

SEPHARDI PRIDE: JEWISH CIVIL SOCIETY AND ASSOCIATIONAL NETWORKS IN INTERWAR SARAJEVO

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Abstract

This essay aims to explore the impact that particular interwar historical circumstances produced on the advancement of Sarajevo Sephardim self-awareness, and on the modernization of their associational networks in the domestic and international spheres. The outline of the present analysis follows the associational construction on the three levels of their existence: Bosnian, Yugoslav, and international. The great variety of associations that Bosnian Sephardim created indicates the beginning of civic initiatives in and the modernization of their community, in a way “civil society before democracy”. Similarly, the urge for a sentimental reconnection with Spain was yet another manifestation of their Sephardi self-consciousness and subsequent overlapping among the multiple layers of their belonging.

Moreover, Zionism incited a specifically Sephardi reaction, that is, the foundation of the Sephardi movement in the international realm, in which Sephardim of Bosnia actively participated. Their ideology, Sephardism, was not a form of separatism from their majoritarian brethren, Ashkenazim, but rather a different interpretation of Zionism without rejecting it.

Finally, the interwar South-Slavic Kingdom had both quite active Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities and thus represents a useful case study for the divergent Jewish opinions. In addition, a re-evaluation of Sephardi associations in the interwar years is a necessary requisite for filling the existent explanatory gap within both Yugoslav and Jewish histories. The Sephardi movement was a modern initiative, providing a democratic discussion platform and promoting a crucial demand for cultural diversity within Jewishness, one that stands even to the present.

Key words: Jewish Associations, Sarajevo Sephardim, Sephardism, Sephardi Zionism, Interwar Sarajevo.

The ancient Greek philosophical thought defined man as “zoon politikon”, a social animal, emphasizing the great importance of sociability for a human being. However,

ancient scholars did not make the clear distinction between the state and society. As Keane (1988) suggests, the affirmation of the notion of civil society, along with the formation of a clear dichotomy between political state – civil society came in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. Although from that period to the final decades of the twentieth century, the term “civil society” seemed to have disappeared from public discourse, the form of organization it describes indeed had various manifestations during the interwar period, depending on the local context. Across Europe, the years between the two world wars brought an outstanding variety of different movements and organizational types, for Jewish and non-Jewish societies alike. The importance of these associations lies in the different functions they fulfilled for the communities. Precisely the examination of these distinct ways of self-organization and self-help will reveal the changed model of behavior, one that announced new, modern times. The Sephardi civil initiatives in Sarajevo were legally protected, non-governmental, self-organized, and tended to be rather secular and resourceful.

The 1920s were undoubtedly the period of most dynamic Jewish associational activity in Sarajevo. At least twenty different associations were established. These were cultural-educational (La Benevolencija, La Lira, Tarbut, Safa Berura), charitable (La Gloria, Ezrat Jetomim, La Humanidad, Sociedad de vižitar doljentes), sport (Makabi, Bar Kohba), youth (Matatja), religious (Hevra Kadiša, Bet Tefila, Degel Atona), and Zionist (Betar, Poale Cion).¹ Most of the organizations founded by Jews in Bosnia had predominantly either a charitable or an educational character; thus, the focus of this study will be on them. However, the local Jewish population was also influenced by social and economic developments in contemporary Europe, which was reflected in some of their organizations (Makabi, Poale Cion, Matatja). These societies often had a rather strong ideological component, being Zionist, socialist or both. What is more, Jews in Yugoslavia did not found political parties but tended to express their political convictions through different Jewish organizations and weeklies. Youth associations were especially politically engaged and the most distinguished in Bosnia was *Matatja*, which actively engaged in different spheres of Sephardi life.

