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In Search of Myself

Autobiography, Imposture, and Survival in Wartime Croatia

Abstract

This article looks at the production of autobiography and imposture as survival techniques during the Second World War in Croatia. Focusing on the petitions of Jewish and Serb citizens wrote to the Jewish Section of the Ustaša Police Directorate and the State Directorate for Reconstruction the article considers the various ways in which Serb and Jewish letter writers who had been placed outside the law in wartime Croatia by the Ustaša regime used a variety of discourse and linguistic markers as well as the generation of idealised biographies in which they identified themselves as Croats in an attempt to escape deportation, ghettoization or stigmatisation and to write themselves into state ideology by asserting their difference from other members of their persecuted community. The article also explores the various ways in which victims who had survived by making compromises with the Ustaša regime sought to rewrite their biographies in the post-war period to identify themselves with the new socialist orthodoxies in the face of the threat of nation-wide campaigns of unmasking and ideological purification. Using Christa Wolf's novel *The Quest for Christa T.* as a frame, it asks how much the historian can ever really know about the biographies of individuals, especially those who have felt the need to reconstruct their lives after traumatic events. At the same time it argues that in addition to the important insight these kinds of microanalysis can provide on everyday life and survival in wartime Europe during the Holocaust, they also bring ambiguity to seemingly distinct historiographical categories such as resistance and collaboration and force us, the readers, to confront our own subjectivity through reading their autobiographical petitions.

“Successful revolutions tear off masks: that is, they invalidate the conventions of self-presentation and social interaction that obtained in pre-revolutionary societies [...] In such upheavals, people have to reinvent themselves, to create or find within themselves personae that fit the new post-revolutionary society.” So wrote Sheila Fitzpatrick in *Tear off the Masks!* her history of imposture and identity in Soviet Russia. Paradoxically, she argued, while revolutionary militants “tend to become obsessed with authenticity and transparency”, hunting for “careerists” and “accommodators” in order to unmask them, they also demand that ordinary citizens invent new identities in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the revolutionary new society and its values.¹ To the extent that all history is in some senses biography and all biography identity, periods of revolution and violent upheaval have often resulted in the writing (and rewriting) of autobiographical texts by ordinary citizens, in particular by those who fear they might be the victims of the terror accompanying the revolution and so seek ways to negotiate it. The study of diaries written by everyday people is now an established part of the historiography of the Stalinist Great Terror of the 1930s in the Soviet Union; petitions written to the state by Soviet citizens during the

¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*, New Jersey 2005, 3.

same period have also been integrated into recent histories of the Great Terror and the social history of life in the Soviet Union. While a diary is a more obviously autobiographical form of writing, one in which the author can explore their inner-most thoughts and subjectivity, the increasing importance social historians of Stalinist Russia have placed on petitions underlines the extent to which petitions to Stalin, senior officials, or middle-ranking Soviet bureaucrats from collective farm workers, factory foremen, lonely soldiers, or anxious students were also a highly subjective autobiographical genre of writing, expressing a desire on the part of the writer to identify themselves with Soviet values whether as a means of escaping the terror or as an expression of a sincere desire to integrate fully into the new society.² These autobiographical strategies of survival, belonging and in many cases, reinvention, were likewise evident during the Holocaust as Jews, Roma, and other victims of persecution in Nazi-occupied Europe sought various means to 'write' identities for themselves in the context of a new society from which they were being systematically excluded. While in the past two decades the diaries and, less frequently, letters and petitions of adult and adolescent Jewish victims in Hitler's European empire have increasingly become a meaningful subject for study by Holocaust historians, almost none of these cases studies have addressed the fate of Jews and other persecuted groups in the Nazi satellite states of what was until April 1941 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This is especially true of the Ustaša-led Independent State of Croatia where the Holocaust, in parallel to the genocide of Serbs and Roma, was carried out with a ferocity and single-mindedness almost unparalleled in any other part of occupied Europe.³

In a desperate situation, a part of the Serb and Jewish communities engaged actively in the writing of often profoundly autobiographical petitions to state ministries, police and security directorates, senior Ustaša officials, and the supreme leader Pavelić himself in an attempt to negotiate their positions in a state which openly sought their destruction. Deeply confessional in tone and content, this subset of correspondents facing deportation, ghettoisation and ultimately death, employed the state's totalising discourse to express a sense of belonging to the Croatian national community then under construction. Often bitterly rejecting the Jewish or Serb identity which they had been ascribed, like Soviet subjective diaries, their petitions and letters were full of emotion and intimate details, self-reflexive, endeavouring to show that the writers had transformed themselves into members of the new society. As in Christa Wolf's 1968 novel *The Quest for Christa T.*, in which the narrator attempted to reconstruct the life of her enigmatic friend, these letter-writers had two lives: the one before April 1941 and the one afterward. Engaged in projects of rein-

2 See for example Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Suplicants and Citizens. Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, in: *Slavic Review* 55 (1996) 1, 80-104; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind. Writing a Diary under Stalin*, Cambridge MA 2006; Veronique Garros/Natalia Korovskaya/Thomas Luhman, *Intimacy and Terror. Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, New York 1997; Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley 1995; Orlando Figes, *Schick einen Gruss, zuweilen durch die Steine. Eine Geschichte von Liebe und Überleben in Zeiten des Terrors*, translated by Bernd Rullkötter, Berlin 2012; Igal Halpin, *Terror in my Soul. Communist Autobiographies on Trial*, Cambridge MA 2003.

3 Among the best recent studies of Jewish diaries and private correspondence during the Holocaust are Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days. Diaries and the Holocaust*, New Haven 2006; Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven 1991; and Alexandra Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages. Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*, New Haven 2002. A number of diaries and notebooks written by Holocaust victims have also been published. See for example Derek Bowman, *The Diary of David Rubinowicz*, London 1980; Saul Esh (ed.), *Young Moshe's Diary. The Spiritual Torment of a Jewish Boy in Nazi Germany*, Tel Aviv 1965; and Chava Pressburger (ed.), *The Diary of Petr Ginz, 1941-1942*, with an introduction by Jonathan Safran Foer, translated by Elena Lappin, New York 2004.

vention and personal transformation as strategies of survival and a means of claiming membership in the new society, some Serbs and Jews, however, sought to represent themselves in the present as nationally-conscious citizens, recalling how they had worked to overcome their 'shameful' national pasts and incarnate themselves as Croat subjects.⁴ How spontaneous these sentiments were is hard to gauge though it is likely that at least some of those who wrote to the state in 1941 genuinely believed the autobiographies they were constructing. At the same time, these Serb and Jewish citizens were writing in extreme times and their letters, heartfelt and confessional as they were, must have been strongly influenced by the threat of terror which hung over them. Furthermore, it was not just the victims of Ustaša terror who were involved in rewriting their biographies or in seeking to transform themselves into conscious citizens; those who aspired to be beneficiaries of the terror were also expected to demonstrate how they had written themselves into the values of the state. One way or another, tens of thousands of ordinary people drawn from all social classes, ideological persuasions, and national groups were involved in the process of remaking themselves through petition writing. On the one hand, the petitions from victims demonstrated the totalising nature of everyday terror under the Ustaša movement: The same state agencies which sought their destruction often paradoxically became the sole intermediary through which Jews and Serbs could save themselves, fulfilling the aim of the movement's architects to construct a society in which no aspect of life would exist except through the mediation of the state. Moreover, in order to save themselves, supplicants and petition-writers were required to denounce their own communities and even their families while insisting that an exception should be made in their case, evidence that they were people who had overcome their past and 'undesired' identities. By contrast, in the post-war Socialist period, some of these same letter-writers once more felt compelled to engage in similar autobiographical practices to either explain or, more frequently, to conceal their interaction with a regime whose sympathisers the new Socialist Yugoslav authorities had vowed to 'unmask' and 'tear out at the roots' as a necessary precondition for the reconstruction of the Yugoslav homeland.⁵

It is true that there are empirical limitations to the reading of correspondence such as this. While thousands of Serbs, Jews and, to a lesser extent, Roma wrote petitions such as these to the state's planning and economic agencies and the organs of terror, they still represented a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Sinti who were persecuted in the first few months of the state's existence (n=470).⁶ The majority of victims did not, it seems, write to the authorities, far less the Poglavnik, and there were, no doubt, diverse reasons for this: Some were illiterate, others believed that any such appeal would be hopeless, while others still had fled or, in a small number of cases, had decided to actively resist. In the case of Serbs, in particular, many had also already been murdered. In this sense, it is hardly surprising that the petitions of Serbs, Jews, and Roma collected in the archival files and collec-

4 Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.*, New York 1979; Original: Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, Halle 1968.

