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ACTR Final Report

Performing Tradition in the Modern Times: Laura Papo Bohoreta and Sephardic

Women's Search for Identity in Interwar Bosnia



Laura Papo Bohoreta and her sisters in front of their family house in Sarajevo circa 1929¹

¹ Courtesy of Sarajevo City Archives

Hypothesis, Research Objectives and Methodology

In one of her last diary entries, almost as if knowing that the end of her life was near, Bohoreta reflected, in a few brief sentences, on her life and work.² Her last words were for me, sometimes her historian but always her admirer, almost numbingly shocking. My heroine was confused, tired, and reluctant to qualify much of her work as important and impactful on the larger social processes of her time. Her attitude was completely devoid of self-praise. These last words seemed more like a summary of all of her mistakes in life rather than her many achievements. I was not ready for her to tell me about those mistakes, since I had only recently discovered how meaningful and important her work is for explaining an individual's relation to historical processes over which she has no say and which, at the same time, she truly manages to influence. And here I was, at almost the very beginning of her story—one in which her disappointments often guided her actions.

The work I propose to do can be understood as one that crosses boundaries between historical biography and microhistory.³ While I intend to write about Bohoreta's life, her life-story in this work will be used to anchor a study; this study will attempt to explain convergences of many historical events and social forces influencing, shaping, and at the end destroying Bohoreta's life. Thus key events of her life will shape this work, as is the case with many biographies, however, at the same time, my goal is to,

² Parts of one of Bohoreta's diaries were published in her niece's Gordana Kuic's book *Balada O Bohoreti* [*Bohoreta's Balad*]. See Gordana Kuic, *Balada o Bohoreti* (Belgrade, Serbia: Narodna Knjiga-Alfa, 2007), 52.

³ On commonalities and differences between microhistories and biographies see "Historians Who Love too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography" by Jill Lepore in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (June, 2001), 129-144.

“...evoke a period, a mentalité, and a [set of historical] problems...”⁴ or achieve nonbiographical goals closer to that of many studies known as microhistories. In other words, this work endeavors to discern the broader contours of the social and cultural landscape of the Sephardic community in interwar Bosnia and Yugoslavia by looking at Bohoreta’s life. My goal is not to completely obscure the singularity and significance of Bohoreta’s life and work, especially since she was in many ways a unique woman of her own times, one who created opportunities for herself as the leader of her community in the interwar Yugoslav public arena when these opportunities were almost non-existent for women of her times.⁵ Only by way of the process of recognizing Bohoreta’s life will we be able to value this life as an allegory for examining the broader issues faced by women in her own time.

My work is closer to studies such as *A Midwife’s Tale*⁶--Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s brilliant social history of eighteenth century New England told by using the diary of a midwife and herbalist—than biographies portraying influential people and focusing on the minutiae of their lives as opposed to the social processes surrounding them.

⁴ Ibid., 132

⁵ While my work will not shy away from showing the importance of Bohoreta as an individual, my work will follow in the footsteps of, as Simone Laessig points out in the introduction of *Biography Between Structure and Agency*, “The recent trend toward discontinuous instead of linear narrative approaches, toward montages and constructions with emphatically multiple perspectives, in which the same life is related and interpreted from different viewpoints.” See Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Laessig in *Biography Between Structure and Agency* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 10.

⁶ Besides Ulrich’s book, other studies can be regarded as equally influencing my work in crossing the boundary between biography and microhistory such as Natalie Zemon Davies’ *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) or Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

Sources I intend to use are much broader than those used in Ulrich's study. While I plan to focus on Bohoreta's book, articles, plays and poems, I also plan on using newspaper articles, governmental, and, in particular, police archival sources. These will be used to explain the world around Bohoreta from the opposing angle, one marked by the prevailing governmental and societal attitudes towards women such as Bohoreta. These sources should also work to provide description and analysis of the context in which Bohoreta lived.

