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HISTORY AND IDENTITY

We are never more than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please. . . . We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making (MacIntyre 1984: 213).

I am [a] Jew from the older generation, soon to be the oldest. What little I know about Jewishness I received from religious parents. We heard about the history of the Jews in religion classes from the great rabbi Moric Levi, and our general orientation in Judaism we received in Hashomer Hatzair.¹ But much of that is forgotten (*Bilten* (JOS) 3 (1989):41).

There is the history that helps make the present, and there is the history that helps make the past. Both kinds of history, the history that actually happened and the history that is told, written, rewritten, displayed, reenacted, and used are essential to understanding Jewish identities at different times and places. Very real objective historical processes imposed themselves on the Yugoslav Jews, and the survivors among them in turn responded to the new conditions in which they found themselves in socialist Yugoslavia by selecting those elements from their past which could be refashioned in a manner that accommodated political and cultural goals. In the postwar period, they too helped coauthor the mythology of the New Yugoslavia, especially those narratives in which Jews played active roles in the National Liberation Struggle of 1941–1945. But they also chose to remember the horrors of history by ritually mourning those who did not survive the Holocaust. It is in such collective and also individual acts of mourning lost family

members and friends that we can see that history is not just the construction of the present. Rather, using the words of one young Serbian writer, "sometimes time has irreversible effects" (Longinović 1996: 213). The Jews of postwar Yugoslavia, both the flesh-and-blood ones that I saw and knew and those I encountered in the texts of Yugoslav Jewish writers, "grappl[ed] with time and its irreversible effects on life" (ibid).

This chapter has several aims. The first is to present briefly the historical processes that were significant in shaping Jewish identities. I describe some of the major continuities and discontinuities, together with the uniformities and variations, in Jewish life across time and place on the territory which the state of Yugoslavia once occupied. However, it is not my intent to write a single history or multiple histories of Jewish life in this part of the Balkan Peninsula, nor would this endeavor fall within the scope and aim of the book.² The formation and expression of a collective Jewish identity during the socialist period entailed a process of selecting and emphasizing those historical elements that could be integrated into their new conceptions about their place in Yugoslav and Jewish history and in the new state. In this chapter I single out these elements and describe them more fully in the chapters that follow. Another aim of this chapter, also supporting my general argument that identity cannot be understood or even exist apart from history, is to claim that both Jewish commonality and difference can be understood with a narrative conception of history. There is a narrative, or story, that many Jews share. And, given the diasporic nature of the Jewish past and present, even within the Balkans, various Jewish settlements have been part of the narratives of other peoples. Thus, there are stories that we as single groups tell, and there are stories that several groups tell together. From this perspective it is easier to grasp identity as incorporating both difference and similarity.

Jews in the Balkans

The exact time and place of Jewish settlement in what became Yugoslavia is unknown. Different theories based on scraps of evidence found in various sources have been expounded. Although such evidence points to a Jewish presence during Greek domination, more solid material evidence based on archeological finds confirms permanent Jewish settlement during Roman rule (Mirć

1957–58). The Jews are, chronologically, a more indigenous ethnic population than the Slavic populations to this region, even though the distinctiveness of the ancient Oriental and Romaniot, and later, Byzantine, Jews was erased by the demographic and cultural vitality of Sephardi Jews who began settling there in the sixteenth century. With the above chronology in mind, the Jews cannot be considered a more foreign element, as strangers in the land of the South Slavs. However, chronology or time is not the only or strongest factor used in classifying populations as indigenous or foreign. Demographic composition and trends, power relations, wealth, and culture (including cultural goals and mythologizing the past to attain these goals) carry far greater weight in the construction of such cultural classifications and in determining place in such schemes. Given these factors over time, the Jews acted mainly as marginal players in the political, social, and economic spheres of society, though in certain urban areas they were far from marginal. Nevertheless, despite small numbers, low profile, and limited impact, their long continuous presence provided them with a sense of stability and legitimacy. They felt that they belonged and were a part of Yugoslav history. No one group has complete authorship of a historical narrative that can be called Yugoslav or Balkan history. As far as the Jews are concerned, they entered upon the Balkan stage at different times and began participating in the narratives of other peoples. Likewise, the other peoples participated in the ongoing Jewish narrative.

Various migrations from different points of origin have influenced immensely the course of Jewish history in what would become Yugoslavia in the twentieth century. Three branches of the Jewish people settled on this territory—Romaniot, Ashkenazi, and Sephardi.