5 See for example Nikola Rubčić, *Kaznimo zločince čovječnosti i narodne budućnosti* [We are punishing the criminals for humanity and the national future], in: *Vjesnik* [News] 5, 29 May 1945 33, 1.

6 Roma were also subject to the same pattern of economic destruction, social segregation, and terror as the Serbs and Jews, but even among affluent educated Roma and Sinti it seems there was less petition-writing. A recent comprehensive discussion of the persecution of the Roma under the Ustaša regime, their deportation, and the confiscation of their property can be found in Bibijana Papo/Danijel Vojak/Alen Tahiri, *Stradanje Roma u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj 1941–1945* [The suffering of the Roma in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941–1945], Zagreb 2015.

tions of the Independent State of Croatia overwhelmingly expressed a desire to be accepted as members of the Croatian national community since petitions to the authorities was one of the few ways they could try to write themselves back into a society they had been written out of. While these Serb and Jewish petition-writers might tell an important story about their respective communities' fate under the Ustaša regime, they are still, statistically speaking, not the dominant story.⁷

Why, then, write about a cohort which almost certainly did not represent the majority sentiment in their communities even in the state's formative period? There are a number of reasons why this subset of the Jewish and Serb correspondents to the state matters to an understanding of the Holocaust in Croatia. First, a case study of the subjectivity of victims in wartime Croatia adds an important dimension to our understanding of how ordinary people in Europe experienced terror in real time during the Holocaust and Nazi occupation. Given that most previous discussions of the terror of the Ustaša regime have pushed the victims and the diverse ways in which they attempted to negotiate persecution to the margins, relying, if at all, on the testimony of those who were bystanders to the programme of terror, perpetrated it, or who miraculously survived it, studying the petitions of the victims tells us something about the day-to-day reality of terror, unfiltered by unreliable memory, ideological narratives, or retrospective reimagining. Simultaneously, the subjectivity of persecuted Jews and Serbs in occupied Croatia challenges conventional thinking about the nature of identity – or at least perceptions of identity – in the South-Eastern Europe of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Third, the fact that some of the petition writers survived the Holocaust enables us to better appreciate how, after the liberation, they reconciled their roles in that terror and recast their biographies once again to write themselves into the new Socialist state. Whether the writers of the petitions consciously saw themselves as creating new identities is less clear: For many, it seems, letter-writing provided a means not so much of demonstrating their inner transformation as a chance to express the identity which they felt they had always possessed, less an attempt to become someone new than to find their authentic selves. Seen from this perspective, and given how little other information there is about the victims, debates about the sincerity of the sentiments in their letters become less central; it is through their writing ultimately that we know them. As Hannah Arendt observed:

“The sources talk and what they reveal is the self-understanding as well as the self-interpretation of people who act and believe they know what they are doing. If we deny them this capacity and pretend that we know better and can tell them what their ‘real’ motives are or which ‘real’ trends they objectively represent – no matter what they themselves think – we have robbed them of the very faculty of speech insofar as speech makes sense.”⁸

7 Of these 470 petitions, around 75 per cent expressed a desire to be recognised as members of the Croatian national community, though within that basic schema, narratives, sentiments, and attitudes differed considerably.

8 Hannah Arendt, *On the Nature of Totalitarianism. An Essay in Understanding*, in: *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, with an introduction by Jerome Kohn, New York 2005, 338–339.

Real-Time Terror in Wartime Croatia

Terror was a defining characteristic of the Independent State of Croatia. This was not surprising since the new state was ruled by the Ustaša Croatian Liberation Movement, an underground separatist terrorist organisation established in the 1930s, many of whose active members had lived in exile in terror training camps in Fascist Italy and Hungary. True, another more intellectual group of young activists ran a propaganda centre in Berlin and, increasingly through the late 1930s, the Ustaša movement gained the support of radical nationalist and separatist students, intellectuals, trade unions, and cultural and social institutes as well as a growing number of workers and peasants. Nonetheless, despite becoming progressively fascistised, the movement's terroristic instincts remained an important feature of its character and view of the world and had a fundamental impact on the development of state ideology. Immediately after it came to power in April 1941 following the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, the Ustaša leadership, headed by Ante Pavelić, the Poglavnik (or Supreme Chief) of the new state, created a series of economic, social, and security ministries and agencies which aimed at removing Jewish and Serb citizens from the life of the new state. Beginning in April 1941, the Office for Economic Renewal (later the State Directorate for Economic Regeneration – DGRP) embarked on a programme to expropriate Serb and Jewish businesses which included the appointment of commissioners to Jewish and Serb factories and businesses in preparation for their nationalisation, liquidation, or sale.⁹ Similarly, the Ministry for Social Co-Operatives introduced a series of legal statutes from early May 1941 enabling the mass removal of Serbs and Jews from their positions in the private sector and the 'Aryanisation' of the Croatian economy. An employment law of 23 May, for example, allowed commissioners to sack workers with one month's notice.¹⁰ In the towns and cities of the new state, especially Zagreb, local Ustaša police chiefs ordered Serbs and Jews to register their property and assets with the police.¹¹ Local authorities and the police also introduced statutes evicting affluent Serbs and Jews from their apartments in the more desirable parts of town to the cramped poorer districts, imposing curfews on the hours they could shop and be on the streets and, often, the facilities they could use.¹²

While these laws made life extremely difficult for Jews and Serbs and represented a form of terror, simultaneous citizenship laws made it clear that Jews and Serbs had ceased to exist as citizens of the state in any meaningful way. For example, the citi-

9 See for example Zakonska odredba o imenovanju povjerenika kod privrednih poduzeća, [Legal provision on the appointment of commissioners for commercial enterprises], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 19 April 1941; Dužnosti povjerenika u židovskom i srbskim poduzecima [The duties of the commissioner in Jewish and Serbian enterprises], in: Nezavisna Hrvatska [Independent Croatia], 12 July 1941.

10 Zakonska odredba o otkazivanju i otpovninama privatnih radnika i namještnika [Legal Statute concerning the dismissal and issuing of notice to private-sector workers and employees], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 23 May 1941.

11 Zakonska odredba o sprečavanju prikriivanja židovskog imetka [Legal statute concerning the prevention of the hiding of Jewish assets], In: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 5 June 1941; Naredba o dužnosti prijave Srbijanca [Order concerning the obligation of Serbs to register], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 7 June 1941; Zakonska odredba o podržavljenju imetka Židova i židovskih poduzeća [Legal statute concerning the nationalisation of Jewish assets and enterprises], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 10 October 1941.

