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On Emotion, Petition Writing, and the Holocaust: The Life and Death of a Jewish Family in Wartime Zagreb

Abstract: This article examines the role of emotion, subjectivity, and petition writing in Holocaust historiography through a microhistorical reconstruction of the Schlenger family in wartime Zagreb. Drawing on petitions submitted by Jewish families to the Jewish Section of the Ustaša police, it explores how victims attempted to negotiate survival within the antisemitic framework of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH). Focusing on the arrest and deportation of Petar and Miroslav Schlenger to the Jadovno concentration camp and the subsequent petitions of their parents, Levin and Marija, the study highlights the emotional language, strategies of self-representation, and appeals to loyalty embedded in these documents. The article engages with broader historiographical debates concerning objectivity, affect, and the representation of trauma, arguing that close reading of petitions enables historians to access the inner lives of victims and re-centre them as subjective individuals rather than passive objects of persecution. While such sources offer limited empirical insight into the mechanics of the Holocaust, they provide crucial evidence of how Jewish families experienced, interpreted, and responded to escalating terror. Ultimately, the study challenges strictly dispassionate approaches to Holocaust history and demonstrates the value of integrating emotional and experiential dimensions into scholarly analysis.

Keywords: NDH, Jews, Holocaust, Zagreb, microhistory, petition-writing

In the corner of an apartment in Zagreb stands a portrait of two young men. It was painted sometime in the late 1930s or 1940 in the last days of Yugoslavia, of the kind that was fashionable then, possibly taken from a photograph. They are brothers though you probably wouldn't guess it if it wasn't for the fact that they are wearing matching outfits: grey slacks, maroon ties, sleeveless pullovers, and blue short-sleeved shirts. Their wavy hair is slicked back. The brother on the left has his arms folded and has a combative expression on his face; his sibling has his hand in his pocket and wears a slightly quizzical look. They are, like many teenagers, thin and awkward. No doubt they don't want to be there, but their parents have insisted. In a matter of a few years, both they and their parents will be dead, four more victims of the Holocaust, wartime occupation, and the local fascist movement which presides over the city and state in which they now live, the Independent State of Croatia [Nezavisna Država Hrvatska – NDH]. In another Croatian city, to the north, Varaždin, lies the family tomb in which the boys and their parents were to be buried in time, a large imposing monument with inscriptions in Croatian and Hebrew. Like the millions of other Jews who perished in occupied Europe, their bodies were never recovered nor their names added to the family crypt. The structure is in a poor state now and covered in graffiti from another conflict in the early 1990s, mostly from the hands of bored teenagers. Despite the appearance in Zagreb over recent years of *stolpersteine* – “stumbling stones” – to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, there is, as yet, no monument to mark the destruction of this family outside their former residence in Ulica Bogovićeve, now a multi-level store selling bargain books.¹

The story of the Schlenger family – Levin and Marija and their sons Petar and Miroslav – is now preserved only in the records of the victims of the Jadovno and Jasenovac-Stara Gradiška concentration camps and in an article written ten years ago by the Croatian historians Michael Soboleski and Narcisa Lengl-Krizman. While So-

¹ I am extremely grateful to Marko Čavlina for providing me with copies of these visual materials and to Tomislav Brandolica for his research support.

boleski and Lengl-Krizman's article focused on the larger cohort of Jewish youth, among whom were Petar and Miroslav, who were arrested and then deported, first to a labour and transit camp and then the concentration camp of Jadovno in Gospić – the forerunner to the Jasenovac-Stara Gradiška concentration camp – and memories of them by their surviving relatives and friends, this article proposes to focus specifically on the Schlenger family. It seeks to reconstruct the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of one Jewish family in the months between the arrest of the two sons and the parents' own deportation to Jasenovac-Stara Gradiška. It begins with a brief overview of the antisemitic terror to which Jewish families were subject following the founding of the satellite NDH under the fascist Ustaša movement, and the establishment of the Jadovno concentration camp complex, the NDH's first large extermination camp. It then proposes to reconstruct the traumatic experiences of Marija and Levin as well as, more broadly, the families of the other arrested Jewish youth through a close reading of the petitions that these same families wrote to the Jewish Section (Židovski odsjek – ŽO) of the Directorate of Ustaša Police. In a cruel twist of fate, the ŽO was located two doors down from the residence of the Schlengers themselves who sought, in increasing desperate letters, to secure the return of their sons and then, when it became clear they would not be returning, to save themselves.

Carolyn J. Dean has noted that in the immediate post-war era, little attention was paid to the fate of Holocaust victims, a situation which only began to change at the beginning of the 1960s with the Eichmann trial during which the accused was confronted by the memories of Holocaust survivors. As explorations of the Holocaust became increasingly populist and emotional, there were concerns about "the preeminence of emotion in politics and sophisticated political appeals to feeling at the expense of critical thinking" which, Hannah Arendt warned, could lead to "the interpretation of victims' feelings as self-indulgent exercises."² Decades later, as Dean has writ-

² Carolyn J. Dean, *Aversion and Erasure: The Fate of the Victim After the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 16, 29.

ten, the Goldhagen controversy highlighted a major disagreement about how scholars should write Holocaust history. "Unlike historians whose allegiance to a neutral narrative voice restrains moral judgment, encouraging a cognitive rather than emotive mode of apprehension, Goldhagen inserts himself into the action, asking the reader to imagine in the most vivid terms how a German soldier must have felt as he shot a young Jewish child, and he describes the murder in gruesome detail." She argues that one of the reasons for the strong reaction to *Hitler's Willing Executioners* among historians was that it did not subscribe to any of the historiographical conventions and instead stepped outside the orthodox approach to writing about the Holocaust, abandoning long-established objective and calibrated methodologies.³ Karyn Ball has similarly contested the utility of objectivity among Holocaust scholars, arguing that criticism of scholars like Daniel Goldhagen for their "undignified" subjectivity raises difficult questions about "what it could mean to fulfil the criterion of dignity as a professional ideal" or write about atrocities "in a 'dignified' manner." Scholars are expected to "hide our feelings...when we perform and thereby constitute our roles as authoritative experts" and to "regulate interpretation by excluding 'insufficiently rigorous,' 'immoral,' 'profane,' or 'pornographic' representation of the Jewish genocide." By contrast, in framing the Goldhagen controversy as part of a wider question about how to represent traumatic history, she argues that his supposed "ressentiment" is an understandable response to a genocide that destroyed families, communities and future generations, insisting that the academic response to Goldhagen's weak logic "exposes the depth of academics' investments in the protocol of restraint, which is inextricably bound up with the epistemological ideal of rigor that governs professional scholarship as a mode of rational behavior." Along with Naomi Mandel, she calls for a moratorium on the "melancholic fetishism of unrepresentability and unspeakability" of the Holocaust that "deflects our complicity with the nodes of conduct that facilitated the Holocaust and other genocides since 1945."

³ Idem, *The Fragility of the Holocaust after the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 43-59.