The Romaniot branch of Jewry, which came from the Near East, was the first to settle in this area. Very little is known about Jews who lived on the Balkan Peninsula B.C.E. Of those who arrived with Roman expansion two thousand years ago, some may have been slaves while others followed Roman armies in order to flee persecution in Palestine and seek a better, quieter life elsewhere. It seems that once in the Balkans, the Jews were given freedom of movement. The archeological record suggests that they were not drawn to a single area. The best evidence of actual communal settlements come from Dalmatia, then the Roman colony of Illyricum, where the Roman emperor Diocletian had his summer palace, and from Macedonia, where they exhibited both Near

Eastern and Hellenistic features. In the Macedonian town of Bitolj the Jews were referred to as *Levantini* or *Mizrahi* ("from the East"). The latter became the surname of several Jewish families (Jevrejski Istorijski Muzej, 1978, 32). The significance of these findings and their presentation is that Jewish presence in this area since antiquity has been confirmed (see exhibit catalogues *Jevreji u Jugoslaviji* (1988) or *Jews in Yugoslavia* (English edition), 1989).

The Jews on what became Yugoslav territories lived in conditions that diverged from the general European patterns. For example, although the Jews in the Ottoman Empire belonged to the subordinate *raya* category, they lived under more tolerable conditions than did the Jews in the Habsburg Empire or Russia.³ In fact, Jews from the north sought refuge in Ottoman lands from pogroms and persecutions inflicted by Crusade forces and local peoples. Later, the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid II welcomed the influx of Jewish refugees expelled from Spain and Portugal. It is significant that Jews did not flee from Ottoman lands to other regions. All of the above facts have not escaped the writers of postwar Yugoslav Jewish historiography, who have given high marks to the Ottoman rulers' treatment of the Jews. However, certain writers (e.g., Pinto, S. 1954; Pinto, A. 1986) have pointed out that Jewish life on the periphery of the Ottoman Empire, such as in Bosnia, depended largely on the disposition of local rulers towards the Jews. And it was not always favorable.

The influx of the Sephardi Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal a few years later was the most significant mass immigration of Jews into the Balkans. These Iberian Jews did not immigrate into a nation but rather into an empire of many ethnic peoples. The rulers of the Ottoman Empire welcomed these displaced Jews, knowing that their expansionist goals would benefit from the expertise that these Jews could provide them in critical areas such as munitions, medicine, trade, and administration. Those Jews already living in Ottoman lands were too few in number to make a significant contribution and did not have the specific skills and knowledge coveted by the Ottoman rulers.

In the Ottoman Empire the Jews, together with the Serbs and other Christian populations, were a *dhimmi* (protected minority community) people of the Book, subordinate to the dominant Muslims. The Muslim rulers gave local Jewish and other ethno-confessional communities relative autonomy as long as they paid the necessary taxes and did not disrupt the Ottoman rule. Local communities governed themselves in more than just religious affairs.

Jewish communal courts handled cases involving all aspects of life. Individual Jews, however, were brought occasionally before Muslim *shariat* courts, though not as witnesses. These cases were most often related to economic life (Levi 1969; Pinto 1954).⁴ The Jews may have had an advantage over other populations because of the valued resources they provided the rulers. As elsewhere, here, too, they sought a close tie with the rulers. To facilitate this process the Jews and other subordinate peoples in the empire created "foundation myths" in an attempt to place themselves nearer to the Ottoman ruler and thereby secure their position and gain advantage in the multiethnic empire (Braude 1982).⁵ As historian Harriet Pass Freidenreich points out, "Until the late nineteenth century, the Sephardi communities in Belgrade and Sarajevo displayed an extremely traditional and patriarchal character" (1979:6). These communities were close-knit, keeping most of their non-economic activities confined to the Jewish quarter. Although ethnic isolation had been strengthened by the Ottoman's theocratic system of rule, the Jews reinforced their separation by opting for isolation in a system that was not characterized by the European pattern of enforced ghetto settlement. These Jews were not forced to live in a sealed off ghetto. If they had the means, they were free to settle outside the concentrated Jewish quarter. By no means, however, were these Jews immune to the processes of cultural borrowing and acculturation. After all, they had not avoided secular learning while in Spain. Although they retained much of their Spanish heritage and followed the Judaic tradition, their life style had "become strongly influenced by the oriental environment" (*ibid.*). This was evident in their appearance, cuisine, dwellings, music, and vocabulary.⁶