12 See for example Hrvatski državni arhiv (HDA) [Croatian State Archive], Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (NDH) [Independent State of Croatia], Zbirka štampata (ZS) [Print Collection], 104.36/104/19 and 1289/41, order from the director of the Ustaša Police in Zagreb, 8 May 1941; HDA, NDH, ZŠ, 104.36/99/115, order of the Ustaša Police office in Varaždin, 21 July 1941; Nove naredbe Židovima u Varaždinu [New orders for Jews in Varaždin], in: Novi list [New newspaper], 27 June 1941; Emily Greble, When Croatia Needed Serbs. Nationalism and Genocide in Sarajevo, 1941–1942, in: Slavic Review 68 (2008) 1, 127.

zanship law of 30 April created distinct categories of communal belonging in the Croatian state by distinguishing between a citizen and a 'state national'. A state national was defined as someone who "stands under the protection of the Independent State of Croatia", while a citizen was defined as a "state national of Aryan origin who by his actions has demonstrated that he did not work against the liberation aspirations of the Croat people and who is willing to readily and faithfully serve the Croat people and the Independent State of Croatia". Only the citizen was defined as the bearer of all political rights and this law effectively meant that Jews and Serbs (as well as other "undesired elements" such as foreign citizens, Roma, and politically "disloyal" Croats) could be stripped of their citizenship rights, deported or worse.¹³ Meanwhile, a Ministry for Education law removed from the discourse of the state any recognition of a separate Serb identity, declaring that "the title 'Serbian Orthodox' is no longer in harmony with the new state order. This legal statute deems it necessary to use the title 'Greek-Eastern faith' when referring to them instead." The Ustaša movement's chief propagandist Mijo Bzik went even further. In a style guide for officials, he stressed that Serbs were henceforth to be known as 'Greek-Easterners', 'Vlachs', and "former Serbs". Under no circumstances, he added, should the word 'Serb' be used "when dealing with the Vlachs in Croatia".¹⁴ A legal statute of 30 April 1941 related to "race membership" issued by the Ministry of the Interior ordered that Jews would be required to wear a yellow star on their chests and arms. The same order banned marriage between Jews and non-Jews.¹⁵ An additional law of 4 June 1941 made it compulsory for all Jewish-owned stores to be marked with the yellow star and the word *Židov* (Jew) and for Jews to change their Croatianised names back to their original, Jewish forms.¹⁶ These legal statutes negated the identity of those Jews and Serbs who saw themselves as or aspired to be part of the Croatian national community. On the one hand, they symbolised the extent to which Serbs and Jews were, to use the expression of the Ustaša party boss in Bosanska Krajina Viktor Gutić, "undesired elements" of which the state needed to be "cleansed", but also "former people" who had ceased to exist as constituent citizens and from whom Croats needed to be separated. In exceptional circumstances, they could become members of the national community, but they would need to prove that they had overcome their "undesired" and shameful origins.¹⁷ In contrast to most other states in occupied Europe, the antisemitic laws contained an exceptional clause for Jews who were employed in vital state sector roles, on active military duty, or who had Aryan spouses and children baptised before 10 April 1941. Honorary Aryan membership was also extended to those deemed as having done something "meritorious for the Croatian nation, especially its liberation". To gain 'Aryan rights', Jewish citizens had to apply in writing to the newly established Jewish Office of the directorate of the Ustaša police. However, while successful petitions exempted individuals from having to wear the

13 Zakonska odredba o državljanstvu [Legal statute concerning citizenship], in: Hrvatski narod [The Croatian Nation], 1 May 1941.

14 Ministarstva odredba o nazivu "grčko-istočne vjere" [Ministerial order concerning the term "Greek-Eastern faith"], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 19 July 1941; HDA, NDH, Ministarstvo pravosuđa i bogoštovlja [Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs], 31.218/I-81-120/119/1941, Mijo Bzik, Okružnica [Circular].

15 Zakonska odredba o rasnoj pripadnosti [Legal statute concerning racial affiliation], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 30 April 1941.

16 Naredba o promjeni židovskih preimena i označavanju židova i židovskih tvrtka [Order concerning changes to Jewish names and the marking of Jews and Jewish businesses], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 4 June 1941.

17 The speech in which this phrase is used can be found in Stožernik Viktor Gutić dobio je naročite pohvale sa Najvišeg mjesta za svoj dosadašnji rad [Centre leader Viktor Gutić has received exceptional praise from the highest authorities for his recent work], in: Hrvatska krajina [Croatian Frontier], 28 May 1941.

Jewish sign, it did not mean they were exempted from the wide range of other anti-semitic legislation related to “racial membership”, as the interior ministry made clear, and a significant proportion of those who were awarded honorary Aryan status, save for those who were related to senior officials in the regime, later perished in Jasenovac or one of the other numerous concentration camps in the state.¹⁸

In May of that year, the Ustaša leadership began to make plans for the mass deportation of hundreds of thousands of the state’s Serbs to Serbia. Ostensibly, this was part of an agreement with the Nazi occupation authorities in which Croatia would accept a comparable number of ‘disloyal’ Slovenians the Reich wanted to expel from Slovenia.¹⁹ However, the number of Serbs the regime wanted to deport quickly grew in excess of the numbers agreed with the German authorities as the state saw an opportunity to significantly reduce the size of the Serb population, especially its educated layer. In late June, a resettlement agency, the State Directorate for Regeneration (DRP), was established in Zagreb to oversee the deportation process.²⁰ The DRP set up local branches throughout the state and established resettlement camps to accommodate Serb deportees, administered by a DRP militia. Conditions in these camps were terrible, characterised by poor hygiene, insufficient food, inadequate shelter, and brutality on the part of the guards; death rates were high. For their part, the German authorities in Serbia made frequent complaints that the Serb refugees arriving from these camps were often half starving and naked and frequently showing signs of abuse. As early as 6 July, the German military authorities in Serbia were demanding a halt to the mass deportations, barely a week after the programme had begun to be systematically implemented.²¹ While Serbs who were being deported were in theory allowed to take a limited amount of goods with them (including valuables and money) in a bag weighing two kilogrammes at most, in practice many deportees arrived in Serbia without even this small amount of personal effects. Some Serbs – although it is not clear how many – likely hearing rumours about conditions in these camps wrote letters to the DRP asking for permission to stay in Croatia. In their letters, they invariably employed the state’s discourse, asserting a specifically Croatian sense of belonging. In fact, they often explicitly rejected a Serb identity, referring derisively to their ‘former’ identity. In overcoming their ‘shameful’ Serb past through acts of everyday political, consciousness, they had transformed themselves

18 Naredba o promjeni židovskih preimena i označavanju židova i židovskih tvrtka [Order about changes to Jewish surnames and the marking of Jews and Jewish businesses], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 4 June 1941. Paradoxically, this legislative anomaly did not mean that comparatively fewer Jews perished in the Holocaust in Croatia. In fact, in some states, which did not introduce legal exemptions from persecutions, such as Romania and Bulgaria, a far greater number of native Jews survived the Holocaust, especially in the core parts of the respective states. The classic text in the Bulgarian case is Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria’s Jews Survived the Holocaust*, London, 2001. On the Holocaust in Romania see e.g. Simon Geissbühler, *Blutiger Juli. Rumäniens Vernichtungskrieg und der vergessene Massenmord an den Juden 1941*, Paderborn 2013; see also Evan J. Hollander, *The Final Solution in Bulgaria and Romania: A Comparative Perspective*, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 22 (2008) 2, 203-226.

19 The classic works on the deportation process are Andrija-Ljubomir Lisac, *Deportacije Srba iz Hrvatske 1941* [The Deportations of Serbs from Croatia in 1941], in: *Historijski zbornik* 9 (1956) 4, 125-145; and Slobodan N. Milošević, *Izbeglice i preseljenici na teritoriji okupirane Jugoslavije* [Refugees and settlers on the territory of occupied Yugoslavia], Belgrade 1981. More recent studies include Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs. Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma 1941–1945*, Hamburg 2013, 123-205; and Filip Škiljan, *Organizirana prisilna iseljavanja Srba iz Nezavisne Države Hrvatske* [The organised forced emigration of Serbs from the Independent State of Croatia], Zagreb 2015.

