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THE HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN NOVI SAD BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS*

Abstract: Between the two world wars, Novi Sad had numerous communities engaged in humanitarian work, to which the members of the Jewish community made a substantial contribution. Guided by traditional values, they provided aid to impoverished fellow citizens, orphaned children, and the elderly. Among these organizations, the society called Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care (Kora hleba i Dečje obdanište), founded in 1925, stands out for the scope of its activities. In addition to various forms of support and aid, the association also organized fundraising events that enriched the town's cultural and artistic life. Based on relevant historical sources and literature, the paper examines the humanitarian activities of the Jewish community in Novi Sad and its contribution to the town's social and cultural development.

Keywords: Kingdom of Yugoslavia, interwar period, Novi Sad, humanitarian societies, Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care, Jewish community, Jelena Kon, concerts.

1. The Tradition of Humanitarianism in the Jewish Community of Novi Sad

In all the regions they inhabited during the first half of the twentieth century, members of the Jewish community sought both to adapt to their surroundings and to preserve their own identity. Alongside religion, language, and culture as its fundamental elements, certain individual and collective traits of the members of the Jewish community played an important role in sustaining that identity. Reflecting philosophically on Jewish people, General Mihajlo Trifunović, King Alexander's aide-de-camp, identified the following personality traits in his unpublished book called *Zakon solidarnosti* (Law of Solidarity):

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spiritual and physical resilience, adaptability to the environment, solidarity, and a talent for effective organization.¹ These traits found their fullest expression in humanitarian work, an area in which Jewish people frequently took the lead within the societies in which they lived.

In earlier periods of its history, the Jewish community was isolated from the rest of society. Since the budgets of Jewish communities were modest and donations were often the sole source of funding, the community's survival depended on voluntary work. Over time, this evolved into a fundamental principle guiding their functioning and organization. It was carried out through committees for culture, education, social and health issues, as well as those for youth and women. Even today, the work within Jewish communities remains predominantly voluntary, although the number of committees has been significantly reduced since the Second World War.²

In the 19th century, with the acquisition of civil rights, the Jewish community became more actively involved in the societies in which they lived. This was most often achieved through the activities of various associations. According to Nebojša Popović's research, members of the Jewish community were among the first to establish societies and organizations for providing humanitarian aid to impoverished compatriots, social institutions aimed at improving public health, and establishments dedicated to the cultural and social enlightenment of the population.³ These became a defining feature of social life, particularly in larger communities such as the Jewish community of Novi Sad in the interwar period.

During this period, Novi Sad was home to a large number of organizations engaged in humanitarian work.⁴ Almost every association, in addition to its primary field of activity (educational, health, cultural, or sporting), also took part in humanitarian activities, and many new ones were founded as well. For the Jewish community, humanitarian work was rooted in its religious obligation. In Judaism, the worship of God is inseparable from the practice of charity.⁵ Jewish sacred texts, such as the Torah, instruct believers to show compassion and aid the poor, presenting this as the highest form of goodness. Even at times when strict observance of religious rules had diminished, providing aid to the poor remained a fundamental value for many members of the Jewish community.⁶

The Jewish community of Novi Sad had a long tradition of charitable work. As in all larger cities, there was a Chevra Kadisha Association, founded in the 18th century with prominent religious characteristics, predating the official recognition of the Jewish community in Novi Sad.⁷ This association was the predecessor of all later Jewish humanitarian societies. Among the oldest of these in Novi Sad was the Jewish Shelter for the Elderly and Orphans Society. It originated as a separate committee within the Chevra

¹ Popović 1997: 155.

² *Ibid.* 47; Aleksić 2006: 93–94.

³ Popović 1997: 47.

⁴ According to the data for 1933, there were 31 organizations engaged in humanitarian work. Historical Archives of the City of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Municipal Government of Novi Sad 1918–1941, Fond 150, Box 846, no. 13698/34, Data on humanitarian aid and health societies. (abbreviated: HACNS, MGNS).

⁵ Learning (and education) also constitutes a religious obligation. Marinković 2022: 38.

⁶ *Ibid.* 38, 41.

⁷ Šosberger 1998: 59.

Kadisha Association, and its main task was to establish a home for the elderly as early as the 19th century, though it was not formally constituted as an independent society until 1930. Isaac Alcalay, Chief Rabbi of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, was named the honorary president, while a merchant from Novi Sad and civic activist Josif (Julije) Kon served as the president of the Society, and the Society's founder, Julije Hajós, was appointed as the executive president. The Society faced numerous challenges, particularly the lack of adequate facilities to accommodate the most vulnerable. These obstacles were eventually overcome, and by the mid-1930s, the Society had acquired a new building,⁸ while a special orphanage wing was added in 1939. The home could accommodate approximately sixty elderly residents and the same number of children. Its work was governed by specific regulations and an activity plan. The Society was active until 1944, but its activities were not resumed after the war.⁹ It is worth emphasizing the importance of prominent individuals in humanitarian work, as illustrated by the example of Josif Kon. This wealthy Jew from Novi Sad, drawing on the authority of his positions in both municipal and provincial government, did not confine his efforts to the Society he chaired but also provided generous support to other charitable societies in town.¹⁰

