

BACKA,

District in Yugoslavia that now forms the western part of the autonomous province of Vojvodina. Jews lived in Backa in ancient times, but the first known organized Jewish communities were established there at the end of the eighteenth century.

Prior to the German invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, Backa had a Jewish population of some sixteen thousand, representing 20 percent of Yugoslav Jewry and 2 percent of the district's population. There were seventeen Neolog communities, following a Conservative rite, and nine Orthodox communities. One-third of the Jews were engaged in trade and commerce, 20 percent were office workers, 10 percent were professionals (doctors, lawyers, and so on), and a similar number were skilled craftsmen and industrial workers. The Jewish community had a considerable impact on Backa's cultural and educational life and on charitable activities. In the 1930s the Zionist movement gained the majority within most of the Jewish communities, and Zionist youth movements - Ha-Shomer ha-Tsa'ir (with twelve hundred members), Tekhelet Lavan (Blau-Weiss, with seven hundred), and Betar (with four hundred) - played an important role by running summer camps and hakhsharot (training schools for agriculture) and issuing their own regular publications. The clandestine Communist youth movement also had a substantial number of adherents among Backa Jews. Some three hundred Backa Jews had moved to Palestine, and Backa communities helped tens of thousands of legal and "illegal" immigrants from Germany and German-occupied countries to make their way to Palestine.

The anti-Jewish legislation introduced in Yugoslavia in 1940 generated resistance among Backa Jews to the growing Nazi pressure. They supported the anti-Nazi coup of March 27, 1941, with most of the young Jewish men volunteering for the army in the April 1941 fighting. Several dozen were killed or wounded, or became prisoners of war.

When Yugoslavia was defeated and its territory carved up, Backa was allotted to Hungary. Compared to the German occupation of neighboring Serbia, the Hungarians were the lesser evil; but even in the early days of the occupation the Hungarians staged incidents to serve as an excuse for murdering thousands of Serbs and Jews. Many others were expelled and handed over to the Nazis; the leaders of the Jewish community and the Zionist movement were taken hostage; thousands of Jews were deprived of their citizenship and most of their possessions, by force or intimidation; and the communities had to pay a war levy. By May 1941, male Jews were being drafted for hard labor, in the course of which they were beaten up and tortured.

Terror against Jews and Serbs was stepped up in July 1941, when Hungary joined the war against the Soviet Union. Many Jews joined the Tito-led partisan movement, and the number of young Jews involved in the struggle against the Nazis was considerably larger than their proportion in the population. By the end of 1941 all male Jews, up to the age of sixty, were drafted into labor battalions (see munkaszolgálat) of the Hungarian army. For the most part they were posted to the Soviet front in the Ukraine, where they were worked to the bone, starved to death, left to freeze in the cold, or murdered by their guards. Some of the men managed to cross the lines, and it was these "deserters" who took the initiative to form the First Yugoslav Armored Brigade in the Soviet Union, which in the summer of 1944 was moved to the Serbian front.

In December 1941 and January 1942, incidents between a mobile partisan force and the Hungarian army served as a pretext for the slaughter of Serbs and Jews, under the cover of a Razzia (raid, roundup) that the Hungarian government had sanctioned on the recommendation of Hungarian and local Nazi elements. To carry it out, two special units were formed, under the command of Gen. Ferenc Feketehalmy-Czeydner, Col. Laszlo Deak, Maj. Gen. Jozsef Grassy, Capt. Marton Zoldi, and other Nazi agents. Over five thousand men were murdered in the course of January 1942, half of them Jews. Six Jewish communities were totally exterminated. Thousands were

brought before "selection commissions" made up of Hungarians, which decided the way in which they were to be killed - by shooting, bayoneting, hanging, or other horrible methods. The city of Novi Sad was ransacked by units of the Second Combat Regiment, commanded by Grassy. On the very first day of the Razzia, dozens of Jews and Serbs were murdered; and on the third day, January 23, 1942, the gendarmes staged an incident that served as the excuse for mass slaughter; hundreds were murdered in the streets, the cemeteries, and the stadiums. The number of Jews murdered accounted for a third of the entire Jewish population in Backa. The killing was stopped with the intervention of moderate elements, among them Endre BajcsyZsilinsky, a member of parliament representing the Smallholders' party.

The massacre caused angry reactions among the Hungarian public and in neutral states, including Switzerland, Sweden, Spain, and Turkey. Miklos Kallay, the Hungarian premier who had taken office in March 1942, had to admit that innocent people had been murdered. In the course of 1943 the men responsible for the carnage were put on trial but managed to flee to Germany, where they were given asylum. In March 1944, when the German army entered Hungary, the culprits in the Backa crimes returned to the country and took part in the deportation of Hungarian Jews to extermination camps.

The situation of the surviving Jews of Backa improved a little in 1943, but this did not prevent many young Jews from joining the mobile partisan units. Zionist functionaries took an active part in the rescue operations. Dr. Moshe Schweiger, a leader of the Ihud Olami (Zionist Labor) party in Backa, took the initiative in setting up a committee in Budapest to care for the hundreds of refugees from Backa in the Hungarian capital. Provide them with housing and employment, and to ensure that they would not be expelled. Dr. Meir Weltmann-Tuval, an Ihud Olami member and leading Zionist, was very active in behalf of Backa Jews at the Istanbul Jewish Agency office. He was joined by Dr. Francis Ofner, a Betar leader in Backa, who had succeeded in escaping from the Hungarian murderers. Together, the two men arranged for

dozens of Backa Jews - children, youths, and adults - to make their way to Palestine.

After the Germans occupied Hungary, on March 19, 1944, German SS units, together with the Hungarian gendarmerie, came to Backa and embarked on the deportation of the remaining Jews to extermination camps. Over a third of Backa's Jews (which at the time numbered eight thousand) were deported to Auschwitz and other extermination camps in May of that year. Of Backa's prewar Jewish population of sixteen thousand, only twenty-five hundred survived to witness the liberation of the district. Many of these had volunteered for service in the Yugoslav army; some of Backa's Jews fell in the final battles against the Ustasa forces in Croatia, or even against SS units. The survivors reorganized themselves into ten communities, but eleven hundred went to Israel after the establishment of the state in 1948 and four hundred left for the West. Only a few hundred Jews were left in Backa.