
“TO SAVE ONE LIFE IS TO SAVE THE WORLD ENTIRE”: THE RESCUE OF JEWS IN BELGRADE DURING THE WORLD WAR II

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ABSTRACT: *The rescue of Jews during World War II has received insufficient attention in Serbian historiography. Most existing studies have focused primarily on identifying those who rescued Jews and those who were rescued. In this study, the author aims to provide a more comprehensive account of the rescue of Jews in Belgrade during World War II. This involves identifying and analyzing both underlying and immediate factors that shaped the context in which these acts occurred. In selecting and structuring the cases of rescue, the guiding principle was not to include and describe every instance, but to highlight specific causalities and distinctive features, such as the roles of particular organizations, members of the occupation regime, and the immediate social environment. The study is based on archival sources, personal testimonies, and existing historiographical research.*

KEYWORDS: Holocaust, Shoah, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Belgrade, Rescue of Jews, Nazis, Righteous Among the Nations

Given the enormous scale and diversity of Jewish suffering during World War II, the dominant narrative in Holocaust studies has long focused on atrocities, the victims who perished, and the perpetrators responsible. In contrast, cases of survival remain a marginal topic to which historiography has devoted comparatively limited attention, as illustrated by the absence of any comprehensive work that systematically examines the rescue of Jews across Europe. The most significant advances in this field have emerged within the Western historiographical tradition. Scholars from France, Denmark, Norway, and other countries have, within their national contexts, provided crucial insights into the dynamics of rescue efforts.¹ The most substantial step toward

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¹ From the works published in English, I would highlight the following: *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans*, ed: Dan Michman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2007); Bert Jan Flim, *History of the Organized Effort to Rescue Jewish Children in the Netherlands 1942–1945* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005); Sylvain Brachfeld, *A gift of life: the deportation and the rescue of the Jews in occupied Belgium, 1940–1944* (Herzlia: Institute

a comprehensive and comparative perspective was made by Bob Moore, who demonstrated, using the cases of Denmark, Norway, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, how the processes of rescue and Jewish self-rescue unfolded across Western Europe.²

Yugoslav historiography, despite its strong overall orientation toward the history of World War II, generally marginalized the study of the Holocaust.³ The historiographies of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia have approached this topic with varying degrees of interest and success.⁴ In Serbia, most researchers have focused on developing a culture of remembrance and educational initiatives. This raises the question of what outcomes such efforts can achieve if they are based on unstable and incomplete primary research into the history of the Holocaust. Specifically, when examining Serbian historiographical writing on the rescue of Jews, scholars have relied mainly on a biographical approach and have largely limited themselves to basic event reconstruction, with little analytical depth.⁵ Historians Milan Ristović, Miloš Timotijević, Sanja Petrović Todosijević, Zoran M. Jovanović and Bojan Aleksov have made advances by examining the rescue and self-rescue of Jews, as well as the interactions, correlations, and responses of both occupation and collaborationist authorities and resistance movements to this phenomenon in their respective works.⁶

As Bob Moore has emphasized, the contextualization of this subject requires close attention to the geographical, social, and chronological settings in which rescue efforts unfolded.⁷ The intensity and forms of assistance and rescue varied considerably depending on whether they occurred in urban or rural environments. In cities, rescue was a much more complex undertaking, requiring the provision of a false iden-

for the Research on Belgian Judaism, 2007); Jacques Sémelin, *The survival of the Jews in France, 1940–44* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Emmy E. Werner, *A Conspiracy Of Decency: The Rescue Of The Danish Jews During World War II* (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 2005).

² Bob Moore, *Survivors: Jewish Self-Help and Rescue in Nazi-Occupied Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ For a more detailed discussion of Yugoslav historiography on the Holocaust and related issues, see: Jovan Ćulibrk, *Historiography of the Holocaust in Yugoslavia* (Belgrade: University of Belgrade, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, the Institute for Theological Research, 2014); Давор Стипић, *У борби против заборава: Однос према Холокаусту у социјалистичкој Југославији: 1945–1991* (Београд: Институт за новију историју Србије, 2024).

⁴ An overview of recent historiographical research in Serbia was provided by Aleksandar Stojanović in his study: Александар Стојановић, „Савремена историографија о Холокаусту у окупираној Србији“, *Друштвене науке пред изазовима савременог друштва: тематски зборник радова*, ур: Гордана Ђигић (Ниш: Универзитет у Нишу, Филозофски факултет, 2017), 151–164.

⁵ Јаша Алмули, *Страдање и спасавање српских Јевреја* (Београд: Завод за уџбенике, 2010); Milan Fogel, Milan Koljanin i Milan Ristović, *Pravednici među narodima Srbija* (Београд: Јеврејска општина Земун, 2010); Milan Fogel, *Pravednici bez medalje i pravednici sa medaljom* (Београд: Јеврејска општина Земун, 2018).

⁶ Милан Ристовић, *У потрази за уточиштем: Југословенски Јевреји у бекству од Холокауста 1941–1945* (Београд: Службени лист СРЈ, 1998); Милош Тимотијевић, „Страдање и спасавање Јевреја у Чачку и околини 1941–1944. године“, *Зборник радова Народного музеја*, 44, (2014), 159–188; Сања Петровић Тодосијевић, „Бекства Јевреја са територије немачке окупационе зоне у Србији 1941–1944“, *Токови историје*, 2, (2019), 59–82; Zoran J. Jovanović, *О новом читању историје: Nadbiskupija beogradska u misiji spasavanja Jevreja i Jevrejki od Holokausta: Prilog za biografiju Josipa Ujčića i kao natpastira* (Београд: Beogradska nadbiskupija, 2022); Bojan Aleksov, *Jewish Refugees in the Balkans, 1933–1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoningh Wilhelm Fink, 2023).

⁷ B. Moore, *op. cit.*, 6.

tity, accommodation, employment, food, and many other necessities for survival. In rural areas, where transportation links and social interactions were much less dense, it was often enough to secure a plausible long-term alibi for the presence of a “relative” or “friend”, a type of alibi that was common in wartime conditions. This phenomenon did not occur in isolation; like any historical process, it was embedded within broader societal dynamics shaped by both deep and surface-level factors. Among the deeper factors, the most significant were the majority population’s attitudes toward the Jewish community, the community’s position within society, and the extent and entrenchment of antisemitic beliefs. On the surface level, the crucial determinants were the unfolding dynamics of the Holocaust itself and the general political and military situation in which it occurred. Rapid developments, particularly during the initial phase of World War II, combined with instability in occupied territories, created conditions highly unfavorable for the rescue of significant numbers of people.

Identifying and highlighting individuals who risked their lives to help their fellow citizens is an important aspect of this subject, especially in establishing the foundations for a culture of remembrance and emphasizing positive historical examples that can inspire future generations. However, the aim of this study is to go further and, using the case of the rescue of Jews in Belgrade, apply a methodological framework that enables a more comprehensive and multilayered understanding of this phenomenon. To understand the position of those involved in rescue, it is essential to reconstruct the general level of repression and clarify the punitive policies directed against individuals who hid people designated as enemies of the Third Reich. Regarding collective rescue, attention must be given to organizations with the capacity to carry out such activities effectively. These include, above all, resistance movements, religious institutions, trade unions, and similar organizational structures.

Shifting focus from groups to individuals, it is also necessary to categorize the motives of those who undertook such actions. This aspect presents the greatest methodological challenge in analyzing the topic. I faced the dilemma of whether to consider only those recognized by Yad Vashem and awarded the title Righteous Among the Nations, or to include other cases that have not been fully documented or that, due to strict evaluative criteria, may never be formally acknowledged. Aware of the rigorous standards and systematic procedures employed by Yad Vashem, and fully cognizant of the fragmentary nature of the available sources on this subject, I have decided to include cases of rescue involving individuals who have not yet been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations. I have not considered cases of rescue motivated by financial or other material gain, nor instances of self-rescue, as I regard these as distinct phenomenological processes that require separate analytical treatment.