Scholarly research has confirmed that women played an especially active role in the work of humanitarian societies.¹¹ This was certainly the case in Novi Sad, where, as early as 1876, the Jewish Women's Charitable Society (*Frauenverein*) was founded, as a branch of the Chevra Kadisha Association. It was among the oldest Jewish women's societies not only in Serbia but also in Yugoslavia.¹² For Jewish women, humanitarian activity carried multiple layers of significance: It contributed not only to strengthening the ties between the Jewish community and the broader social environment in which it lived, but also to the process of women's emancipation. One of the first scholars to recognize this, nearly seventy years ago, was Edita Vajs, who described the patterns by which this process unfolded.¹³ The earliest entry of Jewish women into the public sphere took place through societies dedicated to humanitarian work. Since the aims of these societies were built upon long-established traditions of charity, such engagement enjoyed strong communal support. As education became more accessible to women and the number of women intellectuals and those active in public life grew, the membership and activities of women's organizations expanded into the cultural and educational spheres.¹⁴

⁸ Today, the building on Maksima Gorkog Street houses the offices of Radio-Television of Vojvodina. Petruševski 2018.

⁹ Šosberger 2001: 88, 104–109; *Id.* 1998: 103–105.

¹⁰ Josif-Julije (Žil) Kon (Mako, 1868–Novi Sad, 1942) was the owner of the shop called *Kod plavog konja* and a councillor of the Danube Banovina. For his merits, he was awarded the Order of the Yugoslav Crown, the Third Class. He was one of the founders and a member of the board of directors of the Crust of Bread Humanitarian Society, which was led by his wife, Jelena Kon. Both were killed in the Novi Sad Raid in 1942. *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije: biografski leksikon* 2011: 119.

¹¹ Šosberger 2001: 112; Ivanković 2017: 9; Vidosavljević 2021: *passim*; Veselinović 1998: 489; Filipović, Vučina Simović: 2013.

¹² The work of the Society continued after the Second World War within the framework of the women's section of the Jewish community. Šosberger 2001: 87–88; *Id.* 1998: 59–60.

¹³ Vajs 1957–1958.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 149.

2. The Founding of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society in the 1920s

Building on the foundations of civil equality achieved in the preceding period, the Jewish community in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia experienced prosperity. The research done by Milan Koljanin has shown that the state authorities maintained a benevolent attitude toward them: Both individual and collective rights were guaranteed, government bodies refrained from intervening in the internal affairs of the Jewish community, and the work of Jewish organizations was conducted with complete autonomy.¹⁵ Under such conditions, the community's ties with the broader social environment became increasingly stronger, primarily through business activities but also through other social factors. Whereas in earlier periods members of the Jewish community had lived in separate town districts, during the interwar years they began to settle in other parts of the town as well, which fostered their wider social integration. In lifestyle, behavior, clothing, and habits, most members of the Jewish community did not differ from people around them. While the Jewish communities retained their religious character, they also assumed new social and cultural responsibilities during this period.¹⁶

Researchers agree that the interwar period marked the peak of development for the Jewish community in Novi Sad.¹⁷ This was evident, among other things, in their cultural and humanitarian contributions.¹⁸ The First World War had left long-lasting consequences in the form of economic crises and widespread poverty. In Serbian and Yugoslav society, many families had lost their members, which gave rise to a heightened need for humanitarian action. On this subject, writer and publicist Dušan S. Nikolajević noted in his preface to *Almanah humanih društava* (in English *Humanitarian Societies' Almanac*):

Humanity is a force capable of preserving the values of civilizations and of paving the way toward a new and more humane future. /.../ People should be devoted to the nobility of spirit in order to eradicate brutality. And to beauty, in order to eliminate all that is ugly. The strong should serve the weak.

In the same text, he particularly emphasized that humanitarian work must be organized.¹⁹

In this context, on the initiative of the philanthropist Jelena Kon,²⁰ the Bread for the Poor Society was founded in Novi Sad on May 21, 1925, with the aim of providing aid to

¹⁵ Koljanin 2008: 70–71, 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 88.

¹⁷ Aleksić 2006: 95; Šosberger 2001: *passim*.

¹⁸ In the interwar period, humanitarian activities were organized, systematic, and extensive. They were connected with cultural activities, as the societies' revenues from donations were most often raised through cultural events. Cultural associations also organized fundraising events. In 1928, the Union of Cultural Societies (Serbian *Savez kulturnih društava*) was established in Novi Sad as an umbrella organization that coordinated the activities of associations across various fields of work. Kostović 2014: 170.

¹⁹ Nikolajević 1940: 8.

²⁰ Jelena Kon (Eisenstadt, 1882–Novi Sad, 1942) was born in Austria into the Jewish merchant family Spitzer. After marrying merchant Josif Kon, she moved to Novi Sad. Egeljić 2020.

impoverished fellow citizens, primarily the elderly and workers, who had been most severely affected by the economic crisis of the mid-1920s.²¹ Unlike other associations, which often bore ethnic or religious markers, this society retained a strictly humanitarian character. Its guiding principle throughout its existence was the provision of aid “regardless of religion or nationality.”²² Under the motto “he who gives quickly, gives twice,”²³ efforts were made to ensure that the provided aid reached those in need by the shortest and most efficient route. This aligned with the prevailing view that private initiative was more effective in the humanitarian field than the actions of state authorities, since, as was often explained, “the true goal is often missed due to bureaucratic regulations.”²⁴ The establishment of the Bread for the Poor Society was welcomed by the Novi Sad public. Newspaper *Zastava* reported that “Novi Sad has acquired a new institution of which it may rightly be proud,” founded “through the efforts of a noble soul from our Novi Sad.”²⁵ The Society distributed aid “without making a distinction of religion or nationality” and, on the same principle, selected its membership, which was:

