

Muslim Resistance to the Holocaust: Historical and Pedagogical Implications

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Although Muslims were geographically and politically at the periphery of the Holocaust, recent scholarship is beginning to document a significant Muslim opposition to the persecution of the Jews during World War II. Muslim acts of rescue and resistance occurred too frequently and the justification for their position was too deeply rooted in broader social norms for one to dismiss them as anomalous, yet the deeply moving stories of Muslim efforts on behalf of their Jewish neighbors are relatively unknown. These included public protests (particularly among the Muslim community of Bosnia), collective actions (such as the spontaneous but large-scale rescue of Jewish refugees by Muslim villages in Albania and the assistance to Jews undertaken by North African Arabs at the Great Mosque of Paris), rescue efforts by resistance movements, and many individual acts of heroism on the part of Middle Eastern diplomats and by individuals in occupied Bosnia, Albania, and Tunisia. Documenting the phenomenon of Muslim opposition to the Holocaust is important not only as a contribution to a fuller understanding of history but also as a topic with pedagogical implications. In this paper, I will give a brief overview of the broader context of Muslim responses to the Holocaust and then will offer a more in-depth analysis of the response among the Muslim population in the Nazi-occupied Balkans.

First of all, it is important to put Muslim encounters with the Holocaust in a broader historical and ideological framework. Geographically and politically, only a minority of the world's Muslims – those in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe – had any experience at all with the Holocaust. For most Muslims even from these regions, contact with the Holocaust was very limited and indirect. Indeed, Middle Eastern countries – Turkey, Iran, the Arab lands –

were not directly involved in World War II, while Nazi-occupied North African countries were areas in which the “final solution” was never fully implemented. Only the Muslim regions of the Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania) were subject to the full measure of Nazi persecution of the Jews. It might, therefore, be considered surprising that individually and collectively, Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Albanians, and Bosnian Muslims assisted Jews during the Holocaust and that, unlike in many parts of Europe, these efforts often received considerable support among the general population.

Namik Kemal Yolga, an official at the Turkish Consulate-General in Paris honored for his assistance to Jews during the Holocaust, later said in an interview with historian Stanford Shaw: “The anti-Semitism which can be seen in many countries in various degrees has never existed in Turkey at any time in history.”¹ Although this statement is too absolute to be completely accurate, the fact is that anti-Semitism – and the concept of religiously-based persecution – was historically less common in the Muslim world than in Christian Europe. This is not to assert that Christians and Jews were treated as equals in the Ottoman or Persian Empires; however, there was no massive, government-sponsored persecution equivalent to the Inquisition.ⁱ Rather, Muslim rulers generally allowed members of the other Abrahamic faiths (Christians and Jews) to practice their religions freely and to maintain their traditional cultural practices, an attitude that led large numbers of Sephardic Jews to find refuge within Ottoman territories in North Africa, western Asia, and southeastern Europe. During the Holocaust, Muslims, particularly in the Balkan regions of Bosnia and Albania, frequently explained their actions on behalf of Jews by referencing this historical tradition, specifically citing the principle of religious tolerance, which they perceived as dating back to Ottoman rule or even further back,

ⁱ Some have argued that the Ottoman genocide of Christian Armenians in 1915 was a case of religious persecution, but I would argue that the genocide was based on modern ethnic and national, rather than religious, hatred.

to the earliest days of the expansion of Islam.² Therefore, when opportunities to assist their Jewish compatriots arose, many Muslims responded as a matter of principle.

Turning first to the Middle East/North Africa, Muslim regions which experienced the Holocaust either indirectly or partially, fewer opportunities to assist Jews arose. Nonetheless, a surprising number of rescue efforts were made by citizens of these countries who held official posts in Europe. Diplomats from non-combatant countries were in a unique position to assist Jews as Nazi Germany was careful not to alienate these governments and drive them into the Allied camp. If diplomatic officials were forceful in protesting the deportation of Jewish citizens of their countries, Germany usually backed down. Several Middle Eastern consular officials – and their staffs – showed sufficient resolve to save hundreds of Jews living in Europe. For example, Abdol Hossein Sardari, an Iranian diplomat in charge of consular affairs in Paris, intervened to protect 150 Jews of Iranian, Afghani, and Uzbek origin. Using terminology designed to appeal to the Nazis, he claimed the ‘Jugutis’ to be racially Persian (Aryan) and therefore not subject to persecution.³ Their lives were spared. Diplomats from Turkey, such as Namik Kemal Yolga and Ismail Necdet Kent, also in France, engaged in similar efforts. By 1942, they were spending many of their working hours helping Jewish citizens of France who had emigrated from Turkey decades earlier to get Turkish citizenship papers.⁴ Because of Turkey’s status as a neutral country, these citizenship papers effectively exempted Jews from deportation to concentration camps. As the persecution of Jews in France intensified, so did the efforts of Turkish diplomats, who were often forced to visit Gestapo Headquarters several times daily on behalf of Jews.⁵ One day in 1943, Necdet Kent went a step further, climbing into a cattle car with 80 “Turkish” Jews about to be departed to Auschwitz and refusing to get off until the German officials released them (one station later).⁶ Such actions showed a great deal of

