The Rescue of Jewish Physicians in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), 1941–1945

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Despite the murder of three-fourths of Croatia’s Jews, Croatian doctors, representatives of the Ministry of Health, and other government figures saved 142 Jewish physicians by mobilizing them for a mission to alleviate endemic syphilis in Bosnia. Twenty-seven others were recruited into the Home Guard. Along with members of their families, these Jews were granted “Aryan rights.” In 1942 some began defecting to the partisans; others followed after the capitulation of Italy in 1943. Many died in battle, succumbed to typhus, or were murdered by the Nazis, the Croatian fascist Ustaše, or the Serbian nationalist Četniks. But the story recounted below shows how much better they fared than the Jewish population generally: sixty-two percent survived, thanks to courageous efforts by Croatian civilians and officials. Their rescue demonstrates both that popular attitudes influenced events in Yugoslavia, and that common stereotypes of Croatia during the war should be reconsidered.

Three of every four Jews from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina perished during World War II. Yet during this murder of 30,000 people, 169 Jewish physicians and members of their families—approximately 650 people—were exempted by Croatian officials. The rescue of the doctors reveals much about the dynamic between the Nazi occupiers and their Balkan clients.

Coming to power with the support of their German sponsors, on April 10, 1941, the fascist Ustaše proclaimed the “Independent State of Croatia” (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska—NDH), which comprised the territories of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina of the dismembered Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Bosnia-Herzegovina included numerous ethnic and religious groups, incorporating a large Moslem population in a state governed from Zagreb. The Axis partners installed the exiled leader of the Ustaše (lit. “Insurgent”) Party, Dr. Ante Pavelić, as leader (poglavitnik) of the new entity.

As the official record phrased it during the postwar Yugoslavian investigation, one of the first tasks that the Nazi occupiers assigned to the NDH regime was to resolve the “Jewish Question,” with the solution to include two main components:
“First, to confiscate all Jewish assets, i.e., to return all the material possessions in Jewish hands to the Croatian people. These assets would then be used to rebuild the new Independent State of Croatia. Second, to physically exterminate the Jews in the territories of NDH in the manner of the Nazi doctrine of Racial Laws as conceived by Hitler and formulated by Dr. Alfred Rosenberg.”

From April 1941 to the end of July 1942 the Ustaše humiliated, robbed, interned, exploited, and murdered Jews on NDH territory; after that the NDH began deporting the remaining Jews to German-occupied Poland. Croatia’s genocidal program progressed more quickly in some places than in others, but the course of events in any given locale depended heavily on the extent of German presence and the “submissiveness of political authorities.”

On April 17, 1941, only two days after Pavelić entered Zagreb, his government implemented the first antisemitic legislative package, the “Act for the Protection of the Croatian People and State,” establishing the basis for the subsequent persecution of the Jews. This act stated that “anyone who compromises, or has compromised, in any way the honor of the Croatian people and their vital interests, or who endangers in any way the existence of the Independent State of Croatia and its ruling authorities, even if such an act is merely attempted, is guilty of the crime of high treason.”

But the identification of Jews as the national enemy did not enjoy automatic or universal acceptance. The next day in the daily newspaper Novi list the Ustaše proceeded to elaborate on the measures and warned those who might help Jews evade them: “since many Croat citizens individually and in groups are engaged in the rescue of individual Jews and their families, the Ustaše Office for Law and Order has sent instructions to the State Regulatory Board forbidding lawyers and solicitors from being involved in political matters, particularly on behalf of the Jews. Those who do not uphold this law will be held accountable and bear heavy consequences.”

On April 30 the Ustaše enacted a second statute, charging the Jews with collective responsibility for “the dissemination of lies about the conduct of the government, disturbing the public peace and order. For this, the NDH authorities have determined that the Jews must be dealt with collectively and with harsh measures.” Such decrees left little room for exempting individual Jews.

Yet while the Ustaše embraced the Nazis’ “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” and threatened Croatian citizens who helped Jewish friends, neighbors, or colleagues escape it, they themselves actually shielded selected groups of Jews. Among these were “Honorary Aryans”—mainly persons who had contributed to various Croatian causes, about 500 individuals including immediate family members. Another category comprised Jews in mixed marriages—those performed by the Catholic Church—as well as the children of these unions. Indeed several high-ranking NDH officials, including Ante Pavelić and Slavko Kvaternik (head of the Croatian armed forces), had Jewish wives. Thus, ideology was tempered by greed, pragmatism, and outright hypocrisy. Also protected was a category of Jews
who applied for and received “Aryan rights,” albeit without actual recognition as “Aryans” per se: a few thousand professionals, engineers, business people, physicians, and family members, shielded only until 1943.

