# CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed at analysing different aspects of the Yugoslav Jewish community during two periods of transition: firstly, the transition to the Socialist Yugoslavia immediately after World War II and secondly, the transition from the Socialist Yugoslavia to the reality of new nation states.

A certain periodisation can be introduced in the history of Yugoslav Jewry. The first period covers the time from the founding of the Federation of Jewish Religious Communities in 1919 in Osijek until the outbreak of World War II. This period is generally, and justifiably, described as the heyday of Yugoslav Jewry. The destruction of Yugoslav Jewry in the Holocaust can be regarded as a period of its own, to be followed by the period of transition to the new Yugoslavia. During this period, from 1944 to 1953, the remnants of Yugoslav Jewry were transformed, through rebuilding and adaptation, into one structured and centralised organisation which represented Jews mainly as a national minority in communist Yugoslavia. This period is dealt with in the first part of this study. The following period can be described as one of standstill, with increasing interest in Jewishness aroused by the Six Day War in 1967. This period came to an end in a visible way with the exhibition about Jews in the lands of Yugoslavia in 1988. From then onwards, the development towards the fragmentation of Yugoslav Jewry began, which ultimately became inevitable owing to the collapse of Yugoslavia. This period of transition with its different aspects is studied in the second part of this research.

The transition period from 1944 to 1953 can be further divided into two phases, with the emigration serving as a watershed in between. From the liberation of Belgrade until 1948, Jewish leaders genuinely believed in the provisions regarding religion given in the AVNOJ declarations and in the constitution of 1946. There is an explicit change of attitude in this regard in 1948, marked by the friction in relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Attitudes towards religion became more negative in general, and this was also felt in the Jewish community. An oppressive atmosphere spread in Yugoslav society as the regime hunted dissidents and Soviet supporters and imprisoned them at random. This in turn caused fear and uncertainty among the Jews. Consequently two objectives were pursued by the Jewish leadership. Firstly, the religious character of the community was reduced and Jewish religion was transformed into primarily a personal matter, and secondly, the Jews' position as a national minority was intentionally and intensively empha-

sised. This was visibly manifest in the change of name of the Federation, along with the boycott of Jewish religious holidays by the communist Jewish leaders. This was the path of adaptation which the Jewish leadership chose and sought to implement in the immediate post-war period. A number of Jews on an individual basis chose an even more extreme path of adaptation by positioning themselves clearly outside the Jewish community orbit, and thus came to be known as so-called crypto-Jews. The adaptation undertaken and carried out by the leadership was not implemented as one of the available options during this period, but as the sole possibility of ensuring the very survival of organised Jewish life under the communist regime of Yugoslavia. A policy of adaptation, on the other hand, allowed Jews to retain some specific features of Jewish life and culture to function as a counterbalance against assimilation. Naturally the policy of adaptation meant distancing Jewry from the full spectrum of Jewish life, but nevertheless total submergence was prevented. The fact that there was only a very small number of Jews, under 0.1 per cent of the total population, greatly facilitated their successful adaptation. For this reason, Jews were not perceived as posing any threat to the regime. Their low numbers were actually a protective factor, as a greater degree of tolerance was shown towards small denominations in the communist religious policy.

The emigration of Yugoslav Jews between 1948–52 caused the greatest structural changes to the remaining Jewish population of Yugoslavia, as well as being the main focus of the Federation's activity during this period. A number of reconstituted communities were closed down, and when the post-war transition period was over, both the number of communities and the total of the Jewish population became established for almost four decades. Recognition of the existing realities, with the requirement of adaptation to a communist-ruled society, led to the emigration of Jews of orthodox affiliation as well as of those who still fostered a Zionist orientation. As a result emigration conveniently contributed to the adaptation of the remaining Jews.

Participation in the National Liberation War legitimised the position of Jews in the post-war period, and the sharing of a common enemy, the fascists, only served to reinforce the mutual understanding of the Jews and the regime. The partisan partnership was actively fostered by public appearances together with the authorities in memorial ceremonies of the victory over fascism. This shared history, of course, already had its origins in the inter-war period, when numerous Jews had joined the Communist movement.