She aims to fathom how “our earnest and high-minded scholarship about traumatic history already stoops into cruel obtuseness, an inner coldness that Adorno derided as “the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz.”⁴

As Mark Salber Phillips has written, there is an inherent tension between the desire for an objective and dispassionate account of history and the temptation of emotionally engaged and affective history. Noting the move towards a more emotional history which not only acknowledges the importance of emotions but also their central role in social communication and moral judgement, he argues that in recent decades the idea of history as the act of recording events and then explaining why they happened has increasingly been challenged by narratives that have little interest in the facts of events themselves and why they happened in favour of “retracing the textures of ordinary life and inward feeling” and in producing “an intimate anthropology” of a specific era. As such, they have sought a recuperation of the “commonplace experience of ordinary people in the past – their thoughts, fears, memories and even their physical sensations or innermost feelings.”⁵ Emily Robinson, cautions, though, that the turn towards affective history in place of objective history is a vicarious experience because “we are not remembering our own past but attempting the impossible task of resurrecting another’s,” from whom we are separated by a “hermeneutic gap” in understanding and perception.⁶

This article argues that the close reading of the petitions of the Schlenger family and the other families of the deported Jewish youth not only tells us important things about the everyday life of Jews under the rule of the Ustaša regime but also forces us to engage on a deeply personal level as bystanders and readers with the sordid and tawdry reality of the Holocaust and to reengage with the

⁴ Karyn Ball, *Disciplining the Holocaust* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 2-5, 8, 11, 18.

⁵ Mark Salber-Phillips, “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of Sentimental History for Life,” *History Workshop Journal* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 49-64.

⁶ Emily Robinson, “Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible,” *Rethinking History* 14, no. 4 (2010): 503-20.

victims of the Holocaust as subjective individuals.⁷ In so doing, we return them, rather than the perpetrators, to the centre of their own stories. Inasmuch as the petitions from Levin and Marija Schlenger are in themselves full of emotion, they force us to relate to the writers of the letters and petitions on a profoundly personal level, transforming often abstract historical facts into lived experiences and offering increased insight into how victims of Ustaša terror negotiated with and tried to write themselves back into a state which was determined to legislate them out of society and remove all traces of their existence. Thus, it challenges recent scholarship, most notably by Thomas Pegelow Kaplan and Wolf Gruner, that has argued for petitions as a form of resistance against Nazism and allied states.⁸ At the same time, it provokes challenging questions for historians of the Holocaust about how to write about the “unrepresentability and unspeakability” of the Final Solution and how historians should interpret and use such intimate documents. While these petitions cannot tell us much about the established facts of the Holocaust, they nonetheless provide crucial insight into the thoughts and feelings of the victims, adding emotion and empathy to empirical analysis.

Antisemitic Terror and Family Life in Wartime Croatia

By any standards, the Schlenger family was prosperous and part of the city’s social and economic elite. The head of the family, Levin Schlenger, was an entrepreneur who had been born in Varaždin in 1887 into a business family. He and his wife Marija (née Schwarz) had two sons, Petar and Miroslav, born in 1922 and 1923

⁷ Unpublished diaries of Jewish victims of the Holocaust have become one of the most important sources of subjective approaches in recent decades. See e.g. Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Alexandra Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers Diaries of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁸ See e.g. *Resisting Persecution: Jews and Their Petitions During the Holocaust*, ed. Thomas Pegelow Kaplan and Wolfgang Gruner (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020). Cf with Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1961).

respectively. In the interwar period, Levin was director of the Zagorje industry clay products joint stock company, and owner of the leather company Schlenger and the enterprise Podravina with its headquarters in Donji Miholjac which was involved in the subdivision and cultivation of land. In 1933, he commissioned the building of a six-storey residence in fashionable Bogovićevo in central Zagreb by Slavko Löwy from where he ran his business and also lived with his family; the co-location of the business and the family residence in the same building was intentional and aimed to express the then-progressive idea that entrepreneurs should be visible and available to their staff and workers.⁹ While in other circumstances Petar and Miroslav could have been expected to attend the University of Zagreb, the introduction of a numerus clausus in the previous October by the Yugoslav government meant that the prospects of their sons being able register for a faculty were remote.¹⁰ Instead, both Miroslav, who graduated in the summer of 1940 and had hoped to study law, and his younger brother Petar commenced apprenticeships with local dental practices as trainee dental technicians. Despite the spectre of Nazi Germany and increasingly restrictive anti-Jewish measures, life remained relatively stable and safe for the family. This changed in late March 1941 with the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia, the occupation of the country by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and the establishment of the satellite NDH, ostensibly governed by the antisemitic and antiserb Ustaša movement.

In common with most Jewish families, everyday life changed almost immediately for the Schlenger family in the context of growing legislative repression, arbitrary arrests, and functional ter-

⁹ "Levin Schlenger," *Židovski biografski leksikon*, ed. Ivo Goldstein (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 2018): <https://zbl.lzmk.hr/?p=1996>. Last viewed 5 August 2025.

¹⁰ On the antisemitic measures introduced in October 1940 and the popular reaction to them, see Harriet Pass Friedenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 239-42; Ivo Goldstein, "Dva antisemitska zakona u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji." In *Zbornik Mire Kolar-Dimitrijević: zbornik radova povodom 70 rođendana*, ed. Damir Agičić (Zagreb: FF Press and Odsjek za povijest Filozofskog Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2003), 395-405.

ror against Serbs, Jews, and Roma; tightening legal decrees and strictures regarding their movements and social and economic activities; and intensifying antisemitic propaganda. The early repressive measures in the first months of the state included the expulsion of Serbs and Jews from their apartments in the upper part of Zagreb and other cities to cramped accommodation in open quasi-ghettos; the confiscation of the property of Serbs, Jews, and Roma and the appointment of Ustaša commissioners to their businesses; the mass purging of Serbian and Jewish workers and employees from state institutions and private enterprises alike; the freezing of their bank accounts and severe restrictions on access to valuables held in safety deposit boxes of financial institutions; the removal of their telephone lines; and strict curfews and other limitations on their movement and access to staple goods.¹¹ This not only, almost overnight, impoverished many affluent, middle-class Serbs and Jews but

¹¹ For the details see e.g. Rory Yeomans, "Purifying the Shopfloor: Kastner and Oehler Department Store as a Case Study of Aryanization in Wartime Europe." In *Modern Antisemitisms in the Peripheries: Europe and its Colonies 1880-1945*, ed. Éva Kovacs and Raul Cârstorcea (Vienna: New Academic Publishing, 2019), 235-297; idem, Rory Yeomans, "The Practice of Everyday Resistance: Ordinary People, Opposition, and Terror in Wartime Croatia." In *Anti-Axis Resistance in Southeastern Europe, 1939-1945: Forms and Varieties*, ed. John-Paul Newman, Rade Ristanović, and Ljubinka Škodrić (Schöningh: Brill, 2023), 306-330; Dallas Michelbacher, "Anti-Semitism and Economic Regeneration." In *The Utopia of Terror: Life and Death in Wartime Croatia, 1941-1945*, ed. Rory Yeomans (New York: Rochester University Press, 2016) 23-46; Zlata Živaković-Kerže, "Podržavljenje imovine Židova u Osijeku u NDH," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 39, no. 1 (2007): 97-116; Nada Kisić-Kolanović, "Podržavljenje imovine Židova u NDH," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 30, no. 1 (1998): 439-52; Alma Huselja, "Citizens and Thieves: 'Aryanization' in Wartime Varaždin," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 38, no. 2 (autumn 2024): 165-82; Goran Miljan, "The Ustasha Youth and the Aryanization of Jewish Property in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945," *European Holocaust Studies* 2 (2019): 113-32; Sanja Petrović-Gladanac, "When Economics was a Racial Endeavour: The Aryanization of Jewish Stores and Businesses in Wartime Sarajevo." In *A Marketplace Without Jews: Aryanization and the Final Solution in Southeastern Europe, 1939-1945*, ed. Rory Yeomans (London and New York: Routledge, 2025), 234-256; Hrvoje Volner, "Crumbs from the Table: Aryanization, Ethnic Competition, and the Final Solution in Wartime Osijek." In *A Marketplace Without Jews*, 302-345.