Jews in many branches of the economy and professions received dismissal notices soon after the antisemitic decrees. Ustaše activists were assigned to fill the vacancies created by the firing of Jews (and Serbs) or to take over management of their businesses. However, since most of these lacked professional credentials and experience, the sudden dismissals led to chaos, business failures, and unemployment. Seventy-six percent of the population was engaged in agriculture, and much of it was illiterate.7

Thus, circumstances forced Pavelić’s government to recognize that it would be necessary to recall at least some Jewish professionals from the hard labor or concentration camps to which they had been sent, and to postpone the exclusion of those who were still employed. As a consequence, some Jewish professionals in Croatia gained a temporary reprieve.

**Rescue in Context**

The rescue of Jews by Gentiles has long attracted special attention within Holocaust research. Mordecai Paldiel, then director of Yad Vashem’s “Righteous Among the Nations” program, stated: “The Holocaust has provided us with examples of human behavior at its... best; of men and women, within German-occupied Europe and from all walks of life, who were prepared to risk their lives to save Jews from the Nazis.”8

Scholars came to realize early that rescue meant more than the actions of a few unique individuals, but that the phenomenon had to be understood in the context of particular countries. Holocaust studies in the 1960s and 1970s saw the proposal of psychological and sociological models that might identify which cultures were more or less likely to shield Jews; the 1980s saw further refinements in approaches to the subject.9 Though it should have been understood that only by comparing the particulars of Croatia with experiences in other Axis-affiliated or -occupied countries could the rescue of Jews in the NDH be adequately assessed, in the prevalent view all officials of the NDH are presumed to have been at least passively complicit in the murder of the Jews and others. In Croatia and the other countries of the former Yugoslavia, historians still are focused on the perpetrators and their machinery of murder. Thousands of books and articles have been written on the atrocities, and yet, despite the plethora of documents on rescue by NDH officials, Catholic clergy and laymen, national and international humanitarian organizations, and thousands of ordinary citizens, the subject of rescue rarely appears in the literature.

Moreover, survivors often have been reluctant to discuss rescue, at least upon initial approach. More than one whom I have interviewed admitted that
talking about their own salvation felt like a betrayal of those three-quarters of Yugoslavia’s Jews who did not survive. To acknowledge that people from all ethnic groups had helped was also difficult for some.

And so the rescue of 169 Jewish physicians by NDH officials has received scant attention from historians. What little has been published contains serious factual errors, leading in some cases to erroneous judgments. The episode remains virtually unknown in literature intended for the general public. Yet the instance involved an organized and sustained effort and is fairly well documented, so it may be studied in some depth. The documentation allows us to perceive both the practical and the ethical motives of rescuers.

Briefly, 142 Croatian Jewish physicians were sent into Bosnia to treat endemic syphilis among the Moslem population, and twenty-seven others served as physicians in the Home Guard (Domobranstvo). The mission represented a significant diversion of medical personnel. This public health effort constituted part of the NDH regime’s outreach to its newly acquired Bosnian possession. The objectives of NDH officials in sending Jewish physicians to Bosnia varied: some wished to see the Moslems treated and syphilis contained; others aimed to spare the Jewish physicians from murder by dispatching them out of sight; many were motivated by a combination of these or other considerations.

The program was undertaken by a governmental entity within a regime otherwise focused on destroying the Jews. Even so, a humanitarian element may be discerned in the manner of implementation, as recorded in correspondence. And the effort as a whole does meet the criteria of rescue as understood here: deliberate acts by non-Jews in an effort to save Jews when such acts involved significant risk of loss of property, honor, or life.10 In Croatia under the Ustaše regime, assisting Jews was considered treason and was punishable by death. Even when release from a concentration camp was requested by a government official and approved by the Minister of the Interior, the act entailed possible risk if that official were to fall out of favor.