20 Zakonska odredba o osnutku Državnoga ravnateljstva za ponovak [Legal statute concerning the establishment of the State Directorate for Regeneration], in: *Narodne novine* [National Gazette], 24 June 1941.

21 See for example HDA, NDH, Ponova/SO/OS, 445.1076/unnumbered, German high command to the DRP, 6 July 1941.; Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (BA-MA), BA-AA (Bundesarchiv-Auswärtiges Amt), RH 31/III/26, Arthur Haeffner, *Polizeibericht über Ustascha*, 18 July 1941.

into Croats and demanded to be seen as part of the Croatian national community. Of course, not all Serbs who wrote to the DRP and the Ustaša police directorate wanted to stay. In an atmosphere of economic destitution, impoverishment, and increasing terror, a smaller number wrote asking permission to move to Serbia. However, volunteering to emigrate came at a heavy price. In order for the DRP to grant approval and issue a travel permit, applicants had to sign a form agreeing that they would transfer their assets and property to the state and waiving their right of return. Initially, these conditions were limited only to those who 'voluntarily' left the state, but they were subsequently extended to those Serbs being forcibly deported, too.²² Many of those Serbs who asked permission to stay also sought permission to convert to Catholicism in order to transform themselves completely into Croats.

A small number of Jews, unlikely though the request was to be fulfilled, also applied for travel permits so that they could emigrate, in some cases to Serbia when they had Serb spouses, but more often to other parts of Europe where family members were living and which were unaffected by the war. Others still applied for travel permits as part of a desperate attempt to get their husbands and fiancés out of concentration camps such as Jadovno.²³ Far more often, though, Jews who wrote to the authorities expressed the aspiration to be full members of the Croatian national community. In practice, this meant seeking an exemption from wearing the yellow star and thereby expressing their innate Croatian identity. In their letters they often differentiated themselves sharply from the rest of the Jewish community, looking with scorn on those Jews who, they asserted, had made no effort to overcome their Jewish past and transform themselves into Croats. While the letters were very different in some respects from diary entries and private letters which Jewish individuals were writing in many other parts of occupied Europe in response to ghettoisation and persecution – they were written for an audience but for one the sender did not have a relationship with – they were often equally as self-reflexive, autobiographical, and confessional, with emotional appeals to a shared identity. In contrast to Holocaust diaries, though, which expressed diverse attitudes to the catastrophe unfolding around them, the correspondence of Serb and Jewish writers with the Jewish Office and the DRP expressed a consistent desire to belong by overcoming an accident of birth.

'Shameful' Jews in Search of the National Community

As well as fear caused by their overnight destitution as a result of the 'Aryanisation' of the economy, the letters of many Jewish correspondents to the Jewish Office convey a deep sense of 'shame' at having to wear the Jewish star. The Jewish star not only marked them out as separate and not belonging to the Croatian national community but were a visible daily reminder that, despite their loyalty and sense of belonging, they were perceived as enemies of the Croat people. For many assimilated Jews in Zagreb and other cities in Croatia, having to revert to their original Jewish

22 Zakonska odredba o imovine osoba koje su napustile područje Nezavisne Države Hrvatske [Legal statute concerning the property of people who have left the territory of the Independent State of Croatia], in: Narodne novine [National Gazette], 6 July 1941.

23 See for example Arhiv Udruženje Gospić Jadovno Pag [AUGJP], Fond Đuro Zatezalo [fDZ], 374, Jetty Werner to the Jewish Section, undated; AuGJP, fDZ, 375, Iluš Hahn to the Jewish Section, 25 July 1941; AuGJP, fDZ, 430, Ella Goldschmidt to the Jewish Section, 29 July 1941; AuGJP, fDZ, 414, Laura Frölich to the Jewish Section, 1 August 1941.

names was a sign, to them, of their own personal failure to properly imbue themselves with Croatian values. Surely, if they had ‘deserved’ the right to honorary ‘Aryan’ status, it would be given to them? This was particularly true of the German-speaking Ashkenazi community, some of whom had long exhibited a fiercely nationalistic Croatian outlook. In his memoirs, Imre Rochlitz, a young Jewish refugee from Austria in the period immediately before and after the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia, described the incredulous reaction of many such Jews to the antisemitic laws. As he recalled, many Jews, including in his own family, were susceptible to the very same antisemitic prejudices that they eventually fell victim to, often despising the unassimilated Jews:

“A major family dispute ensued. Why should they persecute us? The various accusations of the Nazis did not seem to fit us: We were not rich, we did not exploit Gentiles, we certainly were not international conspirators, financiers, or Zionists, our culture was Germanic, we spoke *Hochdeutsch* [...] without an accent and we didn’t even have big noses. They could not possibly mean *us*; surely their hostility was directed against the Jews of other cultures and nationalities, some of whom – we secretly thought – might even deserve a small dose of discipline.”²⁴

Among these Jews, the sense of shame at having to wear the Jewish insignia combined with trust and confidence that the authorities would reconsider their decision once they had learnt about the individual’s past service for the national community was pervasive.²⁵ In his petition to the Ustaša police, Aurel Gorjan clearly expressed these complex emotions. Gorjan, a machine engineer from Zagreb, had been one of the founding members, along with the wartime state’s leading film director Oktavijan Miletić and a teenage Krešimir Golik, of the Cinematic Section of the Fotoklub in Zagreb. In 1935, he had helped organise the first international amateur film festival in Croatia.²⁶ In his petition he pointed out that wearing the Jewish insignia would expose him to “ridicule” and make him a “laughing stock in the eyes of others” when carrying out his work. Not only was his request bluntly dismissed,²⁷ but as a subsequent letter of his to the Jewish Section made clear, he had been forced to change his name and that of his wife and son back to the original Grünwald and move to the south side of the city in Deželica ulica as the antisemitic laws stipulated.²⁸

The sense of ‘shame’ was a recurrent feature of many of the other applications to the Jewish Section for honorary ‘Aryan’ status. Leopold Müller, a retired businessman, wrote to the police directorate in June 1941 to explain that having to wear the Jewish insignia would be an indication that he had failed in his endeavour to become a Croat, a disgrace. Married to an ‘Aryan’ Croat wife Marija and living on the affluent

24 Imre Rochlitz, *Accident of Fate. A Personal Account*, Ontario 2011, 20.

25 Bruno Carmon recalled that when a rumour began that the Ustaša police in Zagreb were conducting a sweep of Jewish youth in the city on 31 May 1941, some parents even proposed taking their sons to register with the police, so confident were they that nothing untoward would happen; see Bruno Carmon, *Zagreb, 31 svibnja, 1941* [Zagreb, 31 May 1941], in: *Novi Omanut* [New Art] (May-August 1999) 34-35, 2.

26 During the period of the Independent State of Croatia, Golik was a young war reporter for the party journal *Ustaša* and in 1943 won a literary prize for a short story about an isolated battalion of Ustaša soldiers holding off an attack by Partisans entitled *Because an Ustaša Never Surrenders Alive*. Subsequently, in socialist Yugoslavia, he became one of Yugoslavia’s most internationally successful, popular, and acclaimed film directors. When this earlier aspect of his past became known, it led to him being expelled from the Society of Film Workers and effectively being unable to work as an independent film maker for almost ten years, see Petar Krelja, Golik, *Zagreb* 1997, 31; Krešimir Golik, *Jer ustaša se živ ne predaje* [Because an Ustaša Never Surrenders Alive], in: *Ustaša* 12 (17 January 1942) 3, 4-6.

