



## Balkan Jews & the Minority Issue in South-East Europe

Organizers: Association Internationale d'Etudes du Sud-Est Européen, AIESEE / University of Warsaw

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*Report by Jonna Rock, Berlin*

□ The second AIESEE Warsaw Conference highlighted issues pertaining to the Balkan Jews. In the backdrop of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the following rise of national-states, the Balkan Jewish culture offered alternative angles on which to analyze processes of Western-style modernization. The conference tackled how, in times of modernization, the challenge for the Balkan Jewish communities lied in cultivating Jewish life in relation to tremendous regime-changes. The aim of the conference was moreover to think about the character of interethnic interactions in South-East Europe while the Balkan region has created multilevel cultural relations including languages, traditions and religions.

*Robert A. Sucharski*, Dean of the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" at Warsaw University, welcomed and engaged the crowd of scholars who enjoyed a varied programme of lectures, and panel-based discussions on a range of topics related to the Balkan Jews and minority issues in South-East Europe.

Beginning with new perspectives on the Jewish population in Europe and in the European Ottoman Empire, *Dragi Gjorgiev* and *Răzvan Theodorescu* presented papers focusing on Zionism and on the Ottoman Jews in the Balkans. Gjorgiev described, how non-Muslims in the

Ottoman Empire had to subordinate themselves as *dhimmi*. This was because of the Ottoman citizenship policy, the so-called *dhimma*, regulating relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Non-Muslims were categorized by their religion and were free to practice religion although they had to pay a special tax to the Sultan. Moreover, as Gjorgiev pointed out, non-believers were discriminated upon – having to wear special clothing and not being allowed to ride horses in town. The first two panels of the conference moved on to center on the Jewish population in Albania, Kosovo, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and Yugoslavia concluding with questions chaired by Theodorescu.

After lunch thoughts turned to the issue of Jewish identification and acculturation after the Shoah. The panel introduced fields of interest in Jews and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Israel – engaging in a lively discussion. In a round-table discussion, modernization processes and the legal status of Jews in Serbia and Romania after the Berlin Congress in the light of the account of international Jewish organizations was reflected upon. Thoughts turned to contemporary Jewish culture, with viewings of an excerpt from a film about *Radomsko*, the first Jewish open air museum in Europe.

On the second day of the conference, *Agnieszka August-Zarębska* gave a keynote lecture in which she contemplated on the history of the Sephardic language and culture in the Balkans and discussed the prospects of its future. August-Zarębska referred to the fact that the Spanish refugees in the Balkans spoke regional dialects from their hometowns, such as Catalan, Aragonese, Castilian, Andalusian and Portuguese. After half a century, these dialects were "harmonized" so that only Castilian was spoken. Thus, the Sephardim brought the language that they had spoken in Spain before their expulsion with them, and this language developed into Judeo-Spanish in their new environment. It was therefore after the expulsion that a specific Jewish Spanish variety evolved and distinguished itself from Castilian. August-Zarębska nevertheless argued that various opinions exist regarding the emergence of Ladino and that already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Jews began to translate the Bible into Spanish in Latin letters, i.e., so called *enladinamientos*. Thus, one can say that Ladino emerged through these translations in Spain. There is also a persisting belief that Jews in Spain actually spoke Judeo-Spanish.

The following panels provided an insight into ongoing research on Sephardic literature, language and religion, elaborating, among other topics, on the status of the Judeo-Spanish press in Yugoslavia.

During the afternoon, keynote-speaker *Nadège Ragaru* gave a talk on anti-Jewish crimes in Bulgaria during WWII and she moreover moderated the following panels on Holocaust in Greece, Moldova and Rhodes. During the Second World War, civilians, the church, the royal court and pro-fascist politicians rescued many Bulgarian Jews. In other words: the Nazis hardly deported Bulgarian Jews to death-camps but most were saved (or managed to survive) from the "new order". Ragaru however challenges this perception by demonstrating how anti-Jewish crimes were prevalent in WWII-Bulgaria. – The day finished with informal discussions over a cocktail reception in Sala Złota (the Golden Hall) at the University of Warsaw.

On the third and last morning of the conference, *Konstanty Gebert*, in his keynote-speech, argued that the Jews in second Yugoslavia (1945-1992) were treated like everybody else, and that cultural differences in the multiethnic Yugoslavian state were not considered to be important. He then described how in 2006 Jacob Finci, President of the Sarajevan Jewish Community, tried to run for President in Bosnia and Herzegovina. When asked whether he wanted to candidate as a Serbian, Croatian or Bosniak person, he answered "as a Jew", and

he was told that being Jewish was a "private matter".<sup>1</sup> Gebert moreover moderated panels in which post-Shoah Jewish communities in the Balkans were further discussed.

In the view of *Jolanta Sujecka*, hosting and organizing the AIESEE workshop in Warsaw seemed to be an ideal location for the kind of discussions on Balkan Jews and minority issues in South-East Europe. Firstly, because the physical distance to the Balkans provided a certain degree of neutral positioning, and secondly, because Poland's history of the Jews is a parallel story to the Balkans', and thus, it was possible to grasp both locations and periods of time simultaneously.

Sujecka rounded up the three days' conference on the very same day of 9 November 2016, that Donald Trump secured his historic election to the Presidency of the United States. In her concluding remarks she addressed the problem of xenophobia as a side effect of nationalisms towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was at this time a common conception that national belonging could be determined by race, and minority groups and foreign elements in the national languages were cleansed out. Thus, the conference on "Balkan Jews & the Minority Issue in South-East Europe" was not only an attempt to reconstruct the past but it was also an important contribution to the discussion on identity-formation as such, especially in the context of current problems of migration and multiculturalism that Europe and the world are struggling with. – The closing remarks were followed by a visit to the museum of the history of Polish Jews / POLIN in Warsaw.

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1 According to the 1995 Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a distinction between the three "constituent Bosniac (Bošnjaci), Serb, and Croat peoples" and the "others". The 'others' are members of ethnic minorities and persons who do not declare affiliation with any particular group. As a matter of fact, only persons declaring affiliation with a "constituent people" are entitled to run for the House of Peoples (the second chamber of the State Parliament) and the Presidency (the collective Head of State). Because this regulation is discriminatory, Jakob Finci, President of the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Dervo Sejdić, Roma Monitor of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe, filed a lawsuit in the European Court of Human Rights, which in turn (2009) found that the Constitution violates human rights (*Case of Sejdić and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina*). Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be a candidate for membership in the European Union until its Constitution will be amended.