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## **"The Concept of Holocaust and Genocide in Serbia"\***

### ***A contribution to the discussion on a regional and country-specific context of Holocaust education in Serbia***

On March 10, 2008, the first seminar for educators from Republic of Serbia will open at the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem. It is the sign that Holocaust education in Serbia reached a certain stage where internationally developed standards should be implemented, its level upgraded, curriculum and textbooks enriched with the fruits of already ongoing wider process. At the moment Serbia is a candidate for membership in Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, seeking to be a partner in a common European educational community.

The recommendation of OSCE/ODIHR, that “the topic of Holocaust should be embedded in both a regional and country-specific context in order to address the regional specificities of persecution and deportation, including the role played by the local population”,<sup>1</sup> is of a great importance at this stage of Holocaust education in Serbia. We are in a great need of serious discussion of all the specificities that the Holocaust had in a region and in Serbia itself, in order to find the best way for Holocaust education to reach its ultimate objective – the hearts and minds of pupils and students as active subjects in educational process.

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\* Title given to me by Ms. Wanetik in her invitation to speak

<sup>1</sup> Education on the Holocaust and on Anti-Semitism, OSCE/ODIHR, Warsaw, 2006, p. 64

This paper is a small contribution to that discussion, presented with an intention to open the questions and present problems and possibilities.

The paper is presented by coordinator of Jasenovac Committee of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is a body founded in 2003 with a task to cultivate memory on Jasenovac system of death and concentration camps, located on both banks of Sava river, in today Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Too often an object of controversies in former Yugoslavia,<sup>2</sup> Jasenovac is nevertheless in Serbia the symbol of the suffering in the Second World War.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of Jasenovac for Serbia may be illustrated by the fact that Law on the Museum of Genocide Victims from 1992 established April 22, the day of uprising of remaining Jasenovac inmates in 1945 as national genocide and Holocaust day, which fact was accepted in OSCE/ODIHR report in the spirit of aforementioned recommendation. However, January 27, the UN Holocaust Day is being marked in Serbia in regular fashion as well.

In its uniqueness the Holocaust was made by Nazis - as noted by Yehuda Bauer - "a global problem of the greatest magnitude".<sup>4</sup> For the Orthodox Church, the unprecedented global event of the Holocaust is the chance to reinforce basic human values and emotions and to assure that legislation concerning human rights is there as confirmation of these values and to protect them.

At the same time we have to be sure that law and legislation can not replace basic humanity because then it would be impossible to act as human in the time when human

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<sup>2</sup> The study of Robert M. Hayden, *Recounting the Dead: The Rediscovering and Redefinition of Wartime Massacres in Late- and Post-Communist Yugoslavia* (in Rubie S. Watson (ed.): *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*, Santa Fe, New Mexico, School of American Research Press, 1994, pp. 167-201) is an in-depth insight into the essence of the problem.

<sup>3</sup> Volume *Jasenovac – Eternal Remembrance* published by the Holy Synod of Bishops, Belgrade, 1990, is useful to understand symbolism of Jasenovac in national discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *ReThinking the Holocaust*, Yale university Press, 2001, p. 22

rights are diminished. For example, although anti-Jewish legislation was enforced in Bulgaria during the Second World War, the deportation of Bulgarian Jews was prevented because general attitude in the country was that towards Jews “our relations must be those of universal morality, of one man to another”.<sup>5</sup>

It is exactly here, in producing, growing and developing the basic human values, that we see the irreplaceable and supreme role of education, compared to legal system. Here also we see the importance of Holocaust education in general and in Serbia - with all its specificities - in particular.

Here are several points Holocaust education will have to address:

1. As noted by Browning, Shelach, Steinberg and many others, one of main specificities of the Second World War in former Yugoslavia was “a series of genocidal massacres which could be grouped into three large mass killings”,<sup>6</sup> i.e. extermination of Serbs, Jews (the Holocaust) and Roma. The perpetrators made only slight differences between those three groups, depending mainly of the Nazi policy in particular part of occupied country. Including terrorized and persecuted anti-Fascists from all Yugoslav nations as well, these three groups went through their suffering mainly in same places, being imprisoned, tortured and murdered together at the hands of same perpetrators.