courage – and entailed great risks. Another Turkish Consul, Selahattin Ülkümen, similarly intervened on behalf of 42 Turkish-Jewish families on the island of Rhodes. In retaliation, the Nazis bombed his home, killing his pregnant wife.⁷

Another rescue effort undertaken by Muslims holding public positions in occupied Europe was a group effort supported by Algerian-born officials at the Great Mosque of Paris. Much about the operation remains shrouded in mystery, but historians do know that mosque employees, led by top officials such as Si Kaddour Benghrabit and Si Mohamed Benzouaou, provided papers to dozens of North African Jews, identifying them as Muslims.⁸ Such papers were especially crucial to men as it provided them with an acceptable rationale for circumcision while exempting them from persecution. Children and adults may also have been hidden on the mosque premises on a short-term basis before being moved to different locations.

Rescue efforts occurred even within Muslim countries of the Middle East, despite the fact that most of these nations were beyond the reach of the Holocaust. Iran, for example, took in large numbers of Jewish refugees from Europe. Approximately 1,000 Jewish children, mostly orphans, and 800 Jewish adults found temporary refuge in Tehran, Iran, between April and August 1942.⁹ These were Polish Jews who had escaped into Soviet central Asia until Jewish agencies assisted them in moving through Iran to Palestine. More research needs to be done on the “Tehran Children” to determine the role of the Iranian government and the local population in facilitating their transit through Iran; however, it is evident that even though Iranians did not organize the rescue operation, they certainly condoned it.

Meanwhile, neighboring Turkey also became a haven for Jews. Even before the beginning of the war, when Hitler purged thousands of Jewish academics from their university posts in Germany, 10% of them found refuge – and academic positions – in Turkey. By 1941,

however, an even more urgent situation had arisen: the question of Jewish refugees seeking asylum in Turkey or transit across Turkish territory en route to Palestine. This created a dilemma for neutral Turkey, which was in a precarious position due to its “location between the Soviet hammer and the Nazi anvil”¹⁰ as well as a variety of political and economic problems. In February 1941, the government nevertheless promulgated the “Law Regulating Passage through Turkey for Jewish Immigrants Oppressed in their Countries of Origin,” which allowed transit visas to refugees – but only if they had an entrance visa to the next country of destination. The problem was that Britain was not issuing visas to Jews seeking to enter Palestine, leaving Turkish authorities in a quandary as to whether to accept undocumented refugees. The potential consequences of this confusion were illustrated by a terrible tragedy when the *Struma*, a ship full of Jews anchored off the Turkish coast, sank while officials debated the status of its undocumented passengers. Scholar Mark Epstein notes, however, that the *Struma* incident was not characteristic of the Turkish attitude toward Jewish refugees:

Even if the Turks did not seek opportunities to help, they generally did not simply turn away those who reached their country....Those who managed to enter Turkey and stay, with or without papers, with or without work permits, with or without jobs, were well known to the Turkish police. They were not hidden under floorboard and in barns, converted to a different faith and reeducated.¹¹

Ultimately, large numbers of Jews found refuge in Turkey. In 1943 and 1944, more than 1,000 Jews arrived from Greece, and several thousand more from Romania and Bulgaria were permitted transit across Turkish territory.¹² Therefore, although Turkey struggled with the diplomatic and logistical problems of rescuing Jews, it nonetheless did more than any other country to assist Jews fleeing from persecution in Europe.

