

REPORT

Holocaust Survivors in Yugoslavia: A Window into the Multinational Socialist Federation

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Born to a Jewish father and Serbian mother, Tugomir B. spent the duration of World War II hidden by the Serbian Nationalist Četnik Movement and Serbian families in Četnik occupied and/or allied villages. The Chetniks were an unorganized ‘resistance’ organization who often collaborated with the Nazis and other fascist collaborators in their attempt to defeat the Yugoslav Partisans and reestablish a Serb dominated monarchical Yugoslavia. Tugomir’s protection was largely a favor to his mother who was active in the movement. He had never previously known his father, but they finally met in the years after liberation, marking the start of Tugomir’s new life. He immediately gained a half-brother, two parents (a father and stepmother, his birth mother was a part of Partisan reprisals against the Četniks and although she was not killed, her status made life in post-war Yugoslavia a struggle), support for his education, and an introduction to Jewish life and traditions.

Tugomir’s relationship to his mostly secular Jewish identity grew over time. He recalled stories of his father’s relatives’ destruction in the Jasenovac Concentration Camp and his father’s belief that despite his own lack of religiosity, Tugomir should “never forget that he is Jewish, for if others should remind him, it is a double defeat” (“nikad nemoj zaboraviti da si Jevrejin jel ako te na to drugi poseti to je dvostruki poraz”). He accepted this idea and later came to strongly agree with it. Tugomir served as president of the Jewish youth organization and also began a journal for Jewish Yugoslav youth. Eventually, he married a Serbian woman named Svetlana, and together they raised their two boys in the Jewish and Serbian traditions that they each cherished. Raised like this, their children came to understand themselves as Jewish and Serbian. They could not deny or claim either culture as more or less central to their personal identities. This was so

much the case, that an exasperated census taker eventually registered the children (now teenagers) as ‘Yugoslavs’ after their adamant refusal to be registered as either as Jewish or Serbian.

Tugomir and his family’s story is a remarkable insight into Jewish life in multinational socialist Yugoslavia after the Holocaust. It is among the many testimonies I have had the privilege to learn from as a 2021-2022 Dori Laub Fellow at the Fortunoff Video Archive where I am studying Holocaust survivors’ experiences in the post-war state and their relationship to the Yugoslav idea. In my dissertation, “Our Yugoslavias: Cultures, Memories, and Forms of Belonging in the Multinational Socialist Federation,” I focus on Yugoslavia’s diverse citizenry’s plurality of experiences to examine the kinds of cultures, memories, and identities groups and individuals could and did produce there. I do this to move away from prevailing approaches which continue to treat Yugoslavia as a failed political project, and towards an understanding of it as an ethos and lived experience that the public actively constructed, performed, and continuously revised.

Even as new scholarship continues to emerge, Holocaust survivors and their descendant’s stories are rarely told in studies of socialist Yugoslavia. But they are vital to this history both because Jews, like other groups, helped to build, develop, and shape the post-war state, and especially because their experiences of violence during the Second World War were central to officially sanctioned remembrances of fascist violence and the National Liberation War, but always in a way which failed to adequately acknowledge the precise targeting and destruction of Jews at the hands of Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Their experiences in the post-war state which granted them full citizenship but incomplete recognition, provides an important entry way for understanding Yugoslavia and survivors’ relationships to it. Tugomir’s story, for example, suggests that the near erasure of Yugoslav Jews during the Holocaust and the state’s emphasis on equality among nations and peoples helped to facilitate ‘mixed marriages’ between Jews and non-Jews, lessening stigma previously associated with ethnically-mixed unions. It also indicates that neither he and his wife, nor their children were necessarily attached to a Yugoslav identity. Rather, the conditions that fostered their marriage and their children’s upbringing seem to have necessitated a third category which could accommodate the kind of interethnic life and identity they had constructed, challenging enduring notions of national belonging that continued to exist in Yugoslavia after 1945.

My research as a Dori Laub Fellow with the Fortunoff Archive has come at an important moment in my research process. Currently researching throughout Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia, I have had the opportunity to visit many of the places that were hometowns, deportation and internment sites, hiding places, and/or sites of terror for many of the survivors’ whose testimonies I have absorbed. As a Serbian American who has spent considerable time in the region with next to no knowledge of the region’s Jewish history until I entered graduate school, listening to survivor

testimonies in such physical proximity to these sites has served as an acute reminder that this history has always surrounded me, and remains integral to the region's past and present. I could never presume to truly understand survivors' experiences, yet in walking down their streets and visiting the places which profoundly shaped their lives, I find their stories that much more resonant and grounded in a landscape I recognize and identify with.