The Jews were an urban rather than rural population, though their economic position as middlemen took them into the countryside. Before Serbian independence much of their competition came from other non-indigenous minorities, particularly from the Greeks and Armenians who, like the Jews, were engaged in trade and commerce and lived in the towns. The Serbian urban class had been wiped out by the Ottomans, and only began to re-form following the Serbian uprisings in the nineteenth century. With Serbian autonomy (1830) and, later, independence from Ottoman rule, the status of the Jews changed. Although some postwar Jews and Serbs depict a past Serbia as free of antisemitism, the Jews lived at the mercy of individual rulers who adopted, at times, anti-Jewish measures. Also, Serbian businessmen who feared Jewish economic

competition initiated a campaign to rid the Serbian interior of Jewish settlement. As Freidenreich (ibid:31) notes, "None of these [discriminatory] laws applied to the Jews of Belgrade, who constituted more than half of the Jewish population of Serbia." However, she continues, "these unfortunate incidents did have a considerable effect on the Jewish community of Belgrade because, on the one hand, most of the Jewish businessmen who left the provincial towns came to the capital in generally impoverished circumstances, and on the other hand, some Jews left Belgrade at this time out of fear of possible future measures" (ibid.).

Although not restricted as to where they could settle, distinct settlement patterns nevertheless emerged. Jewish settlers tended to encapsulate themselves in quarters, particularly near the central business district. In time, residence patterns within cities reflected class differences among the Jews. For centuries the Jews of Belgrade lived in a quarter (*mahala* or, simply, *mala*) called Dorćol, located by the Danube river banks in the lower part of the city. The Jewish individual who was born or lived in this quarter is still affectionately referred to as "a child of Dorćol." Only a few such individuals remain alive. In time some of the economically more prosperous Jews began to move out of Dorćol and settle in higher parts of the city (Zerek) which were adjacent to or within the central business district or *čaršija*. In the Ladino language (Judeo-Spanish, Judezmo) the Jews of Dorćol were called *Los de abajo* ("those from below") and the Jews of Zerek and the *čaršija* as *Los de arriba* ("those from above") (Alkalaj 1961-1962). Thus, the spatial move of residence to a higher point in the city was considered a move of upward social mobility. Some of the living descendants of these Jews still live in Belgrade.

Ashkenazi Jews from the central and northern parts of Europe began arriving during the twelfth century. They fled persecution and intolerable conditions in the northern lands. The onset of the Crusades in the eleventh century, in particular, spurred such migration to the Balkan south. Ashkenazi migration to this region continued until the twentieth century. The greatest influx of Ashkenazi Jews occurred in the nineteenth century into Habsburg lands (Croatia, Slavonia, Vojvodina). Having been banished for more than two centuries, the Jews were permitted to return to these lands after Emperor Josif II issued the Edit of Toleration in 1781 (Freidenreich 1979:42; see also Glesinger 1954).

The place of the Jews in the Habsburg Empire was less secure than that of their mostly Sephardi counterparts in Ottoman lands.

As a subordinate ethnic and religious minority, they were tolerated and allowed to practice their religion. However, though situated outside the mainstream of society by external imposition and self-isolation, their internal communal affairs were more subject to state interference and control (Freidenreich 1979; see also Gross 1988). Unlike the Jews in the Ottoman Empire who shared a tolerated but subordinate religious status in the Muslim theocracy with the Slavic Orthodox and Catholic non-Muslim peoples, the Habsburg Jews lived with indigenous peoples who shared the Roman Catholic religion of the foreign rulers.

Most of the Ashkenazi Jews abandoned Yiddish and spoke the language(s) of the foreign rulers, that is, German and/or Hungarian. Prior to the onset of Jewish emancipation, the Jews in these territories tended to acculturate toward the ruling rather than the surrounding indigenous nations. This pattern changed following Jewish emancipation in the second half of the nineteenth century and during the struggle to consolidate civil rights and equality. Then the reference groups became the South Slavic host nations. One indicator of this reorientation was the slavization of first names, especially for girls (Freidenreich 1979).

The Ashkenazi Jews in these territories were exposed to liberalization considerably earlier than were Jews in former Ottoman lands. One manifestation of this liberalizing trend was the religious split that developed within the Ashkenazim branch between the Neologues (Reformed) and the Orthodox. The latter was a small but dedicated minority. When the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities was established in 1919, they refused to join and formed their own association instead (Freidenreich 1979; *Spomenica*, 1969).

