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TRACING VIDEOTAPED TESTIMONIES OF VICTIMS OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM FOR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES. THE MACEDONIAN CASE

The Second World War and the Holocaust in Macedonia
under Bulgarian Occupation

When discussing the deportation of the Jews from Macedonia, it is often first necessary to describe what happened on the Balkan Peninsula, more precisely in Macedonia, during the Second World War. After the German invasion in April 1941, Yugoslavia capitulated and was divided up. The Vardar part of Macedonia, previously part of the kingdom of Yugoslavia, was divided into a Bulgarian and an Italian occupied zone. The basis for Bulgaria's anti-Jewish measures is in the *Law for Protection of the Nation*, imposed by the ministry of internal affairs and public health on 23 January 1941 and ratified by the Bulgarian king, Boris III. It used the Nuremberg laws of 1935 as a template to preserve what newspapers in the early 1940s described as "the purity of the Bulgarian nation". Macedonians and other nationalities in Bulgarian-occupied Macedonia were immediately absorbed as Bulgarians, but Jews were denied citizenship. Between January 1941 and December 1942, 40 laws, regulations, instructions and decisions were introduced in Bulgaria and its occupied territories, targeting the Jewish population within the Bulgarian state borders and excluding them from economic and political life. Jews had to wear a six-pointed yellow star on their left sleeve, to distinguish them from other Bulgarian citizens. Decree Number 598, issued early in 1943, banned Jewish children from attending non-Jewish schools. In some ways, it paved the way for the deportation of the Jews, because it was followed by an

order from Alexander Belev ¹¹, the chief commissioner in the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, for civil servants to make lists of all Jews living in Bulgarian territory. Those lists were the basis of the Belev-Dannecker ¹² agreement signed on 22 February 1943, as a result of which the Bulgarian government handed over 20,000 Jews from Bulgaria, the Vardar part of Macedonia and Aegean Thrace to Germany for deportation. There had been about 8,000 Jews in Macedonia, within the kingdom of Yugoslavia, before the Second World War: 3,795 in Skopje, 3,351 in Bitola, and 551 in Shtip. On the night of 10 to 11 March 1943, Jews from those three cities were taken from their homes to the Monopol tobacco warehouse in Skopje. The state and local authorities had made extensive preparations. However, despite the above mentioned lists, containing the age, sex, profession and address of Jews living in Macedonia, the local authorities had to provide temporary accommodation for the period between the eviction of the Jewish population and their deportation. The whole process was carried out in a highly disciplined manner, without much resistance from the Jewish population or the local inhabitants. Two days after the arrests from Shtip, Bitola and Skopje, Belev issued Order Number 865, seizing and selling property owned by Jews said to have emigrated from Bulgaria, who were in fact about to be deported to the extermination camp Treblinka. On 22, 25 and 29 March 1943, 7,148 Jews from Macedonia were sent to Treblinka. None survived. According to the latest research, they were sent directly to the gas chambers on arrival. ¹³

Teaching about the Holocaust with Videotaped Bystander Interviews
Nowadays, the Jewish community in the Republic of Macedonia numbers nearly 200 members. Most are descendants of Jews who managed to escape into Italian-occupied territories. Tragically, the aim to annihilate the Jews in Macedonia had an almost 100 percent success rate for those implementing it. The Holocaust is taught in both junior and secondary education in Macedonia, presented during two history classes in the ninth (age 13–14 years) and third grades (age 16–17 years). In higher education, the Holocaust is taught within global and national or local topics dealing with the Second World

War. In 2016, my organisation, the *Institute of National History* in Skopje, introduced exploration of this issue in the postgraduate and doctoral studies at the *Saints Cyril and Methodius University* in Skopje; a first in the Macedonian education system. There is excellent cooperation between the Institute of National History, the *State Archive of the Republic of Macedonia* and the *Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia*, based on personal acquaintance and the mutual desire to study the life of the Jews in Macedonia before March 1943. The role of the *Bureau for the Development of Education*, which is part of Macedonia's Ministry of Education and Science, and actively participates in teacher training seminars and the preparation of textbooks, curriculums and teaching aids, has to be emphasised.

Teaching and remembering the Holocaust through narratives seems indispensable to those working with this subject, particularly for the future generations. Without living Jewish witnesses of the Holocaust in Macedonia, memories had to be sought elsewhere, among elderly non-Jews. The project, entitled the *Oral history interviews of the Former Yugoslavia Witnesses Documentation Project in Macedonia*, is part of the *Oral history interviews of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)'s Perpetrators, Collaborators, and Witnesses: The Jeff and Toby Herr Testimony Initiative*, a multi-year project to record the testimonies of non-Jewish witnesses to the Holocaust. The interviews were directed and supervised by Nathan Beyrak. The Macedonian part of the project was carried out between 2012 and 2014 in Bitola, Shtip and Skopje, where the Jewish population had lived until the Second World War. Thirty interviews were recorded and are available for educational and public use on the official web page of the USHMM. ¹⁴ Transcripts in Macedonian and English are being prepared and will in due course be available to the scientific community and all those dealing with this issue professionally. As the name of the project suggests, the focus was on Macedonian citizens of non-Jewish origin who were perpetrators, collaborators or witnesses of the multi-ethnic way of life in the Macedonian cities between the wars, and during the Second World War.

About the Interviews

Every interview is founded on oral history methodology. At the beginning of the process, local researchers traced witnesses. Professional teams filmed the interviews, usually in the witness's home, but sometimes at locations where the events described took place. Each interview is valuable and represents a rare oral source for everything that happened in Macedonia before and during March 1943, as the deportation of the Jews to Treblinka and further processes for stealing and selling off Jewish property at public auctions took place. This highlighted a need for video materials to be used as teaching tools for students in schools and universities in Macedonia. The collection allows future generations to go back in time through the narratives of collaborators and witnesses of the events that occurred in Macedonia before, during and after the Second World War.