also served to separated them from their Croatian neighbours, friends, and workmates.¹²

The main antisemitic and racial legislation defining membership of the national “Aryan” community was issued in the first few months of the new state’s existence. As early as 30 April 1941, the Ministry of Interior (Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova – MUP) introduced the Legal Decree on Racial Affiliation and the Legal Decree on the Protection and Honour of the Aryan Blood of the Croatian People which were direct copies of the 1935 Nuremberg laws; these ordinances defined as Jewish and non-Aryan anyone with three or more Jewish grandparents. For Roma, the laws were even stricter, categorising as Roma someone with two or more Roma grandparents. These racial decrees were supplemented by another on citizenship which defined as a citizen an individual of Aryan origin who had not worked against the “liberation aspirations” of the Croatian people and who was willing to serve the Croatian state and people. These provisions automatically excluded almost all Jews and Roma on racial grounds, in addition to Serbs whom the state perceived as a “political people.”¹³

Jews, as with Serbs, were required to register with the authorities and those older than fourteen were also mandated to wear a yellow star on the left side of their chest, indicating their Jewish heritage.

¹² The term “Croatian” here is used to denote citizenship of the NDH, not ethnicity, reflecting the terminology the Ustaša regime used to categorise the state’s citizens.

¹³ “Zakonska odredba o rasnoj pripadnosti,” *Narodne novine*, 30 April 1941; “Zakonska odredba o zaštiti arijske krvi i časti,” *Narodne novine*, 30 April 1941; “Zakonska odredba o državljanstvu,” *Narodne novine*, 30 April 1941. For the details, see Nevenko Bartulin, *Honorary Aryans: National-Racial Identity and Protected Jews in the Independent State of Croatia* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2013), 61–83; idem, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia* (Schöningh: Brill, 2013), esp. 148–58; Goran Miljan and Anders E.B. Blomqvist, “The Unwanted Citizens: The ‘Legality’ of Jewish Destruction in Croatia and Romania during World War II,” *Comparative Legal History* 11, no. 2 (2023): 226–255; Igor Vuković, “An Order of Crime: The Criminal Law of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), 1941–1945,” *Balkanica* 48 (2017): 289–342. For a comparative overview of racial legislation in the Independent State of Croatia and how it related to Jews specifically see e.g. Robert Blažević and Amina Alijagić, “Antižidovsko i rasno zakonodavstvo u fašističkoj Italiji, nacističkoj Njemačkoj i ustaškoj NDH,” *Zbornik Pravnog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Rijeci* 31, no. 1 (2010): 879–916.

An exception was made for Jews who were in mixed marriages on the presentation of marriage and baptismal certificates as well as for state officials during working hours. Jewish-owned or part-owned stores and businesses likewise had to be marked as Jewish enterprises and state institutions were required to fill in questionnaires for employees with details not just of their racial heritage, but Aryan "conduct." Jews who had changed their surnames to Croatian names since the First World War were ordered to revert to their original Jewish versions.¹⁴ In the economic field, Jews had to register their businesses, assets and property with the Office for Economic Reconstruction (Ured za obnovu privrede - UzOP), later renamed the State Directorate for Economic Reconstruction (Državno ravnateljstvo za gospodarstvenu ponovu). Meanwhile, in order to prevent Jews from hiding their assets, on 5 June the Ministry for National Economy (Ministarstvo narodnog gospodarstva) issued a decree requiring Jews to declare all property that had been taken from them since 10 April 1941 while all future removal of property which had passed into domestic use had to be registered alongside an approval.¹⁵ A third major edict, of 4 June 1941, the Legal Decree Regarding the Protection of the National and Aryan Culture of the Croatian People, banned Jews from involvement in the social, youth, sports, and cultural life of the Croatian people.¹⁶ These repressive measures negatively impacted the everyday lives of ordinary Croatian citizens too: for example, draconian curfews originally placed on Serbs and Jews quickly grew to affect the lifestyles of Croatian citizens, especially in larger towns and cities. Although state propaganda justified these curtailments as necessary measures to suppress crime, vice, and antisocial elements, it provoked various forms of passive resistance from disgruntled citizens.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Naredba o promjeni židovskih prezimena i označavanju Židova i židovskih trgovina," *Narodne novine*, 4 June 1941.

¹⁵ "Zakonska odredba o prijavi imetka židova i židovskih poduzeća," *Narodne novine*, 5 June 1941; "Zakonska odredba o sprečavanju prikriivanja židovskog imetka," *Narodne novine*, 5 June 1941.

¹⁶ "Zakonska odredba o zaštiti narodne i arijske kulture hrvatskog naroda," *Narodne novine*, 4 June 1941.

¹⁷ On this aspect of everyday life in the NDH, see Yeomans, "The Practice of Everyday Resistance," esp. 320-28.

One of the strange anomalies of the Legal Decree on Racial Affiliation was that someone classified as non-Aryan who could demonstrate they had done something “meritorious” for the Croatian nation could write to the MUP and apply for “honorary Aryan” status. Although the legislation was designed to enable the spouses and families of leading Ustaša to avoid the consequences of racial legislation, significant numbers of Jews wrote petitions asking for honorary Aryan status.¹⁸ Most of these applications were rejected and, of the relatively few that were accepted, many were later rescinded.¹⁹ Jewish citizens were affected by all or most of these measures and this included the Schlengers. While the family was not forced to move to the poorer outskirts of the city as many other Jewish and Serbian families were, they were required to register their property with the authorities and wear the yellow star despite the entire family having converted to Catholicism sometime in 1941. In a statement to UzOP on 30 June 1941 registering his assets, Levin confirmed that he had transferred property to the value of 222,650 dinars to the Committee for Jewish Submissions (Odbor za podavanje židova).²⁰ At the same time, it seems that the family’s phone line was disconnected and Levin’s telephone number reallocated to the Ministry of Transport.²¹ Moreover, on 24 May 1941, on

¹⁸ The literature analysing Jewish petitions in the NDH is sparse. See Rory Yeomans, “In Search of Myself: Autobiography, Imposture, and Survival in Wartime Croatia,” *S:IMON SHOAH: Intervention. Methods. Documentation.* 4, no. 1 (2017): 21–42. They are also discussed, though not systematically, in several other articles. See e.g. Yeomans, “Purifying the Shopfloor”; Volner, “‘Crumbs from the Table’”; Petrović-Gladanac, “When Economics was a Racial Endeavour.”