As a work of cultural history situated in the interwar period, also known as the first Yugoslav period, my project specifically interrogates questions of Sephardic women's experiences as individuals who were caught in the midst of the turbulent changes of Empires and the creation of a new multinational state. My goal is to accomplish two linked tasks during my research: to reclaim the experience of Jewish women as they acclimated to the socioeconomic and ideological challenges of modernity in Bosnia, particularly in the interwar period; and to explore the role of ideas about gender in the construction of Jewish identity among Sephardic Jews in interwar Bosnia.

Despite all of the provisions on freedom of religion and full political and civil rights reiterated in the Yugoslav constitutions of 1921 and 1931, the number of Sarajevo Sephardic Jews decreased significantly; their cultural and political organizations were closely monitored by the government and the pressures to assimilate and accept the idea of the Yugoslav nation or, as an alternative, to identify either as ethnic Croats or Serbs, plagued the community. This study investigates how these changes, in particular the pressures to assimilate, affected Sephardic women. It also investigates how these women in turn created new alternatives for themselves and their community.

While the entire Sephardic community was affected by dramatic changes brought on them after the creation of Yugoslavia, it was Sephardic women who had to redefine their roles and create their own places within the new social, economic, and political structures. Many women entered secular schools for the first time in order to learn basic skills as salesclerks, seamstresses, and in rare cases, teachers, pharmacists, doctors, and even lawyers. As they entered these public spaces, they faced double marginality—as Jews and as women. In turn, Jewish women and Sephardic women in particular had to configure their identities on the basis of the options available to them as both Jews and women.

Questions I intend to pursue based on a preliminary reading of unpublished archival sources, include: How did Sephardic women react to and, even more importantly, how did they resist the increasing pressures to assimilate into the larger Yugoslav society? How did the Yugoslav government treat ethno-religious questions in multiethnic Bosnia? In particular, how did they approach the burning question of Jewish assimilation? Finally, I plan to integrate Sephardic women's experiences of assimilation into the larger world of multicultural Sarajevo and explore how and to what extent the local government, intellectuals, and ordinary Bosnians of all religious backgrounds responded to the government's attempt to create a more uniform society; and also: How did they perceive the role of Sephardic women in this process?

My work is rooted in a wide range of historical studies that, despite their opposing and sometimes widely disparate approaches, are almost equally important for the way my work has been shaped thus far.

First and foremost, Bohoreta's life story contributes to our understanding of how Sephardic women in particular re-imagined their identities as they became part of the newly created Yugoslavia, amidst the changes that engulfed all of the members of interwar Yugoslav state but profoundly affected Sephardic women. Although the study of Ashkenazi women has developed in recent years, the history of the Sephardic community in Bosnia and former Yugoslavia has received relatively scarce attention. More recently, both feminist and non-feminist scholars have begun to reconstruct the experiences of Jewish women as a lineage no less important in the evolution of Jewish politics, culture, and identity. Historians engage either in rewriting Jewish history by including women, as in the case of Marion Kaplan,⁷ or in revising the old concepts and methodologies as Paula Hyman's work does.⁸ With these developments, the center of analysis has shifted to the East European Jewish family. Historians have begun examining the women in a Jewish family as modern times eroded many traditional values.

Many of these studies are groundbreaking and provide important background for the study I intend to conduct. Nevertheless, the subjects of these studies are Ashkenazi women who lived in different contexts and thus faced different sets of issues and problems than Sephardic women. Sephardic women, like Laura Papo Bohoreta, faced far more dramatic charges in their own communities. Sephardic women faced a more troubling and more intense set of issues than Ashkenazi women in Eastern Europe, by

⁷ Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family and Identity in Imperial Germany* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁸ Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: the Roles and Representation of Women*, (Seattle and London: The University of Washington Press, 1995).

virtue of the transition from the Ottoman period, in which the Sephardic community, like other communities, had existed as a separate and semi-independent community, into a political, economic, and social system in which that semi-independent status was impossible to retain. The basis of their existence and the system in which the Sephardic community operated had completely changed. While these changes had begun during the Austro-Hungarian period, they reached a crisis point in the interwar period. The role of Sephardim women in this new system, a multinational state that was struggling to deliver promises to its minorities, was intensely debated.