The contrast between Ottoman and Habsburg lands was great. They did not share a common history, except if one includes the numerous conflicts between the two great powers, especially in the border zone. The legacy of this split is visible today in a myriad of ways. It is visible in the divisions of religion, political values, historical memory, nationalistic expression, language, geographical orientation, and identity. It was one land mass and precariously remained one country composed of many different worlds and peoples until its final collapse in 1991 (ibid:1). In the past the Jews of different regions mirrored these divisions. Harriet Pass Freidenreich, whose historical description of interwar Yugoslav Jewry stimulated my interest in the diversity among Jews, expressed it best:

This dichotomy [between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews] mirrored to a certain extent the conflict between Serbs and Croats, the East and the West, which has always caused considerable tension within the country. Just as the Serbs accepted the Eastern Orthodox variant of Christianity and the influence of Byzantium, and the Croats accepted Catholicism and the dominance of Rome, so the Sephardim generally adopted the Babylonian model within Judaism and the Ashkenazim the Palestinian (ibid:7).

The prewar Jewish population was characterized by increasing class stratification. Overall, most Jews fell into the middle class, but there were also wealthy Jews (e.g., industrialists, bankers), working-class Jews, and a growing number of poor Jews. The increase in the Jewish poor seemed to alarm the community as a whole. Class polarization was particularly evident in the central region of Bosnia. Austrian occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina prevented that region's economic conditions from deteriorating to the degree that they did in Macedonia. As a result of remaining within the underdeveloped Ottoman Empire until the Balkan Wars in 1912–1913, Macedonian Jewry was far more impoverished as a whole than Jews living in other regions. Of the 823 families living in Bitolj in 1932, 267 families were poor and 331 were in "utter poverty" (Oren 1971:54). This is yet another area of life in which the Jews reflected regional differences in Yugoslavia as a whole. To the Ashkenazi Jews of Croatia and the Vojvodina, the Sephardim of the Macedonian cities of Skopje and Bitolj were a cultural continent apart. Dr. Rudolph Buchwald, who was the General-Secretary of the Zionist Federation in Yugoslavia, wrote a report of his visit to these cities in 1936. The report was entitled, "Via the Jewish Neighborhoods of Southern Serbia." He saw that world in the following way:

I encountered them amid a volume of tongues and multiplicity of folk styles, . . . amidst the horrendous noise of the Levant. . . . These Jews walked around amid all this, wearing their kaftans and fezes, with a special kind of nobility. . . . These Jews who were so strange and yet so dear and near. . . . They were recipients of the influences of various cultures that penetrated the area—whether of Byzantium and Hellenism . . . or the Turkish and the Albanian, whether

the Serbian or the Bulgarian. Each of them leaving behind a residue and having inscribed its impression on them. Nevertheless they preserved their unique qualities as Jews and fashioned a special Jewish type that exists nowhere else the wide world over (Buchwald 1936:36, quoted in Oren 1971:58).

Both Bosnia and Macedonia had been important administrative and trade centers during earlier historical periods. The fate of these centers followed the decay and collapse of the imperial powers that controlled them. Many Macedonian Jews chose emigration as a solution. Another deciding factor in Bosnia, in particular, after its occupation by Austria in 1878, was the transformation of political economy. For example, the numerous artisans of the region who had practiced their crafts for generations found themselves on the periphery of economic development after the introduction of industrial capital and of a new system of government. Migrating into Bosnia following the occupation were significant numbers of Ashkenazi Jews from mostly Slavic speaking Central European lands. Having been under the Austrian system and speaking German, these new arrivals were immediately prepared to contribute to the capitalistic and administrative development of the region. From the beginning a class division along Ashkenazi and Sephardi lines began to develop. The poor Jews belonged to the Sephardi branch. The class division was reinforced by the tendency of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews to establish independent communal organizations and synagogues (Freidenreich 1979).

It is important to add that Jews helped other Jews through the charitable support distributed through social welfare and ritual organizations, patron-client relationships, and through the contributions of money, food, and clothing provided by individuals and families. Some of these gifts were distributed periodically by way of customs associated with certain holidays or festivals. No repayment was required, although the giver and receiver shared a tacit understanding that once the latter became established or raised out of impoverishment he, too, would become a giver. This generalized form of reciprocity was practiced in the community. Jews who could not afford to pay the communal tax were exempted. Another effort aimed at the poor Jews, particularly those of Macedonia, was to campaign for funds that would enable them to resettle in Palestine (see Oren 1971).