Paul Gordiejew describes the adaptation process as an experiment in secular Judaism which was initiated and set in motion by the leadership, which means in practice that a relatively small core of Jewish leaders maintained control over the secular path the organised community selected, aiming at a secular Jewish community and secular Jewishness. This experiment contributed to the community's

submergence, for it effectively removed the ideological opposition of a religious worldview.[1] This study argues in opposition to Gordiejew's basic thesis of a process of secularisation, although it acknowledges his description of the collective symbols which emphasised adaptation of the Jewish community to the regime.[2] The following facts alone refute Gordiejew's hypothesis: firstly, secular Judaism was already prevalent during the inter-war years, as Gordiejew himself noted,[3] and secondly, as earlier stated in this study, the final stage in secularisation of the Yugoslav Jewry was due to the emigration of the surviving Orthodox Jews, and not the result of any obscure 'experiment'. Consequently the remaining Jewish population were almost all secular in orientation. There was no further need to extend secularism among them, but instead, there was the imposed need for adaptation. This 'experiment' of secularisation is also contradicted by the fact that the reconstitution of the Orthodox Jewish communities was accepted by the Jewish leadership. Dissatisfaction was expressed by the President of the Federation, Albert Vajs, about the boycott of Jewish religious holidays, which further counters Gordiejew's hypothesis. The result of adaptation was not a submerged Jewish community; on the contrary, adaptation enabled the Jews to preserve certain Jewish characteristics. The aim was not, as the term submergence would indicate, to cause Jewishness as a whole to disappear. Jews were still Jews, even in the communist context of Yugoslavia, irrespective of the fact that in many cases it was a secondary identification in comparison to the primary one, the Yugoslav identification. Adaptation was an element of Jewish acculturation in the post-war period, and if any Yugoslav Jewry can be described as submerged or assimilated, it was the group of crypto-Jews, which amounted to about one-third of the *enlarged* Jewish population.

The Yugoslav Jewish community was recognised as both a religious and a national minority in inter-war Yugoslavia. Although formally the situation remained the same in post-war Yugoslavia, especially after the Basic Law on the Legal Status of Religious Communities was enacted in 1953, a certain very significant difference was introduced. While acknowledging that they were both a national and religious minority, the Jewish leadership distinctly emphasised their position as a national minority[4] and made an effort to give the Federation the appearance of a non-religious institution, mainly representing a national minority engaged in cultural activities. At the end of the transition period Yugoslavia had a Jewish national

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1 Gordiejew 1999, 180–181.

2 Gordiejew 1999, Chapter 3 "The Collective Voice of Submergence" is a meticulous study on the symbols which linked post-war Yugoslav Jewry and the regime, and thus legitimised Jews' position in Yugoslavia.

3 Gordiejew 1999, 179.

4 Vajs 1954, 28, 45; CZA/C2/1722: Note on conversation with Mr. Alexander Stajner, August 1965.

minority with a low level of participation in community life and Yugoslav in general orientation. In the 1971 demographic survey, fewer than 25 per cent of the respondents over 15 years of age claimed to have taken part in community activities since World War II. Yugoslav Jews endeavoured to be good citizens and good Yugoslavs, and were often found among the Yugoslav elite.

The post-war Yugoslav Jewish leaders cannot be portrayed as opportunists. All in all, it was the post-war leadership which piloted Yugoslav Jewry through its most difficult period after the Holocaust, and today's Jewish communities in post-Yugoslav countries owe their existence to the skilful efforts of the leadership to ensure the continuity of Jewish life.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia brought a major historical change in the history of the Yugoslav Jewish communities. One period of Yugoslav Jewry, from 1919 until 1991, had come to an end. The year 1991 marks the end of Yugoslav Jewry as a regional entity. A change of this scale, in the form of the fragmentation of the state, concluded Freidenreich in her study, would seriously hamper the Jewish communities' ability to function.

On the basis of this study it can be recognised that her assumption, though understandable, was premature. The centralised organisation of the Jewish communities collapsed together with Yugoslavia, but this did not hamper the ability of the Jewish communities to function in the post-Yugoslav era. On the contrary, despite the fragmentation of Yugoslav Jewry and its framework organisation, there was an indisputable increase in Jewish activities, and even in the Jewish population, precisely as a result of Yugoslavia's turmoil, although now these increases were taking place on the nation state level within new organisational structures and frameworks.