**NDH Official Approval for the Bosnian Health Mission**

Zagreb’s solicitude for Bosnia-Herzegovina becomes explicable when we look at the background of the regime’s ruling clique. A large number of the Ustaše leaders came from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ante Pavelić was born there. So too were Vice-President Džafer Kulenović (a Moslem) and Minister of the Interior Andrija Artuković. The list encompasses many rank-and-file leaders. Since these were not actually from Croatia, they needed to solidify a base of support, while at the same time integrating Bosnia-Herzegovina into the expanded Croatian state. To achieve this dual objective they attempted to integrate the ideology of the racial laws with the ideals of Ante Starčević, “the father of modern Croatia.” Like Starčević, the Ustaše considered the Bosnian Moslems the purest embodiment of the Croatian
“race.” One of the Ustaše’s most ardent representatives, Jozo Dumandžić, put the matter clearly when he stated that “the poglavnik kisses the Moslems in the manner and with same passion as Starčević did.” Pavelić regarded the Bosnian Moslems as an integral part of the Croatian nation, and went so far as to call them “the flower” of Croatia. Regional politics thus guided the Ustaše leadership. The notion of “healing” the Moslem population came quite naturally to them, as did the idea of eradicating the syphilis long endemic in Bosnia.

Accordingly, Dr. Ivan Raguz, head of the Bosnian Health Service, had high expectations when he wrote Zagreb asking for the assignment of medical personnel to the region. But since the Ministry of Health was concerned by the shortage of physicians after the purge of Jewish and Serbian medical staff, Raguz’s request had to be shelved. However, it was not ignored. Already during May 1941, the second month of the NDH’s existence, a sizable number of Jewish physicians had been sent to concentration camps. It was obvious that, if something drastic were not done, within a few months the last remaining Jewish physicians would be gone. Dr. Stjepan Steiner recalled in an interview that in May and June 1941 most Jewish physicians were out of work, both those formerly in government service and those in private practice; Ankica Budak, an official of the Ministry of Health, had made the rounds of their offices to confiscate their equipment and supplies.

From the testimony of Dr. Teodor Gruner, a survivor and a participant in the mission, it appears that the scheme to engage Jewish doctors in the Bosnian mission was the brainchild of Dr. Miroslav Schlesinger, a Jewish physician from Zagreb. Gruner noted Schlesinger’s “miraculous” ability to find means to keep the Jewish physicians out of sight while addressing the shortage of physicians in NDH generally and endemic syphilis in Bosnia-Herzegovina specifically. Gruner is seconded by Dr. Stjepan Steiner, who explained why Schlesinger felt confident that the minister of health would abet the Jewish doctors’ “conspiracy.” Steiner stated that “Minister of Health Dr. Ivan Petrić held the Jewish physicians, including his former professor, Dr. Izidor Steinhardt, in high regard. He fought vigorously to obtain for him the . . . title of ‘Honorary Aryan’ and succeeded.” Colleagues judged that Dr. Petrić did not harbor antisemitic beliefs and therefore might be willing to aid the rescue of other Jewish physicians as well.

Thus, Jewish doctors and Croat colleagues came up with the idea that a mission of Jewish physicians to Bosnia might be broached with the regime—specifically with the minister of health. Success depended on finding the right authoritative individual, one who was trusted by the Jewish practitioners and respected by the NDH hierarchy. Dr. Schlesinger, probably in consultation with other Jewish physicians, solicited the prominent and respected physician Dr. Ante Vuletić to present the plan to Dr. Petrić.

Vuletić urged the benefits of the mission for the image of the Ministry of Health, for improving the health of the Moslems, and for easing the pressure on
non-Jewish doctors in Croatia who were caring for the Christian population and the Army. The notion of rescuing the Jewish physicians appealed to Petrić, but he had to find the best way to present the plan to the other ministers and to Ante Pavelić. Petrić won the support of only three of the seven ministers. His strongest opponent was the convinced antisemite Dr. Mile Budak, head of the Ministry of Religion and Education. But Petrić persuaded Pavelić, who as head of the state backed the proposal on the grounds that the need to treat the Bosnian population was more urgent than the need to “eliminate” the Jewish physicians; in the poglavnik’s eyes the Jews could just as easily be eliminated after the mission to the Moslems.

At the request of the Ministry of Health, therefore, sometime in June 1941 the Jewish Community in Zagreb—the mandatory official organization that now served as a de facto Judenrat—invited physicians to a meeting at its new (and smaller) premises on Strossmayer Square. There representatives of the Ministry offered them what was in effect a chance for survival for those who would “volunteer” for a public health mission to treat endemic syphilis in Bosnia-Herzegovina. No prior experience in treating syphilis was required, although the doctors took a required two-week training course. Upon completion of the course the physicians departed for Bosnia in two groups. Most of the physicians greeted the opportunity, although some declined for personal reasons or stated that they preferred to work with the inmates in the concentration camps in Jasenovac while continuing to reside in Zagreb. Those who joined the Bosnia-Herzegovina mission became contract employees of the NDH. The duration of employment was not specified, but the contract stated that the arrangement would be honored as long as both parties adhered to it.