27 HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 20.252/27571, Aurel Gorjan to the Jewish Section, 31 May 1941.

28 HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 20.252/998, Aurel Grünwald to the Jewish Section, 25 June 1941.

northern side of the town on Ilica, the antisemitic laws threatened to separate them. Hence, wearing the Jewish insignia would not only damage her reputation, he explained, but “would cause me great shame in my old age”. This was not least because, as he continued,

“as a businessman in Zagreb of many years standing, I always distinguished myself as a good Croat and a supporter of the politics of Ante Starčević and the Croatian Party of Right. Among respectable citizens and businessmen, I enjoyed a good reputation and supported all philanthropic and cultural Croatian institutions and never got involved with Jewish organisations and nor did I ever attend Jewish schools, as many people can testify.”²⁹

Likewise, in his petition to the Ustaša police, Vitomir Krauth, a 29-year-old sales assistant, explained that “it is a tragic fact of my life that my ancestors were Jews and I am one too”. He felt the need to emphasise that “in my soul, even in my early childhood, I always expressed myself and felt in every way a Croat”. In this sense, the need to wear a yellow star struck at the core of who he was or thought he was. “Although I don’t want to stress how this affects my feelings, it deeply offends me and strongly debases me that as a Jew I am counted among those who positively worked against the yearnings of the CROAT PEOPLE”, he added, hoping that “in my everyday life I can be permitted to walk about without having to wear the Jewish marking”. He recalled the various ways he had sought to overcome his Jewish ‘taint’ by becoming “extremely active in the Croatian Sokol in Virovitica from 1924 until the time when the notorious Serbian authorities disbanded it”. Afterward, he was among the first to take on the role of auditor, hiding its documentation “in the hope that there would come a time for Croats when the Croatian Sokol could again be active”. He also revealed that “in the time of the most intense persecution of the Croats in 1933, I gave asylum to my good friend and national warrior Josip Begović”.³⁰ Despite their proud assertions of a Croat identity and nostalgic memories of what it meant to be a Croat nationalist in the 1930s, neither Leopold Müller nor Vitomir Krauth were successful in gaining honorary ‘Aryan’ status and they both perished in the Holocaust, dying in 1941 in Jasenovac.³¹

A few petitioners were more fortunate and did receive honorary ‘Aryan’ status. One of these was Vladimir Sachs-Petrović, the veteran leader of the radical nationalist Pure Party of Rights from which many of the founding members of the Ustaša movement, including Pavelić, had come. Returning from self-imposed exile in April 1941, he experienced, he wrote, the prospect of wearing the Jewish insignia as profoundly shameful, particularly in an independent Croatia he had fought so hard to realise. In his petition of May 1941, he pointed out that “in my fifty years of work for the Croat people and especially its liberation I suffered the unceasing chains of persecution. From 1891 to 1941, I placed my life on the line over thirty times for pure *Pravaši* [radical nationalist] ideas and my wife who experienced the entire Calvary

29 HDA, NDH, MUP/ŽO, 12.252/1886, Molba Leopolda Müllera iz Zagreba, Dalmantinska 16/II, za dozvola da mogu stanovati na istočnoj strani grada Zagreba kao i za oslobodjenje nošenje židovskog znaka [Request of Leopold Müller from Zagreb, Dalmantinska 16/II, for permission to stay on the eastern side of the city of Zagreb as well as for exemption from having to wear Jewish markings], 13 June 1941.

30 HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 2.252/691, Vitomir Krauth to the Jewish Section, undated (emphasis in original). Josip Begović, a university student and member of an Ustaša cell, executed in 1934 for alleged complicity in a plot to assassinate King Aleksandar, was one of the most revered and mythologised martyrs in the movement, his death being commemorated every year on the Day of Croat Martyrs in June and the Day of the Dead in November.

31 See HDA, NRH, JT-OPA, 124.1421/6, Popis interniranih Židova u Jasenovcu III od 21 October 1941 62/5000 [Register of interned Jews in camp 3 of Jasenovac as of 21 October 1941].

with me and who was arrested on 4 April 1939 due to her 'illegal' return to the country [Yugoslavia] and who has just recovered from a serious and devastating illness has decided that she would commit suicide if she had to wear the shameful sign of international Jewry against which we have both determinedly fought."³²

Petrović-Sach's petition highlights another common feature of many of the Jewish petitions: the view of the writer that they had, in some senses, separated themselves from the rest of the Jewish community. Like Imre Rochlitz and his family, they were convinced that an exception would be granted in their case because they had demonstrated that they were different from other Jews and therefore had transformed themselves into Croats. In fact, some petitioners viewed Jews with scorn, contrasting the eagerness with which they seemingly wore the insignia with their sense of humiliation. One such petitioner was Ela Sudarević, a thirty-four year old tailor's assistant from Zagreb. While she conceded the practical difficulties in having to wear a yellow star and being classified as a Jew would cause her, being publicly marked as Jewish, she stressed, would represent a sign of moral defeat for her: It would associate her with an identity she viewed with revulsion and associate her with a community whose values were alien to her. She pointed out that she had converted to the Roman Catholic faith in 1937 and, despite coming from a Jewish family, had a modest occupation like most Croats, living a hand-to-mouth existence, barely able to afford the bare necessities, and owning no property of her own. She had, she continued, married a Croat, Slavko Sudarević, in 1937 and "we were always good Croats and felt Croat". Moreover, she wrote that while "there are Jews in Zagreb who wear the designated sign with pride, considering themselves martyrs, for me, this insignia is the greatest shame because I always felt myself to be a Croat and I will always feel like this. I am a tailor's assistant, a worker, and so that I can continue to work I am pleading to be exempted from wearing the Jewish sign. Despite attempts to find work in the past half year, my husband is unemployed and if I were to be without a job and income that would mean catastrophe for us both."³³

Artur Takač, meanwhile, a twenty-three year old athletics star from Varaždin and founder of the town's first ice hockey club, did not mention the Jews by name in the petition he wrote directly to the Poglavnik, but the 'Aryanised' discourse of his letter made it clear that the Jews were on his mind. He sought to differentiate himself from the Jewish community in two ways. First, he praised the wisdom of the antisemitic laws while suggesting that an exception should be made for him as one of a small number of Jews who had transcended their Jewish origins. Second, by emphasising his achievements on the sports field and the role this had played in the construction of a new steely nationalist youth, he sought to emphasise that he stood apart from the stereotype of the weak intellectual Jew, one who had, moreover, made an important contribution in the building of the youth of the future in a Croatian nation-state which would be free of Jews. He belonged, he wrote, to "those who by birth belong under the constraints of those laws, but who with their life and their work are to be separated from the majority of non-Aryans and who are unselfish and sincere Croat nationalists whose life's work is devoted to the awakening of the national consciousness as well as to the progress and prosperity of our nation". He lauded the Poglavnik for his "far-sightedness and generosity" in granting such people all the rights which belong to people of "Aryan origin". In the national organism, there were countless acts which had a great influence on the life of the nation. One of these activities, he added, was sport.

32 HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 1.252/194/41, Vladimir Sachs-Petrović to the Jewish Section, 25 May 1941.

33 HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 31.252, unnumbered, Ela Sudarević to the Jewish Section, 28 May 1941.