¹⁹ Of an estimated 2519 petitions on a variety of subjects by Jewish citizens, only 881 were preliminarily granted. See HR-Hrvatski državni arhiv, Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, fond Ravnateljstvo ustaškog redarstva/Židovski odsjek, 16.252/3000 and 30068.

²⁰ See Levin Schlenger’s statement to UzOP, HDA, NDH, Državno ravnateljstvo za ponovu, Prijava imetka, 30 June 1941, 697.1076/3-1-79-5078/8178/1941.

²¹ “Levin Schlenger,” *Židovski biografski leksikon*; On Levin Schlenger’s disappearance from the telephone directory after April 1941, cf *Telefonski imenik 1941* (Zagreb: Direkcija PTT Zagreb, 1941), 145 and *Brzoglasni imenik 1942* (Zagreb: Direkcija PTT Zagreb, 1942), 134. Schlenger is listed in the 1941 directory in the following way: “Levin Schlenger, entrepreneur, Zagorje industries, clay products, joint stock company, Bogovičeva 4, Zagreb, 77-25.”

the orders of the Ustaša surveillance service (Ustaška nadzorna služba – UNS), the Croatian state's secret police, Levin Schlenger was briefly interned and then released four days later on 28 May. Just days afterwards, the couples' two sons were among the Jewish youth in Zagreb deported first to Koprivnica and then Jadovno.

Petitions were the chief means by which Jewish and non-Jewish victims of Ustaša terror sought to negotiate their position in the state. Jewish and Serbian supplicants used them frequently, albeit often unsuccessfully, to secure the release of relatives, gain access to their bank accounts, ask for the return of property or, in the case of Jews, request honorary Aryan status. Likewise, Catholic women with Jewish husbands appealed for their spouses to have the same rights as "Aryan" Croats, pointing out, for good measure, that as the "Aryan" wives of Jewish husbands, they were negatively affected by the antisemitic legislation.²² Whether most such petitions can be interpreted as acts of resistance against the Ustaša regime is unclear: most petition writers, in Croatia at least, were not seeking to challenge the legitimacy of the state or its laws; rather they were simply asking that an exception be made in the case of their families. In fact, to the extent that the writing of such petitions demanded recognition as equal citizens with rights, thereby challenging the ideological basis of the state, these sentiments were usually far more unambiguously asserted in the petitions of the Aryan employers, neighbours, friends and, especially, spouses of Jewish victims rather than by the victims themselves or their Jewish families. They were also more likely to be successful, at least in the short term. Ultimately, even being in a mixed marriage or the child of a mixed marriage proved to be little protection, though, in a systematically antisemitic state. If it is true that most of the NDH's Jews had been exterminated by the Ustaša regime prior to the Wannsee Conference, under Nazi pressure, even those Jews whose mixed status had shielded them to some extent, were ultimately deported either

²² See e.g. petition to the Croatian State Sabor, 14 May 1942, by a group of 40 wives of Jewish husbands in Osijek, HR-Državni arhiv u Osijeku, Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, Gradsko poglavarstvo Stefan Hefer, Javna djelatnost, razno, k. 9, unnumbered.

to Jasenovac or the camps in the East. The Third Reich completed what the Ustaša state had started.²³

Jadovno and the Arrest of Jewish Youth in Zagreb

There can have been few less hospitable environments for a camp than the one situated in Jadovno, the NDH's first settled concentration camp and the template for the much-larger and better-known Jasenovac-Stara Gradiška concentration camp, constructed later the same year. Located in the rocky and remote hinterland of the Lika, near the town of Gospić, the camp was part of a larger complex of camps spread over the region which included two other camps for women and children on the Island of Pag, Slana and Metajna. On the surface, the remote and desert-like setting of the camp made for a strange location since there was no heavy industry in the surrounding area and few transport and supply routes. Most of the prisoners who were brought to the main camp at Jadovno, to the extent they were involved in manual labour, were engaged in carrying out seemingly pointless but physically arduous tasks such as shifting of rocks from one side of the road to the other. In fact, this apparent lack of any meaningful labour at the camp underlined its primary purpose as a site for the liquidation of its overwhelmingly Serbian and Jewish inmates, designated as enemy populations of the state.²⁴ The first prisoners to arrive at the camp site were

²³ Volner, "Crumbs from the Table," esp. 343-45.

²⁴ There are relatively few studies of the Jadovno-Slana-Metajna camp complex. However, among useful works are Ante Zemljar, *Haron i sudbine: Ustaški koncentracijski logori Slana i Metajna na ostrvu Pagu – 1941*. (Beograd: Četvrti Jul, 1988); Đuro Zatezalo, *Jadovno: kompleks ustaških logora 1941: zbornik dokumenata* (Beograd: Muzej žrtava genocida, 2007); Jens Hoppe, Alexander Korb and Fred Flatlow, "Gospić/Jadovno," in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, vol. 3: Camps and Ghettos under European Regimes Aligned with Nazi Germany – Croatia (Washington DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025), 53-56. By contrast, Croatian works about the camp are apologetic and informed by nationalist narratives. See e.g. Vladimir Geiger, Mario Jareb, and Davor Kovačić, *Jadovno i Šaranova jama: Kontroverze i manipulacije* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2017).

forced to clear an area of the valley and enclose it with barbed wire. Although two barracks were constructed for Ustaša guards, who also had machine gun nests and guard posts, initially prisoners had to sleep in the open air, only later being permitted to build segregated shelters with pine and beech branches and ferns – one for Jews, one for the large number of Serbs, and the other for the small number of Croatian political prisoners. Consequently, the makeshift dwellings were crowded and provided no protection against the elements while no prisoners received packages or parcels, let alone visits, despite approval from the Croatian Red Cross and the Jewish Department of the Ustaša police, and confirmation by the Ustaša secret police, the Directorate for Public Order and Security (Ravnateljstvo za javni red i sigurnosti – RAVSIGUR) on 11 August of the receipt of a large number of parcels.²⁵

Eugen Kvaternik, the head of RAVSIGUR and the Ustaša Supervisory Service (Ustaška nadzorna služba – UNS), outlined the intent of the camp in an order of 8 July 1941: “When the interests of public security require the deportation of undesirable persons from their place of residence, all Greek-Easterners and Jews will be sent to Gospić whereas Catholics and Muslims will not.” The site of the Jadovno camp had been selected by two of the most radical local members of the Ustaša: Jurica Frković, the first Ustaša commissioner for the Lika and governor of Gacko and the Lika, and Juco Rukavina, the first commander of the combined Ustaša armed forces. The camp itself was under the operational authority of the Directorate of the Provincial Police of Gospić County and was established on 18 June 1941 when Stjepan Rubinić, appointed by Kvaternik as chief of police, was sent to Gospić to set up a concentration camp. The Jadovno camp was situated in a valley outside the town, surrounded by forests and craggy mountains. The Velebit region was known for its bottomless Karst caverns, among the best known of which was Šaranova jama where many of the bodies of the victims were brought to be disposed of. The prisoners had been transported to the camp via crowded cattle