More importantly, both Hyman and Kaplan investigate women's roles in the private sphere and inside their families. Neither of the two authors considers the impact that women made on social, political, and economic developments outside their families. My research shows that Sephardic women did in fact play a crucial role in the public life inside and outside of their communities.

Bohoreta's story also belongs to the stories of European women experiencing a tumultuous life in interwar Europe, such as those written as part of Maria Bucur and Nancy Wingfield's collection of essays *Gender and War in Twentieth Century Eastern Europe*, or even more akin to Marina Vujic's book on Marija Juric Zagorka's life. Yet even though Bohoreta's story is a story about a woman, this study will not be used simply to lend agency to women such as Bohoreta; instead, it will examine social relations between sexes by looking at Bohoreta's relationships with men; her concepts of women's as oppose to men's responsibilities, abilities, and placement within their communities; as

well as the way these concepts had changed over time.⁹ Through Bohoreta's story, I will examine the struggles that women faced while living in a place where competing ethnic identities at times did not allow for some of the more pressing issues—those important to women of her time—to surface. Unlike other women of her time, such as the Croatian journalist, novelist, and dramatist Marija Juric Zagorka, who examined relations between men and women of her time and published articles about the political status of women in Croatian society, Bohoreta was not a feminist, in the traditional sense.¹⁰ She struggled with the many demands of her own community when trying to explain the place of Sephardic women. Nevertheless, her work is no less important as it shows struggles of women who felt allegiances to different causes and the challenges that multiethnic societies pose for women living in them.

The Sephardic communities of interwar Yugoslavia has either been studied in comparative studies with Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities, or as a study of the Sephardic communities of the Balkan Peninsula, a fact that makes their every day lives, and especially Sephardic women's discourses, almost unknown to us. For example, Harriet Pass Friedenreich's *Jews of Yugoslavia* represents a groundbreaking and fairly

⁹ As Joan Wallach Scott has suggested in her article "Gender: A useful Category of Analysis," the "her-story" has numerous limitations and it reinforces the idea of particularity of women against the universality of men. Instead, according to Scott, using a category of gender: "...becomes a way of denoting "cultural constructions"- the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men...Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on sexed body." See Joan Wallach Scott "Gender: A useful Category of Historical Analysis" *The American Historical Review* Vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec., 1986), 1053-1075

¹⁰ For more on Zagorka, see Marina Vujnovic, *Forging the Bubikopf Nation: Journalism, Gender and Modernity in Interwar Yugoslavia* (New York: Lang Publishing, 2009).

comprehensive study of the Yugoslav Jewry in the interwar period.¹¹ Yet while her study examines political processes such as interwar instabilities in the political and economic spheres and the affect that these had on the Jewish communities, Freidenreich does not explore in detail the transformation of the Sephardic Jewish community, nor does she incorporate some of the methodological innovations of discourse analysis, cultural history, and women's and gender history. More importantly, Freidenreich regards the Sephardic community as a community that remained mostly traditional¹² even at the beginning of the twentieth century, despite contrary evidence of changes in the political, economic, and cultural lives of the Sephardic community that began in the middle of the nineteenth century when the Austro-Hungarian Empire gained control over Bosnia and Herzegovina, in accordance with the Treaty of Berlin.¹³

Unlike Freidenreich, my understanding of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Sephardic community is that it was undergoing significant changes in character; this becomes evident when following Bohoreta's life-story. Soon after the Austro-Hungarian Empire overtook Bosnia and Herzegovina, her family moved from Bosnia to Istanbul in hopes that they would be able to maintain their livelihood there. This was not the isolated move of a single family based on subjective and imagined ideas of what it

¹¹ Freidenreich's study focuses on Sarajevo, Belgrade and Zagreb Jewish communities but not the Novi Sad, Macedonian, Dubrovnik or Split Jewish communities. See Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America) 1973.

