

# Jews in Croatia – Jewish Communities

(by Melita Švob, Izvor, Zagreb with Jewish community Zagreb Research and Documentation Center »Cendo« in Zagreb and K. D. Šalom Freiburger, Zagreb, 2004).

Ana Perinić

The second edition of the book »Jews in Croatia – Jewish communities« by Melita Švob [Izvori, Zagreb and Jewish community Zagreb Research and Documentation Center »Cendo« in Zagreb and K. D. Šalom Freiburger] in two books on Croatian and English language presents Jewish history from their first settlement in Croatia until today. The author of this book is scientific associate at the Institute for Migration and Nationalities in Zagreb and for the last ten years she has been engaged in research of Jewish population in Croatia. Melita Švob is director of the Research and Documentation Center inaugurated in 2000 in the Jewish community, Zagreb. She has founded, together with eng Zoran Mirković, a database of Holocaust victims and survivors in Croatia. The second edition of the book Jews in Croatia has been expanded by research on the Croatian Jewish communities and the effect of the Holocaust on socio-demographic changes and migrations of Jewish population.

The first part of the book »Jews in Croatia – 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century« concentrates on historical and legal framework of Jewish presence in Croatia, the position of Jewish communities and their institu-

tions during that time. It also gives population censuses from 1857 to 1991. The author presents the history of Jewish settlement in Croatia, migrations, life and organization of Jews and Jewish communities. She traces their presence through many political regimes and various governmental systems in Croatia over hundred years: from the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Independent State of Croatia (NDH) during the Second World War, to the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, to the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and finally to today's Republic of Croatia. The population censuses and the places where Jews lived (according to the censuses) give clear evidence of their historical presence in Croatia.

The best example of Jewish presence, work and influence are their communities (*kehile*). They are organized Jewish communities in Diasporas, which go back as far as 2500 years. These are local Jewish organizations with authority that governs all Jewish religious and related matters, making sure Jewish tradition is honored where Jews are present. *Kehile*

are not only religious but they are also social communities because they take care of all their members, especially of those who are in need. Life in these communities is based on ethical principles of Judaism.

In the second part of the book »Jewish communities in Croatia« 29 such communities, which existed before the Second World War, are described. They were the centers of life, identity and activity of Jews in Croatian towns and other settlements. The Jewish community in Zagreb is treated separately in co-authorship with Zoran Mirković. The processes of the formation of Jewish communities in Croatia and organization of their life in many ways depended on position and rights of Jews in Croatia during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as on the global changes in Europe at that time. The author tried to give a short account of each community and its institutions, its organization and activities in Croatia, followed by original documentation.

The number of Jews in every community according to the population census 1857–1931 is shown graphically. Tabular presentation of the numbers of Jews in 1921 and 1931 is given for every community in the whole District and not only for the places where Jewish communities were situated, since Jews from surrounding places were under the competence of one communal rabbinate. This causes for the difference between the population census and direct data from Jewish communities. The data are necessary for the understanding of the specific conditions of Jewish settlement in this geographic area. These communities existed before the Second World War and most of their members were victims of the Holocaust. After the War only a few survivors returned, while several communities disappeared altogether. The Jewish community in Croatia now consists of 10 local branches. That is all that has remained of

the once vigorous Jewish community of 30 local communities after the outbreak of the Second World War. The book also describes the development and organization of Jewish communities, schools, women's and youth organizations under the influence of Enlightenment in Europe and later by the Zionist movement, which affected the changes in Jewish community of Croatia, but also in its total population. The lists with names of victims of the Holocaust and, wherever it was possible, the names of those who survived are of special importance. In this way the book avoids general and approximate assessments of the numbers of people who were killed in or survived the War, avoiding generalizations too often used in politics and polemics. Accordingly, each victim and each survivor keeps his or her dignity and individuality, which is lost in generalizations based on numbers and statistics. This book presents an elaborate scientific study, substantiated by a number of original documents from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century. Relevant demographic data are presented in the form of tables and figures, while the book also includes original photographs, various private correspondences and documents that present the evidence of time and real life stories. It also gives an account of life and activities of Jewish communities in Croatia and their distinguished members and how they contributed to the economic and cultural life of wider local community. Private letters, photographs and postcards are simple mementoes of people and their families who once populated these communities, animated their associations and whose lives were lost or just barely preserved in time of destruction and prejudice. »Jews in Croatia – Jewish communities« by Melita Švob is valuable contribution to all relevant scientific research of Jewish population in Croatia. It offers opportunities for future research projects while the published preliminary

data provide a chance for eventual correction with help of Holocaust survivors and people who are searching for the information about their family members and friends. Analysis and reconstruction of

history and activities of Jewish communities in Croatia clearly indicate Jewish presence in Croatian history and their contribution to the enrichment of Croatian heritage.

*A. Perinić*

*Institute for Anthropological Research, Amruševa 8, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia  
e-mail: aperinic@inantro.hr*