

Major Instances of Anti-Semitism in my Country and Their Underlying Reasons

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“Belgrade became the first bigger city in Europe which has been cleared of Jews – it became judenfrei”, declared Emanuel Schafer, Chief of the German police and Gestapo in Serbia, in 1942. This sentence best describes the worst anti-Semitic act ever committed in the area of today’s Serbia – the Holocaust. Of all the Jewish people who lived here before WWII, around 90% of them were killed and it wasn’t only the Nazis who played a big role but also a part of the Serbian forces which cooperated with Germans. Even if this was not the beginning of anti-Semitic acts in Serbia, it certainly was the darkest period of anti-Semitism in Serbia.

On the 27th of January 2015, during the conference held to recognize the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust, many representatives of the Jewish community in Serbia said that they live well here, unlike in the rest of the Europe. They said that Jews from some other countries are thinking more seriously about leaving their homes and going to Israel because of rising anti-Semitism and extreme nationalism. But that is not the case in Serbia. They do not feel threatened here.

Then I asked myself, are we really doing better than the rest of the Europe and, if so, in what ways? Is it true that there is no anti-Semitism in Serbia? To answer that question I needed to go back to the end of the WWII and follow the facts to the present.

After WWII, almost everybody thought that anti-Semitism in this region had ended. And really, there were no signs of anti-Semitism from the conclusion of the post-war trials of Nazi collaborators until the middle of the 80s. During that period, Jews were actually migrating to Serbia, mostly to Belgrade, because the government decisively fought against national, religious and ethnic hate, and even anti-Semitism. Ironically, that peaceful period ended with the democratization of the country. Without the system that had controlled the extreme nationalism that was raging at the time, an incorrect perception grew - that freedom of speech meant that you could verbally attack anyone. War and the disintegration of Yugoslavia created a fertile soil for a growing number of nationalist and racist organizations, all of which came from the underground, and started spreading hate toward neighbouring countries and all minorities, including Jews. In their eyes, guess who was guilty for the country’s breakdown? Jews were, of course. They also spread propaganda that Jews were responsible for the bombing by NATO, though any real

arguments of course. “Jews have spread all over the world and they control the USA, which is dominant in NATO”, they said.

Somebody can think now, “Ok, probably the government responded appropriately and prevented the spread of anti-Semitism in Serbia, which eventually led to a comfortable life for Jews in Serbia today”. Wrong. Reactions by the government were both rare and very mild. This resulted in the largest increase in the number of the Jewish people leaving Serbia since WWII. They mostly went to Israel, seeking a safe place to live. Today, only around 780 Jews remain in Serbia. What was once one of the largest minorities in Serbia became one of the smallest. Most people in Serbia today do not even know any Jews nor are any living in their neighbourhoods.

We can still see some anti-Semitic acts in Serbia, even though there are neither physical attacks on Jews nor those who struggle with anti-Semitism. Yet, it appears on the walls in the form of the graffiti, in the form of the desecration of monuments in cemeteries or the demolition of synagogues. Exactly two years ago, all of Belgrade was plastered with posters which claimed that now, 14 years after the NATO bombing of Serbia, Jews were still conducting their terror. This action was performed by the neo-Nazi organization “Blood and Honour”, whose members are mostly young people blinded with the fantasy of “clean Serbianism”. Maybe the worst form of today’s anti-Semitism can be seen in the bookstores. Over one hundred books, with titles like “Jewish ritual murder”, and which are probably in some sense worse than “Mein Kampf”, aim to spread anti-Semitism in Serbian society. The authors of these books are people who glorified Nazism and Fascism during WWII and who were close to the leaders of the “Chetnik” organization. These people came back to Serbia in the 90s and have continued their anti-Semitic propaganda.

So Serbia didn’t tackle the problem of anti-Semitism better than other countries in Europe, nor is it true that there is no anti-Semitism in Serbia. Along time ago, Jews in Serbia did what Jews in the rest of the Europe are considering now – they emigrated. Every one of the above mentioned facts prove that. Also, the mere lack of physical violence does not mean that Serbia is a good country for Jewish people. The fact that a very small number of Jews live in Serbia and that a huge percentage of society tends to have negative attitudes toward Jews (according to ADL research), best describes the irrationality of local anti-Semitism and allows us to conclude that Serbia may still be fertile soil for anti-Semitism.

We need to learn from this example, because there are many other minorities in Serbia that are currently under more active threat, like Roma, Bosniaks, Albanians, Croats, etc. We need to find a way to address the problems of all the minorities, to accept them as equal members of our society, and to allow them to have a peaceful life without the need to look over their shoulders all the time.