Moreover, one of the powerful incentives for building these networks was their common sense of belonging and identification with their ancestral past in Spain. Unlike their fairly assimilated Sephardi coreligionists in France and Holland, Bosnian Sephardim lived for centuries in the millet system which provided them with communal autonomy and the possibility to nurture the essential identity agent, Judeo-Spanish language (Pulido, 1905). The mystification of Sephardi heritage and a certain

¹ The names of the societies are written in the original Bosnian Sephardi spelling.

attractiveness of its reputation already existed in previous centuries. In Western Europe, the myth of Sephardi cultural superiority was championed both by Sephardim and Ashkenazim from the late eighteenth century onwards. Historic personalities such as Benjamin Disraeli and Theodor Herzl proudly claimed Iberian background. Even fierce anti-Semites, such as Heinrich von Treitschke, would believe that Sephardi Jews were closer to German people than other Jews because their history was “more distinguished” (Endelman, 2011: 237-8).

La Benevolencija as a Cornerstone of Bosnian Jewish Civil Society

Bosnian Sephardim in the interwar years were shaped by several crucial developments. These were their historical experience of the Sephardi diaspora in the Ottoman Empire (1566-1878), the influence of the modern Central European Jewry under the Habsburgs (1878-1918), and finally the new framework of the Yugoslav state (1918-1941). The legal system of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes especially protected the religious, charitable and educational associations of its citizens. Hence, the Jews in Sarajevo availed themselves of these possibilities and created a solid associational network, which was a powerful agent of social change, enabling the improvement of their overall social status. It should be stressed that the two Jewish communities, the Sephardi and Ashkenazi, as a rule had separate associations, and this separation was maintained until the Holocaust.

The biggest and most influential Sephardi organization in Sarajevo was *La Benevolencija*, founded in 1892 during the Austro-Hungarian period, which was the inception of the local community's modernization process through the institutionalization of Jewish charity (Pavlović, 2014: 15-9). *La Benevolencija* became an umbrella organization that coordinated the activities of other associations, but it was also very active in the social life of Sarajevo itself, cooperating with other ethnicities and their associations (Pinto, 1966: 175). The organization introduced a variety of apprentice courses and subsidized the education of young, impoverished Sephardim (mostly male). It even managed at the turn of the century to send some of them to the Universities of Vienna, Graz and Prague.² After the Great War, Bosnia became a part of a larger entity, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, proclaimed in December 1918, and this organization then operated in the entire territory of the new state, becoming the major association of not only Sephardi but also Ashkenazi Jews, who made up the majority of the Jewish population in the Kingdom. When it came to stipends, the association did not discriminate between the Jews (Freindenreich, 1979:17).

² Some of these were rabbi Moric Levi, Vita Kajon, Kalmi Baruh, Braco Poljokan, Samuel Romano, and others.

A number of associations for social relief operated alongside *La Benevolencija* among the Sarajevo Jews. Their funding statutes were rather standardized and had basic information about the organization, such as purpose, range of activities, membership requirements and fees, and other common procedural issues. In addition, all of them explicitly excluded any political engagement from their statement of purpose, even though some of them had political issues on their agenda. All these societies were open only to Jewish members, formally including women, although the latter had not been yet legally emancipated in the Kingdom nor were they perceived as equals in Jewish society.³

As stated in the 1914 Statute of the *Kanfe Jona – Bikur Holim*⁴ society, it had a tradition of two hundred years, which made it the oldest continually operating Sephardi association in Bosnia. Its purpose was to nurture “sick and poor Jews of Sephardi rite” (Article 2, 1914 Statute) by providing medical and financial support and human comfort. The Statute consists of some pre-modern elements, which could be due to a continuity with the traditional *hebrot*,⁵ as is shown by the insistence on beneficiaries of “Sephardi rite” but it had modern features as well, especially flexibility when it came to the gender, religion and nationality of the potential benefactors.

