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THE OLDEST JEWISH CHOIR

JOSHUA R. JACOBSON

Perhaps the title is misleading. I am not referring to the delightful octogenarians who sing in the Workmen's Circle Chorus. Nor do I have in mind the Levites performing the *Avodah* in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. My subject is the oldest on-going Jewish Choral society in the world, the Baruch Brothers Choir of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, whose origins go back to 1879.

Strangely, the Baruch Brothers Choir has been ignored by virtually every historian of Jewish music. I found no reference to this organization in any of the works by Idelsohn, Gradenwitz, Rothmuller, Werner or Sendrey. Macy Nulman, under the entry "chorus" in his *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music*, tells us that "Joseph Rumshinsky, who pioneered with Jewish choral groups in Lodz, Poland, organized a group called the Hazomir Choral Society in 1899," but makes no mention of the Yugoslavians.¹ A corroboration for Nulman's assumption can be found in Rumshinsky's autobiography. He relates the exaltation he felt in 1899 when, at the age of eighteen, he became the conductor of the Hazomir Choral Society. "When we stood up and started to sing, a holy musical fire was kindled by the first Jewish choral ensemble in the world."² Clearly, Rumshinsky was never aware that when he started conducting Hazomir, the Jewish chorus in Belgrade was already celebrating its twentieth anniversary.

I first encountered the Baruch Brothers Choir in 1986 at the Zimriyah International Assembly of Choirs in Israel. Three years later, when I spent a month in Belgrade as a "Distinguished Professor" under the auspices of the Fulbright Foundation, I took the opportunity to learn more about the history of this remarkable organization.

¹Macy Nulman, *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1975, p.49.

² Joseph Rumshinsky, *Klangen Fun Main Leben*, New York, 1944, p. 189.

Translated by the present author.

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While there are records of a Jewish settlement in Yugoslavia for thousands of years, in the early sixteenth century the influx of refugees from Spain created the foundations for a large and active community. By the middle of the nineteenth century there were accounts of rich musical traditions in both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities. However, the concept of choral singing, in the Western sense, was still unknown in the Jewish community.

Indeed, prior to the liberation from Turkish hegemony in the nineteenth century, Western music did not have a strong foothold in any of the Serbian communities, Jewish or gentile.³ There was no choral singing (in the Western sense) before 1853, when the Belgrade Singing Society was founded. This ensemble was not alone for long, however, as Serbs quickly developed a taste for choral singing. The creation of the Serbian Jewish Vocal Ensemble in 1879 can be understood in the dual contexts of the increasing popularity of choral singing in the general community and the opening of the barriers which had separated Jew and gentile for centuries.⁴

In a centennial booklet entitled *Spomenica*, the early history of the choir is related:

In 1879, at the time when the Serbian-Jewish Vocal Ensemble was founded, the Jews in Belgrade lived a strictly patriarchal life, and were predominantly located in the Jewish Quarter of the famous Belgrade City district Dorcol. A number of Jewish intellectuals, stimulated by the status of equality granted to the Jews in the Balkans (after the Berlin Congress in 1878) had entertained the thought of organizing a chorus. This was at a time when musical and social life in Belgrade was still poorly developed and a chorus was sorely needed. Besides, the idea of the promoters was that the founding of such a society might contribute to better understanding and rapprochement between

³ After centuries of political and cultural domination by the Turks, in the nineteenth century Serbia gradually began to open up to Western influence. In 1878 Serbia finally gained complete independence from the Ottoman Empire.

⁴ Curiously, the Serbian Jewish Vocal Ensemble, now known as the Baruch Brothers Choir, is not only the oldest Jewish choir in the world, it is also the oldest of all the amateur choirs in Belgrade today.

⁵ Aleksandar Levi, *Spomenica*, Belgrade: Srbostampa, 1979, p. 112.

Serbs and Jews, relieving thus the isolation of the Jewish Quarter?

