

**Nila Ginger Hofman.**

**Renewed Survival: Jewish Community Life in Croatia.**

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers 2006, 168 pp.

\$26.95 paper (0-7391-1330-5), \$60.00 hardcover (0-7391-1329-1)

Nila Ginger Hofman's book is a postmodern odyssey of sorts. Its heroes are not adroit chieftains and stalwart warriors, but hapless civilians caught in a war they did not start and could not fight even if they wanted to. No war party was theirs and they belonged to none, yet all parties were theirs and they belonged to all, somewhat. The war was their neighbours' and compatriots' fight for the right of ethnic divorce. All sides won, and duly separated into what remained of their ethnic homelands, to nurture their ethnic distinctness. Hofman's characters were thus left free to do whatever they wanted under conditions they did not choose, as Karl Marx put it. This kind of freedom was familiar to their forebears, but not to them. They were native aliens again, Georg Simmel's strangers. Their response to the unbearable oddity of not belonging to their homeland was twofold. They reinvented themselves as a people, and reached to the Jewish world beyond — and neither step was easy.

Hofman's story of Zagrebian Jews unfolds on the macro level of social history and the micro level of personal stories. The former begins in 1783, when the enlightened absolutist Emperor Joseph II (son of Maria Theresa of the Seven Years' War that destroyed *la Nouvelle France*), issued an Edict of Tolerance, allowing the Jews to settle in Zagreb, where they could formerly only trade. A prosperous Jewish colony eventually emerged in Croatia's capital, by 1941 over ten thousand strong, or five per cent of Zagreb's population.

The Croatian Jews prospered under the Habsburg monarchy, and under the Serbian Karadorđević dynasty which ruled the new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes since 1918, named Yugoslavia in 1929. They had a synagogue, schools, and "humanitarian, intellectual, political, and recreational" organizations, including a women's association. Some were exclusively Jewish; others had mixed membership. The Jewish population of Croatia more than doubled in the 1930s, swollen by the influx of refugees from Germany and Austria.

In 1941 Germany and its allies conquered and partitioned Yugoslavia, handing a nominally sovereign Independent State of Croatia to their Croat allies, *Ustaše* (Ustashe), although German troops nevertheless occupied the north and Italian south of that state. Like their German comrades, *Ustaše* sought a final solution to their ethnic and political problems. This resulted in concentration camps and killing of the Jews, Roma, Serbs, and Croat anti-fascists. The number of victims is still disputed, with claims and counterclaims regarding the camp of Jasenovac ranging between forty and seven hundred thousand. Most Jews of Zagreb were killed; some fled south to the Italian occupation zone and beyond; some joined the Partisans (communist-led anti-fascist guerrillas); some passed as "Aryans". Hofman's grandfather found refuge in Switzerland. All Jewish organizations were banned; the Zagreb synagogue was razed; and the last rabbi perished in Auschwitz.

In the aftermath of the war some of the five thousand survivors emigrated to Israel and the United States, reducing the Jewish population of Zagreb to some thirteen hundred, one ninth of its pre-war size. Those who joined the Partisans largely identified themselves as Yugoslavs; others followed suit fearing the resurrection of anti-Semitism. Yugoslav and Jewish identities coexisted relatively comfortably until 1967, when Yugoslavia cut diplomatic relations with Israel and embraced the Palestinian cause. That forced the Jews into supporting two mutually inimical causes, Yugoslavism and Zionism.

Yugoslavism meanwhile faded away, especially after the death of Yugoslavia's President Josip Broz Tito in 1980, but there was a sharp upsurge in Croat nationalism even prior to that, in 1969-1971. By the mid-eighties Yugoslavia was a *de facto* confederacy of states, each identified with its ethnic majority, save for Bosnia and Herzegovina which did not have one. As diverse South Slavs and others flocked to their respective ethnic folds, the Jews of Zagreb sought religious and language teachers to help them reconstruct their culture.

In June 1991 Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia, rural Croatian Serbs seceded from Croatia, and the Serbo-Croat war was on. In August 1991 the downtown Jewish Community Centre and memorial plaque to the victims of Holocaust were damaged by explosives. Anti-Semitism was back, although formally illegal. It was soon reined in by the Croatian authorities, anxious to join the European Union; damage to the Jewish Community Centre was repaired at government's expense; and Croatian dignitaries spared no effort to show how safe and welcome are Jews in Croatia — as a minority.

Within this macro context individuals of Jewish origin deconstructed and reconstructed their identities and loyalties. That part of their story is often told in their own words, cited by Hofman. They convey a sense of confusion and loss due to the breakup of Yugoslavia — and of a regained sense of belonging in its aftermath. One respondent put it this way: "I used to have Yugoslavia. Now I don't have that anymore so I turned to my own people".

But turning to their own people proved no easy matter. When an Orthodox rabbi arrived in 1998 (fifty-five years after the last one died in Auschwitz), they discovered that what he meant by being Jewish was quite demanding. Most of them were comfortable living in mixed marriages — and he wanted their spouses to convert to Judaism. They were used to eat what they wanted — and he koshered their Community Centre kitchen. They could not understand Hebrew — and he prayed and lectured in it. He took to learning Croatian, but could not speak it. Their long absence from Judaism made them strangers to it, and their Orthodox rabbi to them. Ulysses found out he was a stranger in Ithaca upon return, and so did they.

They disagreed about the rabbi, about koshering, about religious services — even about rebuilding their synagogue. Some wanted a replica of the old one, Moorish and gothic; others wanted something more modern. Some wanted a synagogue with a museum and cultural centre; others wanted a museum and cultural centre with a small synagogue "for the fifteen or so individuals who attend services regularly" (p. 81). They disagreed on a myriad issues and agreed on one. They were all Jewish, in their diverse ways, and they were determined to maintain their identity.

In terms of criticism, one might object to Hofman's decision to change her respondents' gender and age, not only their names, which is unnecessary to protect their anonymity, and potentially obfuscating. One could point out some factual errors, such as that English was absent from Croatian high schools until the 1980s (while many of us learned it in elementary school back in the fifties), or that Tito led the Partisans between 1942 (not 1941) and 1945 — but we all make errors of the kind, so I will stop here.

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<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/renewed.html>

November 2007

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