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**THE ROLE OF POLYPHONIC SINGING IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
INTERETHNIC DIALOGUE: SERBIA-JEWISH *BARUCH BROTHERS* CHOIR
FROM BELGRADE**

Introduction

In this research I focused on the role of polyphonic singing in the interethnic communication on the example of the Serbian-Jewish choir *Baruch Brothers* from Belgrade¹. Founded in 1879 as the *Serbian-Jewish Singing Society*, the choir with its 137 years long tradition represents one of the oldest Jewish choirs in the world and is an exceptional example of a mixed choir. Due to its continuous existence, it can be considered a kind of a *sound* cultural monument.

This work is based on my own field research which was conducted in Belgrade in the period from March 2015 to May 2016. During the research I used the interview method and made informal interviews with the members of the Serbian-Jewish choir *Baruch Brothers* from Belgrade, of both genders, different age structure. While attending their concerts, I observed reactions of the audience and talked to individual listeners².

The aim of the research is to look at the role of a joint polyphonic singing in the deepening of the interethnic dialogue and cooperation, both in the lives of the singers and their surroundings, from a diachronic perspective and through the analysis of collected narratives of the singers, as well as through the insight into the archive material and the existing publications about the choir activities.

The Jewish community in Belgrade

Regarding the determining of the date of when Jews first came and inhabited the territory of today's Belgrade there is a disagreement on the matter among different authors (Hrabak, 2009: 13-14). A number of authors claim that Jews have been present in Serbia since Roman times (Benbassa and Rodrigue, 2000; Čvorović, 2015: 2). The earliest written information on Jews in Belgrade dates from the mid-tenth century. Those were the Romaniote Jews who spoke the Greek language (Hrabak, 2009: 6-15). The Ashkenazi Jews from Central Europe and Hungary, Yiddish speakers, as well as Italo-phonetic Jews from Italy, found refuge in Belgrade (Sorić, 1988: 124; Vlahović, 1994: 162; Hrabak, 2009: 25). As a result of religious persecutions conducted by the Inquisition in 15th century the Sephardi Jews who spoke Ladino moved from Spain and Portugal (Vlahović, 1994: 162). The Belgrade Jewish community became larger after the Ottoman conquest of the city in 1521 (Hrabak, 2009: 24).

The Jewish community in Belgrade shared the destiny of the Serbian society and periods of development, stagnation and decrease cyclically followed one another. Belgrade Jews developed

¹This paper is the result of Project no. 177027: *Multiethnicity, Multiculturalism, migrations – contemporary process*, by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

²I owe great thanks to all who took part in this research, especially the choir conductor Mr Stefan Zekić and the choir singer and instrumental solo player Abinon Silva who gave me precious information regarding the choir and helped me greatly in my research.

religious, cultural and economic activities (Hrabak, 2009: 6). The growth of the Jewish community was stopped in the second half of 17th century. Austrians occupied Belgrade in 1688. Among other desolations, they burnt the Jewish mahal. By the end of 18th century Belgrade had already survived two more Austrian occupations, in which Serbian and residents of other ethnic belonging suffered, among whom also Jews (Sorić, 1988: 124). At the beginning of 19th century, during the first government of Prince Miloš (1815-1839) the Jewish community thrives (Sorić, 1988: 125).

Right before World War II about 10.000 Jews lived in Belgrade (Popović 1997; Čvorović, Nikolić 2015, 299). Jewish community in Serbia was almost completely destroyed in the Holocaust during the German occupation in World War II (Ristović 2010; Čvorović, Nikolić, 2015: 300-301). More than a half of the surviving Jews moved out into the newly formed state of Israel in the period from 1948 to 1952 (Lebl 2007; Čvorović, Nikolić, 2015: 302). Nowadays, the Federation of Jewish Communities in Serbia is an institution which connects all Jewish communities on the territory of Serbia. This community has 3300 members (Jevrejska opština Beograd 2016).

The Serbian-Jewish singing society – "Baruch Brothers" choir

The *Serbian-Jewish Singing Society* was founded in 1879 in Belgrade (Sindik, 2009: 455). The changes of the choir's name indicate the changes in social and political atmosphere in Serbian society throughout different historical periods (fig. 1).