In the Arab lands of North Africa, the position of Jews was even more precarious. After the fall of France in 1940, Axis troops occupied Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. There

were no death camps on Arab territory, nor were there mass deportations of North African Jews to camps in Europe. Nonetheless, the first steps were taken in the persecution of the Jews: the enactment of anti-Semitic legislation and the establishment of labor camps. While German authorities, rather than local leaders, organized the persecution, the native Arab population, like their European counterparts, varied in their responses: a few participating in atrocities, the majority either unaware of or aloof from the fate of the Jews, some actively providing assistance to those threatened by the Holocaust. Robert Satloff, whose seminal research has recently revolutionized our understanding of the Holocaust in North Africa, has documented Arab assistance to the Jews:

Arabs welcomed Jews into their homes, guarded Jews' valuables so Germans could not confiscate them, shared with Jews their meager rations and warned Jewish leaders of coming SS raids. The sultan of Morocco and the bey of Tunis provided moral support and, at times, practical help to Jewish subjects. In Vichy-controlled Algiers, mosque preachers gave Friday sermons forbidding believers from serving as conservators of confiscated Jewish property. In the words of Yaacov Zrivy, from a small town near Sfax, Tunisia, 'The Arabs watched over the Jews.'¹³

Other Arabs risked their lives to assist Jews. For example, Khaled Abdulwahhab, a Tunisian, hid the Boukrus family on his farm after learning that a German officer was planning to rape a woman in that family. Another Tunisian, Si Ali Sakkat, assisted 60 Jewish internees who had escaped from a labor camp and knocked at Sakkat's gate.¹⁴ The Arab took in the group of strangers and hid them on his estate.ⁱⁱ Fortunately for the Jews, the Allies liberated North Africa in May 1943, bringing to an end three years of fear and persecution.

The Muslims who had the most direct contact with the full horror of the Holocaust were those in southeastern Europe: primarily the Albanians and Bosnian Muslims. For a variety of

ⁱⁱ Interestingly enough, Satloff notes that even though Si Ali Sakkat's rescue of the group of Jews was described in at least two books, his own descendants had never heard about it. (Most likely this silence – and the general lack of information on Muslim Holocaust rescuers in Middle Eastern and North African lands – is a result of negative feelings about Israeli politics, leading some Muslims to conceal their role in assisting Jews.)

ideological reasons, Balkan historians and Holocaust specialists alike paid very little attention to these regions until the 1990s. Even today, there are still enormous gaps in the historical record that need to be filled.

Albania, the poorest country in Europe with a tiny Jewish population of only 200 in 1933, seemed an unlikely place to provide assistance to Jews. After Hitler's rise to power in Germany, however, the small Balkan country became an important destination for Jewish refugees though, at least initially, many of them considered that country merely "a convenient way station on the road to someplace else."¹⁵ Most of the new arrivals soon discovered that they were unable to get visas for another country, so they remained in Albania indefinitely. When World War II broke out, the Balkan nation became an even more attractive refuge for Jews fleeing persecution. In fact, Albania became the only country in Europe that had a larger Jewish population at the end of World War II than at its beginning; approximately 800-1000 Jews found safety – and welcome – in that remote, predominantly Muslim country.¹⁶

Jews who managed to reach Albania were fortunate for a number of reasons. First, Italian, not German, troops occupied the country during the first years of the war, resulting in a much less determined persecution of Jews than in countries under direct Nazi control. Furthermore, the general lack of anti-Semitism, deriving partly from the historical experience of religious toleration under the Ottomans and partly from the fact that Jews constituted less than one percent of the Albanian population, resulted in widespread public sympathy for Jews, who were persecuted by the country's conquerors. Finally, the Albanian code of honor, 'besa,' fostered a deeply engrained sense of responsibility toward anyone who entered one's home as a guest. Anyone that asked for assistance, even foreign refugees with little or no knowledge of the Albanian language, were considered to be 'guests,' and the Albanian host – along with his family

and friends - was duty-bound to protect them without accepting any recompense for the months or years that the guests required their hospitality.

It has been only recently, since the fall of Communism in Albania, that rescuers have been able to speak about their experiences and share the reasons for their actions. Many cited religious reasons. Beqir Qoqja, recognized by Yad Vashem in 1992, explained his wartime assistance to a close Jewish friend: "I have always been a devout Muslim....All Jews are our brothers."¹⁷ Kasem Jakup Kocerri, recognized in 1993, elaborated on this idea: "We have been a family of Muslims for 500 years. 'To save a life is to go to paradise.' *Besa* came from the Koran."¹⁸ Hamid and Xhemal Veseli, who together with their brother and parents rescued two families of Jewish refugees, cited a similar mixture of religious and cultural reasons: "Our parents were devout Muslims and believed, as we do, that 'every knock on the door is a blessing from God'....*Besa* exists in every Albanian soul."¹⁹