“Right from the start of our young state, it was noticeable that you understood the overwhelming importance of physical culture and you dedicated particular attention to it. Among the countless young athletes who dedicated themselves to sport, I attempted with my modest means to make a contribution to the hardening of the Croat soul and body for the most sublime struggle: the liberation of the nation.”³⁴

Ordinary Serbs between Terror, Stigmatisation, and ‘Croat Feelings’

Feelings of stigma and pride in the steps they had taken to overcome their ‘shameful’ origins were also important features of the petitions Serb citizens sent to the DRP, the Serb section of the Ustaša police, and even directly to the Poglavnik himself with the aim of avoiding deportation or gaining permission to convert to Catholicism. These narratives can be discerned clearly in the letter Emil Vukašinić, a shipping merchant from Zagreb, addressed to the “Poglavnik of the Croat people” on 14 July asking permission to remain in Croatia. In his letter, he provided a detailed biography, talking emotionally of his Croat identity and nostalgically of his transformation into a Croat, overcoming his Orthodox roots and “stigmatisation” as a Serb. Simultaneously, his letter articulated his conviction that the Ustaša state was one in which an honest patriotic Croat like himself could expect fair treatment. One of the most noticeable aspects of his letter, common to many of the petitions Serbs and Jews wrote to the authorities during this period, was the appropriation of the state’s language. In his case, this involved the use of the phrase ‘Greek Easterner’; in other cases Serb petitioners referred to themselves as ‘former Serbs’. He also used the Ustaša greeting “For the Homeland Prepared!” which was the mandatory state salutation in all public correspondence and communication among citizens and officials alike. However, Serbs and Jews were ostensibly banned from using it since it could only be employed by those with full citizenship. The writer’s use of it here was likely deliberate, intended not only to ensure his petition was looked on more favourably but also to suggest that he considered himself a member of the Croatian national community:

“On the basis that every Croat needs to write to the Poglavnik for permission, I am sending you my petition to ask that you protect me from being branded as a Serb even though my father was baptised in the Greek Orthodox faith. My mother is a Roman Catholic Croat, my wife is a Roman Catholic Croat, I was married in a Roman Catholic Church, and I myself have converted to Roman Catholicism. Apart from that, I have been in Zagreb for 45 years, where I always actively collaborated exclusively with Croats in Croatian societies. I fought as an Austro-Hungarian sergeant [*Zugsführer*] for four years on the Russian Front and for two years on the Italian Front and was decorated as such. In 1924, I actively collaborated in the Party of Right including in the first election when it appeared in the Croatian Block against the late [Stjepan] Radić when he entered the Belgrade government. I was vice-head of the Croatian Sokol and Holy Spirit and actively worked in it for a number of years until the sixth January regime which forced us to dissolve the Sokol. As a flag bearer and vice-prefect of the Croatian Sokol, the vice-Poglavnik Mile Budak and the Poglavnik surely

34 HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 32.252/2341, Artur Takač to the Office of the Poglavnik, 28 May 1941.

have not forgotten when I, together with them, entered the first ranks of the Croatian Sokol. In my honest struggle for Croatian ideals, I never in any way insulted the honour of my Croatian feelings. I ask to be protected as a Croat from stigmatisation as a Serb because previously I was of the Greek Eastern faith. For the homeland prepared!”³⁵

Of course, underneath the passionate declarations of a Croatian national identity, the account of their personal struggle to overcome their Serb or Jewish origins and the optimistic belief – in public at least – that they simply had to voice their sameness to the Croatian nation and their *differentness* to the communities to which Ustaša racial ideologues insisted they were members of, and that it would be obvious to the state and the Poglavnik that they belonged, lay a barely concealed dread. In the case of Jews, especially in the early months, members of the community waited for worse to come after the initial burst of antisemitic legislation. For their part, many Serbs were desperate to avoid deportation and ‘resettlement camps’. There was also a corrosive sense of terror as rumours about what was happening to Serbs elsewhere in the state spread. This sense of both unrealistic optimism and profound fear is evident in the petition Milan Redić from Soljani wrote to the DRP on 6 August 1941. Although his mother and father were both ‘Greek-Eastern’ and he had been born into that faith too, he had applied for conversion to Catholicism and his request, he assured the agency, was already underway. “Now the resettlement of the Serbs from the Independent State of Croatia is in progress”, he started hopefully, “I am asking the directorate to allow me to remain on my native soil where I was born because I have never felt like a Serb and that is why I am now converting to the Roman Catholic faith and want to be completely equal with other Croats.” The local Ustaša camp leader in Soljani Ivan Graždić and the mayor of Soljani sent endorsements confirming that Redić was “always an upstanding citizen and always worked with the Croats, never expressed any kind of Serb consciousness, and was a member of Croatian societies”.³⁶

In other Serb petitions the sense of desperation was so palpable as to drown out any positive messages about a Croatian identity. These kinds of letters were frequently addressed directly to the Poglavnik in the hope of a positive response and the writer often set out his predicament in overtly emotional terms. These kinds of petitions were penned by the well-educated, humble factory workers, and ordinary peasants alike. The following letter is from Bogdan Lužnjević, a young worker at a dried meats factory from Križevci, asking for his application to convert from Orthodoxy to Catholicism to be expedited. Clearly shaken by a rumour that he and his family might soon be deported to Serbia, he was fearful that he and his family might be subject to “persecution” as Orthodox Serbs if it were not understood that his “true” identity was Croat. His long, confessional letter to the Poglavnik is far less about his struggle to overcome a past ‘shameful’ or unwanted identity and far more about as-

35 HDA, NDH, Ponova, SO/OS, 447.1076, unnumbered, Molba Vukašinić, Emila, otpremnika, Zagreb, Ilica 159 da se kao člana Pravaške stranke iz godine 1924 i podstarješini Hrvat Sokola Set Duh, Priznanje Hrvatsvo kao grčko-istoč, koji je prešao na rimok. vjeru, 14 July 1941 (Petition from Emil Vukašinić, shipping merchant, Zagreb, Ilica 159 as a member of the Party of Right since 1924 and vice-prefect of the Croatian Sokol for the recognition of his Croatanness as a Greek-Easterner who has converted to the Roman Catholic faith). Stjepan Radić was the former leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, the largest and most popular party in Croatia in the 1920s and 1930s. When he entered into a coalition government with pro-government parties in the late 1920s, he was assailed by Croat ultranationalists for ‘betraying’ Croatia. He was assassinated in the Yugoslav parliament in 1928 by a Serbian nationalist deputy and thereafter King Aleksandar declared a royal dictatorship out of which the embryonic Ustaša movement emerged.

36 HDA, NDH, Ponova, OS/SO, 447.1076, unnumbered, petition from Milan Redić to the DRP, 6 August 1941.

serting the identity he believed he always possessed. Grounded in the discourse of the Ustaša movement and the new state, he portrayed the state not as a site of terror and persecution but one in which he, as much as other Croat people, had been liberated and given the freedom to find himself:

“Poglavnik! I, the undersigned, of the Orthodox faith, born in 1919 in Križevci, honourable, a trained sales assistant, appealed for conversion to the Roman Catholic faith on 12 June 1941 but until today it has still not been resolved despite the fact that Dr. Mile Budak, the minister for religion and education, said during a celebration of the Independent State of Croatia in Križevci on 6 July that those who have committed no sins can convert to the Catholic faith. Seeing as I was born in Croatia and recognise the state of Croatia as my dear homeland, I have never erred with words or deeds against the honour of the Croat people but on the contrary always collaborated in Croatian societies and was always with those who worked for the realisation of the liberation of the state of Croatia and because I am utterly poor without anything. [...] I am contacting you as the Poglavnik of our dear homeland with the warmest appeal that you will be so merciful as to approve my efforts to get permission to convert to the Catholic faith and issue an order to stop the possible persecution of me as I am a poor man of excellent moral character, because I earn my crust with great difficulty and do not want to achieve any kind of riches on the backs of others, and as I never worked against the Croat people and guarantee on my life and also, if it is needed, all the citizens of Križevci can prove my claims.³⁷