The Jewish Community and Antisemitism in the Interwar Period

Since the sixteenth century, both the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities have left an indelible mark on the social, cultural, and economic life of Belgrade. From the moment Serbia achieved independence, Jews enjoyed the same guaranteed rights as all other citizens. They participated actively in the country’s wars and contributed to the struggle for Serbia’s freedom. During the interwar period, they received support from

the municipal authorities and the Karađorđević royal dynasty. On the eve of World War II, Belgrade was home to approximately 10,000 Sephardim and 2,000 Ashkenazim.⁸

As historian Milan Koljanin has noted, in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, antisemitism remained a peripheral phenomenon until the 1930s, appearing sporadically through verbal incidents and in a small number of antisemitic newspapers and publications. In the territory of Serbia, which would later fall under German occupation during World War II, the Zbor movement led by Dimitrije Ljotić was the main proponent and carrier of antisemitic policies. The fact that Zbor received only 1% of the vote in the 1938 parliamentary elections shows how minor a threat it posed to the Jewish community.⁹ In the latter half of the 1930s, in line with broader European trends, the situation changed to some extent, although it did not lead to a drastic deterioration in the position of the Jewish community.

Due to the regime's efforts to adapt to a new foreign policy reality and maintain good relations with Nazi Germany, more space was given to antisemitic expressions in the public sphere. The intensity of antisemitic manifestations varied across different regions of the country. In Belgrade, as the capital, antisemitism served both external and internal political objectives. By supporting certain organizations, such as the student association Slovenski Jug, which promoted antisemitic views, the regime aimed to demonstrate alignment with its main partner, Germany. In domestic political struggles, some organizations used antisemitic rhetoric to confront leaders of the Croatian national movement. Antisemitic articles appeared in numerous daily and periodical publications, and lectures and radio broadcasts further spread these messages.¹⁰

The peak of Yugoslav state-sponsored antisemitism occurred with the enactment of laws in 1940. In a wave of adaptation and as a demonstration of the Yugoslav authorities' willingness to align with the "new world order," the *numerus clausus* decree was introduced to regulate the number of Jewish pupils and students in proportion to the Jewish share of the population. Under this decree, only forty-four students were admitted to the University of Belgrade for the 1940/41 academic year, about half the number enrolled the previous year. Another decree targeted trade in consumer goods, prohibiting Jews from engaging in wholesale trade of basic foodstuffs. These measures placed Jews in a legally and economically disadvantaged position and violated the constitution, which guaranteed equal rights to all citizens. Even in this atmosphere, imposed by the regime and certain individuals, antisemitism did not develop into more pronounced verbal or violent forms, nor did it gain a significant number of adherents in Belgrade.¹¹

Occupation

Interwar Belgrade was the capital and the administrative and political center of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. According to the 1931 census, the city had a populati-

⁸ Море: Игњат Шланг, *Јевреји у Београду*, (Београд: Штампарија М. Карића, 1926); Ženi Lebl, *До „Коначног решења“: Јевреји у Београду 1521–1942* (Београд: Ћигоја, 2001); Čedomila Marinković, *Јевреји у Београду (1521–1942)* (Београд: Kreativni centar, 2020).

⁹ Море: Растко Ломпар, *Димитрије Љотић - учитељ или фарисеј: Збор, хришћанство и верске заједнице: 1935–1945*. (Београд: Satena mundi, 2021).

¹⁰ Милан Кољанин, *Јевреји и антисемитизам у Краљевини Југославији 1918–1941* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 2008), 404–413.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 423, 426, 427, 424, 511, 512.

on of 288,938, including 209,449 Orthodox Christians, 56,776 Roman Catholics, 8,936 Jews, 7,395 Protestants, 3,821 Muslims, and 2,561 adherents of other faiths. Despite making up only about 3% of the total population, Jews were a highly visible segment of the city's inhabitants.¹² As in other European cities, Jewish residents in Belgrade lived in concentrated areas; most resided and worked in two districts: Dorćol and Sava Mala. Overall, Belgrade was not a large city in terms of population and its relatively compact urban layout, which considerably facilitated police control and security management – especially when the city was occupied by an army known for its efficient, rigid, and ruthless policing and security apparatus.

Following the April War and the disintegration of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a German military administration was established in central Serbia. Belgrade, as the capital and a city of significant transport and economic importance, became a primary focus for maintaining order and security under the occupiers. A complex and extensive repressive apparatus was established, headed by the Commander of the Security Police and Security Services, with the Gestapo as its most critical component. A collaborationist administration was also created. Initially, it operated as a commissariat, and by the end of August 1941, it had assumed the structure of a government, albeit without several key ministries. This was purely formal: throughout the occupation, the domestic administration had no real autonomy and functioned solely as an extension of the occupiers' authority. In terms of repression within Belgrade, the key instrument was the Special Police Department, which, in both scope and methodology, functioned as a classic political police force.¹³

From the first day of occupation, the authorities sought to control every aspect of life in Belgrade. The existing neighborhood administrative divisions were retained, allowing police and security forces to monitor each street and respond quickly when necessary. To gather information on "suspicious elements," police officers maintained contact with building supervisors, shopkeepers, café owners, and professionals whose work involved interaction with many citizens. Freedom of movement was heavily restricted. Checkpoints were established at the city's entrances and exits, as well as at major public transport stations, where travelers were thoroughly inspected. A curfew was imposed, after which only those with special permits were allowed to move freely. A practice dating back to the interwar period required all residents to register at their local police precinct, which then issued them an identity card. This card contained a photograph, information on physical appearance, and the holder's signature.¹⁴

¹² *Statistički godišnjak 1938/39* (Beograd: Državna štamparija, 1939), 40.

¹³ For more on the occupation system in Belgrade, see: Muharem Kreso, *Njemačka okupaciona uprava u Beogradu: 1941–1944: (sa osvrtom na centralne okupacione komande i ustanove za Srbiju, Jugoslaviju i Balkan)* (Beograd: Istorijski arhiv Beograda, 1979); Бранислав Божовић, *Београд под комесарском управом 1941. године* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју, 1998); Радосав Туцовић, *Драги Јовановић и генерал Мајснер на челу полиције у окупираној Србији: анализа делатности Драгомира Јовановића и Аугуста Мајснера у окупираној Србији 1941–1944* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју; Чигоја, 2022).

¹⁴ More in: Nataša Miličević, „Ausweis, Guards and Borders: Travelling of the Middle Class in Occupied Serbia 1941–1944”, *Токови историје*, бр. 3, (2017), 85–110; Раде Ристановић, *Београдски равногорци: Југословенска војска у отаџбини и Равногорски покрет у окупираном Београду 1941–1944* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју; Catena Mundi, 2021), 85–110, 61–67.