Sometimes the Albanians sheltered Jews who had been friends of the family, such as the Boriçi family, who took in a Jewish couple and their daughter, introducing them as relatives from another district.²⁰ More frequently, as foreign Jews came to outnumber Albanian ones by 4 or 5 to 1, Albanians took in refugees from Poland, Germany, Serbia, Macedonia, or Greece, people who spoke different languages and had grown up in completely different cultural environments. Some of those sheltering Jews, such as Mehmet Frashëri and his family, kept their activity secret from their neighbors.²¹ More often, however, entire neighborhoods or villages were aware of the presence of the Jews and assisted in their rescue.²² Dr. Anna Kohen, who fled from Nazi persecution in Janina, later described how her family had disguised themselves as Muslims in the Albanian town of Vlora and had been accepted by the local population "like their own brothers and sisters."²³ Lime Balla, who helped to shelter Jews along

with her husband Destan, similarly related how peasants in the small village of Shengjergji worked together to disguise seventeen Jews as local farmers; “even the local police knew that the villagers were sheltering Jews.”²⁴ In fact, in wartime Albania, it was extremely common for Jews to live openly under assumed Muslim identities, a situation requiring the complicity of others to conceal that many of these so-called Albanians could not speak the national language. For example, it must have been extremely risky for Ali Koca, an Albanian Muslim, upon hearing of the arrest of Solomon Konforti, a Yugoslav Jew whose family was living with some of Koca’s friends, to swear before German authorities that Solomon was his brother.²⁵ If anyone had inquired more closely, it would have been evident that the “brothers” spoke different languages.

Following the war, most of the Jews returned to their countries of origin or immigrated to Israel. Nonetheless, the close ties between them and the Albanian Muslims that sheltered them endured despite international borders and the repression of the post-war Albanian government. Refik Veseli, whose family had sheltered the Mandil family, visited them in Yugoslavia after the war and trained as a photographer under Moshe Mandil. Veseli later returned home to Tirana and pursued a career in photography. Marko Menachem, a Macedonian Jew, received a visa to move to Israel but then stayed in Albania to assist his rescuer who had been arrested by the communist government. He himself spent four years in prison for his efforts and was not able to leave Albania until 1991.²⁶ Several Jewish families continue to correspond with the families of their Albanian rescuers. To the wider world, however, these stories remained unknown until the fall of Albania’s communist regime – when it became safe to speak about such matters.

Another European region with a sizeable Muslim population was Bosnia-Herzegovina, and there too, efforts to assist the Jews had a large measure of popular support. In order to examine Muslim relations with the Jews of Bosnia during the Second World War – and to

understand why the wartime experiences of this particular region are so little known outside of the Balkans, it is necessary to have a general understanding of the incredibly complex ethnic and political situation in Bosnia. The salient feature of Bosnian life was (and still is) the diversity of its ethnic groups, none of which constitute a majority. Although all the groups speak essentially the same language and frequently intermarry, ethnicity or ‘nationality’ has always been determined by religious heritage, rather than geographical residency. Bosnians who are Orthodox Christians, or whose ancestors were Orthodox, are classified as Serbs; Bosnians of Catholic descent are Croats; Bosnian Muslims were given the ethnic/national designation of ‘Muslim’ – until the term ‘Bosniak’ was developed for this purpose in the 1990s. Similarly, the Jewish population, both Sephardic Jews who had moved into Ottoman Bosnia following their expulsion from Spain in the 15th century and Ashkenazic Jews who had moved into the region later, are considered to be another distinct ethnic group. Before the Axis invasion, all of the nationalities lived in relative harmony. A new identification as ‘Yugoslav’ (meaning ‘South Slav’) had begun to emerge as an alternative label, a unifying geographically-based identity without reference to religious distinctions.

Bosnia’s political situation was equally complex, and in fact, locals joke that Bosnia has “more history than we can stand.” In the century just prior to World War II, Bosnia had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire (with Bosnian Muslims as the dominant group), then by Austria-Hungary (during which time Catholics were favored), and then by the Serbian-dominated Kingdom of Yugoslavia (with Orthodox Serbs predominant). Following the destruction of Yugoslavia by Axis forces in April 1941, Bosnia came under the control of the fascist ‘Independent State of Croatia,’ or NDH, according its Croatian-language initials, a fascist puppet state ruled by the Croatian Ustaša and supported by Italian and German armies. The result was

widespread ethnic conflict, in which the Ustaša considered the persecution of the Jews as rather less important than the Croatian struggle against the more numerous – and more hated – Serbs. This unusual situation, in which Jewish persecution occurred within the context of a more massive ethnic persecution orchestrated by local authorities, has led many scholars to consider Croatia/Bosnia outside the bounds of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, it is within this context that some Bosnian Muslims – along with their Croatian and Serbian counterparts – sought to help the more than 11,000 Jews of Bosnia.

