close collaboration with Hitler and other Nazi officials, especially as it impacted on Bosnia and Croatia is her most recent published work. The book she edited about the fate of the Jewish officers and soldiers who had served in the

Yugoslav Army and became German POWs is the only one that is tri-lingual, namely the text is in Serbian and English running in parallel columns on every page, and the back of the book, or the front, if you wish, consonant to the orthography of the Hebrew language, contains the text in Hebrew with additional photos and illustrations. All of her books contain a very large number of photographs, maps, photocopies of documents, indexes, glossaries, charts, bibliographies, appendices, and other helpful guides for the reader.

Jennie Lebl was born in Serbia, Yugoslavia. She lived in Belgrade from 1933 to 1941 when as a 14 year old girl, just prior to being sent to the women's extermination camp in *Sajmište* [Fairgrounds] near Belgrade where she would have met certain death, she went underground. But she was arrested in 1943 and was sent to forced labor in Germany, where under false identities she barely survived in various prisons and concentration camps. Released in 1945 she returned to Belgrade where she completed high school and studied law and journalism at Belgrade University. However, in 1949, she was imprisoned by Tito's regime for re-telling an innocuous political joke at his expense. Despite the sentence of one year she was held in labor camps for over two years, including the menacing Goli Otok. In 1954 she migrated to Israel and devoted herself to the study and writing about Jews in Serbia and Macedonia. She published quite a few books in addition to the one's covered in this review.

The book *Plima i slom* [High Tide and Crash] deals with the story of the Jews of what is now the Republic of Macedonia and ideally should have been published in the Macedonian language, but the vast majority of Macedonians are able to read Serbian and thus the book is likely to reach its target audience. Jews (called Romaniots) have lived in some parts of Macedonia since after the Babylonian Exile in 587 b.c.e. and in larger numbers since the fall of Jerusalem in 70 c.e., a history that no one has yet explored and which Ms. Lebl also bypassed. But the largest influx of Jews took place after the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1542, hence almost all Jews of Macedonia were Sephards and Djudeo-espanjol-speaking. They were welcomed by the Turks who had occupied Macedonia till 1912 but also had good relationships with the Macedonians until Yugoslavia was attacked and conquered by Germany and its allies in April 1941. Most of Macedonia, Thrace, and an area around Pirot, Serbia, was annexed by Bulgarians; a small section by Italians who created a "Greater Albania" under their protectorate. Several books and extensive documentation on this topic have been published in Macedonia in the Macedonian language.

Many readers may have become aware that the Bulgarian government was one of the very few in Europe that refused to deport Jews to extermination camps—this despite the fact that Bulgaria had joined the Axis. Hence one might expect that the Jews of Macedonia were lucky as they too would be protected by the Bulgarian government. Not so. In fact, the Jews of the “newly liberated territories” of Macedonia and Thrace (previously a Greek province) that Bulgaria considered traditionally their lands, fared very badly. Bulgarians awarded Bulgarian citizenship to people of all nationalities in the annexed areas except the Jews. Not only had they been subjected to the antisemitic laws of Bulgaria, but, as Jennie Lebl carefully details, along with copious documentation, first the Bulgarian government returned about 60 of the about 300 Jews who had fled from Serbia back to the Germans where they were all killed. Then on March 11, 1943, very expeditiously—in a single day--all the Jews of Macedonia were arrested and first collected in a tobacco factory in Skopje, and then equally expeditiously under Bulgarian military escort, delivered to the Germans, who took 7,358 of them to Treblinka (p. 340), from which none returned. The only Jews who survived were those who fled to Italian-controlled Albania or joined the Communist Partisans and lived to see the end of the war unless they died in combat. Of the over 7,000 Jews of Macedonia 97% were killed. The reviewer has had direct contacts with the Jewish Community of Macedonia; today there are not much more than a hundred Jews in the country.

The two books on Jews of Serbia and Belgrade overlap and complement one another. There are records indicating Jews having settled in Belgrade in 1521, although they may have lived there earlier. According to Lebl the Turks treated the Jews better than did the Serbs after they drove out the Turks in the 19th century. Serbs, however, initially thought of the Jews as Turkish allies. They were expelled from Belgrade a number of times and were prohibited from settling in provincial towns. But the situation improved in the 20th century. Lebl provides a great deal of information about prominent Jewish leaders, institutions, publishing activities, rituals, buildings, etc—one gets a very thorough picture of Jewish life. Both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews lived in Belgrade and initially did not mingle much. But by the 20th century greater integration took place between the two communities and more of them switched to speaking Serbian although German and Ladino were still much in use.