Another organization for the mitigation of precarious social conditions was *Ezrat Jetomim*,⁶ a humanitarian society for the support of Jewish orphans in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Article 2 of its Regulations of 1919 stipulates its main aims: support of poor fatherless children and care of their upbringing until they would reach secondary school age or become apprentices. Afterwards, the article proceeds, those children should be taken care of by the society of students and scientists of *La Benevolencija*. *Ezrat Jetomim* provided free health care and medicines, bought books and clothes, and ran a canteen (Pinto, 1982: 184-85). Another society, *Misgav Ladah*,⁷ had a similar aim in providing clothing for poor children going to elementary school and operated throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Articles 1-2, 1922 Statute*).

³ The legal equality of genders was not achieved until 1945 in the Yugoslav countries. The 1921 and 1931 Constitutions of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes / Yugoslavia left this question open but the National Assembly preferred not to grant women full political rights.

⁴ Hebrew for “the wings of the dove” and “visit of the sick”.

⁵ *Hevrah* was “a formal membership association in the framework of traditional Jewish community” but later the term indicated associations of all kinds, such as religious, philanthropic and educational ones.

⁶ Hebrew for “aid to orphans”.

⁷ Hebrew for “refuge for the suffering”.

Female Initiatives

Like Samokovlija's character Sarucha (1966: 337-50)⁸, Sephardi women in Bosnia before the twentieth century received very little or no formal education, and were hardly respected as individuals unless they fulfilled their roles as wives and mothers (Freidenreich, 2009). However, at the turn of the century, the gender roles slowly began to change as these women entered the public arena, mostly through the foundation of their humanitarian organizations. These societies played an essential role in Jewish life, for they not only helped children, the elderly, poor, sick and uneducated, but they also advanced a "communal spirit of solidarity and cooperation" by organizing numerous charitable events and promoting both Jewish and secular culture (Kaplan, 1991: 192).

The three major female humanitarian organizations in Sarajevo were *La Humanidad*,⁹ *La Gloria*,¹⁰ and *Sociedad de vižitar doljentes*.¹¹ The alleviation of poverty was the task of both *La Humanidad* and *La Gloria*. *La Humanidad*, existing since 1894, took care primarily of poor women and children. As Freidenreich (1979: 115) points out, it operated as a day-care center for poor children and endorsed welfare contributions to new mothers, people with disabilities, orphans and girls' formation.

La Gloria had two main aims, namely "to increase the intellectual and moral condition of Jews in general" through the organization of various thematic lectures, courses and gatherings, and to support poor Jewish girls by promoting their formation, work empowerment and by providing dowries for them (Article 2, 1919 Regulations). By some accounts, it provided annual stipends for about fifty female students (Pinto, 1966: 186). Gradually, education became the almost exclusive concern of *La Benevolencija*, which had indeed provided stipends for young female scientists but suggested that "they [Jewish women] are not ready to assume a healthy and socially constructive role in our society. Their activities are mainly connected to charity and humanitarian considerations" (Godišnjak, 1933: 15-7). The latter remark shows how unrecognized female humanitarian work was, though it was essential in an

⁸ Isak Samokovlija (1889-1955) was a prominent Bosnian Jewish writer who wrote stories in the Serbo-Croatian language describing faithfully the life of Bosnian Sephardi Jews. The story *Samuel the Porter* (Nosač Samuel) portrays the hardships of Bosnian Sephardim, with a special emphasis on the female perspective. See "Nosač Samuel" in *Spomenica 400 Years from the Jewish Arrival in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, pages. 337-50.

⁹ Judeo-Spanish for "humanity".

¹⁰ Judeo-Spanish for "glory".

¹¹ Judeo-Spanish for "society for the visit of the sick".

impoverished community like the Sarajevo Sephardim. Nevertheless, this shift from school scholarship to vocational training was at the same time another aspect of the modernization of poverty relief, one that would produce more permanent benefits for economically deprived men and women.

Sosiedad de vižitar doljentas (Jewish Women's Humanitarian Society) had several goals. Its members supported sick and poor Jewish women by the following means: medical care, medicines, improvement of their diet and taking care of any other need they may have while in hospital. A special task, which implies a religious dimension to this society, was to supply all sick Jews in the hospitals with *kasher* meals (Article 2, 1919 Regulations).

