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Book Review: Derviš M. Korkut: A Biography—Rescuer of the Sarajevo Haggadah

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Derviš M. Korkut: A Biography—Rescuer of the Sarajevo Haggadah

Hikmet Karčić

Sarajevo, El-kalem, Institute for Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks, 2020

86 Pages; Price \$10.00

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At the beginning of 2020, the Sarajevo-based publishing house El-Kalem released a biography of Derviš M. Korkut, a Bosniak hero to whom Yad Vashem posthumously awarded Righteous Among the Nations on December 14, 1994. Based on exhaustive archival research, this book precisely reconstructs Korkut's life, which spanned the intersection of the two empires that ruled the region, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian. It also spanned the rule of two kingdoms, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; and the two subsequent political entities, the Nazi Independent State of Croatia, and Communist Yugoslavia. Each of these periods brought unique challenges to the people to whom Korkut belonged and those for whom he fought.

The concise historical introduction offers particularly useful insights into these challenges and the circumstances of the 20th century in the Balkans and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, best described in Winston Churchill's words that the Balkans produce more history than they can handle. For Korkut and his fellow Bosnians, these were tough times that lasted from the beginning of the 20th century to its very end.

The biography starts with an overview of Korkut's early life and education. Born in 1888 to a renowned Bosniak Muslim family, Derviš M. Korkut was earmarked for a religious upbringing. He was educated in Travnik, Sarajevo, and Istanbul. After graduating from the Islamic Theological Faculty in Istanbul, Korkut returned to Sarajevo, and in 1916 he was appointed teacher of religious education and French at the Teachers' School in Derventa. He spoke French, German, Turkish, and Arabic. His defence of his Jewish neighbors began early when the Minister of Interior of the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Milorad Drašković, initiated a procedure for the disenfranchisement of Yugoslav Jews. Korkut took part in the campaign against Drašković's policies, publicly condemned such policies, and gave a speech in the town of Derventa in favor of the Jews.¹

In the second part of the biography, the author further explains the difficult choices Korkut made in the following years, seeking to protect his fellow Bosnians from impending persecution. First, after the authorities of the Nazi-allied Independent State of Croatia began registering Roma and sending them to camps in July 1941, Korkut and other Bosniak intellectuals voiced their opposition. Being unable to ignore these protests, the Ministry of Interior set up a commission, which included Korkut, to give an expert opinion on the position of the Roma. This commission claimed that the Roma were of an Aryan race, referring to, among others, Leopold

¹ Hikmet Karčić, *Derviš M. Korkut: A Biography—Rescuer of the Sarajevo Haggadah* (Sarajevo: El-kalem, Institute for Islamic Tradition of Bosniaks, 2020), 20.

Glück (1854–1907), a Polish Jewish doctor and anthropologist who had conducted research on the Roma population in Bosnia and Herzegovina.²

Then, at the beginning of 1942, as a curator of the National Museum, Korkut managed to save the Haggadah, a 15th-century Jewish manuscript brought to Bosnia and Herzegovina by Sephardic Jews who settled in Sarajevo, then part of the Ottoman Empire, and risking his own life in doing so.³ Shortly after rescuing the Haggadah, he and his wife, Servet, saved a Jewish girl, Donkica Papo (later Mira Baković), whose parents had already been sent to an Ustasha camp. After spending several months with them in their house, Korkut managed to obtain forged documents for her and she successfully joined the partisans, with whom she stayed until the end of the war.⁴

Through a brief but substantive description of the circumstances in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the eve of WWII and the subsequent genocide, and a detailed account of a man of profound moral courage and his efforts to protect those marked for death, this biography makes an essential contribution to understanding the local responses to genocide and persecution and avoids the “simplistic binaries that are embedded in popular understandings of the history of the war,” and the “dichotomy of resistance and complicity”⁵ that very much dominate the historiography in the Balkans. It shows “the persistence of a civic community spirit despite the overpowering ideology of Nazism and Ustashism”⁶ in the words of a historian of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, Emily Greble, who analyzed the local responses to the ethnic cleansing and genocide in World War II in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo. Greble concluded that “the city’s codes of civility and neighborliness” sought to protect the politics, social life, and culture of the Sarajevo community, “revealing institutional and cultural defiance of the regime’s ideological agenda.”⁷