²⁵ Slavko Goldstein, *1941: The Year That Keeps Returning*, trans. Michael Gable and with an introduction by Charles Simich (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), 262-83.

wagons from all over the state and in daily shipments from the surrounding districts of Lika, in trucks, horse drawn wagons, and even on foot. Many of them were starving and exhausted by the cruel treatment they received along the way. Although the prisoners were supposed to be registered at the railway station, it wasn't unusual for prisoners to enter the camp or the transit centre – the jail attached to the Gospić courthouse – unregistered. At any one time, the tiny camp could have as many as 3000 prisoners. Many prisoners did not even make it to the camp since it was already overcrowded and they were instead shot en route, especially from the second half of July onwards. However, at the peak of the transports, the “surplus” prisoners were killed in the camp itself, based on lists jotted down on paper by two of the Ustaša camp commanders, Rudi Ritz, a teacher, and Ante Bešlić, a student from Split; their bodies were then transferred to a cave below Grgin Brijeg. It is estimated that during the three months the camp existed as many as 30,000 prisoners perished, with the vast majority of those killed in the camp being Serbs and then Jews, followed by a small number of Roma, and Croatian and Muslim antifascists and communists.²⁶

After Mussolini sent a telegram to Pavelić on 16 August ordering the reoccupation of Zone A in which the camp was located due to the demands of military security, a sense of panic set in among Ustaša camp personnel, commanders, and the local police in Gospić and surrounding areas, resulting in the mass liquidation of the remaining prisoners in Jadovno as well as most of those on Pag. The truth about the execution sites was revealed during a sanitation inspection by the Italian army under Vittorio FINDERLE in early September following reports from various parts of Lika about “temporary graveyards” from which “the disgusting stench of decaying corpses is spreading.” Consequently, the health service of the Italian Fifth Army Corps in Crikvenica sent two sanitation inspection teams on a tour of the area to “prevent the possible polluting of the water supply.” FINDERLE, head of the first inspection team, following his to-

²⁶ Goldstein, 1941, 262-83; Zatezalo, *Jadovno kompleks logora 1941*, 112-26, 158-69, 169-91, 301-14. Zatezalo suggests a figure of 40,123, of which 38,010 (94.7%) were Serbs.

ur of the Island of Pag and villages in the Velebit vicinity, established the existence of caverns in which “the bodies of the victims of the most recent political events in Croatia were discarded.” In two caverns near the village of Stupačinovo, he reported the discovery of fragments of shirts and men’s clothing, human hair, photographs, empty and torn coin purses, wallets, small toothbrushes, a broken wristwatch, shell casings, and other objects where, it was rumoured, two thousand Serbian men had been massacred three weeks previously. As peasants were ordered to remove the branches covering the caverns, the “sharp, penetrating odour of decayed flesh drifted out” while the surrounding stones were covered with “bloodstains and human remains.”²⁷ It was in these bleak, sordid surroundings that the 165 Jewish youth from Zagreb, including Miroslav and Petar Schlenger, would soon find themselves while their families waited day after day and hope against hope that they would return.

As Narcisa Lengl-Krizman and Mihael Sobolevski have written in their article about the Jewish youth from Zagreb, most of those arrested on 28 and 29 May 1941 were high school and university students in addition to a few apprentices like the Schlenger brothers, and artisans, aged between seventeen and twenty-five years old; many of them were members of the Maccabi sports club and other Jewish societies but were not largely involved in politics, leftist or otherwise. On 31 May 1941, the arrested youths were loaded into three railway cars, accompanied by ten police officers who were issued with free return train tickets to Koprivnica.²⁸ They and their parents were informed that they were being sent to Koprivnica where they would carry out “student labour service” for six weeks which was compulsory for all youths between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one (and from which Serbian and Jewish youth were legally excluded); they were presented with travel passes to that effect. Their parents were told by the newly created Jewish Section

²⁷ Goldstein, *1941*, 262-83; Zatezalo, *Jadovno kompleks logora 1941*, 345-77.

²⁸ ŽO Ustaša police commissariat in Zagreb to the Directorate of the State Railways (Ravnateljstvo Državnih željeznica), 30 May 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 9.252, *Ispostava ustaškog redarstvenog povjerenstva, Židovski odsjek*, 242, inventory number 27146, 30 May 1941.

(Židovski odsjek - ŽO) of the Directorate of the Ustaša police that the work service would last for six weeks and then they would be returned to their families. For the first ten days of their detention, they were accommodated in the facilities of the Danica Chemical Products factory near Koprivnica, which had ceased production before the war and was subsequently selected as the site of the first concentration and transit camp in the NDH. It was surrounded by barbed wire and under constant Ustaša guard. Upon arrival at the camp, the youth were initially accommodated in large common rooms with other prisoners, with whom they went to work in the nearby village of Drnje, filling in trenches and other fortifications built by the Yugoslav army near the Hungarian border. Conditions at Danica were brutal and harsh: Miša Montiljo, a seventeen year old high school student, wrote a postcard to his sister from Danica – the last correspondence he received from her – which ended with the epithet: “Greetings from Fambria and Haftun” (Ladino for “hunger and beating”).²⁹ At the suggestion of the municipal Family Council in Koprivnica, the Jewish Religious Community in Zagreb sent a request to the ŽO to move the youth to the premises of the local oil factory, expressing their willingness to bear the costs of the move, to establish and maintain a kitchen at their own expense, and to pay for the guards from their own funds. On 11 June 1941, the ŽO informed the Ustaša police office in Koprivnica that the move and the basic welfare provisions for the Jewish youth had been approved as basic sanitary hygiene measures to prevent the outbreak of epidemics. These measures included the opening of an office of the Jewish community in Koprivnica; the issuing of a permanent pass for the camp to representatives of the local Jewish religious community; and the introduction of a telephone number for the needs of the Jewish religious community in Koprivnica which was nonetheless under constant surveillance by the local Ustaša police. Meanwhile, on 6 June 1941, the ŽO had issued a permit to Žiga Hefner, a doctor

²⁹ Mihael Sobolevski and Narcisa Lengl-Krizman, “Hapšenje 165 jevrejskih omladinaca u Zagrebu u maju 1941. godine,” *Novi omanut* 31, no. 5759 (November-December 1998): 6-9; Blanka Baruch, “U spomen mojem bratu Miši Montilju,” *Novi omanut* 32-3, no. 5769 (May-August 1999): 21.

from Zagreb, to travel to Koprivnica and carry out "permanent medical service among the Jewish youths in the Danica factory" for the same purpose.³⁰

Three days after the youths had been transferred to the oil factory in Koprivnica, a group of nineteen Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, Romania, and Hungary were also brought there. However, on request from the Jewish Religious Community in Zagreb, these refugees were quickly removed to the nearby village of Draganić as "a forced place of residence" for them and where a camp of 181 refugees had already been established. Although we cannot be sure why the leaders of the Religious Community in Zagreb made this request, it was almost certainly aimed at separating the Jewish youth from Zagreb from the foreign Jews in order to emphasise their Croatian loyalties, something which would become a persistent theme in petitions to the ŽO from their families and members of the Jewish Community calling for their release and return home and in Jewish petitions more generally.³¹

Despite the apparently accommodating attitude of the local Ustaša police authorities towards the youth in the camp, in their private correspondence, they demonstrated a far more ambivalent and concerned attitude about the ramifications of having so many Jewish individuals near a Croatian town. For example, in a report that the Ustaša commission for the city and district of Koprivnica sent to the ŽO on 30 June 1941 – that is, only twenty days after the youth had been settled in the oil factory – it set out a laundry list of worries it had about the accommodation of Jewish youth in such close proximity to the city itself:

³⁰ JRC to the ŽO, 2 June 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 27.252, *Ispostava ustaškog redarstvenog povjerenstva, Židovski odsjek*, 592a/1117; ŽO to the Ustaša police in Koprivnica, 7 June 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 27.252, *Ispostava ustaškog redarstvenog povjerenstva, Židovski odsjek*, 721/1941; Sobolevski and Lengl-Krizman, "Hapšenje 165 jevrejskih omladinaca u Zagrebu," 6-9.