Before turning to the issue of Muslim rescue and resistance in Bosnia, it is important to consider the often cited, and usually misrepresented, existence of a Bosnian Muslim unit of the Waffen SS: the Handžar [Sword] Division, which was even reviewed by the pro-Nazi Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni. First, this unit could hardly be seen as representative of Bosnian Muslim attitudes as it was comprised of a very small number of men, nearly half of whom were conscripted.²⁷ Second, those who joined the unit voluntarily did not do so in order to commit atrocities, but rather in the hope that Germany would help them to stop the atrocities perpetrated against Muslim villagers by Serbian nationalist Četniks (who were, in turn, reacting to Croatian Ustaša violence against Serbs, which they perceived as having Muslim support). As a former soldier in the division, Imam Džemal Ibrahimović, later reflected: “We had witnessed what the Četniks had done and were determined to aid our countrymen. This stirred us to join the division. Who else [but Germany] was in a position to help us?”²⁸ Most importantly, in contrast to later claims by Serbian nationalists, the Handžar Division was a combat unit; it never participated in atrocities or staffed concentration camps.

Although the Bosnian Muslims occupied a relatively privileged position in the NDH, and some sought to work within the Ustaša government, many Muslims quickly became dissatisfied

with the harsh treatment of minorities. On several occasions, this dissatisfaction was expressed publicly, partly because of the erroneous belief that the atrocities were the result of overzealous individuals rather than official policy and partly because the Muslims felt, at least initially, that they had some power to effect change within the state. One spontaneous protest occurred when the mostly Muslim residents of Travnik, Bosnia, observed the local Ustaša organizing a large-scale deportation of the city's Jews in January 1942.ⁱⁱⁱ Because of the extremely cold weather at that time, many residents of the city feared for the health of the people scheduled for deportation. Although the Ustaša authorities refused to delay the transport until the weather improved, a compromise was reached; officials assigned a Jewish doctor, Josef Konforti, to accompany the transport in order to reassure the concerned citizens that efforts were being made to safeguard the health of Travnik's Jews during their journey.²⁹

On several occasions, prominent Muslims in various cities throughout Bosnia wrote formal complaints against ethnic persecution. In Sarajevo, important political and business leaders as well as some members of the Muslim religious leadership criticized their co-religionists who participated in atrocities against the Serbs.³⁰ Most remarkable of all were a number of open letters of protest written by prominent Bosnian Muslims. One example is the 'El Hidaje' resolution published on 14 August 1941. This document protested state-sponsored persecution against Serbs, Jews, and Roma, condemned any Muslims who participated in such crimes, and called for all perpetrators, regardless of religion, to be brought to justice. The resolution was signed by 65 prominent citizens, including high officials in Islamic schools, important writers, physicians, and businessmen.³¹ Another such letter, dated 12 November 1941 and signed by leading members of the Muslim community in Banja Luka, was sent to two

ⁱⁱⁱ Ostensibly the Jews were being relocated to work sites; in reality, they were being sent to concentration camps.

Muslim government ministers, Džafer Kulenović and Hilmija Bešliagić. The letter opened with an indictment of the regime's atrocities and stressed that religious tolerance was a Bosnian tradition.³² The authors requested that the government reassert control over the 'wild' members of the Ustaša, some of whom had disguised themselves as Muslims by donning fezzes when carrying out massacres of Serbs.³³ The authors warned that ethnic persecution jeopardized the state's interests by provoking a violent reaction and urged the state to guarantee the security of its citizens' life, property, and religious freedom.³⁴ Again, dozens of well-known Muslims signed their names to the document. Similar letters were written between September and December 1941 in the cities of Prijedor, Sarajevo, Mostar, Bijeljina, and Tuzla. Many who signed the documents were later interned in concentration camps or died fighting in the multi-ethnic Partisan revolutionary army.³⁵ The Bosnian Muslim community's public protests against the abusive treatment of minorities in its midst were unique in the history of the Second World War.³⁶