Promoting Judeo-Spanish language was an important part of preserving the Sephardi heritage. It was mostly an undertaking of the *Mataija*, the working youth association. Their drama section offered numerous plays in this language, most notable being the works of Laura Papo Bohoreta (Papo, 2010: 97), a Sarajevo born writer, philanthropist, and one of the first educated Sephardi women in interwar Sarajevo (Freidenreich, 1979: 130). Furthermore, being a former student of the Alliance Israélite Universelle,¹² she understood the importance of female education for women's empowerment and thus committed herself devotedly to raising their self-reliance.

Promoting Culture and Education

Two main Sephardi societies in Sarajevo, *La Benevolencija* and *La Lira*, realized a fruitful collaboration with non-Jewish society in the field of culture. *La Lira*, a choral society of Sephardi Jews founded in 1901, nurtured both profane and synagogal music. It represents a fine example of inter-ethnic cooperation, having regular contacts and the exchange of ideas, musical scores, and members with Serbian, Croat, and Muslim choral societies alike (Pinto, 1966: 180-3).

For Bosnian Sephardi intellectuals, a crucial task of education was to modify people's behavior and eradicate superstition, a common concern among Bosnian Sephardim. The educational organizations such as *Tarbut* and the *Jewish Club "Union"* fostered social networks with non-Jewish society, while the others such as *Safa Berura*, a society for learning Hebrew, and *Or Hadaš*,¹³ a Pan-Jewish cultural club, built the bond between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities. For instance, *Tarbut* organized lectures about world history, philosophy, literature and culture for both Jews and non-Jews, having annually about four thousand attendees. This was

¹² Alliance Israélite Universelle is the first modern Jewish international organization, founded in 1860 in Paris. The aim was to help the emancipation of non-Western Jewries by establishing thousands of schools for boys and girls throughout the Ottoman territory, with French as their main language of instruction.

¹³ Hebrew for "new light".

also the task of the *Jewish Club "Union"*, which had an excellently supplied library with the subscription to approximately fifty dailies, weeklies and other publications in Serbo-Croatian, German, French, Yiddish, Spanish and Bulgarian languages (Pinto, 1966: 186).

Or Hadaš, a Jewish cultural society, had both profane and religious elements in its statement of purpose and was open to any unblemished adult Jew. Its aim was the "moral and intellectual progress of the members and their families" but also "the awakening of their interest for the religious-humane obligation of man" (Article 2, 1910 Regulations).

In sum, these societies were the beginning of the modern civic initiatives and the secularization process in the Bosnian Sephardi sphere. The extraordinary variety of voluntary organizations is due to several reasons. Firstly, there existed an old Sephardi tradition of organizing community on the basis of congregations, dating back to medieval Spain. Further, the legal framework of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia provided a favorable ground for these associations, as long as no political goal was pursued. However, an insufficient social policy by the state and economic needs triggered the self-organizational activities of the Yugoslav Sephardim as well. Of no less importance were some intrinsic circumstances of the Jewish community. Namely, the internal divisions based on rite, gender, and economic status were rather conspicuous, thus calling for the diversification of these organizations in order to perform different functions within the Jewish context.

"Two Jews, Three Opinions"¹⁴ or Un Buen Pleito Traje Buena Paz¹⁵

The failed emancipation and rising anti-Semitism in Europe around the turn of the century led to the emergence of the most decisive Jewish movement, Zionism. Notwithstanding, the various communities had different experiences in their respective countries and therefore their interpretation of Zionism differed. As Goldstein (2001:1) observes, the Bosnian Sephardim were regarded as an autochthonous element having lived four centuries in the region, even though they lived in relative isolation from the non-Jewish society while keeping their customs, and thus conversions and intermarriages were very rare. Likewise, the Serbian Sephardim were called "ours" and their loyalty was never questioned since they fought with the Serbian army in the First World War. Conversely, the Ashkenazim adopted the local language very quickly and were more assimilated in national, religious and cultural terms having lived for decades in Croatia, Vojvodina and Bosnia

¹⁴ Famous proverb.