Serbia was under direct German control since April 12, 1941, although they did install a Serbian puppet government. The German military and police very quickly implemented measures against Jews. At first Jews were forced to perform labor tasks but by

July 10, 1941, the men were locked up at various locations in Belgrade and were treated as hostages. As the communists (Partisans) and nationalists (*Chetniks*) carried out ambushes and guerilla warfare against the Germans, the command was that for every killed German soldier a hundred and for every wounded fifty hostages are to be killed. It is at this point that Lebl makes a claim that differs from what the Yugoslav Communists have disseminated, namely that the hostages were all Serbs. Lebl, on the contrary, says that since the Jews had already been arrested it was easiest for the Germans to simply shoot them en masse, so that by October 1941 (pp. 321-322) all Jewish males were executed along with a smaller number of Gypsies, as well as many Serbs. Beginning in October, but most intensively in December the Nazis took all Jewish women, children, and elderly men from Serbia and Banat to the *Judenlager* at the fairgrounds across the river from Belgrade. These were all destroyed in a huge truck that was brought from Germany for the express purpose of killing them with carbon monoxide exhaust. The task was finished by May 1942. About 10,000 Jews of Serbia—some 93 per cent of all Jews—had perished. The report to Berlin in June 1942 was: *Keine Judenfrage mehr* (No more Jewish question) in Serbia. The only Jews who survived were those in mixed marriages, those who joined the Partisans, and curiously, those who were in Germany in POW camps.

That latter story is described in the book published in Tel-Aviv, and it tells of one of the great ironies of the war. The Yugoslav army collapsed in a matter of two weeks—so quickly that the German army could not deal with so many POWs. So they let many of the soldiers home asking them to report in two weeks. Some of the Jewish POWs did not report, and tragically, almost all were later picked up and shot along with the other males, as per above. Most of those who were sent to Germany actually survived because the Germans abided, to a degree, by the Geneva Convention of the treatment of POWs. They were able to correspond with their families and receive packages but soon their post cards came back with notification: “Moved. Destination unknown.” Sometimes, it was not until the end of the war that they found out the sad truth of their elimination.

The story of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj-Amin el-Huseini is known to those who read English and have explored the anti-Jewish and pro-Nazi activities of this man. Lebl provides a very thorough biography, beginning with his family roots, his relationships with the British administration of Palestine, his election as a twenty-five year old to the lofty position of mufti of Jerusalem, his ardent Arab nationalism as well as his anti-Zionism and

Anti-Judaism.. Lebl then provides a detailed account of the growing mutual interest of Nazi Germany and Arabs in the late 1930s with Britain and the Jews as a common enemy, as well as his escape to Rome, from where he re-established contacts with the Muslims in Kosovo, Sandzhak, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Subsequently he met Hitler and Himmler in Berlin in November 1941 and began receiving funding from the Nazis for his collaborative activities. These are all carefully documented in Lebl's book with photographs and photocopies.

In respect to the territories of the former Yugoslavia important are Amin's visit with Ante Pavelić, the head of the Croatian *Ustaša* regime, his trips to Zagreb, Sarajevo, and other cities and then his active recruitment of Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina for two Waffen-SS divisions, "Hanjar" and "Kama" ["Sword" and "Dagger"] and another Waffen SS division in Kosovo made of Albanian Muslims named "Skender-beg" [name of a medieval Albanian hero]. In order to propagandize the Muslims against the Jews El-Huseini wrote a pamphlet, "Islam and Judaism," which was translated into Croatian and was provided as reading material for the soldiers of these units. Lebl's book contains dozens of pictures of the self-named Grand Mufti reviewing these troops and saluting with "Heil Hitler" in the company of German and Bosnian Waffen-SS officers. El-Huseini was likewise active among Soviet POWS of Muslim heritage as well as in territories of the Soviet Union that were occupied by the German army, recruiting them to fight against the Soviet regime. Among his many adventures were his escape to France after Germany's collapse and then finally to the Near East where he died in Beirut in 1974, still publicly defending his numerous contacts with prominent Nazis and his contribution to the attempted eradication of Jews. If anyone had doubts about Hajj-Amin's collaboration with the Nazis, this book would likely eradicate them.

Lebl's writing style is clear, the chapters are divided into numerous sub-titles, her books are richly footnoted. They have an archival quality, because it is her way to preserve materials which otherwise would surely be lost. This, of course, produces a situation where at times she includes details that do not contribute to the main thrust of her narrative. But the five books reviewed here show that Lebl is a prodigious collector of materials with a very comprehensive treatment of sources that span centuries of generally little known developments even in the countries where the events have taken place. Thus her work provides new insight for the vast majority of her readers in the former Yugoslavia, and even more so in the wider world. Her work deserves to get recognition both of historians of the

Jewish people and of scholars of the Holocaust and genocides. Her book about Hajj-Amin is being translated into English and this reviewer hopes that a publisher can be found in the USA in order to make this material available more widely.