¹² Freidenreich understands traditional aspect of the Sephardic community as politically, economically and culturally backward due to the Sephardic community's ties to the former Ottoman Empire. She compares Sephardic communities as traditional as oppose to the "...modern, fairly assimilated Ashkenazic communities..." See Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America) 1973, 23.

¹³ See Peter Sugar, *Industrialization of Bosnia and Herzegovina 1878-1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963).

would be like to live under foreign, and most importantly, Western rule, even if their expectations and perceptions of the Ottoman capital had been false.¹⁴ Instead, as Freidenreich herself notices, many Sarajevo Jews slowly migrated to either Serbia or the remaining parts of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵ Others who remained in Sarajevo were almost constantly defending the essence of their identity from both foreign and domestic forces.

By tracing Bohoreta's life and work, this study is an attempt to understand the effect that the modernization of political, economic, and cultural institutions had on Sephardic communities, and to gauge the various responses, such as Bohoreta's revival of tradition in the public arena, to this modernizing process. In contradistinction to Freidenreich's point that Sephardic communities remained traditional, I will show that Sephardic communities, within Bosnia and Sarajevo in particular, underwent significant changes, and in the process of modernization defended their own tradition by emphasizing not so much religiosity among their members, but the cultural markings of their community, such as language and traditional norms.

Since the publication of Freidenreich's book in 1973, Esther Benbassa and Aaron Rodrigue have written the only additional book focusing on the Sephardi community in the Balkans. One of the issues examined in their work is the building of a unique

¹⁴ Bohoreta's family moved to Istanbul in hopes to continue with the economic and communal activities without realizing that in fact many of the changes that they were trying to escape did not bypass Istanbul Jewish community either. Interestingly, however, several months after their arrival to Istanbul they enrolled their daughter in the Alliance Universelle Israelite school, one of the agents of change and "modernization" of the Ottoman Jews. For more on Bohoreta's life in Istanbul see her published diary in Gordana Kuic, *Balada o Bohoreti* (Belgrade, Serbia: Narodna Knjiga-Alfa, 2007). For more on Alliance in Istanbul see Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey 1860-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America) 1973, 89.

Sephardi identity among Sephardi youth who came into contact with the West by migrating to Zagreb and Vienna in particular.¹⁶ In reaction to the processes of assimilation, these Bosnian Jews, according to Benbassa and Rodrigue, took refuge in the Sephardi identity. But the process of creating a Sephardi identity among Jews from Bosnia as analyzed by Benbassa and Rodrigue took place outside of Bosnia. What took place among Sephardi Jews, and especially women, within Bosnia, in terms of recreating their identity, remains unclear in this study. Sephardi reactions to the replacement of Ottoman multiconfessionalism with layers of multinationalism in their own environment requires further explanation that my study will provide.

Even more importantly, in Benbassa and Rodrigue's study, Sephardi's relation to the Yugoslav identity and the concept of Yugoslav and/or Bosnian Sephardi Jews is not explored. Unlike Katherine Fleming, who in her Greek-Jewish history analyzes the solidification of the concept of Greek-Jew as taking place in concentration camps, and later for those who survived the Holocaust in emigration, Benbassa and Rodrigue do not explicitly examine when and even more importantly how Sephardic Jews' Bosnian identity interrelates with their Yugoslav identity.

The Sephardi community's experience will be compared to the experiences of acculturation among other Jewish communities in Europe as presented in studies such as Ezra Mendelsohn's¹⁷, but their story will also be told as part of the larger story of interwar Yugoslavia and Bosnia. It will examine how Jewish communities in Bosnia

¹⁷ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

relate not only to other Jewish communities in the larger Yugoslav state, but also to the position of these communities in the relation to other ethnic groups.