This repressive apparatus was organized with a single purpose: to maintain order and security with an iron hand. From the very first days, citizens were warned that even the slightest act of disobedience would be severely punished. These threats were carried out following the outbreak of the uprising in 1941. The resistance reached such proportions that the resistance movements controlled free territories, forcing the occupiers to bring in additional forces to suppress it. Several concentration camps were established, and the principle of collective responsibility was introduced. Prisoners were executed as part of reprisal measures, with quotas decreed: for every German soldier killed, one hundred civilians were to be executed, and for every soldier wounded, fifty. By December 1941, the uprising had been suppressed, and the intensity of repression decreased thereafter; however, its forms became more varied. It is estimated that by January 1942, approximately 20,000 people had been killed in occupied Serbia.¹⁵

The citizens of Belgrade experienced terror and suffering both directly and indirectly. Belgrade was one of the few European cities with two concentration camps within its territory and immediate vicinity, operating throughout nearly the entire occupation. The presence of the Sajmište (*Judenlager Semlin*) and Banjica camps instilled fear and served as a stark warning to anyone who might dare to resist the occupiers. Yet there were also those who were brave and courageous: two resistance movements, the monarchist and the communist, were organized within Belgrade itself. The occupation authorities dealt ruthlessly with their members. Arrests occurred almost daily, and the occupiers employed some of the most brutal public acts of violence. One such act was the public hanging of members of the communist resistance movement in Terazije Square on August 17, 1941.¹⁶

Fear of repression was only one of the concerns faced by the average resident of Belgrade during World War II. The primary problem was the acute shortage of basic necessities, including food and heating fuel. Because of the war and Belgrade's isolation from its economic *hinterland*, the regular supply of food was severely disrupted. Prices rose sharply, the black market thrived, and long queues for bread and other essentials became common. The regime's attempts to regulate prices and combat the black market were largely unsuccessful. The daily struggle for ordinary Belgraders was to secure bread, meat, and other essentials for themselves and their families. The situation was further worsened by the influx of refugees from the Independent State of Croatia and other parts of occupied Yugoslavia, who also needed shelter and food.¹⁷

The Holocaust – Main Contours

Hatred of Jews was the key driving force propelling the Nazi machinery from its inception to its ultimate demise. From this hatred emerged the monstrous project

¹⁵ Море: Венцеслав Глишић, *Терор и злочини нацистичке Немачке у Србији 1941–1944* (Београд: Рад, 1970).

¹⁶ Море: Раде Ристановић, *Терор и страдање у Београду током Другог светског рата = Terror and suffering in Belgrade during World War II* (Београд: Музеј жртава геноцида, 2024); Rade Ristanović, „Verbalni delikt, Beograđani i okupacioni režim tokom Drugog svetskog rata”, *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 2, (2020), 103–128.

¹⁷ Море: Драгутин Ранковић, *Свакодневни живот под окупацијом: 1941–1944: искуство једног Београђанина*, пр: Наташа Милићевић и Душан Никодијевић (Београд: Институт за нову историју Србије, 2011).

of the Holocaust, or Shoah, which was embraced by Nazi allies and ultimately resulted in the murder of approximately six million Jews. Although conceived and inspired from a central *locus*, the Holocaust took different forms, dynamics, and intensities across the countries of occupied Europe. These particularities were shaped by various factors, the most significant of which include the character of the regime in power, the degree of collaboration among the local population, infrastructural and logistical capacities, and both the external and internal political and military situations.¹⁸

Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, a reduced Serbia was placed under German military administration, which significantly influenced the course of the Holocaust in this territory. The "Jewish question" was entirely in the hands of the occupiers. The principal authority was the Operational Command of the Security Police and Security Service for Yugoslavia (*Einsatzgruppen Serbia*). The collaborationist administration played a subsidiary role. Within the Special Police Department of the Belgrade City Administration, there was a Third Jewish Section. This section, along with other parts of the police, was primarily responsible for registering and monitoring Jews, and only rarely for making arrests. The Belgrade municipal authorities provided logistical support during the Holocaust in Belgrade.¹⁹

As in most other European countries, the onset of the Holocaust in occupied Serbia was marked by the enactment and enforcement of legal measures, based on the Nuremberg Laws, that threatened the basic rights and existence of Jews. The capitulation had not yet been signed when, on April 16, 1941, an order was issued requiring all Jews to register. The Military Commander for Serbia issued a comprehensive directive on May 27, 1941, which applied to both Jews and Roma. According to this directive, a Jew was defined as any person with "ancestry from at least three Jewish grandparents," "mixed-race individuals with one or two Jewish grandparents who, after April 5, 1941, belonged to the Jewish religion," and those "married to a Jewess or who entered into marriage with a Jewess." Ancestors were considered Jewish "if they were racially full Jews, belonged to the Jewish religion, or had belonged to it."²⁰

All Jews were ordered to register with the "Serbian police registration authorities" in the territory where they resided to compile lists. They were required to wear yellow armbands on their left arms, inscribed with the word "Jew," and their right to work was restricted. Those professionally engaged as lawyers, doctors, veterinarians, and pharmacists were prohibited from continuing their practice. Forced labor was imposed, including clearing ruins resulting from bombing, with both men and women aged fourteen to sixty required to participate. Public entertainment venues, such as theaters, cinemas, public baths, and sporting events, were forbidden to Jews (*Für Juden verboten*). Their freedom of movement was restricted, and no one was

¹⁸ More: Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and The Jews 1933–1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009); Dan Stone, *The Holocaust An Unfinished History* (London: Pelican Books, 2023).

¹⁹ Милан Кољанин, „Немачка окупациона политика и геноцид над Јеврејима у Србији 1941–1942“, у: *Геноцид у 20. веку на просторима југословенске државе*, ур: Јован Мирковић (Београд: Музеј жртва геноцида; Институт за новију историју Србије, 2005), 113; Radosav Tucović, „Collaboration of the Special Police in the implementation of the ‘Final Solution’ in occupied Serbia (1941–1944)“, *Limesplus*, 15, br. 2–3, 2018, 41–59.

²⁰ *List uredaba Vojnog zapovednika u Srbiji*, 31. maj 1941, 84.

allowed to leave their place of residence.²¹ They were also ordered to declare their business and private property. This decree was supplemented on July 25, 1941, stipulating that Jewish-owned businesses and property confiscated under the decree were to be placed under the administration of appointed commissioners.²²

The territory under the Military Commander in Serbia was among the first in Europe where the Holocaust by bullets began. Following the outbreak of the uprising in 1941, the occupiers decided that, as part of repressive measures, the male Jewish population would be executed. Anti-Semitic propaganda intensified, and camps were established to imprison Jews, members of resistance movements, and other proclaimed enemies of the Third Reich. In August 1941, a camp was established at Topovske Šupe on the outskirts of Belgrade, near a civil servants' settlement. It housed male Jews from Belgrade and the Banat region. In overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, 6,000 Jews and between 1,000 and 1,500 Roma were confined. Jews were sent daily to forced labor. From the autumn of 1941, Topovske Šupe became one of the sources from which hostages were taken for reprisals as part of the suppression of the uprising. During this period, Jews and Roma were almost daily taken to execution sites near Belgrade and shot by Wehrmacht units. The drastic scale of the shootings is shown by the fact that, by November of the same year, only 200 to 300 Jews remained in this camp.²³

The next step involved the internment and killing of women, children, and the elderly. On December 8, 1941, the *Judenlager Zemlin* was established in the buildings of the Sajmište camp (former Belgrade Fair). According to Milan Koljanin's research, by May 10, 1942, approximately 6,400 Jews and 600 Roma were confined there. Living conditions in the camp were extremely harsh. During the exceptionally severe winter of 1941–42, 20 to 30 inmates died daily due to lack of heating, insufficient food, and contaminated water. The occupation authorities anticipated a new uprising in the spring of 1942, which created the need for space to accommodate new hostages. The execution of women and children was carried out using a gas van. By the end of May 1942, Emanuel Schäfer was able to report to his superiors in Berlin that Belgrade was "Judenfrei."²⁴

Based on the previously presented chronology of the Holocaust in occupied Serbia, it can be concluded that the physical destruction of the Jewish population occurred with extraordinary speed. It was closely linked to the uprising that raged in this territory in 1941 and took place within the broader framework of repression carried out by the

²¹ *Ibid*, 31. maj 1941, 84–89.