The physicians were compensated according to experience and family status. For example, Dr. Alfred Neufeld (contract #Z-36-249-1941) was paid 4,000 kuna per month. Dr. Hinko Marić (contract #60127-Z-1941) was offered 5,000 kuna. Dr. Teodor Gruner (contract #CDXXXVII-2115-Z-1941), received 4,900; after one year of service Gruner signed a new contract (#21062-0-1942) under which the monthly compensation rose to 7,000 kuna, probably reflecting adjustment for the high rate of inflation. Married doctors received a supplement of 300 kuna per month for their wives and 206 for each child. Like other employees, the physicians had to pay taxes on their income. One of the most important provisions of the contract was immunity from deportation to concentration camps for the physician’s immediate family—parents, spouse, children. Some of the physicians received their assignments while still in Zagreb, while others had to be assigned at the offices of the Institute for Combating Endemic Syphilis (hereafter, the Institute) either at Mostar or Banja Luka.

The team was officially divided into two groups: in Group I, there were twenty-three physicians, of whom three were women. Group II (established after
the first group had demonstrated its usefulness) numbered fifty-two physicians, among them ten women. The first two groups were organized in Zagreb. These two groups were originally to have numbered eighty-one physicians (all from Zagreb), but six of their members had been sent to concentration camps before the orders for their mobilization could reach them, and joined the mission only the following year. Subsequently another two groups were mobilized: one of fifty-five physicians drawn from all over NDH, including five women; and another of twelve physicians (none of them women) who were retrieved from concentration camps in August 1942 (one of these was returned to the Home Guard rather than the syphilis mission). The release of the latter group had been made possible by the intervention of Drs. Vuletić and Sielski (the latter of whom was director of the Institute). Thus the total number of Jewish physicians in Bosnia was 142, of whom twenty-one were women. In addition to these, as of late 1941 and early 1942, twenty-seven Jewish physicians were serving in the Home Guard.

### Survival of Jewish physicians in the Medical Mission, and in the Home Guard (M = male, F = female)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Total sent to Bosnia</th>
<th>Total Survived</th>
<th>Total Killed</th>
<th>Total Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M + F</td>
<td>M + F</td>
<td>M + F</td>
<td>M + F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group I</td>
<td>20 + 3</td>
<td>11 + 0</td>
<td>9 + 3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>42 + 10</td>
<td>25 + 6</td>
<td>12 + 3</td>
<td>5 + 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>49 + 6</td>
<td>36 + 5</td>
<td>13 + 1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV (released from camps)</td>
<td>10 + 2</td>
<td>6 (gender unknown)</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>4 + 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>142 M + F</td>
<td>89 (62%)</td>
<td>41 (29%)</td>
<td>12 (8.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDH Home Guard</td>
<td>27 + 0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, M + F</td>
<td>169 (148M + 21F)</td>
<td>99 (59%)</td>
<td>44 (26%)</td>
<td>26 (15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between the end of 1941 and the end of 1942 the Institute published six issues of a journal called Vjesnik (or Courier), with articles describing some of the challenges the mission encountered and successes it achieved. The fourth issue, printed in Banja Luka in 1942, shows that not all of the physicians who were selected for the original two groups arrived in Bosnia at the same time, the original cohorts reaching their destination in July 1941, while the six who were in camps at that time joined them only in July and August 1942, after the Institute had gotten them released. The same issue of Vjesnik reports that fifty-one members of the mission were married and that the total number of their children was forty-three. Seven of these physicians left the mission during the first year: two were transferred to work in hospitals, one retired (we do not know whether he survived the war), one was dismissed (subsequent fate similarly unknown), two died from typhus, and one seems to have returned to Zagreb to care for inmates of camps (the surviving “official” Jewish community was permitted to extend certain kinds of
aid to prisoners).\textsuperscript{32} We know little about the doctors’ families except that most preferred to remain in Zagreb in their prewar homes; Dr. Gruner was a newlywed whose wife joined him in Bosnia, where she stayed until 1943—when she returned to Zagreb to bear their first child.