... bound together with a strong bond of brotherly love into a noble and beautiful whole. /.../ To help the poor in these difficult and self-centered times, and to do so collectively, is the only phenomenon that can, to some extent, reconcile us with many other unpleasant aspects of our political and social life.²⁶

The Bread for the Poor Society was an example of a well-organized institution. It had its own statute and program of activities adapted to the actual needs of the social environment. Its organizational structure further contributed to its efficiency. The highest governing body was the assembly, which met once a year, no later than the end of June. The board of directors was responsible for implementing the program of activities endorsed by the assembly and was required to convene at least once every two months. Every three years, the members elected a president, two vice-presidents, and one secretary and treasurer. The supervisory board, comprising five members, was tasked with overseeing the financial affairs.²⁷

It is particularly important to emphasize the role of Jelena Kon, who served as the Society’s long-term president and, as was often the case with humanitarian associations, left a distinctly personal mark on its work. According to the Society’s statute, her official duty

²¹ Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, The Royal Court of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1918–1948, Fond 74, 250–376, Brief Report on the Previous Work of the Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society. (abbreviated: AY, RCKY); Historical Archives of the City of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Municipal Administration of the Free Royal City of Novi Sad 1941–1944, Fond 259, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Under the High Patronage of H.M. Queen Marija: Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society in Novi Sad: Founded in 1925*. Novi Sad: Printing and Publishing Joint-Stock Company, n.d. Hereafter referred to as: HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society*.

²² HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society*, 8.

²³ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, The Speech of Jelena Kon at the 10th Jubilee Annual Assembly of the Society; *Pravda*, 6 May 1938, 12.

²⁴ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society*, 8.

²⁵ *Zastava*, 119, 28. 5. 1925, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Copy of the Statute of the Bread for the Poor Society; HACNS, MANS, Box 201, 34808/1941, *Societal Rules*, 1937, 5–7.

was to represent the organization before the public and in dealings with state authorities.²⁸ She presided over meetings of both the assembly and the board of directors and initiated all of the Society's activities. In addition to her primary responsibilities, she also oversaw the finances. Drawing on her reputation and extensive contacts, she successfully secured stable sources of income, which necessitated regular communication with municipal and later provincial authorities. She assiduously ensured that every contribution was used in the most effective way.²⁹ Furthermore, she established cooperation with institutions abroad in order to transfer best practices to the Society's work.³⁰ Personally engaged in all humanitarian activities and in the daily care of the most vulnerable citizens, she also organized numerous events that enriched the cultural and social life of Novi Sad in the interwar period.

In accordance with its program of activities, the Society's primary and most fundamental task was the distribution of bread to the poor, as its very name indicates.³¹ During the first few months of its existence, reports on the donations collected and aid distributed regularly appeared in the Novi Sad press.³² Once a week, usually on Saturdays, bread was distributed—1 kilogram per adult and 0.5 kilograms per child. Although this was far from sufficient, there was a deliberate effort to sustain the action, at least as an expression of empathy and solidarity. The women members of the Society personally oversaw the quality of the bread, organizing tastings and selecting from among the offers of local bakeries. There were also auditing committees that visited the poorest families once a week to determine who among the ones that applied for aid to Jelena Kon needed it the most. In the beginning, this humanitarian action was modest, with around 30 kilograms of bread distributed, but later donations increased to 200 kilograms per week.³³ In her address at the Ceremonial Assembly marking the Society's 10th anniversary, President Jelena Kon reported that in the previous year, 11,337 kilograms of bread had been distributed to around 217 families.³⁴ At the same time, the Society also organized the distribution of staples, particularly before major religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter.

During the Society's first year of work, the need to broaden the scope of humanitarian activities became evident. Guided by the intention to direct aid where it was most needed, Jelena Kon initiated new areas of engagement—providing protection for children and support for mothers. Accordingly, at the assembly's regular annual meeting held on November 7, 1926, the Statute was amended and the Society adopted a new name, the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care (*Kora hleba i Dečje obdanište*).³⁵ A program

²⁸ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Copy of the Statute of the Bread for the Poor Society; HACNS, MANS, Box 201, 34808/1941, *Societal Rules*, 1937, 7.

²⁹ She wrote petitions requesting exemption from fees for organizing cultural and social events at which funds were raised for charitable purposes. HACNS, MGNS, Box 774, 35878/1926.

³⁰ *Zastava*, 182, 12 August 1925, 2; *Dan*, 137, 5. November 1937, 3.

³¹ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Copy of the Statute of the Bread for the Poor Society; *Novi Sad*, 5, 1925, 2.

³² *Zastava*, 182, 12 August 1925, 2; 122, 29. September 1925, 2; 160, 17 July 1925, 2.

³³ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Brief Report on the Previous Work of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society; HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 6; *Zastava*, 120, 31 May 1925, 3.

³⁴ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, The Speech of Jelena Kon at the 10th Jubilee Annual Assembly of the Society.