Balkan Jewry

An American folklorist has written a comprehensive study of a Balkan Jewish population. In *From Sofija to Jaffa: The Jews of Bulgaria and Israel*, a book which follows Bulgarian Jewry from the first century to their present lives in Israel, Guy Haskell (1994) provides a sweeping history of these Jews. He devotes separate chapters to the pre-Ottoman period, the Ottoman (1389–1878) and post-Ottoman periods (1878–1940), and the war years (1940–1944). Haskell relies for this historical description on written sources, which he approaches critically, as well as on informants. Most of the ethnographic focus, however, is on Bulgarian Jews now living in Israel. One of Guy Haskell's theoretical aims is to derive what he calls the "components of [Bulgarian and Bulgarian-Israeli] identity." Reflecting on my own preparation and initial fieldwork, I believe that my original aim was similar to Haskell's—to derive a set of features of Yugoslav Jewish identity. What I found, however, is something other than what I would call "the components of Yugoslav Jewish identity." Where the present work converges with Haskell's is in showing how "pivotal collective experiences . . . have influenced the identity of the group as a whole. . . . paying careful attention to those events, ideas, and cultural transformations that influence ethnic identity [in the present]" (Haskell 1994:72). Although the present study shares with Haskell's the general aim of describing and explaining transformations of the identities of a Balkan Jewish population, our historical and ethnographic approaches and emphases diverge considerably. We have written complementary but very different books on two Jewish populations that occupy the place of footnotes in Jewish historiography.

Guy Haskell provides a more comprehensive historical treatment of Bulgarian Jewry than the present study does of Yugoslav Jewry. I thus recommend that readers seeking a fuller historical understanding of Balkan Jewry as a whole, as seen through the anthropological lens, read *From Sofija to Jaffa*. It should be noted, however, that Haskell argues for the uniqueness of the Jews of Bulgaria. Hence, readers should proceed cautiously when attempting to generalize from Bulgarian Jewry to other Jewish populations in the Balkans. This caution certainly applies to the Jews of Yugoslavia, whose histories both converge with and diverge from the history of Bulgarian Jewry. Thus, I suggest that Haskell's historical rendering should be read together with works that focus

specifically on Yugoslavia, such as Harriet Pass Freidenreich's *The Jews of Yugoslavia*.

Haskell writes, "Although Bulgarian Jewry shares many historical and cultural features with other Balkan Sephardim, its singular demographic make-up and historical experience created a people whose attitudes, culture, and relationship to gentile society were unique, and resulted in the dramatic cultural and social transformations and events during the last century which have no parallel in Jewish social and political history." Were they in fact unique in this regard? Certainly, Ottoman rule over Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia created many similar conditions for its Jewish communities. As a people of the Book, the Jews were a protected religious minority. Furthermore, as city dwellers, they sustained more contact with the other urbanites, the Muslim rulers and other ethnic minorities, than they did with the indigenous Christian populations in the countryside. At times, the indigenous Slavs associated Jews with the Muslim rulers, which sometimes led to Jewish flight. As Haskell notes, the Ottoman rulers "provided its Jewish population with a measure of security and protection unmatched anywhere in Christian Europe" (ibid:77). The large number of Sephardim were welcomed by Sultan Bayazid into the empire. Moreover, they entered when the empire was at its peak. As the empire began to erode after the sixteenth century, many of its Jewish communities also experienced a loss of vigor. Perhaps more than Bulgarian Jewry, who lived closer to the Ottoman center, Serbian and particularly Bosnian Jews lived on the periphery of the eroded empire and were more likely to fall victim to the capricious whims of local rulers. But the Jews of Bulgaria and other regions were not exempt from such threats. Haskell tells us that "[w]ith the decline of Ottoman power came a decline in Ottoman tolerance, and several discriminatory decrees were issued restricting Jewish rights. In 1592 and 1598, Prince Michael of Wallachia crossed the Danube and laid waste Vidin, Pleven, and Nikopol. Nikopol was burned to the ground, in Vidin two synagogues were destroyed, and both communities were decimated" (ibid:82). In Serbia, too, Belgrade changed hands several times between the Ottomans and Habsburgs in various wars, and the city's Jews inevitably suffered from both sides. Haskell is perhaps right on target when he writes that with the decline of and corruption in the Empire "a general malaise set in among the Jews of the Balkans" (ibid:82). At this time the once potent Sephardi culture brought

from the Iberian Peninsula, which integrated religious and non-religious components began its own decline. In his book Haskell proceeds to show how the Jews of Bulgaria filled the vacuum in Jewish life created by what he specifies as a spiritual and educational decline (ibid:84).