Jewish life in the former Yugoslavia was totally dependent on the existence of the organised Jewish communities, and Jewishness was demonstrated primarily by being a member of the Jewish community. After World War II there was rarely any ideological (Zionism) or religious identity involved in being a Jew. The disintegration of Yugoslavia proved that the strength of its Jewish community lay in its organised structure, which, regardless of the collapse of the centralised Jewish Federation, assured a certain continuity for the work of the local communities. The Jewish communities and their structures in Zagreb and Sarajevo were sufficiently strong to enable the creation of their own, new national Jewish organisations. Belgrade inherited the structure of the Yugoslav period, and Slovenia's and Macedonia's Jewries became independent units functioning in their respective communities in Ljubljana and Skopje. Now, after the Kosovo war in 1999, a group of Albanian-speaking Jewish Kosovars in Prizren has emerged, who constitute a distinct group of their own. This historic change moulded the former Yugoslav Jewish communities into new national Jewish communities.

Although the Federation of Jewish Communities in Yugoslavia bears the same title as the umbrella organisation for all the Jewish communities of the former Yugoslavia, it can hardly be seen as the sole continuation of traditional Yugoslav Jewry, any more than can other Jewries in the former Yugoslavia. The post-Yugoslav Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia can be depicted as representing Serbian Jewry, and the fragmentation of both the country and the Federation in the nineteen-nineties inaugurated a new period for Serbian Jewry, even though its activities take place within institutions and structures inherited from earlier days. The Croatian Jews have endeavoured to redefine their own Croatian Jewish history and identity, as distinct from that of the former Yugoslavia. The Jewish community of Bosnia-Herzegovina suffered the most from the turmoil of the war, and the majority of its Jews left the country as refugees. During the war in Bosnia and after it, Jews emphasised the long history of Jews in Bosnia and the safe haven provided to them by the Ottoman Muslims. By this attitude they expressed their general identification with the Bosnian Muslim population and loyalty to the state. Bosnian Jewry subsequently distinguished itself positively through the distribution of humanitarian aid in Sarajevo and other parts of Bosnia. One specific feature of Yugoslav Jewry has traditionally been its activity in the field of humanitarian aid; not only was this the case with the activities of La Benevolencija in war-torn Sarajevo, but it also became evident during the immediate post-World War II years, when the Autonomous Relief Committee was in practice the sole actively functioning Jewish organ within the Federation.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia caused Yugoslav Jews to reconsider their identification in the new national states. As a result, a reawakening of Jewish identification occurred in all the new states, with the possible exception of Slovenia. Slovenia was on the outer fringe of the war and its consequences in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and as a result no major changes took place among its Jewish population. Growing nationalistic ambiguities in both Croatia and Serbia excluded Jews from the possibility of identifying themselves with the Croats and the Serbs in the same way as they had previously been accustomed to identifying themselves as Yugoslavs. Jews had been well acculturated into the surrounding society of the former Yugoslavia and had felt themselves to be 'Yugoslavs' first and only secondly 'Jews'. The disintegration into the new national states made the previous identification impossible; especially in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, a 'Yugoslav' identification was out of the question. Identification, on an individual level, with Croats, Muslims or Serbs was also felt to be unnatural, and so there was only one way out – a return to Jewish roots and identification. The strongly acculturated crypto-Jews, who had for decades remained without contact with the Jewish communities, started to return. This is demonstrated by the fact that there are still about the same number of Jews (6,000) in the region of the former Yugoslavia as

before its disintegration, in spite of the fact that about 2,500 Jews have left the area. Freidenreich had assumed that about 90 per cent of Yugoslavia's Jews belonged to the Jewish communities[5] but this estimate must have been too high. Developments after the collapse of Yugoslavia have shown that only about 70 per cent of Jews can have been members of the Jewish communities. The revival of Jewish identification has rarely, if ever, been connected with Zionist ideology, or with a religious revival, though on an organisational level religion has currently gained more attention than before, especially in Zagreb and Belgrade, but instead a knowledge of Jewish history, traditions and culture has been a factor in moulding a new Jewish identification, which has found its expression within the Jewish community.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia failed to evoke a significant antisemitic movement in any part of the former Yugoslavia, which can at least partly be explained by the lack of deep-seated antisemitic tradition in Yugoslavia. There were sufficient numbers of targets for hate and suspicion even without blaming the Jews for the misfortunes of the former multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia. However, political philosemitism had its own role amid the disintegration, especially in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Through the policy of political philosemitism, the Jewish minority was instrumentalised during the war, and this was a role they obviously viewed with aversion. All the major warring factions in the conflict, using different means from the instrumentalisation of the Serbian-Jewish Friendship Society to the over-representation of Jews in high places under the Tudjman regime in Croatia, tried to demonstrate their democracy by displaying their good relations with the Jewish minority. There was even an attempt to escape international sanctions via Jewish connections, and by means of these connections the attempt was made to influence the policy of the USA and of the other Western nations. The Jewish communities endeavoured, for their part, to keep as low a profile as possible during the conflict, and succeeded in this, except for some sporadic outbursts of nationalistic sentiments by individual Jews. In general, the attempted utilisation of the Jewish minority to achieve the afore-mentioned political ends reflects a basically unnatural attitude towards the position of a particular minority, in this case, the Jewish minority. It reveals that they are still perceived as 'different' in post-Yugoslav societies.