³¹ President of the JRC in Zagreb to the ŽO and RAVSIGUR 14 June 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 9.252, *Ispostava ustaškog redarstvenog povjerenstva, Židovski odsjek*, 27960/2825/727/1941/410; Sobolevski and Lengl-Krizman, "Hapšenje 165 jevrejskih omladinaca u Zagrebu," 6-9.

Above all, we draw your attention to a well-known fact that the very town of Koprivnica is a so-called Jewish El Dorado and that in the town there is a significantly higher percentage of Jews within the population and until now they had control over the entire economy and leading positions. The town of Koprivnica and the surrounding area have the Jews to thank for all the local industry moving to Serbia, leaving the workers and the poor with nothing to eat. The local Jews oppressed the local population and citizens with their speculations and pushed many of them into poverty, and even now they have the audacity to threaten Croats with the worst of things! With all that, in the last couple of days we have noticed some suspicious movement of local Jews, secret meetings, carefully planned, so that even with our most vigilant attention we could not track them or find out what they were about. Considering what has been said previously, the decision of the Jewish Section of the Directorate of the Ustaša police to give permission to move the Jewish youth from Zagreb to the local oil factory, to open a Jewish Religious Municipality (which already exists in Koprivnica), to issue permanent passes for the camp to local Jews (the loudest propagators and enemies of the Independent State of Croatia and our orders Milan Reich, Dr. Slavko Hirschler and Jakob Rosenberg) and to install a telephone!? even if it is under police surveillance, cannot be welcomed by this commission. This commissariat takes the liberty of expressing its opinion that it would be prudent to send all those Jews, no matter what sex or age they are, to the local concentration camp "Danica" in a separate building and put them under the strict surveillance of the Ustaša guards where they would stay until an opportunity arises for them to be removed completely from the Croatian state.³²

The Jewish youth from Zagreb were transferred from Koprivnica to Gospić at the beginning of July and from there they were taken to Jadovno. Out of roughly 2,500 Jews who had been incarcerated in the camp complex of Jadovno-Slana-Metajna, about 1,500 survived. Many of these survivors were transferred to the Jastrebar-

³² Ustaša commission in Koprivnica to the ŽO, 30 June 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, Ispostava ustaškog redarstvenog povjereništva, Židovski odsjek 3. 252/256/33/1941.

sko and Kruščica camps, and subsequently Jasenovac in the case of the male prisoners and Loborgrad in the case of female prisoners where most of them died. Out of the 165 Jewish youth who had been deported to Jadovno, except for ten, they all perished, most likely in the mass liquidation of prisoners when the camp was dissolved. The ten who survived the slaughter were able to do so because a few days prior to the dismantling of the camp, they had been taken to Gospić, ostensibly to clean the streets, on the orders of Janko Mihailovic, an Ustaša guard and a deputy commander at Jadovno, who was an old classmate of the ten and had apparently ordered their transfer to save them from death. Neither Petar nor Miroslav Schlenger were among this group and so it must be assumed that they died in the final camp liquidation. Of those ten taken away in the final few days, only three of them survived the war. The other 162 Jewish youth from Zagreb perished either because they were murdered or from disease.³³

Petitions to the Jewish Section of the Ustaša Police

Almost from the beginning, it seems, many parents of the Jewish youth harboured concerns about the likely fate of their sons, anxieties which grew as the months went by, and their children did not return home. At the same time, in their collective and individual petitions and correspondence to the ŽO and the Ustaša authorities, they stressed their and their children's loyalty to the state, their strong sense of Croatian identity and the satisfaction which their children had gained from having the opportunity to participate in student labour service and offer their toil in the construction of the state. On 10 September 1941, having heard nothing from or about their children for months, several parents of the youths wrote a joint petition to the ŽO expressing their anxiety that their children had still not returned, long after the eight weeks of supposed state labour had expired. If we look at the petition, stripped of its blocks of

³³ Sobolevski and Lengl-Krizman, "Hapšenje 165 jevrejskih omladinaca u Zagrebu," 8.

discourse replicating the ideological tropes of the state, the depths of the fear of the families, their love for their children, and their concern for their welfare resonate.³⁴ In particular, the petition suggests that the families were already aware on some level of what had happened to their sons but nonetheless dared to hope that they still might yet be returned.

On 31 May this year, 165 Jewish youths from the enclosed list were sent to “Danica” camp in Koprivnica for student labour duty. All the children went there with great joy because they knew they would be working there and then return home eight weeks later. For that reason, the children took with them only summer clothes and necessities. After eight weeks in the camp in Koprivnica, the children hoped to be coming home and to be replaced by others, but they were sent to the Jadovno camp on Velebit. All these boys during their education had been brought up in the Croatian spirit and felt Croatian in their body and soul. They were only members of Croatian and sports associations and socialised exclusively with their Croatian schoolmates. They were mostly good students and behaved well. It is well-known that many rich Jewish students consistently supported their poor colleagues and supported all Croatian educational institutions. This can be confirmed by their teachers.

The winter is coming, and those children are not supplied for colder weather, let alone winter. The clothes they brought with them must be torn by now since they have been working for four months and we were unable to send them anything later on. For the reasons stated above, we ask for our children named in the list to be returned to their parents from the camp in Jasenovac. On 30 September, it will have been exactly four months since these children left to work in the camps. In such a way, these children would be

³⁴ Jewish petitions to the ŽO were characterised by a set of stock phrases and linguistic conventions, functioning in a similar way to Alexei Yurchak’s description of late Soviet discourse as “prefabricated ‘blocks’ of discourse, with predetermined and context-independent ‘literal meanings’ attached to them” so that “ideological discourse became *hyper-normalized*.” See Alexei Yurchak, “Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything was Forever, Until It Was No More,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 3 (July 2003): 489–92.

able to continue their education, at least temporarily. We all vouch with our lives that our children will behave impeccably and study and work hard. In our pain, a sole hope remains that our children will be returned to their parents before winter.³⁵