²² *Ibid*, 25. jul 1941, 138.

²³ More: Valter Manošek, *Holokaust u Srbiji: vojna okupaciona politika i uništavanje Jevreja: 1941–1942* (Beograd: Službeni list SRJ, Draslar partner, 2007).

²⁴ More: Milan Koljanin, *Nemački logor na Beogradskom sajmištu: 1941–1944* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1992); V. Manošek, *op. cit.*; Бранислав Божовић, *Страдање Јевреја у окупираном Београду 1941–1944* (Београд: Музеј жртава геноцида, 2012); Ненад Жарковић, „Пролазни логор Топовске шупе“, *Наслеђе*, бр. 10, (2009), 103–112; Dragoljub Acković, *Romi u Beogradu. Istorija, kultura i tradicija Roma u Beogradu od naseljavanja do XX veka* (Beograd: Rominterpres, 2009), 241–300; Milovan Pisari, *Stradanje Roma u Srbiji za vreme Holokausta* (Beograd: Forum za primenjenu istoriju, 2014); Dragan Cvetković, „Logori Topovske šupe i Sajmište kao centralna mesta holokausta u okupiranoj Srbiji—numeričko određenje i kvantitativna analiza“, *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 1, (2018), 69–92.

Nazis at multiple levels. This repression targeted not only Jews but also members of resistance movements and the local civilian population. These are the specific features of the Holocaust in Serbia compared to many other territories in Europe.

Why Was There No More Extensive or Organized Rescue of Jews?

The history of the Holocaust records not only the courageous acts of individuals who risked their lives to save Jews, but also numerous examples of organized, large-scale rescue operations carried out by various groups. As previously noted, the rescue of Jews occurred both through the actions of individuals who risked their lives and through organized efforts aimed at saving entire groups of the Jewish population. From the outset, it must be stated that in occupied Serbia, there were no examples of organized, large-scale Jewish rescue. This raises the question of why.

There were organizations capable of carrying out such operations: since 1919, Jews in Belgrade had their umbrella organization, the Union of Jewish Religious Communities of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes; the Serbian Orthodox Church was the most influential religious institution, enjoying considerable respect among the general population; and both the Communist and Monarchist resistance movements had strong organizations in Belgrade. Yet, none of these institutions or organizations succeeded in organizing the mass rescue of Jews in any form. The following sections will address the reasons for this.

One of the first orders issued by the occupiers was the prohibition of all associations, societies, and similar organizations. In place of the Jewish communities, a Jewish Community Representation was established to act as an intermediary between the Jews and the occupiers. Through this representation, the Gestapo sought to ensure the implementation of all prescribed decrees and imposed penalties. This practice continued during the camp phase, when the organization of the "Jewish administration" left inmates responsible for tasks such as the kitchen and healthcare.

Rumors circulated constantly among the Jewish population that everyone would be deported from Serbia. At the same time, the occupiers maintained continuous pressure through repression, creating an atmosphere of perpetual fear. This climate of fear and despair was especially pronounced during the second phase of the Holocaust (December 1941 – May 1942), when adult men were executed, followed by the remaining women, children, and elderly. All of this was part of a carefully planned scenario intended to carry out the Holocaust without resistance, escape, or other complications for the occupiers. Unlike in other countries, where the threat of mass arrests became evident only after it was clear that the Nazis were conducting the physical extermination of Jews in many parts of Europe, in Belgrade the Holocaust occurred at a time when this was almost entirely unknown. Considering the general attachment of Jews to family and community, their discipline, and their tendency to be conscientious citizens, one can discern the final piece of the puzzle explaining why Belgrade's Jews did not organize collective self-rescue.²⁵

The strongest and most influential organization in occupied Serbia was the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). It had the largest number of believers among the religious groups and maintained a substantial network of churches and clergy. With this infra-

²⁵ Б. Божовић, *Страдање Јевреја*, 277, 278

structure, it was capable of conducting large-scale rescue operations for persecuted individuals and influencing broad segments of the population to participate in these efforts. However, the circumstances in which the SOC operated made such operations impossible. Even before German forces entered the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the SOC was viewed negatively by the Germans. German intelligence agencies characterized it as pro-British. The attitude toward the Church worsened after the demonstrations of March 27, 1941, in which the SOC, led by Patriarch Gavriilo Dožić, participated. Upon entering Yugoslavia, one of the occupiers' primary tasks was to arrest Patriarch Dožić, which they carried out, and he remained in captivity throughout the occupation. Other parts of the SOC were also threatened. In the territory of the Independent State of Croatia, its churches were destroyed, and clergy were killed or expelled. Within occupied Serbia, Metropolitan Josif Cvijović and other bishops were under constant pressure from the occupiers to publicly support the collaborationist regime. Their refusal intensified the pressure from the repressive authorities, and they were placed under police surveillance. Under such circumstances, even regular ecclesiastical activities were conducted with difficulty, and there were no conditions for illegal or clandestine operations.²⁶

Both the Communist and Monarchist resistance movements in Belgrade maintained strong organizational structures.²⁷ Territorial in scope and connected to many people, including elements within the collaborationist apparatus, these organizations had the capacity to organize and execute the rescue of larger numbers of individuals. This raises the question of why they did not provide broader assistance to the Jewish population. In the available archival sources, I could not determine the exact stance of these resistance movements toward the repression of Jews in Belgrade. Given this absence, I can only offer reasoned hypotheses. Both the Communist and Monarchist movements, based on their political and ideological platforms and general activities, did not display antisemitism, which must therefore be ruled out. This is supported by the presence of numerous members of Jewish nationality within their ranks. There are also documented instances of individual Jews being rescued by members of these resistance movements.²⁸

During the period of physical extermination of this population segment in Belgrade, the resistance movements were largely unable to intervene effectively. From September 1941, the Communist resistance came under intense pressure from the police in Belgrade, which arrested many prominent members and destabilized the organization. Simultaneously, the occupiers in Serbia launched large-scale military operations accompanied by collective shootings, causing the Monarchist resistance in urban areas to adopt a more passive stance to avoid arrests and the compromise of its organization.

²⁶ More: Ђоко Слијепчевић, *Историја Српске православне цркве*, III (Београд: Култура, 2002); Branko Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939–1945* (Београд: Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1992), 457–459; Радмила Радић, *Живот у временима: Гаврило Дожић (1881–1950)* (Београд: Институт за новију историју Србије, 2006), 222–277.

²⁷ More: Раде Ристановић, *Београдски комунисти: комунистички покрет отпора у окупираном Београду: 1941–1944* (Београд: Институт за савремену историју; Catena Mundi, 2022); Р. Ристановић, *Београдски равногорци*.

²⁸ More: Јаша Romano, *Jevreji Jugoslavije 1941–1945: Žrtve genocida i učesnici Narodnooslobodilačkog rata* (Београд: Savez jevrejskih opština, 1980); Aleksandar Ajzinberg, *Pisma Matviju* (Београд: А. Ajzinberg, 2020).

The only period when the resistance movements might have been able to provide more substantial assistance to the Jews was the early stage of the Holocaust, when antisemitic decrees were first implemented. By all indications, military logic prevailed over empathy toward fellow citizens. This was a period focused on building and rebuilding organizational structures and consolidating personnel. After the outbreak of the uprising in the summer of 1941, all efforts were directed toward its expansion and support. All available capacities were devoted to these objectives, and any other considerations became secondary. Wartime logic took precedence over humanitarian concerns.