If we compare Bulgarian and Serbian Jewry, we may find that some of the uniqueness claimed for Bulgarian Jewry withers away. Unlike Bulgaria's homogeneous Jewish population, however, Serbia had distinctive Sephardi and Ashkenazi populations, and for purposes of comparison of the kind Haskell invites we must keep them separate. On the whole, Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities in Belgrade were not only different because of separate institutions, but also because of how their members saw the Serbs and in turn how the Serbs saw them. When Serbs referred to the Jews of Serbia as *naši Jevreji* ("our Jews"), they had mainly Sephardi Jews in mind. Thus, the Sephardi experience in Belgrade was similar to that of Bulgarian Jewry in terms of general acceptance by both ethnic populations in Bulgaria and in Serbian Belgrade.

The Ethnogenesis of the Yugoslav Jewish Community

Based on the Law on the Jewish Religious Community established in 1929, the Jews in interwar Yugoslavia "formally constituted a state-recognized religious body patterned on the Central European model" (Freidenreich 1979:72). The Law of 1929 defined the duties of the Sephardi, Neologue, and Orthodox religious communities.⁷ It also legalized Jewish holidays for Jews in government service and the military, and for Jewish students. Individual Jews could belong to the Sephardi, Neologue Ashkenazi, or Orthodox Religious Community. Membership, in theory, was "compulsory by law for all adherents of the Jewish faith residing in the country. . . . Withdrawal . . . was possible only by conversion to another religion or by moving elsewhere" (ibid:73). Even before the war, however, not everyone was a member of one of these communities. Despite this fact it remains that before the war, religion was the primary distinguishing marker of ethnic descent for both Jews and non-Jews. The two were often synonymous identifications. Even Jews who sought national integration with larger nationalities retained their Jewish religious affiliation. They called themselves "Serbs (or Croats) of the Mosaic faith." Although legally the Jews constituted a religious community, the state recognized them as a national

minority with the right to establish various institutions and associations (Vajs 1954).

Although there was considerable acculturation and even assimilation between the world wars, the Jews of that period can be distinguished from other populations on more than just religious criteria. Structurally, they represent a demographic and socioeconomic contrast to other populations. The Jews were urbanites while their host populations were predominately rural and peasant. Despite representing less than half of one percent of the total population, their urban presence was as high as twenty times that percentage, thus giving them a voice in municipal politics and economics. In some cities their presence was sufficiently strong to influence the balance of power on certain political issues. The occupational distributions of Jews and non-Jews reflected the urban-rural dichotomy. Whereas 76 percent of the active non-Jewish population were engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fishing, only a minuscule 0.6 percent of the Jewish population were associated with these occupational categories. Fifty-nine percent of the active Jewish population fell within the category of commerce, credit, and communication, but only four percent of the non-Jewish population did so. Proportionately, Jews were represented twice as high in the category of public services, free professions, and military, although relatively few pursued military careers (Freidenreich 1979:219). In contrast to the other populations, the Slovenes excluded, the Jews enjoyed near universal literacy. Because of their declining birth-rate during the twentieth century, Jewish children were not over-represented in the elementary schools, but in higher education Jewish students were overrepresented in medicine, law, engineering, philosophy, and music (ibid:64–66).

The Shared Features of Yugoslav Jewry

The Jews of Yugoslavia in all of their diversity have shared certain commonalities with one another and together constitute a part of the wider collectivity called the Jewish People—*Am Israel*. For many, perhaps most, this unifying feature of peoplehood, which can also be understood as the narrative or story of the Jews, overrides the numerous differentiating features within Jewry (Elazar 1989). But as Anthony Cohen (1985) demonstrates in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, underneath shared symbols such as the “Jewish People” or the “Jewish Community” or even “Jewish

Narrative" is found a wide range of meanings carried by individual members and subgroups, as each interpretation is mediated by a different set of social statuses, experiences, and locations. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that the Jewish narrative(s) unfolded and overlapped with the narratives of other peoples. No one people writes its own complete story. To understand this basic commonality of peoplehood, thus, we must begin with the understanding that there exists often bewildering complexity and difference beneath the shared symbolic forms. While acknowledging the mediating processes involved in the construction of the symbolic community, that is a community united more by integrative symbols than social institutions, it can be shown that the Jewish community is unified by the written and ongoing narrative that is Jewish history. It is a community that has lived and is continuing to live a story. But as stated earlier, no one can boast of complete authorship of such a narrative (see MacIntyre 1984). Moreover, different peoples participate in each other's narratives, and thus every group is part of multiple narratives. Keeping this in mind we cannot speak about an unconstrained refashioning of identity.