As in Albania, many individual Muslims from Bosnia risked their lives to assist Jews. For example, a truck driver, named Izet Arnautović, upon hearing that the Jews of Travnik were about to be arrested, made several trips in which he smuggled people to safety.³⁷ A Muslim woman, Zekira Beširević, collaborated with a Serbian friend to rescue members of a Jewish family in whose shop both women worked.³⁸ Sometimes entire families were involved in rescue efforts. Mustafa and Zejneba Hardaga, a Muslim couple in Sarajevo, provided shelter to the family of Josef Kavilio, a Jewish acquaintance whose home had been destroyed during the German bombing of Sarajevo in April 1941.^{iv} Later Kavilio's family escaped from the NDH, but

^{iv} Sheltering the family of four must have been difficult as Mustafa's brother and sister-in-law were also living in the same apartment. In addition to the crowded conditions, because the Hardagas were observant Muslims, the women of the family would have had to wear veils within their home due to the presence of an unrelated man.

he himself remained behind to sell his business. When he was arrested and put into a forced labor brigade, Zejneba made repeated trips to his worksite, bringing enough food for Kavilio and some of his fellow prisoners. Kavilio finally escaped from the Ustaša, whereupon the Hardagas again took him into their home. This time, hiding him was much more dangerous than it had been in April 1941; his Muslim hosts knew that they risked arrest and deportation to the Jasenovac concentration camp if their actions were discovered. In fact, Zejneba's father, Ahmed Sadik, was arrested for hiding another Jewish family and subsequently died in Jasenovac. Nonetheless, the Hardaga family hid Kavilio until he had recovered enough from his internment to escape from the NDH and rejoin his family in Mostar.³⁹ All of them survived the war.

Another extraordinary rescuer was Dervis Korkut, a Muslim Albanian from Kosovo, who held an important position in the National Museum in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Upon the request of a Serbian friend, Dervis and his wife Servet took in a young Jewish woman, disguising her as a Muslim Kosovar and introducing her as a nanny for their baby son. She lived in their apartment for four months until she was able to escape to the Adriatic coast, which had been annexed by Italy and was therefore a haven for Jews.⁴⁰ That same year, 1942, Dervis Korkut also saved the priceless 14th century Jewish manuscript, the Sarajevo Haggadah, which he spirited out of the museum while the Serbian director deceived a Nazi officer who had come to claim it. One of Korkut's friends hid the book in his home until the end of the war.⁴¹

As in Albania, Bosnians opposed to the Holocaust found considerable support among the population. Because of Bosnia's difficult mountain terrain and its citizens' revulsion at the ethnic persecution perpetrated by the Ustaša government, Nazi occupation troops, and the Serbian Četnik forces, Bosnia became the center of Partisan military operations. The development of the Partisans' broad-based 'Yugoslav' emphasis on "brotherhood and unity"

struck a deep chord within the Bosnian Muslim population, whose leading political party during the interwar period, the Yugoslav Muslim Organization had embraced Yugoslavism as a way “to escape assimilating pressures of both Serbs and Croats.”⁴² Partisan ideals of ethnic cooperation even became the driving force among prisoners in the concentration camps of the NDH; Jews, Christians, and Muslims joined together in ‘party organizations,’ essentially food-sharing cooperatives, both in an effort to survive and as a means of defying the Ustaša notions of ethnic separation.⁴³ Thus, the collaboration of Muslims, Christians, and Jews became a matter, not just of expediency, but of principle among large segments of the Bosnian population.

As the Partisans and its espousal of Yugoslavism became a truly popular force in society, the revolutionary army became a haven for Jews, Serbs, Roma, and others threatened by the regime. Escapees from the concentration camps, in the words of Jewish Jasenovac survivor Leon Maestro knew that “the Partisans meant freedom.”⁴⁴ Muslims came to play a role in this institutionalized rescue of Jews, both as soldiers and as noncombatants who brought escaped prisoners to Partisan lines. A Jewish camp inmate, Ado Kabiljo, later described how he and a group of about twenty prisoners predicated their escape plans on the assumption that Bosnian Muslim peasants were unlikely to cooperate voluntarily with the Ustaša guards.⁴⁵ Following their escape, they headed for a Muslim village on the Bosnian side of the frontier, where they did indeed find assistance. Another camp inmate, a Croatian political prisoner named Čedomil Huber, similarly describes receiving help from Bosnian Muslims. During a mass escape attempt during the final liquidation of the Jasenovac camp, he and his fellow escapees (of various ethnicities) were rescued by a Bosnian Muslim man who had heard gunshots and, deducing what had happened, was looking for escapees in order to assist them by bringing them to the relative safety of Partisan territory.⁴⁶ When enlisting in the Partisan army, Jasenovac survivors often

requested and received permission to be assigned to the same unit as their fellow survivors.