"An Act of God": Catholic Clergy and the Rescue of Jews

During World War II, the Roman Catholic Church did not publicly oppose the Nazi persecution and extermination of Jews. However, at regional and local levels, some members of the clergy worked to rescue and assist Jews through various means. One approach involved easing official restrictions and facilitating conversion to Catholicism. For example, in Zagreb in 1941, 3,518 Jews were baptized into the Catholic faith. Unfortunately, this provided little protection, as the Ustashe determined Jewish identity mainly on racial rather than religious grounds.²⁹

The Archdiocese of Belgrade liberalized the procedure for conversion to Catholicism, a measure that can be regarded as the only form of action during the occupation in Belgrade with elements of an attempt at collective rescue. Archbishop Josip Ujčić, who had upheld strict rules regarding conversion in the interwar period, did not officially revise his stance during the occupation; however, it appears that he consciously turned a blind eye. The Archdiocese primarily focused on individuals in mixed marriages who had converted to enter into marital unions. It publicly advocated for them with the collaborationist authorities and, in a letter dated November 1941, requested that anti-Jewish decrees not be applied to them or their children. While it is unclear to what extent these initiatives were effective, it is documented that Jewish women in mixed marriages were released from the Sajmište camp.³⁰

The authorities maintained a clear stance regarding conversion to another faith; in a government letter from Milan Nedić's administration, it was explicitly stated that Jews were forbidden to convert.³¹ Despite this, the Archdiocese of Belgrade continued to permit such conversions during the occupation. Requests began as early as April 1941 and became more frequent as the Holocaust escalated. In October, when mass shootings began, petitions were submitted almost daily. Until the resolution of the "Jewish question" in May 1942, the Archdiocese of Belgrade received numerous petitions of this kind. During this period, 55 individuals converted from Judaism to Catholicism, while fifty others returned to the Catholic faith across the territory of occupied Serbia.³²

Apart from the number of petitions submitted and processed, and a few case descriptions, little is known about this initiative. The researcher who has studied this to-

²⁹ Slavko Goldštajn, *Holokaust u Zagrebu* (Zagreb: Židovska općina Zagreb, 2001), 31.

³⁰ M. Koljanin, *Nemački logor*, 59.

³¹ Z. M. Jovanović, *op. cit.*, 67

³² *Ibid.*, 47–57.

pic most extensively, Zoran Jovanović, has not provided answers about how many individuals survived as a result of this initiative or how the Catholic Church managed to carry out such a significant number of conversions despite the orders of the occupying authorities.³³ Further research has revealed that, as of November 1941, the police had operational information indicating that the parish priest at the Church of Christ the King on Krunska Street No. 23 was assisting Jews by allowing them to convert to Catholicism. According to reports, he significantly simplified the conversion procedure, requiring only the study of the Bible.³⁴ From January 1942, however, the occupying authorities strictly prohibited the conversion of Jews and marriages between Serbs and Jews.³⁵

Not all good deeds of the clergy of the Belgrade Archdiocese have remained insufficiently clarified. The personal example of Andrej Tumpej, a Lazarist serving in the parish of the Belgrade neighborhood of Čukarica, demonstrates the courage of a member of a strictly hierarchical organization who risked not only his position but also his life to save others. Like many Jewish families, the Kalef family found themselves in a precarious situation with the arrival of the Nazi occupiers. The head of the household, Avram Kalef, who was physically disabled, and his elderly mother were executed in a gas van. His wife, Dona Kalef, born Antonija Ograjenška, a Slovenian, managed to hide with their two daughters, Matilda and Rahela. Initially, they stayed at her brother's home, but after his departure, they were left without shelter. This desperate situation forced Dona Kalef to turn to Andrej Tumpej, with whom she shared a Slovenian background, for help.³⁶

This Roman Catholic priest did not hesitate to help. He arranged accommodation for the girls in a monastery house and provided them with false baptismal certificates. Matilda and Rahela were renamed Lidija and Breda. After receiving the documents, the Kalef family became more independent and lived near the Hippodrome. Tumpej occasionally visited them and helped Lidija and Breda enroll in high school. By providing new identities and logistical support, this priest enabled part of the Kalef family to survive until liberation.³⁷ In gratitude, Rahela retained the name given to her by Tumpej, under which she later achieved fame and built a distinguished operatic career.³⁸

This was not an isolated case of Tumpej assisting people in distress. In April 1942, Marta Fruhter and Anita Rozenberz, Slovenian Jews who had been living clandestinely in Belgrade since December 1941, came to his door. They intended to convert to Catholicism, either by marriage or immediate baptism, but Tumpej refused, explaining that this would conflict with current regulations. At first, he provided them with material assistance and stated that he would take certain steps to obtain identification under Christian names. The priest approached officials at the Church of Christ the King, who maintained records of Slovenian refugees, and requested that

³³ Ibid, 57–69.

³⁴ Istorijski arhiv Beograda (dalje: IAB), Zbirka Bezbednosno obaveštajne agancije (dalje: BIA), kutija (dalje: k.) 3.

³⁵ M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 79.

³⁶ *Slovenska biografija. Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti* (Ljubljana: Znanstveno raziskovalni center SAZU, 2013), <http://www.slovenska-biografija.si/sbi733462/#slovenski-biografski-leksikon>, (accessed 12. 11. 2025.).

³⁷ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 77–79.

³⁸ Breda Kalef, „Zahvalna sam muzici...“, u: *Mi smo preživeli. Jevreji o holokaustu* (Beograd: Jevrejski istorijski muzej Saveza jevrejskih opština Jugoslavije, 2001), 2, 380.

they issue refugee papers. Within a few days, Marta Fruhter was officially registered with the occupation authorities as the refugee Jelica Stojanović, and Anita Rozenberz as Branka Marković. To obtain the complete documentation, they traveled to Zabrežje (Obrenovac) to obtain travel permits. Based on these documents, they registered in the VIII quarter, where they were issued permits to reside in Belgrade.

Tumpej's activity was discovered by the police in August 1942. The investigation began with the arrest of Fruhter, Rozenberz, and her sisters Erna and Bogdana Savić by agent Tenka Dalvović on July 31, 1942. This former member of the Communist resistance recognized Anita Rozenberz as a communist and arrested everyone with her. During interrogation, Rozenberz and Fruhter revealed all details and named the Roman Catholic priest who had assisted them.³⁹ Tumpej was arrested on August 4 and interrogated on August 9, 1942. Before the investigators, he admitted only what the police already knew, that he had managed to procure two refugee papers without naming the officials who issued them. His assistance to the Kalef family remained secret. Despite his confession and the evidence, "Parish priest Andrej Tumpej was released on August 12, 1942 by order of the Governor of the City of Belgrade."⁴⁰ Such a serious offense during the occupation was, in most cases, punishable by death, which suggests that the release of this priest was likely due to intervention by higher authorities rather than the mercy of the city administrator, Dragi Jovanović. The State of Israel recognized Andrej Tumpej's heroic deeds and posthumously awarded him the title of Righteous Among the Nations in 2001.⁴¹

Traitors or Heroes

Attitudes toward collaborators and those who served the occupiers remain a contentious issue in Serbian society, with opinions deeply polarized. Some view them as pragmatic individuals who simply performed their duties and tried to alleviate the hardships of their compatriots under occupation, while others label them as traitors who served the occupiers to advance their political objectives. Both perspectives oversimplify this complex phenomenon, often disregarding the context and circumstances in which people lived and acted during this period. What is indisputable, however, is that certain individuals within the occupation and collaborationist apparatus assisted in the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. This assistance was motivated by a range of factors, from self-interest to altruism.⁴² Here, the focus will be on those examples driven solely by the desire to save human lives without personal gain.

The case of Pál Žamboky is perhaps the most paradoxical example of Jews being rescued by someone who was part of the occupation regime. This Belgrade shoemaker of Hungarian origin, who operated a workshop at the corner of Visoki Stevan and Dubrovačka streets, saved two Jewish children during the occupation. However, repairing shoes was not how Žamboky earned a living in the first year of the occupation, 1941.