The choir was originally called *The First Jewish Singing Society*. This name was changed into *Serbian-Jewish Singing Society* a year later. Under this name the choir worked until 1941 (Hofman, 2004: 36). The name itself shows the concept of cherishing Jewish tradition and building mutual Serbian-Jewish relations. What makes it special is the fact that ever since its founding the choir has been ethnically mixed with a larger share of the majority people's members who primarily cherish musical inheritance of a religious and ethnic minority. The whole situation is inasmuch more specific considering the antisemitic attitude which spread through Europe in the second half of 19th century, at the time when the choir was founded. Throughout 20th century and until today Serbian society has continuously cherished propitious attitude towards the Jewish community, a testimony to which is, among other things, the existence of this choir.

It is especially interesting that many of the choir conductors were Serbs, prominent composers, for example S. Mokranjac, S. Hristić, J. Marinković (Hofman, 2004: 36). Regarding the gender structure, the choir was initially formed as a male ensemble. However, very soon, in the late 19th century it became a mixed male-female choir.

In World War II during the German Nazi occupation of Serbia, therefore in Belgrade as well, a large number of Serbian, Jewish, Roma and civilians of other nationalities suffered greatly. Fifty singers and three conductors of the choir were killed in concentration camps and fights against fascism (Hofman, 2004: 113-114).

After World War II the choir continued its work. Their first performance with a small number of surviving members took place in Belgrade in autumn of 1944. However, as a result of economic crisis in the postwar period and the further moving out of the Jews into Israel the choir continued its regular activities until 1952 under the name of "Choir with the Jewish Community of Belgrade" (Hofman, 2004: 31-32). The choir was named *Baruch Brothers* in 1962 after the communist revolutionaries (Hofman, 2004: 36-37).

Today the Serbian-Jewish singing society – the *Baruch Brothers* choir is a section of the Jewish Community of Belgrade. Rehearsals take place twice a week (and more frequently when it

is necessary) in the Jewish community building.

Concerts often take place in the congress hall of the building. Ever since its founding the choir has been financially helped by many institutions and individuals like the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, The Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Fund, etc (Hofman, 2004: 52-54).

Every year the choir gives many public performances, concerts at home and abroad. The repertoire is modified according to the requirements of the performances. The choir regularly gives performances at commemorations in the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. Their singing performances can also be heard in the Belgrade Synagogue.

The "Baruch Brothers" choir has a very rich and versatile repertoire. The conductor Stefan Zekić humorously says that the choir sings musical compositions "from Bach to *sevdah*", meaning that their repertoire consists of classical, spiritual and traditional compositions. When we speak of *sevdah*, it has to be pointed out that many songs which belong to the genre of *sevdalinka* and are very popular on the territory of former Yugoslavia, are actually of the Sephardi Jewish origin. The choir has a large music notes library. Work conception is such that the Jewish and Serbian cultural heritage is primarily cherished. The choir repertoire contains various patriotic and heroic songs together with the Jewish and Serbian spiritual music.

Regarding Serbian composers, there are works of Mokranjac (audio ex. 1), Hristić, Tajčević, etc. Jewish authors' works include compositions of H. Aleksander, S. Alman, E. Amiran, K. Berić, L. Bernstein, etc. (Hofman, 2004: 57). Berić arranged the Sephardi songs and some folk songs in Yiddish. Regarding the Western Europe music, the repertoire is very comprehensive (audio ex. 2), starting from the works of some old Renaissance masters like Di Lasso and Palestrina, then Monteverdi, Bach, Mozart, Dvorzak, Vivaldi and others to contemporary alive composers.

They perform a capella program, but vocal-instrumental works, the cantatas. This was the first amateur society which took part in an opera between the two wars. They sang in the Belgrade National Theatre in *The Bartered Bride* by Bedrich Smetana. At the annual celebration of the Victory Day on May 9, 2015 they sang a Partisan song "Through the woods and forests" and some other songs from the national liberation struggle like "Side by side with Marshal Tito". The next day, May 10, on the Day of the suffering of Belgrade Jews – at the place called Staro Sajmište they performed these songs in Jewish. At the celebration of 100 years from World War I, in 2015 the choir took part in the project "Serbs of the faith of Moses in the struggle for the freedom of Serbia". On this occasion they performed a lot of Serbian patriotic songs and they were partly sung in Jewish.