Jewish escapee Ado Kabiljo, for example, preferred staying together with the others in his group, one of whom was a Serb and one a Bosnian Muslim, rather than enlisting in a separate Jewish regiment.⁴⁷ The Partisans thus became, in practice as well as in theory, a multi-ethnic force.

Just as in Albania, Jews often stayed in touch with the people who rescued them, but by an unusual twist of fate, the Jewish community sometimes had the opportunity to return the favor five decades after the Holocaust. During the brutal Bosnian civil war of 1992-1995, when Bosnian Muslims became the target of Serb forces, Zejneba Hardaga and her granddaughter were brought to Israel, assisted by the Josef Kavilio's daughter, who along with her family had found shelter in the Hardaga home during the world war. Other Bosnian Muslims escaped from besieged Sarajevo on buses sent to evacuate the Jewish community. One of the women who left Bosnia in this way was Servet Korkut, who had conspired with her husband to hide a young Jewish woman during World War II. Only a few years after Korkut left Bosnia, her daughter found herself threatened in another genocidal conflict, this one in Kosovo. As Muslim Kosovars fled en masse in 1999, the Israeli government arranged to bring a group of refugees to Israel. Among them were Korkut's daughter and her family, who were greeted at the airport by the son of the woman her parents had rescued more than fifty years before. Thus, when the situation was reversed in the former Yugoslavia, some Jews actually rescued their Muslim rescuers.

The little-known story of Muslim rescue and resistance during the Holocaust has pedagogical implications as it challenges some common assumptions and prejudices. In the West, we like to view our civilization as an enlightened one with a strong commitment to human rights whereas we perceive Middle Eastern civilization as lacking that inherent respect for life. Yet, the historical record of the World War II era calls such complacency into question. The

Holocaust, unfortunately, was a Western phenomenon, organized and carried out by Europeans, confined exclusively to European or European-controlled lands. In contrast, a number of Muslims, despite their relative distance from the main centers of Jewish persecution, played a significant role in resisting that persecution. Muslim countries frequently sheltered large numbers of Jewish refugees, while diplomats and notables from Turkey, Iran, and the Arab lands intervened along with their Christian counterparts to save Jewish lives in Europe. Muslims in the Balkans, from impoverished peasants to local notables, whose countries were occupied by the Nazis or their collaborators, sought to protect their Jewish neighbors and even foreign Jews who had fled to their lands. In Albania and Bosnia, Muslims also participated in saving Jewish lives through the Partisan resistance movement. In addition, one might note that the only religious group in all of Europe to protest the Holocaust officially and publicly while it was occurring was the Islamic religious and intellectual leadership of Bosnia. When Muslims who opposed the Holocaust, either individually or collectively, were asked why they did so, they referred to humanitarian motives just like Western rescuers, yet they also cited historical and ideological precedents specific to their region and belief system. Despite starting from a different, non-Western perspective, Muslims nonetheless arrived at the idea of a common humanity.

¹ Stanford, J. Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust: Turkey's Role in Rescuing Turkish and European Jewry from Nazi Persecution, 1933-1945* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 60-61.

² Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, "Bosnia-Herzegovina at War: Relations between Moslems and Non-Moslems." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (1990), 289 and other sources.

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum., "Abdol Hossein Sardari (1895-1981)," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. Web. 3 Feb. 2010.

⁴ Shaw 63-64.

⁵ Ibid, 65.

⁶ Jewish Virtual Library, "Necdet Kent," Web, 17 Feb. 2010.

⁷ International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, "Selahattin Ülkümen," Web., 17 Feb. 2010.

⁸ Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 152-156

⁹ The brief references in English raise more questions than they answer. See: Shoah Resource Center, "Tehran Children," Web. 16 Jan. 2010, and Ada Holtzman, "The Children of Zion 'The Tehran Children,'" 6 May 2004, *JewishGen*, Web, 16 Jan. 2010.

¹⁰ Tuvia Friling, "Between Friendly and Hostile Neutrality: Turkey and the Jews during World War II," in *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1808-1945*, ed. Minna Rosen, Vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2002), 310.

¹¹ Mark A. Epstein, "A Lucky Few: Refugees in Turkey," in *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 547-548.

¹² Friling, 416 and 422.

¹³ Robert Satloff, "The Holocaust's Arab Heroes," *Washington Post*. 8 Oct. 2006. Web. 22 Feb. 2010.