As well as portraying himself as an honest working man of “excellent moral character” who did not exploit others, but simply earned his “crust” with “great difficulty” and is therefore an ideal new Croat worker, this 24-year-old factory worker emphasised the commitment of his family to the Croatian nationalist cause and their disdain for the Serbian Orthodox Church, not just now but in the 1930s, too. Not only he but also his brother, a builder’s assistant, were married to Croat women, he wrote, their marriages consecrated in the Catholic Church. Like him, his brother was a “resolute Croat” who “always expressed himself as a Croat” and had also applied for conversion to Catholicism. In his petition, he recalled that his family resolutely “stood on the side of the Croats” not least because “we saw that the Orthodox priests were not doing God’s teaching”. This reinforced the state discourse about the heretical and sacrilegious nature of Serbian Orthodox priests and the Church. In fact, the Serbian Orthodox Church was viewed by Ustaša ideologues as one of the main proponents of Serbian nationalist ideology and, later, when the Ustaša movement had abandoned its original programme of mass killing and forced deportation, as an obstacle to the assimilation of the Serb peasant masses. At the height of the Ustaša campaign against the church in the spring and summer of 1941, Ustaša camps and commissariats throughout the state closed Serbian Orthodox churches, monasteries, societies, and schools. Meanwhile, the DRGP and DRP confiscated, nationalised, and liquidated church property and assets and expelled hundreds of priests while Ustaša militias arrested and murdered dozens of others and destroyed or burnt down hundreds of churches. Ljužnjević asked the Poglavnik to publish a licence for conversion to the Catholic faith for him “because without a spiritual shepherd it is hard for us here because we are as though lost”. He added that “as honourable Croat workers, we should not be persecuted”. This hinted again at the threat of terror hang-

³⁷ HDA, NDH, Ponova, 445.1076/SO, unnumbered, Bogdan Ljužnjević to the Poglavnik, 5 August 1941.

ing over the family from the local Ustaša authorities and militias which at the time appeared determined on cleansing the state of Serbs entirely. In order to underline his loyalty and that of his family, he declared that – if necessary – they would be “always upstanding in defence of our dear homeland of Croatia”, sacrificing “our own lives for the freedom and independence of our Croatian homeland”. He concluded his letter emphatically, declaring that “I remain always for the homeland prepared. Long live our Poglavnik Dr. Ante Pavelić, long live the freedom of the state of Croatia, long live the Croat people. Always prepared.”³⁸

Reconstructed Biographies for New People

The lives and fates of the subjects explored in this article followed very different paths during the Second World War, the Holocaust, and after. For most of the Jewish subjects, there was no after. A few, however, did survive. One of these was Artur Takač, who went on to enjoy a successful career in Socialist Yugoslavia as a sports trainer and Olympic official. The account of how he managed to escape the Holocaust contained in the Biografski Leksikon (Biographical Lexicon) of Jewish personalities does not match the archival evidence. While there are obvious reasons why Takač kept his correspondence with the Poglavnik and his attempts to assert a Croat and ‘Aryan’ identity prior to his escape from the Ustaša state concealed, the political culture in post-war Socialist Yugoslavia also encouraged people from all ethnic groups to edit their autobiographies and reinvent themselves in order to integrate into the new social orthodoxies. The pressure must have been especially intense in the first formative years of the state when the campaign to unmask Fascists who were allegedly concealing themselves as Socialist citizens was at its height and party newspapers called on vigilant citizens to root out all manifestations of ideological deviationism in their factories, offices, neighbourhoods, and even homes.³⁹ Personal biographies, therefore, were not just often acts of imposture, but also a question of survival. In Takač’s case, his Socialist biography removed him completely from Croatia at the time he wrote his petition to the Poglavnik and relocated him first in a labour camp in Italy and then as an active participant in the anti-Fascist struggle. In truth, these aspects of his wartime experience only occurred later. Nevertheless, this biographical editing ultimately helped him to build a career as one of Yugoslavia’s most celebrated sports trainers, someone who played a leading role in the organisation of the triumphant 1984 Sarajevo Olympics and after whom an athletics tournament would be posthumously named. Far away from the Varaždin and Croat identity he described in his letter, he would, ironically, spend the rest of his life following liberation in Belgrade, ultimately being recognised as one of Serbia’s most illustrious and noteworthy Jews.⁴⁰ Yet, as the case of Krešimir Golik illustrated, the risk of exposure and denunciation lurked menacingly in the background with threat of social and ideological shaming and career ostracism should it be revealed.

Artur Takač’s life in Fascist Croatia and Socialist Yugoslavia was one example of this repressed fear, but then so were the lives of countless other Croat citizens who, in the space of twenty years, had had to acquire new personas under (variously) syn-

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Rubčić, *Kaznimo zločince čovječnosti i narodne budućnosti* [We are punishing the criminals for humanity and the national future].

⁴⁰ See Teodor Kovač, Artur Takač, in: Aleksandar Nećak (ed.), *Znameniti Jevreji Srbije. biografski leksikon* [Famous Serbian Jews. Biographical Lexicon], Belgrade 2011, 227-228.

thetic Yugoslav, Fascist Croatian, and Socialist regimes. Imposture was an important element of post-war life in Socialist Yugoslavia as tens of thousands of ordinary citizens sought to rewrite their personal biographies in order to reinvent themselves in line with the new socialist orthodoxies just as thousands of ordinary people had tailored their pasts to survive in the Independent State of Croatia. In fact, the same individuals were often involved in serial rewritings in their attempt to negotiate their lives in interwar Yugoslavia, under Ustaša rule, and in Socialist Yugoslavia. Not surprisingly, in all three states an important part of official discourse involved tearing off the masks to reveal the authentic person, someone who all too often, it seemed, hid character or national flaws, deviant ideological agendas, or a corrupt private life underneath. In all three societies, vigilant and honest citizens were encouraged to denounce dangerous neighbours, work colleagues, friends, and even relatives.⁴¹ One of the most notorious of Socialist Yugoslavia's imposters was a con man and seeming fantasist called Leo Furetić, unmasked working in the card index section of the Yugoslav secret police in 1946. In interwar Yugoslavia, he had lived under the name Bernard Švarcenberg and had served time in prison for fraud and embezzlement, but in April 1941, finding himself in the Independent State of Croatia, this illegitimate son of Jewish single mother Cecilija Rozner had managed to get himself baptised and changed his name to the more Croat Leo Furetić, a surname, according to Yugoslav investigators, he had taken "from some goat herder called Furetić in Sesvete for whom he was an apprentice for a period". He then seamlessly joined the Ustaša movement, inventing membership in the revolutionary 1918 battalion (revered by Ustaša ideologues for mounting an insurrection against the new Yugoslav state on 5 December 1918 in Zagreb's Jelačić Square). He also successfully hid his Jewish ancestry, even if ultimately a disciplinary Ustaša court sentenced him to death for corruption and accepting bribes in return for favours. He had the last laugh, escaping from the notorious Savska Cesta in Zagreb in 1944.⁴² In the autobiography he wrote for his Yugoslav post-war interrogators, he revealed his varied career as soldier, convicted felon, factory owner, con artist, policeman, death row prisoner and, finally, Communist spy and all-round fixer.⁴³ Con man or victim of circumstance? Fascist functionary or Socialist spy? Clandestine friend of the resistance or disreputable collaborator? Which one of these personas was the real Ivo Furetić or, indeed, Bernard Švarcenberg? Perhaps they all were, in the same way Ivo and Bernard were one and the same person. At different times, these contradictory identities ensured his economic, social, and physical survival. Whether by the time he was unmasked he actu-

41 Interwar Yugoslavia, especially during the period of King Aleksandar's Yugoslav dictatorship, developed an extensive system of surveillance, denunciation, and monitoring of public opinion. Ordinary citizens were also encouraged to demonstrate their transformed Yugoslav consciousness by denouncing anti-Yugoslav sentiment and, while some were motivated by opportunism, the desire for social advancement, social resentment, or revenge, others engaged in denunciation for idealistic reasons or to demonstrate they had become Yugoslavs. See Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Policing Yugoslavism. Surveillance, Denunciations, and Ideology during King Aleksandar's Dictatorship, 1929–1934*, in: *East European Politics and Societies* 23 (February 2009) 1, 34–62; and Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs. Identity in King Aleksandar's Yugoslavia*, Toronto 2014, 137–206.