None of these stories found a place within the relative dearth of studies on the society of interwar Yugoslavia. Yet two of these studies are important for my work, despite their very different approaches to the political events in interwar Yugoslavia.¹⁸ In the first study, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History and Politics*, the author Ivo Banac analyzes interwar political parties and events that enveloped several conflicts between Croats and Serbs. His study is rooted in the idea that interwar Yugoslavia was a multiethnic state unable to cater to the needs of numerous nations and nationalities, and, as such, was destined to become authoritarian in the process. Banac, influenced by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*¹⁹, defined the nation as a group of people sharing cultural traits and imagined historical consciousness.²⁰

¹⁸ Studies of the first Yugoslavia in English language are numerous. However, most are either less important or not directly relevant to my argument even if they are outstanding. For example, studies such as Charles Jelavich's *South Slav Nationalisms: Textbook and Yugoslav Union Before 1914* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1990) or Jozo Tomashevich's *Peasants, Politics and Economic Change* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press), 1955 examine the Yugoslav nationalism and dealings with the politics of industrial development in economically diverse regions of the new country. Even Robert Donia's and John V. Fine's *Tradition Betrayed*

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson defined nations as imagined communities or communities in which each member holds in his or her mind a mental image of their affinity to their community. Anderson describes this further when he says that a nation, "...is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso) 1991.

²⁰ Banac is not completely faithful to Anderson's idea of the imagined communities supplementing it with Karl Deutch's definition of nationality as distinguished from a notion of nation and Miroslav Hroch's ideas on modern national integration. Moreover, unlike Anderson, it is not clear that Banac believes that nation is a product of modernity something that other historians of the Yugoslav lands such as John R. Lampe uses in his analysis of the nation and nationalism in Yugoslav lands. See "Failure of the Yugoslav National Idea" by John R. Lampe in *Studies in East European Thought*, Vol. 46, No. ½. June 1994, 69-89.

On the other side of the spectrum is Dejan Djokic's *Elusive Compromises: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia* who argues, in defiance of several studies (proliferated in the 1990s) focusing on the second Yugoslavia's violent demise and reiterating that the Croat-Serb relation was inherently violent,²¹ that in fact the interwar period was marked by attempts on both sides to find a compromise that could satisfy demands heard in both Serb and Croat camps. **Invalid source specified.**²² The attempt to bring these two sides were, as Djokic claims, constantly present, but became even more intense in 1930s, when economic and social instability affecting not only the Yugoslav state but also other European states, threatened to destroy this new country. The subjects of this political study are the two largest ethnic groups in Yugoslavia. Djokic recognizes his inability to bring into the fold stories of other ethnic groups, despite the fact that other historians have successfully argued that interwar Yugoslav politics cannot be best observed by looking exclusively at Serb-Croat relations, and that other relations such as the Serb-Slovene are, if not more important, than equally important, when analyzing the political upheavals in interwar Yugoslavia.

²¹ Many studies of ethnic relations in Yugoslavia that appeared in 1990s emphasized the violent nature of the relationship between different ethnic groups as "ancient hatreds" when in fact as Eve Levine shows there was no such thing as inherent "ancient hatred" among different ethnic groups in Yugoslav lands. According to Levine: "The intermingling of religious customs and holidays from different faiths in particular testifies to the absence of antagonism..." As quoted in John R. Lampe in "Failure of the Yugoslav National Idea" *Studies in East European Thought*, Vol. 46, No. 1/2. June 1994 69-89

²² Djokic, Dejan. *Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 11.

Thus the main difference between Djokic's work and my own is that Djokic focuses on the two largest ethnic groups in Yugoslavia.²³ Unlike Djokic, the subjects of my study are Sephardic Jews: a smaller, but nevertheless important group whose case illuminates our understanding of interwar ethnic relations in Yugoslavia from the margins. This study does not pretend to claim that the concerns of the Sephardic community were as intensely debated as the Serb-Croat drama within the Yugoslav public sphere. Nevertheless, issues that were of concern to the Sephardic community in Sarajevo help us to understand the minority group's, and especially, the Sephardic group's position in the newly created multiethnic country.