The low, neutral profile was deliberately chosen by the Jewish communities in order to protect Jews everywhere in the former Yugoslavia. Understandably, Jews felt their position as a minority threatened by the sudden changes, and would clearly have preferred the preservation of the former Yugoslavia. The wheels of change, however, could not be stopped, and the Jewish communities had no choice but to adapt to the new situation and to adopt a public attitude in line with the politics of

5 Freidenreich 1979, 202.

the new host countries. Actually, this used to be the situation of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The multi-ethnic and multi-religious context of the Ottoman Empire attracted the Jews, for it gave minorities a protected position, and reciprocally led the Jews to identify with the central authorities. In this sense Communist Yugoslavia was a similar case. The Jews felt that their position in multi-ethnic Yugoslavia was secured, and therefore their objection to the disintegration was understandable as an inherited tradition of their forefathers. Among the Jews, disintegration was opposed least by the Croatian Jews. As the disintegration and turmoil became inevitable, Jews promptly adopted a public attitude in line with the new central authorities in the new national states, which was also a continuation of a centuries' old tradition of aiming to protect their own position. Thus a certain parallelism in the Jewish attitude toward the splitting up of a larger unit into smaller units in the Balkans can be seen in the cases of the Ottoman Empire, to some extent also the Habsburg empire, and finally Yugoslavia. This attitude was made possible only by the relatively secure minority position enjoyed by the Jews living under these regimes.

The Jewish communities survived the transition from Yugoslav to post-Yugoslav era. Owing to the large number of former crypto-Jews who have sought their Jewish identification within the Jewish communities since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Jewish population has not decreased despite the fact that about 2,500 have left the region. Activities have, in general, increased, and a wider variety of activities are offered than during the communist period. The revival of Jewish life, which had already begun at the end of the nineteen-eighties, received a new impulse in the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the accompanying war. As this impulse was obviously bound up with the conflict and the uncertainty of the future, it is likely to slow down with time. This can be observed in Serbia, in particular, which suffered from international sanctions and the totalitarianism exercised by the Milošević regime until the beginning of October 2000. The situation among Serbia's Jews became even worse as a result of the Kosovo war in 1999, as many young and able community members left the country. The uncertainty of the political development overshadows the Jewish community, and for the sake of the future, relations were maintained in Serbia both with the regime in power and with the opposition.[6] With the ousting of Slobodan Milošević, however, future prospects may be more promising, especially if the economic situation improves with the lifting of international sanctions.

The restitution of property issue, not only in Serbia but also in Croatia, shows the reluctance of the regimes to solve concrete problems that would be of extraordinary importance to the Jewish communities. Nevertheless, the range of Jewish

6 Singer 19.6.2000.

community activities is on a completely different scale compared with the period before the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and so there is no fear of the disappearance of Jewish life and communities from this part of the Balkans. The level of activities in the Jewish communities throughout the former Yugoslavia is at its highest since World War II. Predictions have often been made about the demise of Yugoslav Jewry but have proved to be premature.

The number of Jewish communities was almost the same before and after the disintegration of Yugoslavia.[7] There were 27 Jewish communities and three affiliated agencies (formerly independent communities) in Yugoslavia in 1988–89 immediately before the disintegration.[8] The number of communities in the same region about ten years later, in the year 2000, is 26 with one group (Albanian speaking Kosovar Jews in Prizren).

