Philo-Semitism in Serbia Circa 1940

David Pickus (Arizona State University)

The term "philo-Semitism" is easier to define than to explain or discuss. A neologism coined as a counterpart and answer to "anti-Semitism," its use has never caught on in the wider public, probably for the obvious reason that "love of the Jews" or "friendship toward the Jews" has never been as organized, destructive or wide-spread as its opposite. Despite this, Philo-Semitism has indeed had a historical impact, and not only in the English-speaking and/or Calvinist influenced lands where its impact is most evident. To some extent, philo-Semitism was (and is) visible even in the most virulently anti-Jewish parts of the world, including central and eastern Europe. Moreover---and this is the heart of the essay to follow---in Serbia, where anti-Semitism was never as strong as elsewhere, philo-Semitism played (and plays) an interesting role in Balkan self-understanding. With that in mind, I take up the question of who defended the Jews, who "loved" them and why.

A word about the particularities of Serbian history sets the stage: while there is certainly no shortage of "anti" feelings in relation to other nations and groups in Serbia, in comparison with other states, the Jews, to a noticeably smaller degree, were identified as the primary enemy. This, from one angle, may have a "rational" reason, as Croats and Bulgarians, Germans and Turks, and Albanians (to name only a few) have come into more direct and bloody conflict with Serbs than Jews have. Yet, while it is true that Jews did not pose a territorial threat to Serbian territory and national claims the way other groups did, it is quite impossible to identify an unambiguously "rational" kernel in ethnic hatred. Was there ever a truly rational reason that some groups in places like Germany, the Ukraine, Romania, etc. singled out the Jews as the principal national enemy? And what should we make of the fact that anti-Semitism can play a noticeable role in the politics and identity of regions where Jews hardly live? In all this, it is something of an illusion to believe that

something objective and unassailable in the history of the nation discloses the deeper logic of philo or anti-Semitism. Instead, to reach some sort of explanation, we must combine these objective explanations with an investigation of the psychological underpinnings of hatred or friendship toward the Jews.

To sum up, although the feelings expressed in philo-Semitism are typically not as ugly and not as cruel as those expressed in anti-Semitism, in their own way, they are as self-serving and internally motivated as those driving Jew haters. Rather, than denounce this process, or declare the ideology it represents to be illegitimate, it is better understanding the logic and aims of philo-Semitism. What does it seek and, in the end, what can it accomplish?

Our Hebrews

Because this is such a wide topic, it is best to focus on a single case study, proposing hypotheses that can then be tested in wider and more rigorous contexts. To do this, I want to concentrate on one of the most difficult and horrifying moments in east European nation building. This is Serbia/Yugoslavia on the eve of the Nazi invasion. Not only was the idea of a south Slav nation about to receive a blow from which it, ultimately, failed to recover, but as part of the process of unleashing and egging on ethnic and genocidal warfare, the hope that the Jews could find a normal and peaceful place among the peoples of the Balkans was simply destroyed. Although the full extent of the damage could not be predicted in 1940, it was without question possible to see that anti-Semitism brought with it a wider "agenda" for ethnic intolerance and conflict in the Balkans. What then could someone say to defend the Jews circa 1940?

Luckily, we do have a document that can shed some light on this issue. It is a practically unknown book. Titled, *Nasi Jevreji: Jevrejsko Pitanje Kod Nas* (Our Jews: The Jewish Question Here), the slim book is an anthology of short statements by public figures, primarily Serbs, defending, in various ways, Jews and the Jewish presence "with them." Holding a copy of volume one in your hands (volume two was never published), it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the book was intended as

what we would now call a "public relations effort." More investigation of this topic is needed, but the full story of how *Our Jews* came into being will probably never be known. What can be known is what the contributors chose to say, and not only about the Jews, but about their own self-understanding and hopes for the future. This collective ideological "portrait" tells an interesting story.

The main theme is announced in a brief introduction to the collection. Stressing that what sparked the editors to embark on this project was nothing more than objectivity and the search for objective truth, they then declare that their nation (meaning the Serbs), "in our own eyes, and those of others" is a "prisoner of justice." (p. 3) Consequently, they are unable to hate the Jews, as indeed they cannot hate any another nation different from their own "flesh and blood." Whether this self-description can, in fact, be called objective is one question, but another question--and one that is equally important to ask--is why it was desirable for participants in this exercise to present themselves as "prisoners of justice."

To get an answer, we can identify two underlying tropes that appear like leitmotivs through the contributions to the anthology. They are;

1. That the principal metaphor for understanding anti-Semitism is as an epidemic. It is something that blows in from the outside of the country, and that fellow citizens only express it because they have "caught it."
2. That the contributions Jewish Serbs have made to their nation were not motivated by the needs of an out group. Rather, they were made with the same spirit that animates the patriotic contributions of the Serbs.

I would like to provide a few examples of these leitmotivs, before I present a conclusion, and suggestions for further research and discussion.

- A contribution by one Mihalo Kujunčić (former vice-president of the National Assembly) seeks to study the Jewish presence in south Serbia dispassionately, only using what it can present as unquestionable facts. After laying out statistics revealing that there are not many Jews in his region anyway--7500 out of 1.6 million, he notes the fact that most

employed Jews work in small enterprises, and make local contributions to the economy. "Can they really be that dangerous?" (p. 44) he asks rhetorically. They do not represent foreign capital he declares.