Along with Djokic's study, my work explores the willingness expressed among the leaders of different communities to foster cooperation between different ethnic groups in the newly created Yugoslavia. The Sephardic Jews of Sarajevo continuously engaged with other ethnic groups as they found their place within the uncharted waters of interwar Yugoslavia. Yet these uncharted waters were inherently unstable and often a source of conflict. Besides taking into account the many ways that groups such as the Sarajevo Sephardic community cooperated with other groups throughout the interwar period, my study incorporates conflicts that were often just as present in the dealings of different ethnic groups as they were voicing their own claims for their own place in the colorful and sometimes volatile interwar public life.²⁴

²³ It's also important to mention that Djokic's study is about state building. The focus of his study is neither nation building or as in my case cultural and political activities of minority group.

²⁴ Another important difference between my and both Djokic's and Banac's study is that I focus on the cultural political events in the Sephardic community while both of the authors focus primarily on the political developments-both state and nation building in interwar Yugoslavia. In that sense my study is closer to Andrew Wachtel's *Making a*

Much recent feminist scholarship touches directly or indirectly on questions of memory. But scholars working in other areas of cultural and collective memory, especially the memory and post-memory of the Holocaust, have only recently begun to engage with feminist theoretical analyses of gender, sexuality, race, nation and class. As Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith observe in their introductory essay of a special issue of *Signs*, devoted exclusively to issues of gender and memory, many interpreters of the Holocaust have actively resisted making gender differentiations among witnesses and analyzing how representational paradigms might be gendered.²⁵

Only recently has there been an emphasis on the analysis of the events of the Holocaust as well as Holocaust memory by using gender as a category of analysis. For example, a common claim regarding the inclusion of women in the history of the Holocaust is that they were uniquely at risk because of their marked maternal and sexual bodies. In Carol Ann Rittner's and John K. Roth's book *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, there is an emphasis on women's sexual and reproductive experiences, pointing out that they suffered specifically because their bodies were marked by Nazi and anti-Semitic policies and practices.²⁶ On the other hand, in *Women in the Holocaust* Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman look at elements such as culturally defined gender roles of

Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia. According to Wachtel he concentrates on "...culture and cultural politics in the South Slavic lands...in order to delineate those ideological mechanisms that helped lay the foundation for the formation of a Yugoslav nation and the Yugoslav state." See pg 5 in Andrew Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998). However, his study differs from mine in more than just the fact that he focuses on the building of the Yugoslav nation. Wachtel follows continuities and discontinuities in the building of the Yugoslav nation in a stretch of time that my study does not cover.

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ C. Rittner and J.K. Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, (New York: Paragon House, 1993).

Jewish men and women before the war, the differences in the nature and degree of harassment, work requirements, and the different experiences in every day life, in order to provide a framework for an exploration of women in the Holocaust. There were also those who warned against essentializing women's experiences by reading their bodies only as sexual and maternal, as this would eventually reproduce gendered stereotypes of women.²⁷

The works that dealt more directly with the Holocaust memory have raised questions involving gender as a disruptive element of analysis. In their analysis of the film *Shoah*, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have argued that while the director, Claude Lanzmann, relies overwhelmingly on the authoritative male voices of witnesses, "traces of gender differences are nonetheless reinscribed in this film."²⁸ According to these two authors, women in *Shoah* are mainly spoken about by male witnesses.

Even in memorials and museum exhibitions, the embodiments of public remembrances of the Holocaust, women are often seen as figures of representation, as symbols rather than voices or agents of their experience. One of the few feminist scholars looking at gendered representations in Holocaust memorials, Judith Baumel sees women represented predominantly as mothers in the memorials in Israel.²⁹

My work will engage recent studies on institutions of Jewish public culture in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Eastern Europe and Russian Empire by focusing

²⁷ Susan Horowitz, "Gender, Genocide and Jewish Memory," *Prooftexts: A Journal of a Jewish Literary History*, 20 no.1 (2000), 158-190.

²⁸ See Hirsch and Spitzer, "Gendered Translations: Claude Lanzman's *Shoah*," in Angela Woollacott, ed., *Gendering War Talk*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 89.