³⁹ IAB, Fond Uprave grada Beograda, Odeljenja specijalne policije (dalje: UGB SP), IV-191/1; IAB, UGB SP, IV-191/2.

⁴⁰ IAB, UGB SP, IV-191/6.

⁴¹ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 79.

⁴² B. Moore, *op. cit.*, 331-345.

Because of his good command of German, he was employed by the occupation authorities and became an interpreter for the Gestapo. In this role, according to survivors' testimony, he assisted people in the Dorćol neighborhood of Belgrade, where he also lived.⁴³

During the interwar period, the Ben Avram family lived in Dorćol and consisted of the father, Saul; his wife, Ester; grandmother Barbara; and three children: Hajim, Ruža, and Jozef. The father and eldest son, Hajim, perished in the Topovske Šupe camp. In December 1941, the mother, daughter, son, and grandmother, along with other women, children, and the elderly, were forced by the occupiers into a column and marched into the unknown. Their neighbor, Žamboki, accompanied them to determine their destination. As the column advanced, Žamboki realized they were being taken to the newly established Sajmište camp.

When the column reached the gates of the camp, aware of the imminent danger to his neighbors, Žamboki proposed that, with his help, they attempt to escape. Because Barbara was elderly, at age 80, Ester could not leave her mother behind and agreed that Žamboki would rescue her children. It was no longer safe for them to return to their apartment, so Žamboki temporarily placed the children with a relative, Aunt Vida, who also lived in Dorćol. This was only a temporary solution while he organized their escape from Belgrade. The ultimate goal was Novi Kneževac, Žamboki's birthplace, where his brother still lived.

Extracting the two children without identification documents was particularly challenging. Žamboki decided to rescue the girl first. Using his acquaintance with a local captain, he managed to smuggle Ruža into Banat in an empty wine barrel. Until September 1942, Jozef and Žamboki lived together in Belgrade. Facing a renewed risk that the occupiers would discover Jozef's identity via Pančevo, they fled by train to Novi Kneževac. In this Banat town, they awaited liberation.⁴⁴ For his courageous act, Žamboki was recognized in 1995 as a Righteous Among the Nations.⁴⁵

Parts of the Belgrade City Municipality were involved, both directly and indirectly, in the Holocaust. From employing Jews for clearing the city after bombings, to adapting buildings for the Banjica Camp, to supplying food to the Sajmište Camp, high-ranking municipal officials were undoubtedly aware of many aspects of the Holocaust in Belgrade and could foresee the grim fate awaiting the Jews. It remains unknown whether this knowledge, or something else, motivated Dr. Miloslav Stojadinović, a senior municipal official, to attempt to help them. At the time, he was one of the few urban planning experts with a social perspective and had held numerous important positions in the municipality during the interwar period.⁴⁶ During the occupation, he continued to work in the municipality and, for a short period from June 16 to September 11, 1941, he was even at its helm. It was precisely during his tenure that the military building housing the Banjica Camp was reconstructed.⁴⁷

⁴³ Jozef Žamboki, *Život i muzika će pobediti: Kako sam ispunio zavet Pala Žambokija* (Beograd: VRT, 2019), 22.

⁴⁴ J. Žamboki, *op. cit.*, 31–41.

⁴⁵ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 34–38.

⁴⁶ *Ko je ko u Jugoslaviji* (Beograd: Jugoslovenski godišnjak, „Nova Evropa“, 1928), 143. Zlata Macura, *Život na ivici: stanovanje sirotinje u Beograd: 1919–1941* (Beograd: Orionart, 2018), 276.

⁴⁷ *Ново време*, 22. јун 1941, 1.

While simultaneously addressing the acute municipal problems of Belgrade, Stojadinović helped Jews by providing false identity papers, and his apartment, located near the Gestapo headquarters, served as a safe house.⁴⁸ In some cases, Stojadinović went even further. In the autumn of 1941, as mass shootings of Jews began and danger threatened his personal friends, the Lovrić family, he risked his life to help them. He learned that the card index listing Jewish names was kept on Džordža Vašingtona Street. Early one morning, hoping the building would not be crowded, he entered without authorization and took the card in the name of Helena Lovrić. He narrowly avoided detection when a German officer appeared and reminded him that unauthorized access to the card index was strictly forbidden. Had he not been a high-ranking municipal official, this encounter could have ended differently. For his courageous actions, Stojadinović was recognized in 1966 by Yad Vashem and awarded the title Righteous Among the Nations.⁴⁹

In addition to their duty to impart knowledge, educators have an unwritten obligation to help shape their students into ethical individuals. Leading by personal example seems to be the most effective way to achieve this. One person who followed this principle during the occupation was Spasenije Prica, headmaster of the First Belgrade Gymnasium. Following the Nazi occupation of Belgrade, Jews were forced into labor to clear the damage caused by the April bombing. Geršon Kapon, identifiable by the yellow armband, was one of the city's high school students who performed this work daily. Convinced that such measures imposed by the occupiers would bring no good to the Jews, and influenced by the example of his brother, who had fled to Split, Kapon decided to leave Belgrade. He attempted to acquire a new identity by altering his name and surname in his school record book. The attempt was unsuccessful and resulted only in the destruction of the document.

In a desperate situation, he passed by the First Belgrade Gymnasium and decided to seek help. He encountered Prica and his assistant. Recognizing the situation, the headmaster immediately approved the issuance of a new record book. Along with it, Prica gave Kapon a new name – Georgio and added an "i" to his surname (Kaponi) to make it sound Italian. Armed with these false documents, Kaponi joined his brother in Split that summer. Even after the liberation, in honor of his rescuer, Geršon kept the modified surname – Kaponi.⁵⁰ Based on his initiative, the committee awarding the title Righteous Among the Nations decided in 1993 to grant this honor to Professor Prica.⁵¹

Friendship in a Time of Darkness

By nature, people in times of distress seek help within their immediate surroundings. They turn to friends, colleagues, neighbors, acquaintances, and even complete strangers who may offer or from whom they may request – material, moral, or other forms of assistance. Most rescue efforts emerged from such relationships, and in this section I highlight the most distinctive among them. A friendship formed during the

⁴⁸ M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 71.

⁴⁹ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 45–47, 245.

⁵⁰ Jevrejski istorijski muzej (dalje: JIM), fascikla (dalje: f.) pravедnici, izjava Geršon Kaponi.

⁵¹ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 74–76.

interwar period saved three members of the Judić family: father Sima, mother Bojana, their nine-year-old daughter Flora, and a grandmother also Flora. Unlike many other Jewish families, this household already believed on the eve of the war that, given the growing danger, it was necessary to leave Yugoslavia. Tragically, they soon experienced firsthand that these fears were justified. In October 1941, during the mass execution in Kragujevac, Sima Judić was killed. After this event, the remaining adult members of the family were convinced that “none of this would lead to anything good, that it must end badly for the Jews, and that it would be wise to find refuge elsewhere.”⁵²

They tried, through various acquaintances, to leave Belgrade, but were unsuccessful. In desperation, the grandmother remembered an old acquaintance. In her youth, she had lived next door to the Milutinović family in Dorćol. Life later took them in different directions, but she recalled that they had moved to a house in Pašino Brdo, at 49 Tetovska Street – an area that was then almost on the outskirts of Belgrade. The Judić family found them and asked to be sheltered for a few days. What was meant to be a brief refuge turned into hiding that lasted until the end of the occupation.