This kind of petition, reflecting both hope and mounting worry while seeking to stress the loyalty of the writer and the victim to the state, was evident in many of the individual petitions sent to the ŽO on behalf of the incarcerated young men and boys. Since most of the Jewish youth came from educated, middle-class backgrounds, their families were no doubt aware of the fine line they trod between appealing for the release of their family members, their own precarious status in a functionally and ideologically anti-semitic state, and the urge to appeal to the best instincts of state officials without overstepping the acceptable boundaries of discourse so-called “undesired elements” [*nepoćudni elementi*] such as Jews and Serbs were able to safely employ. Not just the families of the young men but some of their employers wrote to the ŽO asking for their return and stressing their excellent records as employees and the benefits they could bring to the Croatian national economy. As in the celebrated case of the factory owner Oskar Schindler, these employers strived to emphasise the amenity potential of their young trainees, a common technique in petitions by employers of Jewish employees who wanted to underline the vital role they played in the successful business operations of their company.³⁶

A representative example of this kind of petition is one that August Cerer, a dentist on Jurišićeva ulica, wrote to the ŽO on 31 May 1941 asking for the release of his apprentice dental technician Fedor Fleš [Flesch] who, as he explained, was employed in his technical laboratory. “In his work he is already of great importance be-

³⁵ Parents and relatives of 165 Jewish youths from Zagreb to the ŽO, 10 September 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 6.252/732.

³⁶ On amenity potential, see Ray Jones, “The Economic Puzzle of Oskar Schindler: Amenity Potential and Rational Choice,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 57, no. 1 (January 1998): 3-26. For a discussion of the specific context of the NDH, see Michelbacher, “Anti-Semitism and Economic Regeneration,” 23-46.

cause he is now approaching the end of his apprenticeship and is needed especially at the moment because my current technician doesn't come regularly to work. Thus, I ask you kindly to release my apprentice from state labour."³⁷ The father of Fedor Fleš, Hugo, also wrote a letter to the directorate on behalf of his son. In his petition, he enclosed a second petition he had written on behalf of his family for the attention of the supreme head of the state, Ante Pavelić, the Ustaša Poglavnik, asking that his family be granted Aryan rights as well as requesting that, at the same time, the ŽO "publish an order releasing my son to freedom." As with Fedor's employer's petition, in his request for Aryan rights for himself, a businessman, his wife Anica, and twelve-year-old daughter Ljerka, he stressed the economic amenity potential such a resolution would bring. "I have a business on Ilica 44, in other words on the northern side of Ilica. A commissioner has been appointed to my business. As a Jew, I am banned from walking in the northern part of the city. Business reasons such as visiting customers, sending goods, and contacting clients demands that we can move around in this part of town because we have customers who live there. To avoid damage to the business, I ask that I, my wife, and daughter are allowed to move in the northern part of the city of Zagreb for business reasons."³⁸

In his attached testimonial to the ŽO which was full of confessional details attesting to his Croatian identity and lifelong loyalty to the Croatian nation, he wrote that although he was a Jew in "the sense of clause three of the Legal Decree on Race Membership," he and his ancestors were "only Jewish by religion but in their feelings and actions – I think – good Croats." He added that he had volunteered for service on the Russian Front during World War One and after returning from service he had opened his store in Ilica which he had personally run ever since. "My entire upbringing – from my first steps onward – was purely Croat." He pointed out that in 1921 he joined the separatist Croatian Party of Right and after it

³⁷ August Cerer to the Jewish Section of the Main Ustaša Headquarters [Glavni Ustaški stan – GUS], 30 May 1941, AUPiPŽJ, Fond Duro Zatezalo, unnumbered.

³⁸ Hugo Fleš to the ŽO, undated but probably June 1941, AUPiPŽJ, FDZ, unnumbered.

was banned continued to be a member, remaining “actively involved in the Croatian movement for independence. He added that “morally and materially” he had continued to assist various militant separatist causes, including the Croatian youth movement and newspapers as well as supporting political prisoners with money and clothes. Between 1929 and 1939, he had voted exclusively for the Croatian Peasant Party because of which his business had suffered negative consequences from the tax authorities. He also stated that he had refused to serve nails to Chetnik (Serbian nationalist] supporters who had come to his store, telling them that he only provided them for customers who were involved in “Croatian nationalist activities,” for which action he was attacked by the Chetniks in front of his entire family, with one even pulling out a hand grenade. In April 1940, he recalled, the 551 Osijek infantry was preparing a farewell evening for their commander, and he gave a speech which ended with the words: “The Croatian people feel themselves reborn because they are no longer under the former constraints but instead are in the Croatian Banovina. But the Croatian people will only really be completely happy when they are in their own liberated homeland. In the name of all soldiers and officers of our infantry I wish that the Croatian people were today in their own Free State of Croatia.’ Following this speech, I was considered undesirable and was no longer invited to army exercises.” As well as being a member of Croatian nationalist worker and trade organisations such as Hrvatska radiša, for nine years he had also been secretary of the Tailors’ Clothes Society of Artisans, “where at every meeting I emphasised Croatian national goals.” As such, he concluded, he had fulfilled the conditions in point 6 in the Decree about Race Membership and consequently he argued that he and his family, including Fedor, were deserving of “all the rights that belong to people of Aryan origin.” As part of this, he asked that they be absolved from the requirement to wear the Jewish sign.³⁹

Likewise, Richard Koller, the head of an engineering firm in Zagreb, wrote to the ŽO to ask for the release of his son on the same

³⁹ Hugo Fleš to the ŽO, undated but June 1941, AUIPIŽJ, FDZ.

amenity principle, arguing that his return was necessary for the continued viability of the family firm. “My only son, Ivan Koller, who is employed in my firm as a technician, has been working in Koprivnica for nearly three weeks. I am sixty years old and in ill health and my engineering firm has an urgent order from the Ministry of Forestry and Mines as well as from other industries. I kindly ask you to allow my son to return home so that he can help me in my work,” he wrote.⁴⁰

The letters written by other parents requesting the release of their children from Jadovno combined concern for the welfare of their sons with confessional declarations of Croatian identity. Thus, in his petition asking that his son, Saša, be released from his duties at the labour camp in Drnje, Oton Blühweiss [Blivajs] explained that his son, a first-year student in the medical faculty, had a heart condition and was therefore banned “from all strenuous and excitable activities.” There was the risk that life in the camp “could significantly worsen his health condition.” At the same time, he wrote that his son had always been a good Croat, like his father who had stood on the ideas of Ante Starčević, the nineteenth-century father of the Croatian nation, and had always “worked to defend Croatian state rights”; this had caused him to be persecuted as a “good son of the homeland.”⁴¹ The most combative and assertive petitions came from non-Jewish parents who wrote to the ŽO requesting the release of their loved ones, pointing out that on the basis of their purely Aryan origins and according to the racial decrees of the state, their children should be classified as Aryan and not be in the camp at all. In so doing, they were calling on the state to adhere to its own decrees. Julija Svarč, for example, wrote to the Jewish Section of the Main Ustaša Headquarters [Glavni Ustaški stan – GUS] – the policy-making nerve centre and think tank of the Ustaša regime – on 6 June 1941 requesting that her son Aleksandar “who is currently to be found in the Jewish youth work camp in Koprivnica be released home because he is not a pure blood Jew but a half Jew. I, the under-

⁴⁰ Richard Koller to the ŽO, 18 June 1941, AUPiPŽJ, FDZ, 514.