³⁵ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 3.

of child protection was devised, modeled on social welfare practices in Western European countries. In line with the plan for further expansion of the Society's activities, the following institutions were to be established: a children's day care, a school cafeteria, a milk kitchen, a nursery for infants, as well as medical and legal counselling services for mothers.³⁶ Insight into the Society's work, based on preserved archival materials and reports in the contemporary press, reveals that these objectives were achieved within a relatively short period.

Observing that many children in Novi Sad were living in poor conditions, inadequately fed and clothed, and that a large number of single mothers were unable to care for their children while working, the assembly decided to establish a day care facility within the Society, which was ceremonially opened as early as 1927.³⁷ The Ministry of Health provided premises, which the Society's members furnished in accordance with contemporary hygienic standards and with the most modern equipment.³⁸ The day care admitted children between the ages of one and six for full-day care while their parents were at work, with priority given to the children of single mothers. According to the president of the Society, the day care would serve as "a substitute for maternal love and paternal care." A nurse was employed to care for children aged 0–3, while a teacher worked with those aged 3–6. The children were cared for, dressed in clean clothing, and provided with three meals—breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack. A physician examined them daily. The educational program was based on the English Model, which, in the president's view, had proven to be the most effective. The children acquired basic hygienic habits and patterns of behavior and were expected to apply these habits and patterns in their broader social environment. The overarching aim was to raise them to become good individuals and responsible citizens. On major holidays, celebrations and performances were organized, during which clothing, footwear, and sweets were distributed to children.³⁹ According to a report on its activities in 1926, the day care cared for about twenty children daily; by the mid-1930s, when the Society acquired its own building, this number had increased to as many as seventy.⁴⁰

The expansion of the Society's work continued with the opening of a school cafeteria in 1928. In the cafeteria, during the school year, around 250 pupils received lunch on a daily basis. Teachers who worked in Novi Sad schools sent children to the cafeteria if they had noticed that their pupils were "frail."⁴¹ The most remarkable achievement of this humanitarian initiative was that, on an annual basis, approximately 55,680 meals were provided for around 200 children.⁴²

³⁶ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 3.

³⁷ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Brief Report on the Previous Work of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society; *Vreme*, 15 September 1927, 3. In 1925, a significant number of cases occurred in which the police authorities brought abandoned and impoverished children to Jelena Kon, requesting that she provided care for them. HACNS, MGNS, Box 776, 7790/1927, 21 February 1927.

³⁸ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Brief Report on the Previous Work of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society.

³⁹ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 6–7.

⁴⁰ HACNS, MGNS, Box 776, 7790/1927, 21 February 1927.

⁴¹ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.* The Speech of Jelena Kon at the 10th Jubilee Annual Assembly of the Society.

Another noteworthy achievement of Jelena Kon and her associates was the establishment of a milk kitchen in 1930.⁴³ It prepared sterilized milk and milk formulas prescribed by a physician following a child's medical examination. Initially, the work was overseen by Ilija Arsenović, a pediatric specialist.⁴⁴ The milk kitchen was furnished in a modern way, with advanced milk sterilization equipment produced by the Lautenschläger Company, for which, according to one report, as much as 100.000 dinars was spent. Milk was distributed free of charge to impoverished parents, while those in somewhat better financial circumstances paid a symbolic fee.⁴⁵ Available records indicate that, by the mid-1930s, when the Society's activities reached their peak, 150 bottles of milk were distributed daily, amounting to 46,240 milk formulas annually. Due to the high mortality rate among young children, this initiative was regarded as a significant contribution to improving children's health.⁴⁶

Given the breadth of its humanitarian activities, the Society required substantial financial resources. A significant share of its overall income came from the contributions of founding members (who initially paid an amount of 5.000 dinars), benefactors (who first contributed with 2.000 dinars), and bequests.⁴⁷ Reports on donations regularly appeared in the Novi Sad press, especially when the annual assemblies were organized.⁴⁸ The Society's work was also supported by the municipal authorities and later by the authorities of the Danube Banovina. The Town of Novi Sad consistently allocated 3.000 dinars per month to the Crust of Bread Society, in addition to occasional subsidies for the furnishing of new buildings and the maintenance of its departments.⁴⁹ The Society's president, Jelena Kon, also participated in various funding competitions organized by the Royal Court for the allocation of state funds to humanitarian institutions.⁵⁰

A significant source of funding was voluntary contributions collected during social and cultural events. Charity events, dances, soirées, and tea parties were organized and attended by prominent ladies of Novi Sad. The members of the Society also organized events during the ball season, from December 25 to February 12. They showed particular dedication in preparing performances featuring the children in the Society's care. For them, costume balls were organized, along with recitals, musical performances, dances, and charity bazaars.⁵¹

The artistic evenings organized by the Crust of Bread Society not only served as a means of collecting donations but also made a substantial contribution to the enrichment of the cultural life of Novi Sad during the interwar period. The town thus became a stage for world-renowned names in both music and drama, who appeared there during their

⁴³ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 7.

⁴⁴ Đura Jovanović and Ofner have also been mentioned.

⁴⁵ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 7.

⁴⁶ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Brief Report on the Previous Work of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society; HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, The Speech of Jelena Kon at the 10th Jubilee Annual Assembly of the Society.

⁴⁷ HACNS, MANS, Box 201, 34808/1941, *Societal Rules*, 1937, 3–4.

⁴⁸ *Zastava*, 120, 31 May 1925, 3.