The *Baruch Brothers* choir sing their repertoire in several languages, Serbian, Hebrew (Ivrit), Yiddish, Ladino, Church Slavonic, Latin, English, French, Italian, etc (audio ex. 3 and 4).

Most choir members do not speak Ivrit and the lines in music sheets are transcribed into phonetic letters in Cyrillic or Serbian Latin. To pronounce the Ivrit correctly they get help from the Belgrade rabbi Isac Asiel. When they were in Israel giving a concert, Stefan Zekić, the conductor, was congratulated on his good Ivrit and nobody could believe that he didn't actually speak the language, but only could sing in it. I recorded a similar phenomenon in some other Serbian choirs where members couldn't speak the language they sang in. It can be concluded that besides languages we speak or have a passive knowledge of, there are also languages in which we sing. In this case, singers just convey the message without deeper understanding.

The *Baruch Brothers* choir had a prominent role in former Yugoslavia. Apart from giving performances throughout the former Yugoslavia, choir members also had many performances and tours abroad. In the second half of 20th century, during the "Cold War" and the block division of

the world, this choir from a socialist country had many concerts in the so called western countries like Switzerland, Great Britain, etc (fig. 2). In 1978 the choir went on a very important and big tour in the USA. In 42 days they went to a lot of towns and cities on the east coast. The tour included a concert in Carnegie Hall in New York. The day after their concert the president of SFRJ Josip Broz Tito visited New York. During the tour the choir members stayed with Jewish families in their homes. In this way personal contacts were made and with them a certain kind of micro-multicultural dialogue (fig. 3).

Diachronically viewed, the choir cooperated with a number of instrumental artists, orchestras and vocal solo singers. Although being a primarily amateur society, that is to say, one does not need to have a formal education to be a member, throughout its long history many professional musicians also sang in it, among whom some opera solo singers. I will name here only some of them, Djurdja Kačarević, Jadranka Jovanović, Duško Cvejić, Breda Kalef. Famous actros also sang here, like a Serbian actor Aljoša Vučković.

The choir made two LP albums and one CD. They received numerous domestic and international awards.

The *Baruch Brothers* choir has the board and the arts council. The conductor is the one who has the greatest influence on the forming of a repertoire. Stefan Zekić has been the head conductor since 2006 and he has been a member for 18 years, since his first year of high school. Additionally, Zekić is a conductor at the opera at the National Theatre where his predecessor Dejan Savić was also a member of the *Baruch Brothers* choir for many years.

The Serbian-Jewish choir has always been gathering young people together (fig. 4). In the interviews my informants were always stressing that one of the main motives for singing was – "socializing and communication". Today the majority of singers are Serbian too. However, besides them and Jews, there are also some members of other nationalities. It is interesting to mention that the current director of the Goethe Institute, Matthias Müller, joined the choir shortly after his coming to Belgrade 3 years ago.

Currently, the choir has 80 members and 40 of them are regular at rehearsals. The percentage of young singers, between the ages of 20 and 27, mostly students, is currently the largest. There are about ten singers who attend high school. There are a few middle-aged singers. There aren't many older singers, those over 65, but they do come regularly to the rehearsals. The oldest singer, Abinon Silvio, is 70 and he has been in the choir for 48 years (fig. 5). For years he was a solo singer and he played the accordion. There is no generation gap in communication between the choir members, it is obvious that they function harmoniously.

In the late 1990s during the breakup of former Yugoslavia and a great economic and social crisis, the choir was thriving as for the number of its members. About 100 members were regular at rehearsals. The rehearsal hall was full. I would like to remark that there was a keen interest in joining choir ensembles in Serbian society during this period. Around 2000 there was a sort of a shift in the *Baruch Brothers* choir, the number of their members was decreasing.

As for the gender structure, women have always been a majority, they make 2/3 of the membership. During my research I came to the information that regarding amateur singing men often have prejudice that it is not "a manly enough activity". On the other hand, there are many married couples who actually met in the choir. There are ethnically mixed couples. Singers bring their children to choir rehearsals. After the rehearsal they continue to socialize. The older members point out that diachronically viewed, there are certain differences in the way and intensity of the

social interaction between the choir members. Namely, in the period from 1960s to 1990s choir members were spending much more time together. After the rehearsals they continued to socialize in their homes, but more often they went to restaurants and cafes. The economic crisis in the 1990s limited the socializing to home visits. Since the 2000s there has been a tendency to socialize in public catering facilities again, but they still stress that "it is not as it used to be".