Of the former Yugoslav countries, the situation of the Jewish community seems to be most secure in Croatia because of its relative stability, the improving economic situation and the progress of democracy, especially after the Tudjman era. The basic problems of the Jewish communities, however, have not changed as a result of political disintegration. These are the advanced age of the members and the financial dependence on international Jewish organisations, above all on the JDC. The continuing self-perception of Jews as primarily Jews by ethnicity poses a problem when thinking in terms of religion. Inevitably, therefore, the link with the traditional understanding of Jewishness remains weak. The Jewry of former Yugoslavia – many of them themselves survivors of the Holocaust – survived again thanks to their organisational structure, which provided the framework for Jewish identification even in the most oppressive period after the Second World War. These communities skilfully profited from the historic change to stimulate and activate Jewish life in the post-Yugoslav countries. The Jewry of former Yugoslavia lives on, but now transformed into new, nationally organised Jewish communities. The tragedy of Yugoslavia gave an unexpected impulse to a strongly acculturated Jewish community, opening new prospects for future survival.

As is well known, the disintegration process of Yugoslavia has not yet come to an end. Relative stability has been reached so far only in Slovenia and Croatia, while Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, including Kosovo, are still vulnerable to future upheavals. The future of the Jewish communities is directly linked to the development of the societies surrounding them. The development towards open, civic and democratic societies is the best guarantee of continuing Jewish life in this region. In fact, this is the prerequisite for a viable Jewish presens in general according to Sergio Dellapergola.[9] In the worst scenario, the disintegration would

7 See maps 3 and 4 on the pages xii and xiii.

8 *Jevrejski Kalendar 5749 (1988–1989).*

9 Dellapergola 1994, 71.

continue with the secession of not only Kosovo and Montenegro but also Vojvodina from Serbia. This would be a major structural blow to the Jewish Federation in Belgrade, for it would be stripped of most its communities, and would mean setting up a new Jewish organisation for Vojvodina's Jews centred in Novi Sad. Thus, according to the worst scenario, the fragmentation of Yugoslav Jewry may continue. This is only a theoretical scenario, and given the situation today, unlikely to be realised.

Since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, three new Jewish communities have been reconstituted, Zrenjanin in Vojvodina, Priština in Kosovo, which was subsequently forced to close down its activities because of the Kosovo war, and Koprivnica in Croatia. These communities, once obliterated as a result of the Holocaust, have now re-emerged manifesting Jewish vitality and the capacity to survive a long period of invisibility. The mere awareness of Jewish origins can suffice, as the Yugoslav experience proves, to inspire the search to recognise one's own background, and lead to the development of Jewish identification. The war and the accompanying external threat were sufficient to ignite this process. The potential exists below the surface for the re-emergence of new communities even in localities where they have not existed since the end of World War II.

The findings of this study about different aspects of post-Yugoslav Jewry also demonstrate that the position of Jewish communities today resembles more the situation which prevailed in the inter-war period than that of the communist period. Activities are conducted without fear of interference from the authorities, Jewish identification lies in the foreground, Jewish religion has a more visible role and multi-functional activities can be freely developed. Consequently the transition from Yugoslav to post-Yugoslav reality can be said to reflect, to some extent, a mental transformation back to the nature and position of Jewry in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

As the geopolitical context of the Balkans has recently been changing, the Jewish communities living there have been attempting to find an adequate framework for their future life and activity in the region. The establishment of a new umbrella organisation is being planned for the Jewries of the so-called Stability Pact Countries of South-East Europe, a group to which countries of the former Yugoslavia also belong, and this plan was actually discussed in Skopje in March 2000.[10] This further demonstrates the flexibility of the Jewish organisations to adapt to changing realities, and to find the most appropriate forms of co-operation and activity. In practice, this would also mean a renewal of traditional links with the Jewries of Greece and Turkey[11], links which hardly existed during the communist

10 Finci 13.3.2000.

11 A new umbrella organisation including Turkey seems still problematic for the time being since Turkey's Jewry is not allowed to associate with any foreign Jewish organisations.

era. This possibility, in turn, also exemplifies the return to the position which prevailed during the inter-war period, when the freedom existed to create contacts without fear of intervention by the authorities. Whether there will be an official regional umbrella organisation or not does not alter the fact that a new and broader regional network of some kind is being formed following the fall of communism and Yugoslavia in the Balkans.