From \textit{Vjesnik} it is clear that Minister of Health Petrić paid special attention to the first group of twenty-three physicians. He had a great deal to lose if the mission failed or was sabotaged, but he also had much to gain. Petrić worked to motivate the physicians: if he were to gain approval to send further groups to Bosnia, he had to be able to demonstrate concrete successes. Dr. Gruner recalled:

For the first few months, we worked extremely hard and under difficult conditions. We knew what was at stake both for [the Ministry], and also for the others who might follow should the first group be successful against syphilis. Our first task as physicians was to go to the most remote regions of Bosnia and to convince the local population that [we] were there to help. Once word about the quality of our treatment went out and confidence was gained, the success of the physicians was guaranteed. Due to our accomplishments, within a few weeks of our arrival, a second group of fifty-two physicians joined the project in September 1941.\textsuperscript{33}

Despite Petrić’s pleas and Gruner’s optimism, from 1942 onward some doctors began slipping away to join the partisans. Forty-six of the doctors would eventually be killed in battle; eight of the women died either in battle or from typhus. Dr. Draga Weinberg left the Bosnian mission only to be captured by the Ustaše in Zenica in 1944 and deported to Auschwitz, where she was killed in 1945.\textsuperscript{34} The fate of twenty-eight physicians has not been confirmed, appearing in neither the Dotršćina files in the National Archives of today’s Croatian Republic (compiling information on 6,600 Jewish victims in the Zagreb area) nor in any surviving files of the Jewish community.

\textbf{Protection of the Physicians’ Families}

Periodically, Ustaše commanders sent circulars ordering regional and local police units to refrain from sending to concentration camps family members of physicians who were in NDH service.\textsuperscript{35} Each family member was issued a special identification card stating that the holder was protected at the request of the minister of health and with the approval of the Office of Public Order and Security (or Security Service, under the Ministry of the Interior). But even despite this and other measures, some family members were arrested and interned.\textsuperscript{36}

Among the fifty-one archived letters between the Security Service and the physicians, more than three-quarters dealt with requests to release family members from camps.\textsuperscript{37} Rejections usually stated that relatives did not fall into the category of “immediate family”—parents, spouses, and children. For instance, Dr. Gruner obtained the prompt release of his parents,\textsuperscript{38} but his appeal for the release of his sister (Edit Gruner) and his mother-in-law (Greta Berger) was
denied.\textsuperscript{39} Dr. Alfred Neufeld did obtain the release of his mother-in-law (Helen Rudolf Spitzer), but then his wife (Eta Neufeld) had been a medical student before World War II and took part in the mission.\textsuperscript{40}

Obtaining the release of family members from camps and other special requests were handled by the Institute, as the officially responsible organ. Occasionally other relatives were spared. Dr. Darko Fišer, later president of the Osijek Jewish Community, testified that his uncle and aunt—both physicians in Bosnia—were granted permission to take his mother, him, and his sister along.\textsuperscript{41} The three spent more than a year in Bosnia before escaping to Hungary in 1942 (the family had connections to that country and were culturally Magyarized). Sometimes requests to release children who were not “immediate relatives” were approved. Dr. Margite Heimer-Cegledi obtained the release of her eleven-year-old niece, Vera Heimer, whose parents had been killed.\textsuperscript{42} The Security Service sent one common letter to seven physicians informing them that a total of twelve of their family members were being released from concentration camps.\textsuperscript{43} Mistakes occurred, and immediate family members were deported, but Institute personnel made sincere efforts to ensure that the terms of the contracts with the physicians were honored.\textsuperscript{44}

One instance of that commitment permitted Gruner himself to survive. He was working in Varcar Vakuf, Bosnia, while the Germans and the Ustaše were engaged nearby in battle against the partisans. When the Institute learned of his danger, the office urged Gruner to return without delay to Banja Luka, even permitting him to rent a car at Institute expense; Sielski himself signed the telegram.\textsuperscript{45} It seems that most of the physicians were able to maintain regular correspondence with their families. For one period of several weeks Dr. Gruner did not contact his parents; but when his worried father (Cantor Bernard Gruner) wrote to the minister of health asking his whereabouts (and not forgetting to underline his son’s efforts to curb syphilis and improve the health care of local children), he received a reply reassuring him that his son was still employed by the Institute.\textsuperscript{46}

On May 5, 1943, Heinrich Himmler arrived in Croatia for talks with Pavelić. The Nazi SS chief expressed dissatisfaction with the pace of deportations in NDH. Pavelić promised to do better in return for Germany’s financial support. Immediately thereafter the Institute was instructed to deliver all the physicians and their families to the authorities.\textsuperscript{47} Again Dr. Sielski and Dr. Vuletić courageously rose to the challenge, responding that all doctors were needed to cope with a new spotted typhus epidemic; indeed, they maintained, if the Jewish physicians were lost, they would be unable to assist German soldiers stationed there who contracted the disease. This stalling saved Jewish lives. Drs. Vuletić and Sielski protected the physicians and their families even after the doctors’ terms of service were over. For his courage and humanity during this saga, Dr. Vuletić was awarded posthumously the title of the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad

\textsuperscript{84} Holocaust and Genocide Studies
Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust remembrance authority. Dr. Sielski, who obtained the release of those who had been sent to concentration camps, deserves similar recognition.