By analyzing the information acquired during the research it can be concluded that during its long history the Serbian-Jewish choir *Baruch Brothers* has been contributing to cherishing of the interethnic and multicultural dialogue primarily on the micro-level, among the choir members, and consequently with its own example on the local community level – in Belgrade. The role of concerts on tours and visits in Serbia and abroad is to establish a dialogue on the global level and to testify about the culture and the link between the Serbian and the Jewish people.

Audio examples

1. II rukovet (Second Garland), Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac. Live recording of the concert held in „Cvijeta Zuzorić" Art Pavilion in Belgrade, 2008. *Baruch Brothers* choir conductor Mr Stefan Zekić's private music archive.
2. Antiphons (Psalm 103), Alexander Gretchaninov. Live recording of the concert held in „Cvijeta Zuzorić" Art Pavilion in Belgrade, 2008. *Baruch Brothers* choir conductor Mr Stefan Zekić's private music archive.
3. Simonah Midimonah (Chaim Shalmoni, lyrics, Shlomo Weissfish, music, Joshua Jacobson, arrangement). Live recording of the concert held in Belgrade Jewish Community Hall in 2007. *Baruch Brothers* choir conductor Mr Stefan Zekić's private music archive.
4. Hasidic song, Aleksander Vujić. Live recording of the concert held in Belgrade Jewish Community Hall in 2007. *Baruch Brothers* choir conductor Mr Stefan Zekić's private music archive.

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სურათი 1. ბელგრადის სერბულ-ებრაული გუნდი ძმები ბარუხები. გუნდის არქივი.
Figure 1. The Serbian-Jewish choir *Baruch Brothers* from Belgrade. *Baruch Brothers* choir archive.



სურათი 2. ბელგრადის სერბულ-ებრაული გუნდი ძმები ბარუხები ლიანგოლენის საერთაშორისო ფესტივალზე, 1977. გუნდის არქივი.
Figure 2. The Serbian-Jewish choir *Baruch Brothers*, Llangollen International Festival 1977. *Baruch Brothers* choir archive.



სურათი 3. ბელგრადის სერბულ-ებრაული გუნდის, ძმები ბარუხების საკონცერტო ტურნე აშშ-ში 1978წ. გუნდის არქივი.

Figure 3. The Serbian-Jewish choir *Baruch Brothers*, USA tour 1978. *Baruch Brothers* choir archive.



სურათი 4. ბელგრადის სერბულ-ებრაული გუნდის, ძმები ბარუხების კონცერტი კოლარაკ ჰოლში, ბელგრადი 2015წ. გუნდის არქივი.

Figure 4. The Serbian-Jewish choir *Baruch Brothers*, concert in Kolarac concert Hall, Belgrade 2015. *Baruch Brothers* choir archive.



სურათი 5. ბელგრადის სერბულ-ებრაული გუნდის, ძმები ბარუხების მომღერალი და სოლო ინსტრუმენტალისტი აბინონ სილვა. გუნდის არქივი.

Figure 5. *Baruch Brothers* choir singer and instrumental solo player Abinon Silva. *Baruch Brothers* choir archive.



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რედაქტორები *რუსუდან ნურნუშია*
იოსებ ჟორდანი

EDITED BY *RUSUDAN TSURTSUMIA*
JOSEPH JORDANIA

ბამოცემავი მუშაობდნენ: *ნინო რაზმაძე*
მაია კაჭკაჩიშვილი
მაია ხარძიანი
თეონა ლომსაძე
ბაია ჯუჟუნაძე

THIS PUBLICATION WAS PREPARED BY: *NINO RAZMADZE*
MAIA KACHKACHISHVILI
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BAIA ZHUSHUNADZE

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ტრადიციული მრავალხმიანობის კვლევის საერთაშორისო ცენტრი, 2018

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State Conservatoire, 2018

ISBN 978-9941-9464-8-6

გარეკანის მხატვარი ნიკა სეპისკვერაძე
Cover Design by **NIKA SEBISKVERADZE**

კომპიუტერული უზრუნველყოფა მარიამ პოლტახიენტი
Computer Service by **MARIAM POLTAKHIENTI**