The remembrance of common suffering was absorbed soon after the war into the main state narrative of “brotherhood and unity” but lived strongly within personal and family narrative, up to that point that in Serbian case it became part of a national narrative.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Yosif, metropolitan of Varna, quoted from Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2001, p. 25

<sup>6</sup> Damir Mirković, *Victims and Perpetrators in Yugoslav genocide 1941-1945: Some Preliminary Observations*, in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 3/1993, p. 318

<sup>7</sup> A book of Jaša Almuli *Alive and Dead: Dialogues with the Jews*, NOVA, Beograd, 2002 gives 22 cases of such narrative. The book is awaiting its English edition.

This common experience represents rare possibility given in Holocaust education where students will have chance to relay on the family tradition and the task of the teacher will be rather to cultivate and upgrade already existing knowledge and feelings and to build broader knowledge on the Holocaust and show its specific context, uniqueness and importance.

This inherited common narrative is especially important because of Roma presence within it, since “the experience of Roma and Sinti in Europe under National Socialism should be an integral part of any Holocaust-education curricula”,<sup>8</sup> and can only be helpful both to recognize Roma experience of persecution and to understand another dimension of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

2. Former Yugoslavia produced two parallel narratives on the Holocaust: one was that of historiography, where after closing of Commission on War Crimes in 1948 the genocide of the Jews was mended with other “Fascist” atrocities while only historiography produced within the Jewish community was allowed to personalize Jewish nation as a victim.

The other narrative was developed in the culture and opposite to Yugoslav historiography it was very rich. As Dina Katan Ben Zion showed it recently,<sup>9</sup> Yugoslav literature/s and Serbian in particular had strong ‘Jewish narrative’ consisted of both - Jewish writers like Danilo Kiš, Aleksandar Tišma or David Albahari - and Jewish themes; Nobel price winner Ivo Andrić even published collection named *The Jewish Stories*. All of them tackled the subject of Holocaust and movie director and multiple Cannes winner Emir Kusturica based one of his first movies *Buffet Titanic* on an Andrić’s story on Holocaust in Sarajevo. Together with numerous translations of scientific literature and

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<sup>8</sup> Education on the Holocaust and on Anti-Semitism, OSCE/ODIHR, Warsaw, 2006, p. 63

<sup>9</sup> Dina Katan Ben Zion, *Presence and Disappearance – Jews and Judaism in Former Yugoslavia in the Mirror of Literature*, The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2002

*belles-letters* like Ka-Tzetnik, and movies as well, it made Holocaust subject part of everyday culture.

Since most of these writers are mandatory part of curriculum, it opens door for an excellent interdisciplinary approach in Holocaust education, where the subject of the Holocaust will be seen in 'polyphonic' modus, not only within the teaching of history but of literature and arts as well. This genuine material is of great value for the study of pre-war life of the Jewish community in Serbia and Yugoslavia, everyday life during the Shoah, participation of the Jews in resistance and time of rebuilding in the aftermath of the War.

3. Until Tito's death in 1980, in Yugoslav historiography there was no attempt at internal reconciliation, as all guilt of war crimes and suffering was laid on the occupying powers and the so-called collaborationists".<sup>10</sup> As a result of controlled historiography, some war events – as Communist post-war mass executions of their enemies and 'enemies' – were taboo-themes and some aspects had to be treated with taboo-approach.

Historiography in eighties took genocides as one of its main subjects. One of first to readdress the theme and to pave the way was Vladimir Dedijer, for some time president of Russell Tribunal, wherefrom he took definition of genocide developed by Jean Paul Sartre. Much wider than Lemkin's, this definition was implemented in Yugoslav historiographies and caused general confusion: first, almost any massacre became 'genocide'; second, the uniqueness of the Holocaust was downplayed and the Jewish ordeal was counted simply as one genocide among the many.