Though some of the physicians deserted to the partisans in 1942 and the first part of 1943, most who did so went over after the capitulation of Italy on September 8, 1943. The partisans desperately needed medical personnel, and urged the Jewish physicians to join. After going over to the partisans Steiner served with Tito, and became his personal physician after the war, soon rising to the rank of general officer. Other veterans of the Bosnia mission occupied important posts in various hospitals after the war. Doctors considering joining the partisans had to think about their families too: should news of their defection reach the NDH authorities, they would be the first to be sent to the camps. A cover story might cloak the defection, as when in mid-1942 Dr. Stjepan Steiner and his wife, Dr. Zora Goldsmith, joined the partisans after a staged kidnapping. The “incident” was arranged to take place in broad daylight, allowing witnesses to observe how the doctors had struggled to “escape” from the partisans. Other doctors elected to remain in NDH service almost to the end of 1944, as the last portions of Bosnia-Herzegovina were being liberated; but as both Gruner and Steiner later testified, Vuletić and Sielski shielded the families of even the deserters, refusing—at great risk to themselves—to inform the authorities and even retaining the doctors’ names on the employment rolls. It should be noted, finally, that the local Moslem population appreciated the mission; despite local elite support for the Ustaše, and despite widespread antisemitic agitation (spearheaded in part by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem), Moslems figured in the survival of all those Jewish doctors alive at war’s end.

Aftermath

Under Yugoslavia’s Communist regime, the Jewish physicians who participated in the “syphilis mission” and the Croatian Home Guard were forced to justify having “volunteered” to serve the NDH. Two of the participants, Dr. Zdenko Lowenthal and Dr. Samuel Daić, published accounts during the heyday of the Tito era, when they had reason to describe participation as part of a plan by the Communist Party. According to both, Schlesinger, a communist, had been instructed by the Party to rescue the Jewish physicians. The authors maintained that many of the doctors had joined the mission as a result of this Communist initiative. Perhaps strangely, shortly thereafter Dr. Jaša Romano was able to respond in a Yugoslavian publication to this revision of history by pointing out that when the mission was first being discussed, Germany had not yet overturned the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact by invading the USSR and the Communists had as yet formulated no concrete plans for a partisan movement. It was more than unlikely that the Party would have considered—let alone supported—a plan to send Jewish
physicians to Bosnia to serve the NDH government in the anticipation that they would one day join a future Partisan movement. During a 1968 conference he had been permitted to attend at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Lowenthal himself revised his improbable 1963 statement: “In the summer of 1941...a group of eighty Croatian Jewish physicians decided to form a special organization for the control of infectious diseases in Bosnian villages. Sixty of [them later] joined the Partisan army and played an important role in its health services.” But if this version abandoned the unlikely role the speaker had assigned the Party in 1963, it nonetheless left aside the question of why, when the NDH regime was deporting Jews to concentration camps, the Ustaše would suddenly allow some eighty Jewish doctors to organize a mission to remote rural areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina; also unexplained was why any Jew would choose to roam Moslem territories during wartime, especially given local adherence to the Ustaše. It seems likely that this version too had been formulated by Lowenthal’s Communist overseers, although no one seems to have challenged it at the conference.

Though Romano corrected the account given by Lowenthal and Daic, he gave a figure of only eighty physicians serving on the Bosnia mission, including sixty-eight from Croatia and twelve from Bosnia itself. Other historians have uncritically accepted this total despite the availability of archival data that might increase it. And if, as I argue, a total of at least 142 physicians were sent to Bosnia, a commensurately higher number of family members also survived. Romano may have introduced his own misconception when he claimed that the Jewish physicians had been sent to Bosnia in order to reduce competition with their “Aryan” colleagues elsewhere in Croatia: as Steiner recalled in an interview, Jewish medical practices in Zagreb already had been closed and plundered in May and June 1941 before the idea of sending Jewish doctors to Bosnia had first been broached. In any case, the Ministry of Health certainly did not have to send them to Bosnia to “remove” them. Romano also claimed, with similarly little basis, that the Bosnian mission should be considered forced labor: forced laborers did not sign contracts to work in their professions, did not receive a salary, did not enjoy the privilege of seeing their families, could not file appeals with the government, and were not permitted to keep their apartments and possessions. Although at least one former participant, Dr. Eta Naifeld, subsequently referred to the service as “forced labor,” this imprecise usage departs from the archival record and all accepted definitions of compulsory labor in Axis-dominated Europe.