²⁹ Judith Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1998).

on the role of Yiddish theater in facilitating some of the most pressing issues that Jews faced in this period. Jeffrey Veidlinger's book *Jewish Public Culture in the late Russian Empire* will be an important guide for understanding why and how public culture in general, and theaters more specifically, became an important forum of public expression for Jews. Most importantly, in the vein of Veidlinger's study, I plan to analyze how some of the more traditional and ritual performances are directly or indirectly transferred to more modern verbal and nonverbal theatrical expressions. Bohoreta's many plays, just like the Yiddish performances and European theater as a whole, seem to be an outgrowth of religious rituals and festivals. Most notably, Laura Papo Bohoreta's theater play *Esterka* resembles some of the characteristics of traditional celebrations (Purim).³⁰ Veidlinger's analysis of purimshpil, a form of folk theater common throughout the Ashkenazic world, and its influence on the Yiddish theater, will be examined and applied to the theater that was emerging among Sephardim in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

In addition to Veidlinger's book, Joel Berkowitz's collection of essays titled *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches* provides my work with an important guide for understanding the origins, significance, and the influence of purimshpiel for the development of the Yiddish, and in the case of my study, Ladino theater. In particular, I am interested in applying Ahuva Belkin's analysis of purimshpiel's importance for the

³⁰ The first records of Sephardic theater in South Slav lands date from the second half of the XVIII century in Dubrovnik. Plays were performed in Jewish quarters and Christians were forbidden by their church to watch them. Thematically they were connected with the Purim, although at times as for example recorded in 1793 a permission was asked from Dubrovnik authorities to perform a tragedy. The first performance in Judeo-Spanish was held in Sarajevo in 1888 and the play was entitled *Judas Maccabaeus*. For more information on Sephardic theater in South Slav lands see Aleksandar Gaon's *Spanski Jevreji Juznoslovenskih Prostora*. [Sephard Jews in South Slav Lands] (Belgrade: Jewish Historical Museum, 1992).

broader masses; this importance endured despite the dismissal voiced by so many community leaders because of the purimshpiel's grotesque humor, crude physicality, obscenities, and cursing. Belkin believes that the parody and other unexpected features of purimshpiel were part of the folk festive culture and thus should not be regarded as degenerate, a description often used by Jewish leaders to lower its importance.³¹

By using their work, I plan to trace common traits and shared characteristics between the Yiddish theater and the Ladino theater created by Bohoreta. My work, however, will add to the existing work on Yiddish theater by involving themes that were more important to Sephardic women in the interwar Balkans. Thus, issues that are gender specific, such as the perception that the rate of intermarriages between Jewish women and men from other ethnic groups had increased (challenging the survival of the Sephardic community in Bosnia), or issues that women faced at work as women and Sephardic Jews will be examined in my work by way of their expression through Bohoreta's plays.

Preliminary Research Findings and Policy Recommendations

The first time I visited Bosnia in 2001, after many years of exile, I passed by a building in downtown Zenica, a small Bosnian town, that reminded me of a Synagogue. The building was attached to a coffee shop and there was a lively group gathered around it. I was intrigued and decided to inspect the building at a closer distance. The first object I noticed was a plaque that was dedicated to the fallen victims of fascism. When I entered the building, I met several employees who were all, it seemed, aware that the building, now a town's museum, used to be a Synagogue. However, after asking numerous

³¹ See Ahuva Belkin in Joel Berkowitz, *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), 33

questions, I realized that even though the employees were aware of the building's original use they knew very little about what took place with the community that once frequently visited this religious institution.

In many ways this short story exemplifies the state of the Holocaust studies in Bosnia. For an ordinary person in Zenica a Synagogue that once was an important point of meeting for a thriving Jewish community represents just a museum with an awkwardly attached coffee shop.

In Bosnian politics, however, the Holocaust memory is still being used in political wars over whose ethnic group has suffered the most during World War Two and in what ways the victimhood of one group can explain the atrocities committed in the 1990s.