⁴⁹ HACNS, MGNS, Box 811, 28663/30. The municipal authorities allocated up to 20.000 dinars for the maintenance of the kindergarten. HACNS, MGNS, Box 795, 29303/29.

⁵⁰ AY, RCKY, 250–376; HACNS, MGNS, Box 776, 7790/1927.

⁵¹ *Zastava*, 250, 31 October 1925, 2; 293, 23 December 1925, 2; 118, 5, 7 January 1926, 2; 28 May 1926, 3.

European and American tours. Through her personal contacts in the first place, Society's president Jelena Kon was able to arrange a series of classical music concerts in the hall of the Hotel Sloboda. Documentation has been preserved only for the most eminent performers—many of them of Jewish origin—whose artistry had already been favorably received by the demanding critics in Vienna. In 1925, two pianists, Professor Paul Weingarten and fourteen-year-old Robert Goldsand,⁵² gave recitals, followed by performances from violinists Bohuslav Martinů and Vaša Příhoda.⁵³ In 1927, the Novi Sad public was given the opportunity to hear distinguished Polish composer and violin virtuoso Moriz Rosenthal, while later that same year, they witnessed a performance by the leading performers of the Vienna Ballet, Grete Wiesenthal and Toni Birkmeyer.⁵⁴ The following year brought performances by the pianist and founder of the Polish Philharmonic, Bronisław Huberman, and violinist Alexander Uninsky.⁵⁵ Particularly notable was the year 1929, when Novi Sad hosted a concert by the King's Guard, which performed with its full orchestra accompanied by solo artist Vika Čaletova, the prima donna of the Ljubljana Opera. The public was particularly interested in the concerts of the Don Cossack Choir and the Belgrade Academic Singing Society Obilić. The literature emphasizes that the concerts given by violinist and composer Paul Hindemith and pianist Arthur Rubinstein were of utmost importance.⁵⁶ According to certain reports, Novi Sad also welcomed celebrated Russian performer Dela Lipinskaja.⁵⁷ These events were consistently covered by the local press, and owing to the enthusiastic response of the audience, many of the artists soon returned to perform again in Novi Sad.

3. Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society in the 1930s

In the 1930s, a new chapter began in the work of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society in Novi Sad, symbolically marked by the opening of the Society's new building in 1933.⁵⁸ As recorded in a brief history of the Society, "this marks the end of the formative period of the Society, characterized by many struggles for its very survival." In the years that followed, progress was evident on many fronts: in the growing membership, the widening scope of activities, the Society's cooperation with other humanitarian societies, and the existence of highly ambitious plans for further development.⁵⁹

⁵² HACNS, MGNS, Box 776, 7790/1927, 21 February 1927; *Zastava*, 263, 17 January 1925, 2; *Novi Sad*, 7, 1926, 3.

⁵³ HACNS, MGNS, Box 776, 7790/1927, 21 February 1927.

⁵⁴ *Zastava*, 234, 15 October 1927, 3; 283, 11 December 1927, 3; HACNS, MGNS, 49905/1926.

⁵⁵ *Vreme*, 23 November 1930, 9.

⁵⁶ *Zastava*, 22, 30 January 1929, 2; *Vreme*, 19 January 1929, 1; 16 December 1929, 3.

⁵⁷ *Dan*, 210, 19 September 1937, 5; *Vreme*, 3 February 1931, 7.

⁵⁸ The Society operated in the premises of the Public Health Institute, which had been made available to them by the Ministry of Health. In 1931, the building was needed for other purposes, and the Society moved to a private apartment. At the 1930 annual assembly, a decision was made to construct a new building that would house all the departments, allowing for the expansion of activities. Thanks to donations, a functional and modern building was erected, designed by Đorđe Tabaković. AJ, RCKY, 250–376, Royal Court Marshal's Office, no. 427, 19 March 1932; HACNS, MGNS, Box 819, 27 March 1931; HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 4, 5, 8.

⁵⁹ HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 5.

At that time, Jewish women received public recognition for their humanitarian work. In the late 1920s, *Jevrejski almanah* published an article on women's emancipation, which, in addition to highlighting the achievements of female scholars, writers, artists, and other cultural workers, emphasized the significance of humanitarian work in this process:

... particularly in the field of charitable work done by Jewish women /.../ and our charitable women's societies carry out invaluable humanitarian and social work without much pomp or publicity.⁶⁰

Shortly thereafter, at the Congress of the Union of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia in Belgrade in 1933, the issue of Jewish women's equality in municipal work appeared on the agenda for the first time, since they "shoulder a considerable portion of charitable, humanitarian, and, more recently, cultural and national work." Accordingly, it was concluded that Jewish women could be of great value in the work of the committees of Jewish communities.⁶¹

There is no doubt that such public approval further encouraged participation in the work of humanitarian societies. For example, the Crust of Bread Society membership reached its peak during this period. Although it began its work with only fifty members, by the mid-1930s the number had grown to 450–500, and appeals for new members continued unabated.⁶² Due to the scope of the article, it is impossible to list, let alone describe, the contributions of all members who supported humanitarian work within the Society. Distinguished members were acknowledged during formal events, at the opening of the Society's assemblies, and in the Society's patronal celebration of Emperor Constantine and Empress Helena on June 3.⁶³ Among them was Queen Marija Karađorđević, under whose patronage the Society had been placed since 1930.⁶⁴

One record book from the board of directors's meetings and regular annual assemblies has been preserved about the Society's activities from 1935 to 1941. While reports on the assemblies can be found in the press, at the request of the Society's

⁶⁰ Urbach 1927: 69–70.