¹⁵ Bosnian Sephardi proverb.

but were mainly considered “foreign” because their mother tongue was German or Hungarian. Therefore, from the very beginning of the Kingdom, the Ashkenazim felt more threatened and were more receptive to the radical forms of Zionism.

My main argument is that Sephardim did not discard Zionism, but rather chose to practice it in the *Galut* (diaspora) in their own way, combining the universal Jewish with a particular Sephardi element. In fact, the Sephardim considered themselves more Zionists than the Ashkenazim, given that they had been raised in this tradition and not merely adopted it later in life, as they thought most Ashkenazim did.¹⁶ In contrast, the Ashkenazi counterpart condemned such a viewpoint, claiming that it was a separatism that could not be allowed inside the Zionist movement. These disagreements culminated in a controversy of the 1924-1927 period, known as *Sarajevski spor* or Sarajevo dispute (Loker, 1997: 72-9).

The two sides published their respective views in the two Bosnian Jewish weeklies. *Jevrejski život*,¹⁷ which was mainly Sephardi, and in *Narodna židovska svijest*,¹⁸ which was predominantly an Ashkenazi journal. While each of them claimed to defend the real Zionist position, Zionism itself was in stagnation in Sarajevo. Over the next few years, both sides published vicious attacks against one another in their weeklies and neither side wanted to compromise (Freidenreich, 1979: 148). Both journals were published until 1928, when the two communities finally reached an agreement, which was embodied in their joint journal *Jevrejski glas*, first published in January 1928. It contained all the topics of concern for Yugoslav Jewry, but also a lot of articles dedicated to the destiny of Jews elsewhere, actively following the developments in Europe and Palestine. In addition, every issue of *Jevrejski glas* had some contributions in the Judeo-Spanish language or about the history of Sephardi Jews.

A Reconnection with Sefarad¹⁹?

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Sephardim of Bosnia and other Balkan states, developed an awareness of mutual dependence and common interest. The initiative was a counter-reaction to a two-fold challenge. On the one hand, given that most of them lived in the newly created nation-states, the process of their gradual integration

¹⁶ The Sephardim proudly remembered their Sarajevo born nineteenth century rabbi, Yehudah Solomon Alkalai (1798-1878), a pioneer of political Zionism and a friend of Herzl's grandfather. See “Pionir političkog cionizma-Sarajlija” in *Jevrejski glas*.

¹⁷ It contained contributions by prominent Sephardists as Vita Kajon, Braco Poljokan, Kalmi Baruh, to name some of them.

¹⁸ A weekly wherein Oskar Grof, Adolf Benau, David Levj- Dale, and other old guard Zionists published their opinions.

¹⁹ The Iberian Peninsula, as named by the Sephardim.

began, influencing a piecemeal loss of some distinctive features of the Sephardi identity. On the other hand, the Zionist Executive wanted no particularism within their movement. Bosnian Sephardim took two main directions as an answer to this identity crisis. They sought to reconnect with their medieval homeland, Spain, and to rebuild the linkage with their coreligionists of the Sephardi rite from other countries.

Around the turn of the century, Spanish intellectual circles began to take more interest in the destiny of Spanish Jews, expelled from their homeland centuries before. In the interwar years, the Spanish literary magazine, *La Gaceta Literaria*,²⁰ frequently wrote about Sephardi topics, especially covering the Balkan communities. An issue from 1928 published an interview with Dr. Kalmi Baruh from Sarajevo ("Transéuntes literarios", 1928:4) who was in Madrid at the time and befriended the editor of *La Gaceta*, Ernesto Giménez Caballero, a Spanish writer and diplomat. Shortly after, Giménez Caballero was warmly welcomed in Sarajevo by the local Sephardim ("Jedan prijatelj", 1929: 1). In his report to the Spanish government, he singled out Sarajevo as the home of a vivid Spanish heritage and the purest Judeo-Spanish language. Moreover, Caballero accentuated Baruh's capabilities and education, believing he was the most distinguished Sephardi intellectual in the Balkans. The same year, Baruh became the first Sephardi from the Balkans to receive a stipend from Spain (Vidaković, 1990: 76-7).