The Milutinović family had three children, two sons and a daughter, but one of the sons died young, and his baptismal certificate was altered to give Flora a false identity: she became Miroslava Milutinović. The grandmother took the name Lenka Simić, and the mother, Bojana, became Bojana Jakovljević, refugees from Prokuplje. The mother and grandmother rarely left the house, fearing police patrols. Additional security came from the fact that the Milutinović daughter, Ružica, worked as a clerk in the Department of Special Police. Under these assumed identities, the Judić family survived the war in the Milutinović household.⁵³

Lea Rozencvaj, a Jewish woman from Belgrade, was among those who, after losing her family’s support, had to find her own way to survive the occupation. Her father, Eduard, and mother, Olga, were killed in the camps at Sajmište and Topovske Šupe, while her brother died as a partisan during the 1941 uprising. After returning to Belgrade from Zagreb following the start of the occupation, Rozencvaj faced a dilemma: whether to register as Jewish, as her parents and grandmother had done. Her decision not to comply with this order from the occupation authorities proved to be the right one when German soldiers came to their apartment at No. 1 Karađorđeva Street and took away her parents and grandmother.

Fortunately for her, the family’s neighbors, the Aleksić and Jakovljević families, did not allow themselves to be intimidated by the occupiers’ threats that anyone helping the enemies of the Third Reich would be held responsible. A hospital discharge certificate obtained by Mile Jakovljević, in the name of “Olga Rodić, born 1918 in Drvar, treated for schizophrenia,” proved crucial in securing a new identity for this Jewish woman. With this document and two witnesses, one of whom was Jakovljević, she obtained a refugee identity card and a residence permit.⁵⁴ On the basis of these papers, Lea Rozencvaj survived the occupation, working as a nurse in Arandjelovac, Niš, and Požarevac.⁵⁵

⁵² Jaša Almulji, *Jevrejke govore* (Beograd: Signature, 2005), 195.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 191–201.

⁵⁴ IAB, UGB, kartoni žitelja-Rodić Olga.

⁵⁵ Sava Bogdanov, „Kako se Lea Rozencvaj spasila 1941. godine”, u: *Mi smo preživeli*, 2, 332–344.

The dreams of a shared life and starting a family for Dara Đošević and Avram Adanja had to be postponed following the occupation of Belgrade in 1941. The new reality, symbolized by the yellow armband, required different kinds of planning. Aware that this "marking" was only the beginning, the Adanja family, father Jakov, mother Gizela, brothers Avram and Benko, and sister Stella, who was married to Šalom, sought to escape from Belgrade. From the very first day, Đošević provided them with food. With help from her acquaintances, she arranged for them to obtain forged identification documents, but as this process was slow, she temporarily sheltered them in a psychiatric hospital on Avala.⁵⁶ At the beginning of November 1941, using these forged documents, she smuggled Jakov and Avram to Priština. By the end of November, she returned to Belgrade and similarly smuggled Gizela and Benko, and at the beginning of December that same year, Stella with her two children. They remained in Priština until 1942, when, again with Đošević's assistance, they managed to relocate to Rome, where they stayed until the end of the war.⁵⁷ After the liberation of Yugoslavia, the couple realized their pre-war plans and married. This courageous woman was posthumously recognized in 1998 as Righteous Among the Nations.⁵⁸

Jakov Bararon's godparent relationship with Jovan and Angelina Stefanović demonstrates that this ancient way of strengthening friendship could endure even in the most extreme circumstances. Like other Belgrade Jews, the Bararon family was targeted by the repressive apparatus. Jakov's son Avram was among the first taken to the Topovske Šupe camp. As the owner of a small trading business, his skills allowed him to manage provisions, which temporarily preserved his life. After the camp closed, he was transferred to the Sajmište camp, where he had some freedom to leave to handle supplies. When the gas van operations began, transporting prisoners from the Judenlager Semlin to their deaths, Avram, feeling trapped in a hopeless situation, committed suicide during one of his permitted outings.⁵⁹

The remaining family members, Rivka and three-year-old Jakov, were cared for by Milutin Stefanović, son of Jovan and Angelina, to ensure they were not left alone. As Jakov recalls from his mother's story, after his father's suicide, she stopped reporting to the authorities and decided to flee.⁶⁰ While Avram was in the camp, Stefanović regularly visited his wife and child and provided them with false documents under the names Radmila and Miša Babić. For security reasons, they were separated: Rivka traveled to Niš, and Jakov began living with Stefanović in Jajinci.⁶¹ After three months, Rivka returned briefly to Belgrade and, with Milutin's help, went to do voluntary work in Vienna, where she was discovered, arrested, and deported to Mauthausen. Paradoxically, Jakov survived in Jajinci, the very place where the gas van had delivered its deadly cargo. After liberation, he was handed over to the Jewish Community of Belgrade and was soon reunited with his mother, who had survived Maut-

⁵⁶ JIM, f. pravednici, 95.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 97–98.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 206.

⁶⁰ Jakov Jaša Bararon, „Sjećanja na rano djetinstvo”, u: *Mi smo preživeli: Jevreji o holokaustu...*, 5, 351.

⁶¹ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 206–208.

hausen. For their actions, Milutin and his sister Mileva Stefanović were recognized as Righteous Among the Nations on January 31, 1993.⁶²

The master-apprentice relationship saved a young life during the occupation of Belgrade. The married couple Bogoljub and Lenka, née Demajo, Longinović had a daughter, Sofija, in 1939. The pre-war communist Longinović was executed in reprisal in the village of Skela in August 1941. During this time of hardship, Vidosava Andeselić, who had been Lenka's apprentice in one of Belgrade's tailoring salons, regularly visited the Longinović household. Because her husband and uncles (the well-known Demajo brothers) were communists, and she herself held leftist sympathies, the Longinović home was under constant police surveillance. It was only a matter of time before agents came knocking. This moment arrived in January 1942, when officers of the Special Police entered the apartment and took Longinović. Before leaving, she entrusted her daughter to Marija Andeselić, mother of Vidosava. Longinović was transported from the Special Police Department to the Sajmište camp, from where she would take her final journey in a death van.⁶³

Throughout the remainder of the occupation, Sofija lived in the Andeselić apartment at 34 Knjeginje Olge Street. The child was in a precarious physical state: unable to walk, unable to speak, and in need of constant care. Despite these difficulties and the harsh economic conditions of the occupation, Marija Andeselić not only preserved her life but also ensured that she learned to walk and speak. According to Sofija's recollection, special food was prepared for her.⁶⁴ Following the end of the occupation, Marija Andeselić became Sofija's legal guardian.⁶⁵ On August 18, 1993, a letter from Jerusalem informed Vera Petrović Andeselić that she, her mother Marija, and her sister Nata-lija had been recognized with the title of Righteous Among the Nations.⁶⁶

Fearing for the life of his wife Fedorina, who was Jewish on her mother's side, Kamenko Raca left Zemun for Belgrade following the occupation, convinced that her background would not be scrutinized in occupied Serbia. Fedorina's sister, Margareta Koristka, stayed in Zemun, where the authorities discovered her Jewish origin. Through a connection in the communist resistance, she obtained a pass and fled to Belgrade. Without hesitation, Raca took her into their apartment at 9 Takovska Street. She lived there until mid-1943, spending raids in a makeshift hiding place inside a wardrobe. Using documents Raca obtained through his network of acquaintances, Margareta received a new identity in August 1943. She was officially registered as a refugee from Croatia, which allowed her to live independently until the end of the occupation.⁶⁷ The Committee for the Bestowal of the Title Righteous Among the Nations recognized Kamenko Raca's actions of benevolence and considered them for formal acknowledgment.⁶⁸

⁶² JIM, F. pravednici, 791.

⁶³ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 153–156.

⁶⁴ Video testimony of Marija Andeselić: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzUgDHDk1sI> (accessed 4.10.2025.).