⁶¹ Alkalaj 1933: 115. The Congress Resolution stated that Jewish women were to be granted the right to vote and participate in the administration of the community, while the implementation of these rights was left to individual communities. (*Rezolucije primljene na Kongresu 1933*: 155–156.) According to the 1936 Statute of the Novi Sad Jewish Community, participation in the work of the administration was made possible for the president of the Women's Charitable Association. *Pravila novosadske jevrejske veroispovedne opštine* 1936: 4.

⁶² AY, RCKY, 250–374; HACNS, MANS, Box 263, 37280/1944, *Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society*, 3.

⁶³ The Society's patronal celebration was held for the first time in 1938. Invitations to the celebration were sent to Queen Marija Karađorđević and President of the Council of Ministers Milan Stojadinović. AY, RCKY, 138–205, Office of Her Royal Highness Queen Marija, no. 881, 14 October 1938; Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, Milan Stojadinović Collection, 68–410. (abbreviated: AY, MS); *Dan*, 122, 29 May 1938, 8.

⁶⁴ AY, RCKY, 250–376, Royal Court Marshal's Office, no. 1336, 10 September 1930. Among the prominent members mentioned are Bishop of Bačka Irinej Ćirić, who also served as honorary president, and Court Lady Teodora Dunderski. The Society received significant support in 1939 when the wife of the Ban of the Danube Banovina joined and became a member of the board of directors. Historical Archives of the City of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Crust of Bread Humanitarian Society – Novi Sad, Fond 212, Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 27 March 1939. (abbreviated: HACNS, CBHS).

president, Jelena Kon, members of the Society did not inform the public about board meetings, because “by recounting the facts they get distorted, and then the ladies and the Society face unpleasant reproaches.”⁶⁵ It is clear that the Society’s activities had expanded, which was confirmed by the new *Societal Rules (Društvena pravila)* adopted in 1937.⁶⁶ There were further plans to expand the Society’s scope of work, but financial support from the municipal authorities was not granted.⁶⁷

Based on the available primary sources, it can be concluded that the distribution of aid during this phase of the Society’s work had expanded considerably. Traditionally, winter aid in the form of food, clothing, and footwear was provided. Each year, on the eve of major religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and Palm Sunday, festive events were organized in which the Society’s beneficiaries participated and were given aid, as well as gifts and sweets.⁶⁸ The various departments of the Crust of Bread Society are said to have been operating at full capacity. It was recorded that the school kitchen continued to work even during holidays, and regular meetings with mothers were held in the presence of a physician and members of the board of directors. In 1937, the Society further expanded its activities with the opening of a new department—a nursery for infants—for which a special fund was established at the 12th Annual Assembly with an initial sum of 100.000 dinars.⁶⁹

In order to make humanitarian work more organized, the 1930s saw increased collaboration among charitable organizations. While they continued to carry out their core activities, they increasingly participated in initiatives organized by other societies. Members of the Crust of Bread Society responded to requests from numerous bodies, including the Red Cross, and collaborated with the Association of Mothers (*Materinsko udruženje*) in Belgrade, the Circle of Serbian Sisters (*Kolo srpskih sestara*), and the Save the Children Union (*Unija za zaštitu dece*).⁷⁰ The Society was also a member of the Association of Cultural Societies in Novi Sad (*Savez kulturnih društava u Novom Sadu*). Humanitarian work connected various types of associations—cultural, educational, charitable, sports, and women’s organizations—and this umbrella institution was intended to contribute to better coordination and broader outreach through joint activities.⁷¹ The central event of this collaboration was the Annual Collection Day (*Sabirni dan*), held each May, during which

⁶⁵ HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors’ meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society, 3 February 1936.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 12 September 1936.

⁶⁷ Jelena Kon wrote a petition requesting that one of the members be sent to Rome for a five-month course in child education according to the famous Maria Montessori method, who was also the instructor at the course. HACNS, MGNS, Box 819, 13721/1931. The School Board of the Danube Banovina and the Local School Board in Novi Sad rejected the construction of four rooms that would have housed a primary school. HACNS, MGNS, Box 825, 34436/31.

⁶⁸ HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors’ meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society, 6 June 1936.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 10 September 1937; HACNS, CBHS, 12th Regular Assembly: Record; AY, RCKY, 138–205, May 1938.

⁷⁰ HACNS, CBHS, Record from the 13th Regular Assembly of the Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society, 19 June 1938; Record of the board of directors’ meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children’s Day Care Society, 23 May 1938.