**Conclusions**

Postwar historians, including Leon Poliakov and Jacques Sabille, considered the Ustaše’s behavior “one of the most gruesome” stories of World War II. Fifty years later historians have not changed this perspective much; writing in the 1980s Menahem Shelah, and more recently Ivo and Slavko Goldstein, appear to regard
almost everyone in the NDH regime, and indeed the Croatian people virtually as a whole, as complicit in the extermination of Jews. From this point of view the identification in the archival records of a few stray Croatian rescuers might seem beside the point. But such a view has in fact obscured historical nuances that did operate to save Jewish lives. The aim here has not been to diminish Ustaše responsibility for the annihilation of 30,000 Jews in the NDH. But the broad perception that the entire Croatian population was complicit must be challenged. Archival primary sources together with interview accounts clearly demonstrate that opposition to the activities of the occupation forces and of the Ustaše regime manifested itself immediately after the roundups began in April and May 1941. Thousands of people from all strata of Croatian society assisted Jews in myriad ways, among them authorities in the NDH’s own Ministry of Health.

Ustaše atrocities must be viewed in the broader context of Nazi-inspired terror and murder. Although the Ustaše were willing Nazi collaborators, antisemitism in Yugoslavia was not as deeply rooted as in some other places, despite a ceaseless barrage of German- and locally-generated propaganda. Thus, when the Germans required the local authorities to carry out genocidal measures against the Jews, the actual implementation was tempered by countervailing considerations. Pragmatism played a role, as did prewar collegial relations, humanitarian values, and the complicity of ordinary Moslem Bosnians who had benefitted from the work of the Jewish medical teams. Croatian officials and professionals undertook serious risks to preserve the lives of 169 Jewish physicians and members of their families. The survival of these Jews constitutes a genuine case of rescue.

Esther Gitman earned a Ph.D. in Jewish history from the City University of New York. Her dissertation was one of the first sustained studies on rescue and survival in Croatia. Her publications include “A Question of Judgment: Dr. Alojzije Stepinac and the Jews” (Review of Croatian History, February 2006); and “In the Footsteps of Jews Who Escaped Genocide in the Independent State of Croatia during World War II” (published in 2003 by the Jewish Community of Zagreb). Dr. Gitman has held a Fulbright Grant, a David and Goldie Blanksteen Fund for Jewish Studies Research Fellowship, and a Barbara and Richard Rosenberg Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2006–2007).

Notes
1. Zemaljska komisija za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovi pomagača protiv Židova (ZKRZ), or the National Commission for the Verification of Crimes of the Nazis and Their Collaborators against the Jews (National Commission), Hrvatski Državni Arhiv Zagreb (HDA), ZKRZ-GUZ, 2235/2-45, box 10, p. 123.
execution of German measures depended on the submissiveness of political authorities, the assistance of local police forces or other auxiliaries, and the passivity or support of the populations and mainly of the political and spiritual elites.”


5. Noci list, 18 May 1941.

6. Report by Dr. Samuel Pinto [who had been asked by the National Commission to summarize the NDH measures against the Jews], HDA, ZKRZ-GUZ 2235-2/45, box 10, p. 18.

7. Narodne novine, 19 June 1941.


14. Dr. Teodor Gruner, interviews, January 14 and 16, and May 12, 2003, Zagreb. Dr. Miroslav Schlesinger was a Jewish physician who had studied in Vienna, where he engaged in student affairs. Upon return to Zagreb he promoted working-class causes. Schlesinger abandoned the syphilis mission to join the Partisans (with his wife and child); all subsequently perished.

15. Steiner interviews.

16. A letter sent by Dr. Ivan Petrić to Baraković, with the approval of Minister of Internal Affairs Andrija Artuković, recommended that Dr. Izidor Steinhardt and his family be granted the rights of Aryans. HDA, RUR 252, 27710, ŽO 1467, July 14, 1941.

17. In 1942 Dr. Ivan Petrić escaped Croatia and made his way to South America.

18. Narodne novine, 30 April 1941.


20. HDA, RUR 252, 29195, ŽO 3396.


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22. Instructions to all officers of the law to refrain from sending to concentration camps Jewish physicians working for the Ministry of Health, HDA, RUR 252, 29184, ŽO 3379.