The Bosnian Sephardim anxiously and regularly followed the statements of the Spanish officials and reported them in *Jevrejski glas*. Although it may seem that after centuries an apology was outdated, for the Sephardim it was a perfectly reasonable expectation. The government of Miguel Primo de Rivera issued a Decree in 1924, allowing every Sephardi to claim Spanish citizenship. However, the Spanish functionaries during the 1920s and 1930s did not have a clearly articulated and transparent attitude towards Sephardi Jews. This does not come as a surprise considering that the state itself was *La España Invertebrada* (Invertebrated Spain)²¹. Some Sephardim felt the urge to participate in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which attracted at least several dozen volunteers from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Loker, 1976). Nevertheless, in 1931, in the weekly *Jevrejski glas*, a famous Sephardi rabbi, Šabataj Djaen²² realistically contemplated that "esides language and historical memories, mostly very sad ones, there is nothing that would bond us [Sephardim] to contemporary Spain" ("Repartijacija Sefarda", 1931:4).

²⁰ *La Gaceta Literaria* was a Madrid-based magazine founded by Ernesto Giménez Caballero in 1927, which promptly became a reference point for the Spanish avant-garde, having contributors such as Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, to name but a few.

²¹ See *España Invertebrada* by José Ortega y Gasset, a famous Spanish philosopher.

²² Šabataj Djaen (Sabbatai Dyaen), a rabbi and writer, colorful personality and active Zionist who worked across the Balkans and in the countries of the South America. See *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije*, pags. 263-64.

From Local to Trans-Europe Sephardi Associations

At the end of the nineteenth century, Bosnian Sephardim first went to study at Vienna University. In 1898, they founded the Sephardi student club *Sociedad Academica de Judios Espanioles*²³ or *Esperanza*,²⁴ along with other Sephardim from the Balkans. The purpose of this club was to enhance their Sephardi heritage by studying Judeo-Spanish language and Sephardi history. Among the most active members from Bosnia were Moric Levi, Vita Kajon, Isidor Sumbul and Isak Samokovlija. Based on the aforementioned concept, in 1925, a Sephardi student organization by the same name was established in Zagreb, the members of which were diligent Sephardists such as Samuel Kamhi, Avram Pinto, and Ješua Kajon among others.

In 1927, *Esperanza* published the Sephardi Manifesto, in which S. Kamhi and J. Kajon formulated the main points of the Sephardi movement. The Sephardim, Kamhi (1927: 12-3) believed, could contribute to Zionism and common Jewish concern only in their own way, as Sephardi Jews. The Sephardi character was a “mental amalgam. It is enough to see a Sephardi Jew when he is doing something, and one would see the succession of his oriental lethargy with his southern vividness and impulsivity, and without any problem, his Jewish distinctiveness” he explained and inquired “Why not permit nuances within Jewishness?”. He stressed that Jewishness was not homogenous but included various distinct elements (Kamhi, 1927:7). Precisely this affirmation was a basic Sephardi argument for the legitimacy of maintaining their own movement.

In June 1930, at the initiative of a Serbian Sephardi organization, the Balkan Sephardi Conference was held in Belgrade. Representatives from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia attended the event, but the Sephardim from big centers – Paris, Vienna, Milan and Jerusalem – were represented as well. The conference was a microcosm of Sephardism, mirroring all the diversity of the standpoints that existed in the Sephardi world of the time. The fact that passionate debates existed among Sephardim at this conference does not diminish the relevance of this meeting. It served as a common Sephardi trans-Balkan basis for the interchange of opinions, a *sine qua non* requirement for the further development of the Sephardi movement, that is, a renaissance of Sephardism as a harbinger for the revival of Sephardi culture (Pavlović, 2014: 47-51).