The greater the number of Holocaust projects funded and studied in this region, the greater the impact will be on understanding the gravity of all the problems surrounding the Holocaust memory as well as the recent genocide.

By focusing on the life and work of one woman, this project attempts to raise issues concerning women's lives in multiethnic communities in both the time of peace and war.

Many of the questions that this study raises can be applied to multi-ethnic societies around the world, nevertheless, it is also specific in its attempt to explain the multi-ethnic living in the light of the Holocaust.

While visiting Bosnia I worked in over ten archives and with numerous archival collections. In Sarajevo, my main archival center, I used collections in Sarajevo City Archives, Bosnian State Archives, the Jewish Museum, Jewish library and

Documentation center, Zemaljski Muzej, National library and numerous private collections.

Sarajevo City Archives, I was able to review several interwar newspapers such as Jugoslovenska Posta and Jugoslovenski list as well as Zidovska Svijest. Sarajevo City Archives housed several collections of books published in the interwar period and dealing with the questions of minorities in Bosnia, women's role in the newly formed Yugoslavia as well as the Jewish community in Bosnia. All of these sources allowed me to explore and examine the interwar social and cultural life of Jewish women and in particular Bohoreta's world that I knew very little about due to the lack of these type of studies in modern historiography.

The State Archives of Bosnia and Herzegovina proved to be one of the most important institutions that houses archives of many women's groups from the interwar period. Despite the difficulty of locating these sources (the State Archives have published guides of their archival sources, however, these are very vague and rarely list all of the documents included in folders) and many difficulties in dealing with the employees in these archives, I was able to view three entire folders and several partial folders containing details on various women's groups and Jewish social and cultural organizations.

I was fortunate to have met several helpful and professional archivists and librarians in the Jewish library and Documentation center who managed to find digitalized copies of Jevrejski Glas unavailable elsewhere in the Balkans as well as many collections of photographs. While working in these archives, I was introduced to

Bohoreta's distant relatives who provided me with further leads and contacts in the Balkans with more information pertaining to Bohoreta's life and work.

Another surprising and unexpected source of research materials was the Department of Special Collections in the National and State Library. Despite the fact that the library was still suffering from the effect of the 1992-1995 conflict when the library lost many of its collections, I was able to locate literature pertaining to the cultural and social life of interwar Sarajevo. This literature gave me an important background to the study I intend to write.

Archival sources located in Sarajevo were crucial in helping me define the world of the inter-war Sarajevo, Sephardic Jews and women's groups active at that time. Surprisingly, there are numerous archival collections that can help historians of the inter-war period and the Sephardic community in their attempt to gain a better understanding of their life prior to the Holocaust. The most burning and immediate problem is the lack of resources for archives in the region to organize and classify these researchers.

Besides the archival sources, I was able to interview several survivors of the Holocaust who had some, even though slight, recollection of the life prior to the Holocaust as well as their survival and the post-war reconstruction of the Yugoslav society. Their family documents and stories aided my research in understanding the archival sources found in State and City archives by providing personal stories, often difficult to find in the archives.

In order for the United States to understand how to continue with successful policies in this country, its officials and policy makers need to know the history of multiethnic living and the challenges that Bosnia as a multiethnic society has faced

throughout history and continues to face today. This can be done through studies that emphasize social developments in the twentieth century as well as individual experiences of these same developments. One of the most tragic events that took place in Bosnia as its population was tortured and killed and its cities ransacked and burned at the end of the twentieth century was an attempt to completely destroy its multiethnic face. Yet while the recent events and genocide in Bosnia were tragic, we tend to forget that in fact the multiethnic state of Bosnia has been threatened many times. The Holocaust destroyed one of the pillars of the Sarajevo society. Almost ten percent of the total population in Sarajevo was destroyed during the Holocaust. We need to be able to understand the way multiethnic society functions in Bosnia in order to prevent future destructions and conflicts in this area.