⁷¹ HACNS, MGNS, Box 846, 8938/34.

voluntary contributions were gathered on the streets of Novi Sad.⁷²

The 10th anniversary of the Society's work, celebrated in 1935, attracted considerable public attention and was attended by numerous officials and representatives of both municipal and provincial authorities. On this occasion, it was noted that significant achievements had been realized in the field of humanitarian work and that the Society had gained the reputation of an influential institution of its kind, not only in Novi Sad but throughout the country.⁷³ Another important event for the Crust of Bread Society was the visit of Queen Marija, who expressed great satisfaction with the Society's work and, on that occasion, donated 10.000 dinars.⁷⁴

During this period, the Crust of Bread Society continued to participate in organizing cultural events. The year 1936 began with a ballet performance and a staging of *The Marriage of Figaro* by the Belgrade Opera. This was followed by a guest performance of the Royal Guard Orchestra, conducted by Ivo Tijardović. They presented the operetta *Little Floramye*. That same year, the Novi Sad audience had the opportunity to attend a production of *The Cabinet Minister's Wife (Gospođa Ministarka)* in German, performed by the ensemble of the renowned theatre from Vienna.⁷⁵ The Belgrade Opera continued its guest performances in Novi Sad throughout 1937, when the Don Cossacks returned with another concert, and Viennese theatre productions were once again hosted. The winter season featured a rich musical program, including a Philharmonic concert and, in November, a performance by the Vienna Boys' Choir.⁷⁶ The year 1938 was marked by performances of major figures from the international artistic scene. It began with a recital by American pianist of Ukrainian-Jewish origin Alexander Uninsky, followed by a performance of the Theater in der Josefstadt from Vienna, a concert by Croatian violinist Zlatko Baloković, and operetta productions by the Sofia Theatre. The winter season brought a performance by violin virtuoso Nathan Milstein.⁷⁷ In 1939, the cultural program opened with ballet and children's theatre performances, but in the autumn, it was decided to suspend concerts and entertainments due to the global situation.⁷⁸ Later that year, however, a concert was given by American violinist Erick Friedman, and preparations for more artistic evenings continued.⁷⁹

⁷² HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 8 April 1940.

⁷³ HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 8 April 1940.

⁷⁴ AY, RCKY, 138–205, no. 269, 30 May 1937; HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 23 June 1937.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 6 June 1936. Prior to that, in 1931, a concert was held by the Belgrade String Quartet. Manuscript Department of Matica srpska, Collection of Manuscripts, Invitation to the Belgrade Quartet Concert, 1931. (abbreviated: MDMS, CM).

⁷⁶ HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 6 December 1937; 19 March 1937; 2 February 1937.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society in Novi Sad made on November 10, 1938; Record of the board of directors' meeting, 2 May 1938; 21 March 1938; 7 February 1938.

⁷⁸ HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 26 September 1939.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 27 November 1939.

In addition to the artistic programme, the festivities organized by the Society generated significant revenue. Weekly tea parties were held, bringing together members of humanitarian organizations of Novi Sad.⁸⁰ Public attention was drawn to the garden party at the Queen Marija Hotel, as well as to the performance of André Birabeau's comedy *My Son the Minister* by the Burgtheater Troupe from Vienna, led by well-known stage and film comedian Hans Moser.⁸¹ Special programmes were organized for children, including matinées, performances by comedians and acrobats, as well as shows featuring the wards of the home and pupils from Novi Sad elementary schools Đorđe Natošević and Queen Marija.⁸²

In the late 1930s, the Society's work was accompanied by numerous difficulties. Its field of humanitarian activity had been considerably expanded, yet reports from meetings of the board of directors indicate a noticeable decline in members' engagement: weak turnout for shifts at the Society's Home, less consistent daily supervision, and even a lack of personnel to take care of purchasing food. Irregularities were also observed in keeping records of the Society's income from membership fees.⁸³ The problems culminated in 1937 with the resignation of the long-standing president, Jelena Kon, which was not accepted. Ultimately re-elected, Jelena Kon appealed to those present to continue working conscientiously and to devote their free time to their "humanitarian movement."⁸⁴

The end of 1939 and the beginning of 1940 brought new hardships. The winter was harsh, and coal shortages prevailed. Because of the extremely low temperatures, mothers refrained from bringing infants, while the school cafeteria recorded reduced activity compared to the previous period, as other institutions, such as the Red Cross, were also distributing free lunches to pupils. According to one report, many children fell ill that winter.⁸⁵ In the spring of 1940, flooding forced the closure of the school cafeteria. Nevertheless, the Society responded to the Red Cross's call to take in 40 infants and provide meals for around 200 children, while also organizing fundraising in Vojvođanska and Sremska streets for the most vulnerable.⁸⁶ In May, the Society was to mark its fifteenth anniversary, but the celebration was postponed "until circumstances in the world improve." Jelena Kon was elected president of the Society for the last time, with a three-year mandate.⁸⁷

The situation was further complicated by numerous financial problems, which at certain points could have led to the closure of the Society. Expenses were steadily increasing, while support from the municipal and provincial authorities was increasingly absent. Even the salaries for the day care teachers, which were supposed to be dealt with by

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 19 October 1936.

⁸¹ *Dan*, 89, 10 September 1935, 12; 243, 18 October 1936, 10.

⁸² *Dan*, 82, 11 April 1937, 10.