⁶⁵ J. Almulj, *Jevrejke govore*, 205–219.

⁶⁶ JIM, F. Pravednici (bez signature).

⁶⁷ JIM, F. pravednici, izjava Margarita Koriska i izjava Kamenko Raca.

⁶⁸ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 220–221.

The question remains whether, in the postwar period, citizens would have enjoyed the theatrical and radio performances of Olga Adam, née Ungar, if two Belgraders had not provided false testimony. The Ungar family was expelled from their home when the occupying authorities arrived. After reaching Belgrade, the father, Marcel, was taken to the Topovske Šupe camp, where he was executed, while the mother, Margarita, Olga, and her eleven-year-old brother Tibor found refuge with relatives. In December 1941, the occupation authorities called on all Jewish women to register. They might have complied if not for the intervention of Dragoljub Trajković, a railway worker. Trajković, who regularly traveled for work between Vojvodina and Serbia, delivered a letter for Olga's maternal aunt, Irma Weiss, at the end of 1941. From this chance acquaintance, a friendship developed between Trajković and Olga.

The suitcases for the camp were already packed, but Trajković dissuaded them and persuaded them to hide in his house at No. 5 Limska Street, Belgrade. The plan was to obtain documents from the Belgrade City Administration based on false testimony and then secure identification at the Refugee Commissariat. Their neighbor, Mile Stavrić, assisted by bringing in Vlado Katanić. They fabricated a story that the family had lived elsewhere and that Olga's aunt had married Katanić. Allegedly, they had arrived in Belgrade after the outbreak of the April War in 1941. The lack of documents was explained by claiming that authorities had confiscated them at the border.

The new identity required changes to both first and last names. Given the international character of her name, Olga kept hers, while her brother was renamed Tihoimir, and her mother, Marija, received the new surname Urošević.⁶⁹ The entire account was later confirmed as truthful by Trajković and Katanić before the Belgrade City Administration. Based on these documents, they obtained refugee identification from the Refugee Commissariat, thereby completing the construction of their false identity.⁷⁰

However, a false identity did not always guarantee complete security. This became clear in the case of the Ungar family. While walking through a Belgrade market, Margarita was recognized by her former maid, a *Volksdeutsche*, who shouted, "What is this Jewess doing in Belgrade?" Although exposed, Margarita managed to escape, but the incident clearly showed they were not safe in the city. They decided that a rural environment would offer greater security. With help from an unnamed woman who sold them food, they settled in the village of Grabovac near Svilajnac, where they remained until liberation.⁷¹

Not only neighbors and friends aided Jews; there were also instances in which complete strangers risked their lives to provide shelter. One example is the Jovanović family, who saved two members of the Kraus family. Dr. Herbert Kraus, the father, joined partisan units in the early days of the uprising and remained with them until liberation.⁷² His wife, Blanka, who was also involved in the communist resistance, stayed behind with their child, Aleksandar. Initially, members of the communist movement in Šabac provided assistance by securing false identity documents for Blanka under the name Branka Novaković.

⁶⁹ Olga Adam, „Spasili ih dobri ljudi”, u: *Mi smo preživeli*, 2, 340–345.

⁷⁰ IAB, UGB, kartoni žitelja, Urošević Olga; IAB, UGB, kartoni žitelja, Urošević Marija.

⁷¹ Olga Adam, *op. cit.*, 345–349.

⁷² *Židovski biografski leksikon*, zbl. Izmk.hr/?p=873, pristupio: 4. jula 2019.

With these papers, Kraus moved to Belgrade in the summer of 1942, where she was supposed to meet a contact. During this time, the communist organization suffered severe setbacks at the hands of the Special Police, which disrupted its operations and left newcomers from the interior without support. Wandering the streets of Belgrade, Kraus came across a courtyard passage on Kosovska Street, where an unknown woman emerged from her apartment and offered them shelter. This intervention proved lifesaving for Blanka and her son. Danica Jovanović, the head of the household, along with her daughters, provided refuge. Initially, Blanka concealed their Jewish identity, but when she revealed it, the Jovanović family continued to protect them. Using the false documents, Danica officially registered Blanka and Aleksandar at her address. After some time, they assessed that Belgrade did not represent a safe environment for them. Their next refuge was the village of Dudovac, where Danica had relatives. The Kraus family moved there, and Blanka taught local students to prepare for their secondary school examinations.⁷³ They remained in Dudovac until liberation. On the initiative of Aleksandar Kraus, Danica Jovanović and her daughters were recognized in 1993 as Righteous Among the Nations.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Unlike in many other European cities, the Holocaust in Belgrade unfolded with extraordinary rapidity. Given this intensity, there were virtually no realistic opportunities for collective rescue of the city's Jewish population. The Jewish community, terrified by repression and misled into believing they would be merely relocated, had neither the time nor the means to organize or coordinate significant protective efforts. The Holocaust largely took place within the broader context of repression against resistance movements and other patriotic organizations that might have been capable of organizing large-scale rescue operations. This constraint forced organized groups to concentrate on rescuing their own members and pursuing their own objectives.

Despite harsh penalties for those who sheltered or aided Jews, Belgrade was home to individuals willing to risk their own lives and those of their families to help. These rescuers came from various sectors of Belgrade society, including some who were themselves part of the occupiers' administrative or enforcement apparatus. Such episodes challenge clear-cut distinctions between "traitors" and "heroes," highlighting the complex moral landscape of the occupation.

Forms of assistance varied widely, from providing false identity documents to offering long-term shelter. The study also reveals specific patterns: the initiative to escape often came from the Jews themselves, especially those who had witnessed the suffering of relatives and understood the Nazis' ultimate intent – physical extermination. The fact that many individuals left Belgrade after obtaining false papers highlights the difficulty of maintaining safety in an urban environment and the relative security found in rural areas. Regarding motivation, most acts of rescue were based on personal connections – friendships, family ties, professional relationships, or other individual bonds

⁷³ JIM, f. pravednici, izjava Aleksandra Krausa.

⁷⁴ M. Fogel, M. Koljanin, M. Ristović, *op. cit.*, 92–94.

between the rescuer and the person being saved. These networks of trust and solidarity were crucial for survival under conditions of extreme danger.

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“TO SAVE ONE LIFE IS TO SAVE THE WORLD ENTIRE”:
THE RESCUE OF JEWS IN BELGRADE DURING THE WORLD WAR II

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Summary

This paper examines the rescue of Jews in Belgrade during World War II, a topic that has received limited attention in Serbian historiography. Moving beyond the identification of rescuers and survivors, it analyzes the broader social, political, and institutional contexts in which acts of rescue occurred. Drawing on archival sources, personal testimonies, and existing scholarship, the study highlights key causal factors, including the roles of specific individuals, organizations, and elements of the occupation regime. Unlike many other European cities, the Holocaust in Belgrade unfolded with exceptional speed, leaving little opportunity for organized or collective rescue efforts. As a result, rescue activities were largely individualized and often took place within the wider framework of repression against resistance movements, which limited the ability of organized groups to assist beyond their own members. Despite the severe penalties imposed on those who helped Jews, Belgrade was home to individuals who knowingly risked their own lives, and often the lives of their families, in order to save others. These cases complicate binary categorizations of collaboration and resistance and underscore the moral ambiguities of life under occupation. Assistance ranged from the provision of false identity documents to long-term concealment, often initiated by Jews themselves who recognized the genocidal nature of Nazi policies. Personal relationships and networks of trust emerged as the primary motivation and enabling factor for rescue, while relocation from urban to rural environments frequently offered greater chances of survival.

KEYWORDS: Holocaust, Shoah, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Belgrade, Rescue of Jews, Nazis, Righteous Among the Nations

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