42 The soldiers were portrayed in Ustaša iconography as the first Ustaša revolutionaries. The anniversary of their uprising was an important day in the state's calendar and an army unit was named after them. In December 1941, the bodies of the dead soldiers were buried with great solemnity at the national cemetery of Mirogoj and the surviving participants in the uprising were incorporated into an honorary battalion at the behest of the Poglavnik to honour their dead comrades. Membership of this battalion offered not just state acclaim but numerous privileges, as Furetić's career in wartime Croatia illustrates. On the state's appropriation of the 1918 uprising, see Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation. The Ustaša Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941–1945*, Pittsburgh 2013, 328–330.

43 HDA, MUP, RH, ZIG, NDH, 176.154/1549/9339/149, 2 Zapisnik o saslušanju Furetić Leo [Minutes of the hearing for Leo Furetić], 21 July 1946.

ally knew who he was is another question. By contrast to Furetić's strategies of survival, many Serb and Jewish petition writers, attempting to survive in a time of terror and revolution, aimed to assert their loyalty, publicly at least, by tearing off the masks which had kept their 'real' national affiliations concealed, now adding new ones in search of their 'authentic' self.

In Search of the 'Authentic Self'

If, in times of revolution, ordinary people who fear becoming victims of the violence that accompanies it have, as Sheila Fitzpatrick has written, often been forced to tear off their masks – the carefully constructed image of themselves which they present to the world – and create new identities in order to negotiate the social upheaval, for many years the historiography of episodes of modern terror such as the Great Terror in Stalinist Russia and the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Europe often assumed that potential victims either withdrew, making themselves as inconspicuous as possible, or lived a double life, presenting a socially acceptable persona for the public sphere and reverting to an 'authentic self' which expressed resistance in the privacy of the home.⁴⁴ Increasingly, Soviet and Holocaust historiographies have challenged this view. While, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in how ordinary Jews experienced the Holocaust in South-Eastern Europe as everyday life, consideration of the individualised nature of Nazi occupation in the former Yugoslavia, despite the rich diversity of sources available to researchers and the importance of the Independent State of Croatia in the Nazi empire, is only in its formative stages. What do the petitions written to state agencies and ministries – the Ustaša police, the State Directorate for Reconstruction, and just as frequently the Poglavnik himself – by this cohort of Jewish and Serb victims tell us about the behaviour of victims of terror during the Holocaust? First, some victims of persecution did not withdraw from the state, aiming to become inconspicuous, as a means of negotiating what they had good reason to expect would be a terrible fate. Nor did they flee or join the incipient resistance struggle. Instead, they were consumed by questions of identity, involved in an (admittedly one-sided) dialogue with the state about their subjectivity. Hence, they publicly declared their difference to other members of their persecuted community as a means of emphasising their affinity with the wider collective of the Croatian nation. Second, while the sentiments expressed in the writers' petitions underline the fluidity of their identity to a contemporary reader that is clearly not how they intended their confessional letters to be interpreted by the bureaucrats who read them. Rather, by stressing their separateness from the community to which they had, they believed, been arbitrarily and unwillingly assigned, and in attributing their 'false' non-Croat identity to malign others (the Jewish community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Yugoslav state), they were tearing away their masks not to adopt a new identity but to reclaim the identity they felt they had always possessed but which could only now be unmasked for the first time.

Finally, the fact that a small number of petition writers such as Artur Takač survived the Holocaust provides us with the opportunity to compare their attempts to write themselves into the Ustaša state with their endeavours aimed at writing themselves into the new Socialist Yugoslav values. In the case of Takač, this required that

⁴⁴ Jochen Hellbeck, *Speaking Out. Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalin's Russia*, in: *Kritika* 1 (2000) 1, 72.

he, once again, refashion his autobiography since a Socialist consciousness was clearly incompatible with a past stated identification with Fascism, irrespective of whether it had been motivated by idealism or fear and desperation. Takač's successful integration into the new Socialist state raises questions about the sincerity of the declarations the writers expressed in their petitions. Who was the 'real' Takač, for example? The youthfully exuberant athlete who wrote to the Poglavnik in summer 1941 expressing himself as "an unselfish and sincere Croat nationalist"? Or the other one, the one who became a Socialist resistance fighter and trained generations of Yugoslav athletes before staging the triumphant 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo? Were the 'real' Vitomir Krauth, Leopold Müller, or Bogdan Ljužević the ones who wrote these letters, or were the words they wrote on the page and their 'authentic selves' disembodied and disconnected from each other? In the latter case, we surely cannot know since they either perished or disappeared without trace. For Takač, perhaps his letter to Pavelić never really was anything more than a search for salvation. Or maybe it was as genuine as his later support for the Partisan movement and the Socialist values of Yugoslavia, given that there were numerous examples of young Croat workers, intellectuals, and students who moved between Fascism and Socialism in the violent years of their internecine conflict. If so, this might in itself tell us something about the subjectivity of ordinary people not just during the Holocaust and Nazi occupation but under totalitarian revolutionary rule more generally.

Where the notorious trickster, imposter, and con man Leo Furetić is concerned, of course, it seems much clearer to us who the real person was despite his many disguises and identities. To ask, however, who the 'real' Furetić or Takač was is perhaps to pose the wrong question. As the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood wrote: "There's never only one, of anyone."⁴⁵ The practice of petition-writing as autobiography in a time of terror with all its fear, desperation, and idealism provides an important insight into the way in which the Holocaust and ideological terror in occupied Europe and the post-war period – in this case the Independent State of Croatia and Socialist Yugoslavia – forced victims into tearing off one set of masks and putting on another, hopefully adopting a new identity, but ever fearful that a past 'wrong' comment, letter, or identity would unmask them as a class traitor, national enemy or economic saboteur. More than this, however, exploring subjective processes at the individual level forces the historian to see the Holocaust in fundamentally personal terms, blurring the line between collaborator and victim, challenging post-war discourses about the Holocaust and experiences of occupation as well as contemporary historiographical judgements. Perhaps the autobiographical petitions of the victims of terror in wartime Croatia are subjective in another sense too: The stories of ordinary people in extraordinary times, told in their own words and everyday narratives, are ultimately moderated by our own reactions to them. In an interview of 1982 Christa Wolf reflected that both the narrator and central character in *The Quest for Christa T.* in fact involved Wolf in a dialogue with herself. Her motive for writing the story, she confessed, was "entirely subjective". While the novel did, indeed, seek to memorialise a real-life friend who had died too young, she nevertheless "suddenly" realised as she was writing the manuscript that "it was *myself* I was confronting".⁴⁶ Likewise, the correspondence here not only provides a glimpse of what it must have

⁴⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, London 1988, 6.

⁴⁶ Christa Wolf, Interview with *Myself*, in: Alexander Stephan (ed.), *The Author's Dimension: Selected Essays*, New York, 1993, 13.

been like to experience terror in real time, but forces us to think about our own subjectivity. In the final analysis, to the extent that victims such as Vitomir Krauth and Bogdan Ljužnević were seeking, through their petitions, to be recognised as their authentic selves, they challenge us to think about who we really are through reading them.

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