We can examine several elements of the historical narrative of the Jewish people. First of all, the written account itself—from the selection of the founding ancestor to tribal development, the giving of the law, and state development—not only serves as a charter and model for behavior, but it also tells a story. The story is not just a medium through which to communicate moral principles, but to describe people, events, social transformations, displacements, defeats, victories, and suffering. That the text itself, that which contains the story, retains its significance for the remnant of practicing religious Jews of Belgrade is evident in various forms and activities, perhaps most dramatically on Simhat Torah,⁸ when the Torah scrolls are paraded around the synagogue and are touched and kissed by the congregants. Through their reenactment in such rituals the different events in the story have been remembered. The Simhat Torah rituals highlight God giving the Law to the Jewish people and the people delighting in the Law. I witnessed this reenactment in the highly secular Belgrade community. Even there the ritual flame had not been entirely extinguished. The written account provides a description of the ritually sealed covenant between God and this People. Many Jews continue to believe that the covenant gave the Jews a messianic purpose and mission, although their interpretations of the purpose vary according to beliefs and political orientations. Others try to explain away this

purpose by substituting materialist or other interpretive methodologies. What is significant despite the spectrum of belief and unbelief is the ritual, spiritual, or at least conceptual, hold that this covenant has had and continues to have over the Jewish People, including those few members who lived in Yugoslavia and now live in its successor states. This I found to be true even for those who might describe themselves as agnostic or atheist in relation to the Jewish Charter (Torah and Tanakh). They responded that knowing they are the descendants of Abraham is important to them and that they "continue to feel the imprint of the covenant." Jewish activist and past president of the Zagreb Jewish community, Slavko Goldstein, a secular oriented Jew, more than acknowledged the importance of the Bible when he wrote:

Only the original source, the Bible, is incontestable. In the Old Testament are rooted the powerful myths of one, almighty Lord, of the chosen people, of the Covenant with God, of the promised land, of the Messiah who was to come when it was the most necessary. When the disbelief of recent times diluted the power of religion and myth, their place was taken by the power of biblical history, literature, philosophy, the moral code. Never exhausted and ever open to new interpretations, the Bible has become the Book for all times and of all nations but above all, it has remained the Book of the people that made it and founded on it their cult of the Book (Goldstein 1989:13).

Anthropological observers of Jewish ethnicity concur with Goldstein regarding the Jewish charter. Handelman and Handelman (1990:195) have commented that "the most enduring and influential template of [model for] Jewish culture is the Hebrew Bible, together with related commentaries, liturgies, legends, folk traditions, and festivals. They constitute a corpus of knowledge and experience, . . . encoded in the Hebrew Bible."

The story is incomplete without the sacred landscape of the Promised Land, Palestine, Israel. This part of the story as told from within the land or in exile or diaspora has remained significant for millennia. Jews carried with them into the Balkan Diaspora a nostalgic sentiment for the ancient Jewish state and the hope of rebirth, long before the mass Zionist movements of the twentieth century. In Yugoslavia this sentiment was dramatically demonstrated by the story about a Sarajevo rabbi by the name of Rav

Danon, who died in Hercegovina in the nineteenth century on route to Palestine.⁹ His grave is the only one in the area, and on the anniversary of his death Bosnian Jewish pilgrims traveled to the site and held a *limud*.¹⁰ Such pilgrimages continued well after the Second World War. Other pre-Zionist accounts demonstrate the nostalgic or mystical tie to the land. The Zemun rabbi Jehuda Alkalaj, for example, has been called a forerunner of Zionist orientation.¹¹ The story of Rav Danon is a story about movement toward the land; it is about going back, unlike exile, which highlights the opposite condition of not being in or not moving toward the land. This is often referred to as the exilic condition, which may involve movement away from the land, displacement, and de-territorialization. This condition continued to be felt and was manifested in the statements of the Jews of postwar Yugoslavia. One community leader spoke about carrying that ancient fate. Another noted how the Jews are classified as *neki drugi* ("someone else") or *nešto drugo* ("something else") (Albahari 1990). The Jews' historical statuses, or lack of them, raise important anthropological questions concerning how groups that experience de-territorialization and dislocation become categorized in the "national order of things" (see Malkki 1995).