Stepping back from the specific claim Kujunčić was making, we should think about whom he wanted to reach and how he might have understood himself in the process. While a great deal cannot be read into a single comment, it does not seem farfetched to suggest that Kujunčić presented emotional appeals as being something foreign to himself as his region. Consequently, the claim that the Jews represent no threat is also a way of reasserting that the Serbs can take care of themselves; that they are not susceptible to the manipulative efforts of others, and that Serbs can rely on themselves not to overreact. this is not the only moment in the book where this message is conveyed.

- A Certain Derviš Korkut, curator of the state museum in Sarajevo, also declared that anti-Semitism could only be brought into the country from the outside. And if you do happen to see something that looks like native anti-Semitism, it actually has to do with business competition, and has nothing to do with current anti-Semitism. He also says that that, in other countries, anti-Semitism serves as a "lightning rod" (p. 53) for the signaling of more serious problems.

Stepping back from this claim (often made by Jews themselves), we see a further assumption that Serbian society is more cohesive than other places, as is thus not as susceptible to mass delusions as they are. This notion is also suggested in various forms throughout the book. It suggests that philo-Semitism was, in part, attractive because it allowed Serb--typically on the defensive--to draw favorable comparisons between themselves and other nations

- A certain Vojislav Nenadić, former Secretary of the National Assembly, notes that Serbian Jews not only consider themselves Serbs, but proved in struggles for national liberation against the Turks. As he put it, "during the entire period of our national-revolutionary labor, a situation where some Jews informed to the Turkish government did not occur.

> Nor did they testify against us. Examples of treason on the part of the Jews did not exist." (p. 62)

Stepping back from this sentiment--also echoed elsewhere--we not only see the common theme in defenses of the Jews that, if Jews are treated well they become loyal citizens, but also the implication that not every minority would acquit itself so well, and not every host people would show itself so grateful as the Serbs. In this respect, philo-Semitism serves as a means for praising the spirit of a people and through that, its sense that it need not rely on internal coercion, but through generosity can incorporate others into its collective action.

Conclusion

What implications does a glance at this philo-Semitism have for our understanding of Serbian nationalism and nationalism in general? Though, on the surface it may seem like a denunciation of Serbian philo-Semitism to say it had self-interested motives, it should be kept in mind that nationalism has always understood itself as a "higher egoism." The fact that there was an instrumental aim in appreciating the Jews is something that can be accepted as a matter of course. What needs to be discussed is whether philo-Semitism did indeed make a change in the theory and practice of Serbian nationalism, and whether this change should be seen as a positive one.

As might be expected, the matter is mixed, requiring more investigation. I have, however, two concluding thoughts that I would like to propose as an invitation for further discussion:

First, the most "self-serving" elements of philo-Semitism may, in fact, have been the ones most useful to Serbs and Jews in the long run. This because it provided both minority and majority communities with a predictable means of fraternizing. Jews would know what they needed to do to evoke the "generous" elements in their host community and Serbs would know what they could expect when they made magnanimous efforts toward the Jews. That this process was not

so easily repeated in other European nations only served to make the bond between Serbs and Jews feel more special and lasting.

Second, a social process that succeeds on one level may cause unsolvable problems on another. The ongoing declarations that Serbian Jews were not different from Serbs emphasized the fault line that anti-Semites exploited, namely the ease with which the Jews could indeed be distinguished from the rest of the population. One of the sad ironies of a very sad story is the fact that the very efforts to imagine the Jews as part of the nation also illuminated the conditions with which they would be rejected. Since philo-Semitism is anti-Semitism turned on its head, its presence could never eliminate the danger that it, in different conditions, could be "turned back." Put more bluntly, the need for a philo-Semitic book of this sort shows how vulnerable the Jews truly were.

All this goes back to the theme first voiced at the start: we need to be as candid about the needs that motivate friendship as we are about the needs that motivate hatred. Doing that can help us grasp more clearly just how fragile (and threatening) the creation of a national community can be.

ФИЛОСЕМИТИЗМЪТ В СЪРБИЯ (ОКОЛО 1940 Г.)

Дейвид Пикъс
(Щатски университет на Аризона)

(Резюме)

Обстоятелството, че антисемитизмът не пуска корени в балканските страни по начина характерен за много други балкански страни, е било често предмети на коментари. Това, което заслужава да бъде изследвано е логиката, смисълът и функциите на това, което можем да наречем "филосемитизъм". В този доклад вниманието е съсредоточено върху Сърбия и особено върху интелектуалните усилия да бъдат защитени евреите в периода между двете световни войни.

Основният извор за този доклад е един сборник публикуван в навечерието на нацисткото нападение. Озаглавен "Нашите евреи" (1940), сборникът съдържа кратки статии от известни обществени фигури

обясняващи причините за тяхното противопоставяне на антисемитизма и защитата на присъствието на евреите в Сърбия.

В доклада се прави подробен анализ на тези аргументи. Целта е да се изясни сложния и противоречив въпрос за националната идентичност. Става дума за представата за "избраността". Доводите в защита на евреите от сръбските общественици е чувството за взаимното сходство. И сърбите и евреите възприемат себе си като малки, но особено забележителни народи, борещи се за своето оцеляване във враждебния свят, който ги заобикаля. Политическите и социалните последствия на това психологическо сходство заслужават по-задълбочен анализ, какъвто съм опитал да предложа в своя доклад.