²³ Judeo-Spanish for “Academic Society of the Spanish Jews”.

²⁴ Judeo-Spanish for “hope”.

“Sépharadim au travail!”²⁵: the Evolution of the Sephardi International Organization

At the Congress held in Vienna in 1925, the World Sephardi Confederation was established. Structurally, it had two Central Committees, one in Jerusalem for Eretz Israel and the other in Salonika, for the Diaspora, which was relocated in 1931 to Paris (Pavlović, 2014: 51-2). The Yugoslav Sephardim had an important part in the initiative leading to the establishment of the Confederation, especially at the Vienna Congress (Freidenreich, 1979: 149). *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi*, which became the official monthly organ of the Confederation, reiterated the urge of maintaining a special Sephardi identity and of having particular Sephardi pride for their distinguished ancestors. The monthly was praising, on the one hand, the assimilatory ability of Sephardim and their affinity to French culture. On the other, it called for the preservation of Sephardi distinctiveness. What is more, it supported the colonization of Palestine as well (Pavlović, 2014: 53).

Despite the economic crisis and increasing anti-Semitism in Europe during the 1930s, in 1935 another Pan-Sephardi conference was held in the British capital and more than 30 delegates from 12 countries decided to found the World Sephardi Union. The last meeting of the Union before the Second World War took place in Amsterdam in May 1938, which had 42 Sephardi participants from 14 countries. Even though these encounters were not of great frequency, they showed the continuity and a clear intention to gradually expand the influence to more Sephardi communities. The Yugoslav Sephardim devotedly participated at these conferences. At the conference in Amsterdam, Braco Poljokan and Lazar Avramović were delegates of the Sarajevo and Belgrade communities respectively, wherein they were named as members of the World Sephardi Union's Central Committee (“Druga konferencija”, 1938:1-5).

The success of these Sephardi trans-national initiatives is differently evaluated. Some historians, such as Freidenreich (1979: 150-1), Benbassa and Rodrigue (2000: 149), were prone to conclude that they did not yield any palpable results. However, the latter viewpoint oversimplifies the Sephardi issue, quite often qualifying it as mere separatism. It underestimates the organizational task of creating a common Sephardi consciousness and the achievements that the Sephardi associations of the interwar period actually realized in this direction on the local, regional, and finally the international level. Clearly, the sépharadisme that they proposed was an *all-inclusive*

²⁵ A slogan from the first issue of *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi*, a monthly organ of the Universal Sephardi Confederation, see *Le Judaïsme Sépharadi*, p.5.

ideology, which allowed different choices and lifestyles to its proponents. This was an obvious sign of secular and modern thought, which endorsed and supported the heterogeneity of the adherents. Even though Sephardism emerged from the Zionist movement and showed the cultural features of ethnic nationalism, it had no separatist national agenda but praised the insertion into a French-style secular republic.

The Second World War and Holocaust destroyed “the old Sephardi heartland” (Rodrigue 2005: 15) in the Balkans, annihilated most of its Sephardi elite, changing forever the local demographic landscape as well as the global face of Sephardi Jewry. It meant a hardy recoverable loss for the Bosnian Sephardi community, a sudden break of the flourishing associational initiatives, as well as the extinction of their trans-national connections.

The re-evaluation of the Sephardi movement in the interwar period is today a necessary task. Historians tend to overlook, or at least underestimate, the significance of these Sephardi initiatives that the Shoah discontinued in their further development. Balkan Sephardi associations were proponents of a cultural pluralism that enriched the common Jewish heritage with a variety of new interpretations of what Jewishness might possibly mean. In this understanding, the Sephardim of Bosnia were indeed champions of modernity, since at the core of their cultural and institutional endeavors was an essential contemporary requirement: the freedom of choice.

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