

## ARYEH RUBIN

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March 8, 1999

Greetings from Zagreb, Croatia.

I arrived in Zagreb a few days ago to attend the trial of Dinko Sakic, the commander of the Jasenovac Death Camp (known as the Auschwitz of the Balkans). The trial was to have begun this past Thursday, March 4th, but was delayed until March 15th, on medical grounds. To most observers, he looked remarkably fit. President Tujman has reportedly agreed to have him examined by an international medical tribunal in the event of another delay.

### **The Killer**

Sakic, a robust 77, remains unrepentant. He was quoted in a Zagreb magazine as saying, "I regret that we had not done all that is imputed to us. For had we done that then, Croatia would not have problems today." He was extradited from Argentina last year through the offices of Dr. Ephraim Zuroff (Effie), the Jerusalem director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Dr. Zuroff, whom I accompanied in Zagreb, is the major force today in bringing the remaining Nazi war criminals to trial.

Sakic's wife, Nada, was also extradited for her crimes as a sadistic camp guard, but has since been released from jail. Effie will be submitting new evidence and witness testimonies that should hopefully have her reincarcerated.

The Jews of Croatia, numbered about 40,000 before the war (12,000 in Zagreb). Approximately 80% of them were murdered during the Holocaust under the helm of the fascist Ustashe government headed by Ante Pavelic. Many of the killings were carried out by the local Croats (as opposed to Serbia, where the Nazis themselves were the murderers).

### **The Church**

A. Stepinac, the Archbishop during World War II, and later Cardinal, has been nominated for beatification by the Vatican. Dr. Zuroff and others have voiced strong opposition to Stepinac becoming a saint. He was the spiritual leader of a fascist government that killed tens of thousands of Jews and other minorities, and for the most part, kept silent. After the war, Stepinac was placed under house arrest to await trial for collaboration with the Ustashe.

During this period he became a symbol of the anti-Communists. His intercession on behalf

of some Jews married to Christians, and on behalf of some elderly Jews in an old age home were amplified, and he never stood trial. Though he remained under house arrest until his death, he is today revered as a savior throughout Croatia.

Josip Bozanic, the recently appointed Archbishop, received Effie and myself on Friday afternoon. His appointment by the Pope surprised the community, since he has not exhibited much nationalistic fervor. He spoke, I believe, sincerely and warmly of the Jews, quoting the Pope's famous statement, "The Jews are our elder brothers in faith." He asked that the Jewish world support the small Croatian Jewish community. It seemed to me that Bozanic wants Croatia to face its past. He has spoken out against the acts of Vjekoslav Lasic, the Dominican priest who holds memorial masses for the Ustashe leader, Pavelic.

### **The Jews**

The Jewish community center is based in a former school. A bomb was set off in its lobby during the war with the Serbians in the early 1990's. Local nationalists were suspected and the Croatian government contributed to its repair. The synagogue is located on the third floor in an unremarkable room. The main synagogue was destroyed in 1941, and is now a parking lot.

The first official rabbi to serve the community since World War II was installed a few months ago. An affable 31 year-old Jerusalemite, Rabbi Kotel Dadon, has been serving the community, for the past several years, as an itinerant preacher from Budapest, where he had been studying for his doctorate in law. His wife, Aggi, who hails from Budapest, encouraged the reluctant rabbi to undertake what can only be described as a labor of love.

Meager resources (though the community is trying to reclaim its substantial pre-war holdings), a congregation that after four decades of Communism is not interested in religion, and a local populace with an anti-Semitic streak, present Rabbi Dadon with significant challenges. In spite of all this, he continues to persevere, and does, indeed, manage to inspire his flock.

All three Sabbath services were conducted without a minyan (though there were 12 men present at Friday night's services, not enough of them were sufficiently Jewish, according to Jewish law, to be counted by the Rabbi in the minyan). The services that were conducted, though, had enthusiastic participation. Even when the rabbi doted on some minor esoterica, the audience of men and women were continually mesmerized.

Rabbi Dadon shared with us, in private, a poignant anecdote about the previous rabbi. The night before the Ustashe rounded up the remaining Jews in Zagreb for transport to Auschwitz, Cardinal Stepinac sent a message to Chief Rabbi, Dr. Shalom M. Freiburger,

informing him of the impending transport and that the Rabbi's life could be spared. After some inquiries, Rabbi Freiburger ascertained that the entire community was to be sent away and that he alone would be saved; he sent word to the Archbishop that he would remain with his community and meet whatever fate beheld them. He was shot to death within minutes after disembarking at Auschwitz.

**May Need Help**

If the trial of Sakic is postponed yet again, I may call upon you to email or send a letter to President Tujman urging him to enjoin the court to commence the trial; and for Croatia to face up to its past.

Sincerely,

***Aryeh Rubin***