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<sup>10</sup> Tea Sindbaek, *World War II Genocides in Yugoslav Historiography*, p. 2

During the Balkan wars in the nineties, this confusion produced many manipulations with both terms, genocide and the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> Situation began to improve significantly in mid-nineties with new generation of specialists like Milan Koljanin, Ivo Goldstein or Milan Ristović who uplifted Holocaust research on a new level. But here we are facing serious problem with teachers who were formed by enormous quantity of literature produced in eighties and affected by confused and manipulated public discourse of the nineties (last could also be said for pupils and students), and it will require serious work to be done during the teacher training and theoretical education.

4. In Serbia there is “a heritage of anti-Semitism similar to that in other Balkan countries”,<sup>12</sup> and between two World Wars it was more oriented against ‘foreign’ Ashkenazim than against Sephardim who were considered to be ‘native’. Three important anti-Semitic boosts followed – German propaganda during the Second World War, Yugoslav anti-Zionism in the aftermath of the Six Day War and general atmosphere of intolerance that reigned in former Yugoslavia in the nineties. With all that, Sekelj in 1998 concluded that anti-Semitism in Serbia, although constant is a peripheral phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

However, Holocaust education in Serbia will have to face a new phenomenon of a global subculture of anti-Semitism: radical right-wing movement is being spread through internet and all possible media, creating global community similar to hippie, punk or any later sub- or counter- culture movement in its own time. It is much smaller,

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<sup>11</sup> Marko Živković, *A Wish To Be A Jew: The Power of the Jewish Trope in the Yugoslav Conflict*, in: *Cahiers de l'URMIS* 6/2000, pp. 69-84; David Bruce MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts?: Serbian and Croatian Victim Centered Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2003; Michael S. Desch, *The Myth of Abandonment: The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust Analogy*, in: *Security Studies*, 1/2006, pp. 106–145.

<sup>12</sup> Laslo Sekelj, *Antisemitism and Jewish Identity in Serbia*, The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Jerusalem, 1998, p. 7

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 21

but still very appealing especially to high school population: therefore there is not much difference between groups of 'neo-Nazi brethren' found in Belgrade or Petah Tikva. It will require from a teacher to be good equipped with tools to combat the Holocaust denial especially.

At the university level anti-Semitism masked in form of anti-Zionism is more frequent. Founded also in Yugoslav pro-Arab heritage of Tito's time, it is now being spread, paradoxically, by some radical left and radical right groups with almost same rhetoric: 'Holocaust industry' or Goldhagen affair are still attracting much more attention and critical perception by academicians than serious breakthroughs in Holocaust research. In this matter academic exchange with Holocaust scholars and Israeli historians dealing with the history of the State of Israel would be of great importance.

From its founding in 2003 Jasenovac Committee considered Holocaust education as an important step needed to be made not only in Serbia but in whole region. In order to achieve that goal, we turned to Yad Vashem and from 2003 13 people working for our Committee graduated from the International School; two more were sent by the Ministry of Culture of Serbia and one by Serbian Jewish Community. Our graduates came from Serbia, Republic of Srpska/Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia.

Jasenovac Committee is not a body that could or intend to replace state authorities in Holocaust education; more appropriate role of our Committee is to initiate and support all activities in that matter. Thus, in numerous contacts with Serbian authorities we stressed need for them to take initiative in Holocaust education.

With Ministry of Culture we realized an academic exchange with Israeli scholars in June 2006; during the first visit of the International School staff to Serbia in January 2007 Bishop Irinej of Bačka handed over to Orit Margalioth translations of educational

materials of Yad Vashem into Serbian as our gift for the beginning of cooperation between Yad Vashem and Serbian Ministry of Education.

What we got from Yad Vashem and what we hope that Serbia will get from whole process of Holocaust education – symbolized in today's Europe with Task Force - is not only knowledge of an unique tragic event in history of humankind. It is at the same time knowledge how to how to be creative in overcoming tragic legacy and how to understand ourselves and others, which is base for any reconciliation, so badly needed in the Balkans. Finally, it is way how to cultivate memory, basic European value once and for all times given to humankind by the people of the Book.

Jasenovac Committee of  
The Holy Assembly of Bishops of  
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