⁸³ HACNS, CBHS, Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 23 June 1937.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* Record of the first meeting held after the General Assembly in Novi Sad on September 19, 1937.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Record of the board of directors' meeting of the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society, 27 March 1939; 8 April 1940.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 20 June 1940; 8 April 1940.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 20 June 1940.

the school administration, were not being paid.⁸⁸ Dissatisfaction was expressed at a meeting of the board of directors:

Indeed, the authorities should accommodate us much more, because after all, we take on the care that they would otherwise have to provide for the poor. In Belgrade, charitable societies have it easier, as the authorities support them generously. We manage on our own somehow, but that brings far more worries, and alongside these worries, it is harder to work and even harder to achieve success.⁸⁹

The weaker financial situation also made it more difficult to collect and distribute aid, which was already strained by rising prices due to the war-induced crisis in Europe. The high cost of staples, especially flour (1 kilogram costing 640 dinars), threatened to halt humanitarian activities. This caused concern among the members, as any interruption of the Society's work would be a serious "blow to the poor." In the autumn of 1940, the milk kitchen was not operational because its doctor was called up for military exercises, and there was consideration of not opening the school cafeteria, which Jelena Kon firmly opposed.⁹⁰

At the beginning of 1941, the Society's work became significantly more difficult. The record from the last board of directors' meeting notes that Jelena Kon was distributing bread on her own and personally holding meetings with mothers.⁹¹ Material support from the provincial authorities was again absent, and donations from benefactors and local industrialists were far from sufficient.⁹² A notable achievement under these circumstances was that not a single child in their care fell ill during the influenza epidemic. Despite all difficulties, they managed to ensure that elderly citizens received bread and tea during the cold period.⁹³

Following the establishment of Hungarian occupation and the implementation of numerous anti-Semitic measures, Jelena Kon was forced to step down. In 1942, she and her husband were killed in the Novi Sad Raid. In October 1941, the municipal administration issued a temporary decree permitting the Crust of Bread and Children's Day Care Society to continue operating, but on the condition that a new board of directors be elected. Archival records from the Second World War show the activities of the Magdolna Charitable Society, which carried on the work of the Crust of Bread Society.⁹⁴ According to preserved sources,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 29 January 1940.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 10. December 1940; 23 September 1940.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 5 February 1941.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ HACNS, MANS, Box 201, 34808/1941, Határozat, 23 October 1941. As the president of the Society, the wife of Zoltánné Szalantay is mentioned. HACNS, MANS, Box 205, 11/1942; *Ibid.* Box 230, 7638/1943. The decision was evidently made by referring to the Society's Rules of Procedure from 1937, which stipulated the cessation of the Society's activities: when it no longer had members or resources to carry out its tasks. The decision on the liquidation of the Society was to be made by the general assembly upon the board of directors' proposal, provided that two-thirds of the members were present. The property was to be handed over to the town and could be used solely for the purpose of establishing similar societies. HACNS, MANS, Box 201, 34808/1941, *Societal Rules*, 1937, 8.

from May to October 1943, the home accommodated 62 children.⁹⁵ There is also evidence that, in cooperation with the Social Services Department of the Danube Banovina and other related institutions, such as the Children's Home in Subotica, the Society facilitated the care of abandoned children.⁹⁶ After the war, the Society's work was not resumed.

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⁹⁵ HACNS, MANS, Box 230, 7638/1943.

⁹⁶ HACNS, MANS, 5102/1944.

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ДЕЛАТНОСТ ХУМАНИТАРНИХ ДРУШТАВА НОВОСАДСКИХ ЈЕВРЕЈА ИЗМЕЂУ ДВА СВЕТСКА РАТА

Резиме

У свим областима које су насељавали у првој половини XX века, Јевреји су тежили да се прилагоде средини у којој живе и истовремено очувају свој идентитет. То је најчешће остваривано кроз деловање различитих удружења, пре свега хуманитарних. Она су постала главна карактеристика друштвеног живота, посебно у већим заједницама попут јеврејске општине у Новом Саду између два светска рата. Хуманитарно деловање Јевреја се заснивало на верској обавези. Чак и у време када су престали да се строго придржавају верских правила, пружање помоћи сиромашнима је за многе остала темељна вредност. Новосадска јеврејска општина је баштинила дугу традицију добротворног рада. Као једно од најстаријих удружења у Новом Саду на том пољу радило је друштво „Јеврејско уточиште за старе и сирочад“, које је било активно од XIX века, а конституисано тек 1930. године. Разлог је у томе што у међуратном периоду хуманитарно деловање постаје организовано, систематично и широко постављено, а оснива се и велики број нових друштава како би се ублажиле последице сиромаштва и економских криза. У том контексту, на иницијативу добротворке Јелене Кон, у Новом Саду је 1925. основано друштво „Кора хлеба и Дечје обданиште“. За разлику од других удружења која су неретко имала етничко или верско обележје, оно је задржало свој чисто хуманитарни карактер. Први задатак удружења био је дељење помоћи у хлебу и основним животним намирницама, да би временом проширило своју делатност оснивањем дечјег обданишта (1927), ђачке трпезе (1928), млечне кухиње (1930), саветовалишта за мајке и дома за одојчад (1937). Друштво је имало велику подршку новосадске јавности и од 1930. било под покровитељством краљице Марије Карађорђевић. Тридесетих година почиње наредна фаза у његовом раду, која је на симболичан начин обележена отварањем нове зграде 1933. године. У овом периоду друштво достиже највеће домете по броју чланова и ширини деловања, а повезује се са другим сродним установама. Уметничке вечери у организацији друштва „Кора хлеба“ не само да су служиле сакупљању донација, него су и у великој мери обогатиле културни живот града између два светска рата.

Кључне речи: Краљевина Југославија, међуратни период, Нови Сад, хуманитарна друштва, Кора хлеба и Дечје обданиште, Јевреји, Јелена Кон, концерти.

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