



PROJECT MUSE®

*Jewish Portraits in the Works of Ivo Andrić / Jevrejski
portreti u delima Ive Andrića (review)*

Radmila J. Gorup

Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies,
Volume 20, Number 1, 2006, pp. 206-208 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ser.0.0019>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/257677>

***Jewish Portraits in the Works of Ivo Andrić / Jevrejski portreti u delima Ive Andrića* by Dušica Savić Benghiat. With a text by Žaneta Đukić Perišić and an introduction by George Vid Tomashevich, edited and translated by Sofija Škorić. Serbian Literary Company: Toronto, 2005. 92 pages.**

Reviewed by *Radmila J. Gorup*

Jewish Portraits in the Works of Ivo Andrić is a bilingual volume edited by Sofija Škorić and published by the Serbian Literary Company, Toronto, Canada. George Vid Tomashevich, professor emeritus at the University of Buffalo, SUNY, wrote an excellent introduction. The luxury hard cover edition is richly adorned with beautiful color prints, works of Dušica Savić Benghiat, a well-known artist and illustrator, who also illustrated books by Milorad Pavić. In addition to the introduction, the volume has ten chapters, with Serbian and English texts appearing in two columns on the same page. The Serbian text is by Žaneta Đukić Perišić who is an Andrić scholar and the editor of *Sveske*, the journal published by the Ivo Andrić Foundation in Belgrade. Sofija Škorić translated the Serbian text into English.

In his introduction, Professor Tomashevich praises Andrić, the only Nobel Prize winner in Serbian and South Slavic literatures, for his masterful depiction of individual psyche as well as entire historical epochs of his native Bosnia. According to Tomashevich, by his disposition and the mixed ethnic background, Andrić was predisposed to have empathy for individuals who were socially unwelcome. No wonder he was attracted and even fascinated by the long-suffering community of Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman province of Bosnia. The author's interest in Bosnian Sephardic Jews resulted in a score of successful portraits the reader encounters in Andrić's rich opus.

The Sephardic Jews came to Bosnia in the 15th century after being expelled from Andalusia, Spain, during the Inquisition. In Bosnia they shared the destiny of other non-Muslims. However, they were given various positions in the trade and administration that Christian serfs were not allowed to occupy. Sephardic Jews lived in a closed community. Their way of life, as well as their foreign tongue, set them apart from their neighbors. They changed their masters but never totally adjusted to this inhospitable land, and they always remained nostalgic for their former sunny homeland.

The title of the book is somewhat of a misnomer because the volume dwells not only on individual men, women, and children but also on the old Jewish cemetery in Sarajevo.

Dreaming of exploits and victories but mostly out of boredom, small Christian boys pick on Jewish boys. They beat them during their holidays

simply because they perceive them as different. One of the boys, the one who is supposed to be initiated, makes a different choice and for that earns the contempt of his peers. In the process both groups get acquainted with life and its fundamental cruelty.

Portraits of two tragic female characters are included in the volume. Rifka Papo, the character from the story "Love in the *Kasaba*," is a sixteen-year-old girl, whose physical beauty causes her downfall. She catches the eye of a Croatian nobleman who is looking for an easy entertainment in a gloomy Bosnian *kasaba* (provincial town). Two outlooks on life collide in this story: the selfishness and arrogance of a Westerner and the naïveté of a young Jewish girl who truly falls in love and pays for that with her life.

Lotika, a character from the novel *The Bridge on the Drina*, comes to Višegrad as a young woman to open a hotel. This small oriental town is now opening to European influences. This hardworking and courageous woman devotes herself to work and finally sacrifices herself for her numerous family members scattered all over Europe.

The unenviable position of Sephardic Jews in Bosnia and their painful nostalgia for their former homeland is clearly visible in Andrić's Jewish characters. Mordo Atijas, one of the four doctors in the novel *The Travnik Chronicle* (also translated as *Bosnian Story* and *The Days of the Consuls*), tries to be invisible between the Turks and the Christian *rayah*. He works hard, demands nothing and minds his own business. History of his people taught him that this is a true recipe for survival.

Another Atijas, Solomon, the head of an extended family, is the one who helps the departing French consul when he leaves Bosnia. He does this out of gratitude for the consul's kindness toward the Jewish community of Travnik. He tells the Frenchman that, exiled and unhappy, his people have not adjusted to the harsh condition of life in Bosnia where they have been humiliated and oppressed. He also explains how the Jews survived through the centuries of persecution and how they preserved that wisdom for survival through generations. He wants the French consul to inform civilized Europe of their plight.

Whereas Mordo and Solomon Atijas are practicing Jews with strong ties with their community, Mento Papo, the character of the short story "The Titanic Bar" is a renegade. Yet he suffers the same fate as other Jews in Bosnia. When the Nazis came to power, the popular owner of the Titanic Bar is first abandoned by his customers and then by his Catholic wife. He perishes in the hands of a low ranking ustasha solely because of his Jewishness.

Max Levenfeld is a character from the short story "The Letter from 1920." The son of a Viennese Jewish convert to Christianity, Max leaves

Sarajevo to escape the hatred he sees as indigenous to Bosnia, only to perish in another land of hatred, Spain of the civil war of the 1930's.

Andrić also left a touching description of the Sarajevo Jewish cemetery in which four centuries of Sephardic history of survival in Bosnia was preserved. It is known that Andrić often visited the old cemetery and spent a long time standing by stone monuments.

In the words of Professor Tomashevich, *Jewish Portraits* "is in every respect a very laudable literary and pictorial review of the sad, tragic, and unmerited fate of Sephardic Jews, a macro-metaphor and condemnation of all kinds of bigotry, intolerance and man's inhumanity to man." Sofija Škorić and the Serbian Literary Company should be commended for bringing this attractive and valuable book to the readers.

Columbia University