23. The contract was signed by the physician, a government registrar, and the minister of health.

24. Dr. Neufeld’s (in some documents “Najfeld”) contract of employment is in HDA, RUR 252, 28601, ŽO 38245. All contracts were identical except for the name of the individual physician and the initial salary, which was based on experience. See also instructions for departure September 4, 1941, HDA, RUR 252, 28601, ŽO 8245.

25. HDA, RUR 252, 28929658, ŽO 8, 10, 11.


27. HDA, RUR 252, 29184, ŽO 3379. Protected Jewish engineers received similar privileges to those granted the physicians. See HDA, RUR 252, 29904, ŽO 5421.

28. USHMM, 1998.A.0024, reel 4, pp. 586–87: on March 19, 1946, Dr. Bela Hochstader told the National Commission how he was captured in June 1941 in Zagreb and sent to the concentration camp on the Island of Pag, where he was among the few to survive; he was transferred to Jasenovac but released in June 1942 at the request of the Institute. On Hochstader’s dispatch to the camps on July 15, 1941, see his wife’s request for his release: HDA, RUR 302/Inv. 10154/1941, ŽO 5050. At about the same time two other physicians were also released; see RUR 252, 29117, ŽO 3135 (Dr. Stanko Pollak); and 28266, ŽO 6408 (Dr. Hinko Marić). Probably there were many such examples: I found thirteen physicians who were rescued and sent to serve in Bosnia.

29. HDA, RUR 252, 28810, ŽO 1071, January 26, 1942. Future archival research may tell us more about the Jewish engineers and Jewish businessmen whose skills were considered indispensable and whom the government also reprieved.

30. Correspondence between the physicians, the Institute, and the Office for Law and Order, HDA, RUR 252, 29184, ŽO 3379; 29790, ŽO 5071; 28017, ŽO 4143. Most of the letters were from physicians requesting release of family members. There are several communications informing wives of the release of their husbands from the concentration camps.

31. I saw the issues of this journal that survived in the private collection of Dr. Teodor Gruner. It appears that initially the Zagreb physicians were not aware that the program would invite physicians from other parts of Croatia. Very few were from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

32. Teodor Gruner in Vjesnik no. 4 (1942): 37. (Material in the journal was neither identified by author, nor titled.)

33. Gruner interviews.

34. HDA, Dotrščina (a ledger compiling information on all Zagreb Jews who were murdered or who died during the war).

35. HDA, RUR 252, 28929, ŽO 2145, December 23, 1941; HDA, RUR 252, 29078, ŽO 2712, March 20, 1942; HDA, RUR 252, 29184, ŽO 3379, April 17, 1942.

36. HDA, RUR 252, 29165, ŽO 334.
37. For example, see HDA, RUR 252, 29790, ŽO 5071. This document shows the names of twelve family members released at about the same time; in such cases the Institute was notified along with the family.

38. HDA, RUR 252, 29790, ŽO 5071, July 12, 1942. See also testimony in which Gruner mentioned the help of Archbishop Stepinac and of Dr. Karlo Lutelski, son-in-law of Dido Kvaternik, the head of the Ustaše police forces. Gruner was especially grateful to Minister of Health Dr. Ivan Petrić, Deputy Minister Dr. Mladen Petras, and the director of the “Institute,” Dr. Stanko Sielski.

39. HDA, RUR 252, 29864, ŽO 5288, September 31, 1942.

40. HDA, RUR 252 28946, ŽO 2240, February 28, 1942.


42. HDA, RUR 252, 29864, ŽO 5288, September 31, 1942.

43. HDA, RUR 252, 29221, ŽO 3436, April 23, 1942.

44. List of family members released from concentration camps, HDA, RUR 252, 29790, ŽO 5071.

45. Dr. Teodor Gruner, private collection, doc. #3806, 1943.

46. Cantor Gruner’s letter to the Ministry of Health asking for information about the whereabouts of his son, Dr. Teodor Gruner, HDA, RUR 252, 28762, ŽO 749. The back of the original letter bears a reply dated January 20, 1942.

47. Ante Sorić, Židovi na tlu Jugoslavije (Zagreb: Muzejski prostor, 1988), 211. Between May 7 and 13, 1943, approximately 4,500 Jews were deported from NDH territories to Auschwitz.


53. If we add approximately four surviving family members to each of the sixty-two physicians whom my research adds to the previous estimate, then it is arguable that 248 additional family members survived as a result of the Bosnian mission.
54. Steiner interviews; Ivo and Slavko Goldstein, *Holokaust u Zagreb*, 218–19. On page 219 the Goldsteins provide a record of all the items confiscated from Jewish medical private practices.