Jewish customs and symbolic activities are closely tied to the Jewish religion. It is extremely difficult to express Jewishness without using or invoking such symbols. Secular Yugoslav Jews acknowledged that, even though they themselves are not religious, religious symbols and institutions like the synagogue are important for the maintenance of both Jewish life and identity. It is worth noting that the survival of Jewish communities is associated with the presence of some semblance of religious practice, though there may be Yugoslav Jewish individuals who may disagree with this thesis.¹² One secular Jewish leader acknowledged that "the only thing that can save the [Yugoslav Jewish] ethnic group is *religion*." The Jewish community of socialist Yugoslavia can be classified as predominantly secular, but a tiny practicing religious remnant remained. It is impossible to state what the Yugoslav Jewish community would have been without such a remnant, but there is some evidence that suggests Jewish existence cannot thrive or even continue without any Jewish ritual. The case of Chinese Jewry suggests that the loss of Jewish religious practices was associated with the complete assimilation of the Chinese Jews into their host society. Rhee (1973) hypothesized that Jewish entrance

into the civil service, which required the adoption of Confucianism, contributed to the attenuation of the Judaic religion in China. Although the Yugoslav Jews had not broken completely with religious practice and symbolic forms, their conscious orientation toward secularism provided sufficient conditions for "testing" whether their "experiment in secular Jewishness" had successfully replaced Judaism. At the same time we must acknowledge that the presence of religious life, however contracted and neglected, can fulfill functions of ethnic preservation and thus help to ensure continuity.

A Persistent People

The Jews are an ancient people whose history continues to unfold. As a people, they have not been reduced to "writing history." The Jews are a persistent people that have survived generation after generation for four thousand years despite the absence of a Jewish state and despite restrictions and persecutions of various kind and scale in the lands where they settled following the last great dispersion that began with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 C.E. Spicer (1971) has argued that such opposition is the primary ingredient that characterizes a persistent people. Certainly opposition has been a ubiquitous feature of Jewish life. Whether or not the oppositional process was the primary factor behind the persistence of the Yugoslav Jews is examined below. It is sufficient to state here that opposition in its more coercive and violent forms was not the factor it was elsewhere in Europe, with the exception of the years 1941-1945. What is certain is that Jews have persisted continuously for about two thousand years on the territory that became Yugoslavia. On that basis alone they can be described as a persistent people.

The Jews are a historical people also in the sense that their view of the world is historical rather than cosmological (Berger 1967). Specific historical events and persons define this general historical orientation. To the Jews, Abraham, Moses and Jacob certainly have more substance than Hercules, Perseus, and Agamemnon. It is, thus, more difficult to conceive the Jewish people in Berger's terms, as a "mythologically conceived collectivity" (ibid:117-118). I do, however, see grounds for defining the Jews of Yugoslavia, on one level, as a "conceptual community" or a "symbolic community" (Cohen 1985).

The Significant Materials of Yugoslav Jewish Identity

Significance is defined as those elements in the past that the Yugoslav Jews themselves considered important for conceptualizing Jewishness and reconstructing a Jewish community in the postwar years. They were the elements that the Yugoslav Jews, selected and then displayed in various forms. I elicited such significant elements, the materials out of which a postwar collective identity was fashioned, from published chronologies, publication topics, museum and exhibit topics, interviews, and cultural performances; that is, from what they have said or written, what they have done, and what they have displayed. A sampling of such elements would include: transformational events (e.g., wars), social movements (e.g., Zionist movement, Communist movement), ideologies (e.g., fascism, Titoist socialism, nationalism).

The Yugoslav Jews reflected their own internal diversity and the external diversity of the various foreign rulers and indigenous peoples with whom they came into contact. In the words of one community leader, the Yugoslav Jews "resemble the rest of the Yugoslavs. Just as contemporary Yugoslavia still carries the stamp of its history, its cultural traditions and the material civilization of the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Venetian Republic, so the Yugoslav Jews carry the fading marks of Sephardi and Ashkenazi cultures, through which [the following] levels of influence clearly were deposited: Serbian enlightenment, Croatian Illyrianism, Hungarian regeneration, the Young Turk movement, emancipation, national awakening and liberation. And also: the Holocaust and racist persecutions which were repulsed and destroyed in the National War of Liberation with the noticeable contribution of Yugoslav Jewry" (Mošić 1987:45).