The chorus at first was an all-male ensemble. When women were admitted in 1899, chaperones were appointed to ensure that no “unseemly behaviour” would ensue.

In 1934 a second Jewish choir was formed in Belgrade, the Jewish Academic Chorale. But apparently the Jewish population wasn't sufficiently large to support more than one choir. After only a few years, the Jewish Academic Chorale merged with the Serbian-Jewish Vocal Ensemble.

The Jews of Yugoslavia suffered enormously during the Holocaust. Of the 10,000 Jews who lived in Belgrade before the war, only 1000 survived.⁶ In 1941 the Serbian-Jewish Vocal Ensemble was forced to suspend its activities. But immediately after the liberation in October of 1944, the few surviving members of the ensemble managed to give a concert in the ruins of Belgrade.

By 1952 the chorus was completely resuscitated, and in 1962 adopted a new name, “The Baruch Brothers Choir,” in memory of Izidor, Bora and Jozi Baruch, who were killed while fighting in the ranks of the Partisans against the Nazi invaders.

In its 111 years of existence the choir has been served by some thirty-three music directors, from Pera Dimic in 1879 to Dejan Savic in 1990. Most of the conductors have been non-Jews, the most notable of whom was Stevan Mokranjac (1956-1914), Serbia's greatest choral conductor and composer.

Presently, the choir enjoys a reputation as one of the finest vocal groups in Yugoslavia. Although only about 10% of its members are Jewish, the ensemble maintains its ethnic identity through its strong ties with the Belgrade Jewish Community Center.⁷ The repertoire represents a cultural and religious mixture, including Israeli compositions, synagogue music by Lewandowski and Sulzer, arrangements of Yiddish and Ladino

⁶ Slavko Goldstein, “Jewish Communities in South Slav Lands, “Jews in Yugoslavia, Zagreb, 1979,p.76.

⁷ Interview with Dejan Savic, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, March 12, 1989

⁸ Interview with Aleksandar Vujic, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, March 22, 1989.

folksongs, as well as oratorios, motets and masses by European composers and arrangements of Serbian folksongs.⁸ In 1910 the Serbian-Jewish Vocal Ensemble had the distinction of participating in the first performance of an opera in Belgrade: “The Bartered Bride” at the National Theatre.

Like most of the amateur choirs in Serbia, the Baruch Brothers Choir is large (over 100 singers) and comprises a wide range of age groups from high school to senior citizen, and ability levels from professional singers to rank amateurs. The group rehearses three nights a week (!) and has a full schedule of social as well as musical get-togethers. There are frequent tours, both domestic and international.⁹

What are the prospects for the continued survival of the Baruch Brothers Choir? Can a Serbian-Jewish musical ensemble continue to thrive in the 21st century? There are several factors that indicate an optimistic prognosis. Currently the Jewish and Christian communities in Belgrade enjoy excellent relations. Serbs and Jews have suffered adversity together on a number of occasions in recent history, including persecution by the Nazis in the 1940s and the recent friction with the Moslem population in Kosovo. For several years the Serbian State has been pressing the central government of Yugoslavia to recognize the State of Israel.

The Jewish community of Belgrade has recently shown some signs of renewal. Although the intermarriage rate is alarmingly high and the few remaining synagogues are largely empty, there is a significant renewal of interest in Yugoslavian-Jewish history and Israeli culture. One Friday night when I was in Belgrade, while the only synagogue couldn't even muster a minyan, the Jewish Community Center was bustling with activity as preparations were underway for the upcoming Purim pageant.

The Baruch Brothers Choir is blessed with a significant contingent of young Serbian and Jewish singers, many of whom are in their teens and twenties. They seem devoted to their ensemble and to its cultural objectives. Their energy and commitment point to a healthy future for this unique musical organization.

Anyone interested in further information on the Baruch Brothers Choir should write to its conductor, Dejan Savic, at 3rd blvd. 118/ix apt. 23, 11070 Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

⁹ In Yugoslavia many people join a choir primarily for the coveted **opportunity** to travel outside of the country.