The interviews can be divided into three groups. The first comprises witnesses who saw events directly associated with the deportation of the Jews from Macedonia or what happened later, the confiscation of Jewish property and its sale at public auctions. The second group consists of people who were buyers at these auctions, and the third is composed of people who participated in the demolition of Jewish houses after the Jewish population of Macedonia had been deported.

Although the State Archive of the Republic of Macedonia and the Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia possess an extraordinary archive of documents and photographs that deal with the life of Jews in Macedonia between the wars and up to their deportation, these 30 interviews represent a remarkable first-hand source of information.

Examples

I would like to highlight three key interviews. Their significance is neither in their length nor the traumatic memories recounted. They stand out because of the events through which the speakers passed as witnesses and the personal perspective this offers to the public and future generations. The first interview was given by Milan Terzovski (2014), who was mistakenly taken

to the Monopol tobacco warehouse in Skopje as a teenager, and spent about 48 hours with the Jewish population from Macedonia. Although he was young at the time, he gave us excellent information about the conditions in which the Jews were being held inside the Monopol tobacco warehouse during those two days. The second remarkable interview is with Aleksandar Nikolovski (2014), who lived next door to the Monopol tobacco warehouse in Skopje and was a daily witness of things happening in the yard of the building where Jews were being detained. On one occasion, Alexander, then ten years old, was invited into the courtyard by the Bulgarian soldiers and forced to retrieve numerous gold items from a pool with a shovel. He had to put them in a bucket and hand them over to the Bulgarian officer. The third especially important testimony came from Dimitar Andonov (2014), who lived in the city of Shtip. Dimitar, who was still at school, was recruited by the local government to help demolish houses in the Jewish neighbourhood. His testimony allows us to compare the role of the military, the police and the administrative authorities and their abuse of the local population. It shatters the myth in Macedonian historiography that local people had no role in the deportation of the Macedonian Jews and the subsequent sale and liquidation of their property. This interview is a complete counter-narrative to the official history in Macedonia and efforts to exonerate the local population.

Education with Interviews

The Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia was opened in 2011 as a permanent and indelible symbol of the suffering of the Macedonian Jewish population. Its educational programmes often include seminars on Holocaust education for junior and secondary school teachers from Macedonia and the Balkan states. This “educating the educators”, as it is called, is extremely important because these seminars provide teachers with materials and the latest information regarding Holocaust education in global and regional context, and show them what sources might be useful in their school during the history education classes. The thirty interviews undoubtedly represent an important segment of this training. During the seminars, teachers

are presented with clips from the interviews and given the opportunity to explore how to use interviews in history classes. The starting point is almost always the local history, followed by a focus on more specific segments, such as living together, community relations, deportation, the looting of Jewish property, etc. Educating the educators is only one step, perhaps one of the most important, to build a bridge between the findings of university professors and children in schools.

Regarding the various forms of antisemitism, it is important to be able to detect the smallest sign of it right from the beginning – in the past, the present and the future. This is where the teachers' role is crucial because they are in touch with future generations and have to direct them on the right path. The Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia organises educational seminars, alone or in collaboration with other organisations working on this issue, such as the *Centropa* 15 project in Austria and *Mémorial de la Shoah* in France. One of the best uses of interviews in history courses, interviews that were made using oral history methods and are part of this collection, was when in a high school in Skopje showed the testimony of a perpetrator involved in destroying houses in the Jewish neighbourhood, followed by an interview with a bystander. Comparing the two very different accounts gave the students a great opportunity to create their own unique picture of what had been going on 70 years ago.

As Eduardo Galeano put it so beautifully: “History never really says goodbye. History says ‘See you later’” (2013). Using the videotaped testimonies in our educational programmes we are constantly facing our joint past through a different, very approachable dimension.

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- 1 Alexander Belev (1900–1945) was a Bulgarian political figure and a lawyer known for his extreme antisemitism. He was one of the founders of “Ratnik”, a far-right Bulgarian fascist organisation. From 1942 to 1943, he was the chief commissioner of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, the state body that regulated public relations under the provisions of the Law for the Protection of the Nation. In 1945 he was sentenced to death and executed.
- 2 Between 1940 and 1942, Theodor Dannecker (1913–1945), SS Hauptsturmführer, was responsible for the deportation of 13,000 Jews from France to the Auschwitz extermination camp. As a man trusted by Adolf Eichmann, he was sent back to Berlin and became the highest German official in organising the Holocaust in the territories occupied by Bulgaria. After being arrested by US-American Forces in 1945, he committed suicide in Bad Tölz, Germany.
- 3 The scientists who deal with this issue, according to the documentation in their possession, are familiar with the events in the tobacco warehouse in Skopje and the route along which the trains with the Jews from Macedonia were deported. However, thanks to the memories of Chil Rajchman, which were first published in 2009 in French under the title *Je suis le dernier Juif. Treblinka (1942–1943)* and translated into Croatian in 2014, a clear picture began to appear. In Chapter 15, entitled Transports of the Bulgarian Jews, Rajchman remembers the arrival of the Jews from Macedonia and their last moments, see Rajchman, Chil (2014). *Ja sam posljednji Zidov*, Zagreb: Fraktura, pp.122–126.
- 4 See www.ushmm.org; <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn50874>, accessed 12 July 2017.
- 5 See http://www.centropa.org/de/country_header/centropa-austria, accessed 27 September 2017.