¹⁴ Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous* 116-117.

¹⁵ Harvey Sarnier, *Rescue in Albania: One Hundred Percent of Jews in Albania Rescued from the Holocaust* (Cathedral City, CA: Brunswick Press, 1997), 23.

¹⁶ Ibid. 61.

¹⁷ Norman Gershman, *Besa: A Code of Honor* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2007), 28.

¹⁸ Ibid. 22.

¹⁹ Ibid. 34.

²⁰ Ibid. 10.

²¹ Ibid. 12.

²² Ibid. 6, 22, 34; Sarnier 59.

²³ Sarnier 59.

²⁴ Gershman 6.

²⁵ Sarnier 53.

²⁶ Ibid. 51-52.

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- ²⁷ George Lepre, *Himmler's Bosnian Division: The Waffen-SS Handschar Division, 1943-1945* (Atglen: Schiffer Military History, 1997), 315.
- ²⁸ Lepre, 316-317, quoted from the author's telephone interviews with Imam Džemal Ibrahimović on 11 December 1995 and in June 1996. (The term 'imam' designates him as a Muslim religious official.)
- ²⁹ Josef Konforti, "Sjećanja dra Josefa Konfortija (Memories of Dr. Josef Konforti), in *Sećanja Jevreja na logor Jasenovac* (Memories of the Jews of the Jasenovac camp), compiled by Dušan Sindik (Beograd: Savez Jevrejskih Opština Jugoslavije, 1972), 211.
- ³⁰ Francine Friedman, *The Bosnian Muslims: Denial of a Nation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 125.
- ³¹ Muharem Kreso, *The Nazi "Final Solution" of the Jewish Question in the Occupied Countries of the Western Balkans, 1941-1945* (Sarajevo: Institute za istraživanje zločina protiv čovječnosti i međunarodnog prava, 2007), 88-89.
- ³² Letter from a Muslim group in Banja Luka to Džafer Kulenović and Hilmija Bešlagić, dated 12 Nov. 1941, in *Zločini Nezavisne Države Hrvatske, 1941.-1945* (Atrocities in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945) (Beograd: Vojnoistorijski Institut, 1993), vol. 1, 833.
- ³³ *Ibid.* 834-835.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* 836.
- ³⁵ Kreso 89.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 289.
- ³⁷ Konforti 210.
- ³⁸ "Dodjela medalje pravednika 16.10.08" (Awarded righteous medals 10/16/08). *La Benevolencija, Jewish Cultural and Humanitarian Society of the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Hercegovina*. Web. 31 Jan. 2010.
- ³⁹ Mordecai Paldiel *Saving the Jews: Amazing Stories of Men and Women Who Defied the "Final Solution"* (Rockville: Schreiber Publishing, 2000), 115.
- ⁴⁰ Peter Hellman, *When Courage Was Stronger Than Fear: Remarkable Stories of Christians and Muslims Who Saved Jews from the Holocaust* (New York: Marlowe and Company, 2004), 309-310.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.* 310.
- ⁴² Xavier Bougarel, "Bosnian Muslims and the Yugoslav Idea," in *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918-1992*, edited by Dejan Djokić (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 102.
- ⁴³ For specific examples of instances where Muslims and Jews worked together in the camp, see: Eduard Šajer, interview by Jaša Almuli, 28 June 1997. Belgrade, Yugoslavia, transcript of tape recording (Washington D.C.: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 1997), tape 2, 6; Josip Erlih, interview by Jaša Almuli, 27 June 1997. Belgrade, Yugoslavia, transcript of tape recording, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 1997) tape 2, 7-8; and Ado Kabiljo, interview by Jaša Almuli, 11 July 1997. Belgrade, Yugoslavia, transcript of tape recording (Washington D.C.: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 1997), tape 2, 5.

⁴⁴ Leon Maestro, “Sjećanja Leona Maestra” (Memories of Sado Koen-Davko), in *Sećanja Jevreja na logor Jasenovac* (Memories of the Jews of the Jasenovac camp), compiled by Dušan Sindik (Beograd: Savez Jevrejskih Opština Jugoslavije, 1972), 115.

⁴⁵ Ado Kabiljo, tape 2, 6.

⁴⁶ Čedomil Huber, interview by Jaša Almulj, 7 July 1997, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, transcript of tape recording (Washington D.C.: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 1997), tape 4, 18.

⁴⁷ Ado Kabiljo, tape 2, 12.

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