“In analyzing the local responses to the Ustasha genocidal agenda,” she wrote:

Sarajevo’s leaders disagreed with a central tenet of the Nazi ‘New Order’: that biology could determine an individual’s identity. Consequently, they fought for exemptions for individuals—and at times for entire groups such as Muslim Roma, Jewish converts, and Sarajevo Serbs—who they believed belonged to their community because of a shared religious, ethnic, or civic connection.⁸

That is best shown by Korkut’s text “Anti-Semitism is Foreign to Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” which he published in 1940, just before the Nazi attack on Yugoslavia. This text is translated and included in the biography. In this work, Korkut stated that the attempts to impose anti-Semitism on Muslims should be rejected, that it “does not have roots amongst us and is not home-grown,”⁹ and called for the poor Jewish people in Sarajevo and Bitola [Macedonia] “to be helped and taken care of more than ever before.”¹⁰ Then he praised Bosnia and Herzegovina as a “classic example of religious tolerance,” claiming that testament to that was the fact that the Jewish cemetery, “one of the oldest in Europe was never desecrated,” as well as the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina’s first synagogue had been built on Waqf land

² Ibid., 36–37.

³ Ibid., 40.

⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁵ Emily Greble, *Sarajevo, 1941–1945: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Hitler’s Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 255.

⁶ Ibid., 117.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 255.

⁹ Karčić, *Deroiš M. Korkut*, 75.

¹⁰ Ibid., 76.

[Islamic endowment].¹¹ “The shining crown and most brilliant proof of religious tolerance in Bosnia is the following, however: the places of worship of all four local religions stand one beside the other,” Korkut added.¹²

Another significant contribution of this biography is the insight into the suppression of the memory in Socialist Yugoslavia and the political arrest and imprisonment of potential opposition, which included “many who were anti-Ustasha and anti-Nazi.”¹³ Namely, as author Hikmet Karčić details, after the end of WWII and the establishment of the socialist government, Derviš M. Korkut, like many other members of the Bosniak Muslim elite, was arrested in 1947 as part of the process of removing potential opposition. Paradoxically, he was found guilty of “collaborating with fascist Germany” and “acting against the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia,”¹⁴ sentenced to 8 years in prison, confiscation of all his property, and deprivation of political rights. After his prison sentence was reduced to 6 years, he was released on June 7, 1953, but never officially rehabilitated. He died on August 27, 1969, at the age of 81.

Injustices done to Korkut by erasing him from the collective memory were at least partially corrected in 1994 when Mira Baković wrote to Yad Vashem explaining how Derviš and Servet Korkut had saved both her life and the Haggadah. She called Korkut “a great friend of Bosnia’s Jews,” adding that she was the only witness to his having remained a friend even “during the persecution of Jews when we had few true friends who were ready to risk their lives and the lives of their families.”¹⁵ Yad Vashem posthumously awarded him “Righteous Among the Nations” on December 14, 1994, at the Israeli Embassy in Paris, at the time when Bosnia and Herzegovina was being ravaged once again by the war.

This poignant, well-written biography will be of great interest to those studying the history of Eastern Europe, genocide, and Holocaust studies, as well as anyone interested in Bosnia’s pluralistic culture and its unique legacy in Europe. The Anglo-American historian, Tony Judt, wrote that while the post-war history of Europe was overshadowed by silences and by absence, and once plural Europe “had been reduced to dust between 1914 and 1945,” a remnant of it survived in Sarajevo. “On its restricted scale,” he wrote, “the Bosnian capital was a genuinely cosmopolitan city: perhaps the last of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, ecumenical urban centers that were once the glory of central Europe and the eastern Mediterranean.”¹⁶

Sarajevo’s pluralistic culture survived the devastation of World War I and even flourished despite the war and genocide in World War II by virtue of people like Derviš M. Korkut. Therefore, the story of his life, marked by courage, perseverance, and resistance, needs to be given the place in collective memory that it deserves, a task this book achieves. Written in English and thus available to a wider readership, it not only pays tribute to Derviš M. Korkut, but also sheds light on the Sarajevo he sought to preserve at the risk of his life.

¹¹ Ibid., 76–77.

¹² Ibid., 77.

¹³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 8–9, 684.