⁴¹ Oton Blühweiss to the ŽO, undated but probably June 1941, AUPiPŽJ, FDZ, 378.

signed, his mother, am a pure-blooded Aryan woman which I am providing evidence of with my birth and marriage certificates."⁴²

Even though they had not heard from or about their children for months, anxious and heartbroken parents continued to write petitions to the relevant agencies in the fading hope that their sons were still alive, even though many of them were written and sent at a time when they almost certainly were already dead. A particularly heartrending petition of this kind was written by Sigmund Klugman, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Croatian army, to the ŽO in early September pleading for the release of his son Salamon, a medical student who had been taken to Jadovno in June and who did not survive. The emotional toll that the continued absence of their son was having on Sigmund and his wife and their desperation to have him back is evident from the petition as is the sense of weariness and resignation which it expresses despite the attempt by Sigmund to write himself and his family into the values of the new state and Ustaša regime while maintaining the discourse of a humble supplicant.

My son never sinned against, spoke against, or voted against the Croats. Always he associated with and was eagerly accepted into the ranks of the Croatian nationalists which many of his colleagues from within and outside the Club of Croatian University Students can affirm and you can see this from the testimonial of the Ustaša University Centre which I am enclosing. I and my family have converted to the Roman Catholic faith, and we would like him to do the same as soon as possible too. My wife – his mother – has been ill for a long time. My son has been in this camp for three months already since 30 May and I was always true to Croatian ideology and always protected subordinate Croats, which Lieutenant Colonel Vjekoslav Kovačević, the head of the military delegation of the State Railway of the NDH...and many others can attest to. In the hope that my petition will be answered, courteous greetings, Sigmund Klugman.⁴³

⁴² Julija Svarč to the Jewish Section of GUS, 6 June 1941, AUPiPŽJ, FDZ, 372.

⁴³ Sigmund Klugman to the ŽO, 11 September 1941, AUPiPŽJ, FDZ, 982.

The Long Wait of the Schlenger Family

Like Sigmund Klugmann, Levin and Marija Schlenger waited anxiously for news of their sons throughout the summer and autumn. They wrote at least three petitions to the nearby ŽO. Although it must have become apparent to them at quite an early stage – as it surely did to Sigmund Klugman – that their sons would not be coming home, their increasingly desperate petitions, though weighed down by realization as the months wore on, never completely gave up hope that they would be released. However, the stress of the situation in which they found themselves must have been unimaginable and by this time Levin himself was already suffering from some kind of paralysis or chronic physiological condition, almost certainly the result, at least in part, of the emotional and psychological strain of unrelenting Ustaša antisemitic persecution and no doubt exacerbated by the continued absence and imprisonment of his much-loved sons.

Marija wrote her first letter to the ŽO on 22 June 1941 on a spare scrap of paper. Although the family was permitted to continue living in their residence, it was in far more straitened circumstances: Levin's businesses and assets had been confiscated in the name of the state and, as a result of the state's racial decrees, it is likely that their domestic servants had been released and they were forced to fend for themselves in the context of a cost of living crisis, the freezing of their bank accounts and safety deposit box valuables, and strict curfews on the amenities, including grocery stores, which they could make use of. Even though at this stage, Miroslav and Petar had only been gone for just under four weeks, the tone of Marija's letter shows that she was already consumed by a sense of rising dread, no doubt informed by the fact that she had received no communication from them:

I tried to get in touch with you in person and I am presenting you with my petition in these emotional words and my maternal concern which affects nearly all mothers equally...I am exhausted with pain and anxiety for the fate of my children because of

which I cannot summon up any strength for anything and nothing more remains for me other than that to beg you to kindly consider resolving my justified plea that my sons Miroslav and Petar return from imprisonment in Koprivnica and which is located under case number 387 in the Jewish Section of the Ustaša Police in Zagreb. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Marija Schlenger.⁴⁴

In the meantime, Levin had written his own petition to the ŽO on 7 June 1941, just days after his sons had been taken away, pointing out that they had not gone to university but had instead undertaken apprenticeships to learn practical and socially-useful trades.

On 30 May 1941, agents of the Ustaša police took away both my sons, Petar Schlenger, 18, by profession a dental apprentice in the practice of Dr. Rikard Kleinheld, a dentist in Zagreb, and Miroslav Schlenger, by profession a dental apprentice in the practice of Dr. Ivo Vinski, a dentist in Zagreb. At the end of this school year, my son Petar will graduate. My son Miroslav graduated in 1940, also in Zagreb, and this year is registered at the University of Zagreb. As soon as in September last year, there appeared certain problems for students of the Jewish faith, I decided that both sons should learn a practical vocation. Because of their delicate physical condition, I chose dentistry for them both. My son Miroslav started work right away and Petar immediately after he had finished his high school education. The conditions for the signing of a contract were undertaken right away but the rapid development of the war situation...prevented its earlier signing. Apart from that, it is a long-held tradition that regular professional contracts are only signed after a trial period which youths such as these have spent in apprenticeships. I attach a transcript of both apprenticeship contracts. Seeing that as from the above as well as the attached it is clear to see that both sons are already employed. I justifiably request that both sons are released from further detention and work in the labour camp in Koprivnica and are returned to continue their apprenticeships in Zagreb.

⁴⁴ Marija Schlenger to the ŽO, 22 July 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 9.252/unnumbered.

A decision by the Ustaša police office in Zagreb on 11 June 1941 confirmed that his request had not been approved.⁴⁵

By the time of Marija's second petition in October 1941, it must have been painfully obvious to both Marija and her paralysed husband that their two sons would not be coming home. Marija's second petition to the ŽO was much longer, more emotional and, understandably more desperate than her first, but it is also characterised by a sense of hope that she might see them again, underneath the formal language so characteristic of such petitions, demanding to know how they are and stressing their love of Croatia.

"Dear director sir! I ask you to forgive me that I have contacted you in this way. My aching mother's heart gives me the strength to send you this petition in which I seek no special favours for me or my sons. I have two sons, the older Miroslav born 1922, a law student, and the younger Petar, born 1923, a high school graduate. On 30 May they were both taken away from me for state labour. Since that time, I have not seen them and nor do I know where they are. My sons were never involved in any anti-national activities. Nor could they because of their upbringing since I brought them up in the spirit of those principles with which I was educated at the Sacred Sisters of Ursuline in Varaždin. In the name of maternal love, I ask you to accommodate me only insofar as you tell me where they are now and what kind of condition they are in. So many tears shed because of uncertainty about the fate of my children; so many sleepless nights because of anxiety about the health and life of my children whom I gave unhappy life to gives me a glimmer of hope that you will grant this heartfelt plea of a desperate mother. Understand me, director sir, and forgive me for sending my petition to you but I can't visit you in person. However, my maternal heart tells me that I must do everything I can to alleviate the unfortunate fate of my children."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Levin Schlenger, Zagreb, Bogovičeva /III, molba za oslobodjenje Petra i Miroslava Schlenger od radnog logora u Koprivnici," 7 June 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 9.252/387/41.

⁴⁶ Marija Schlenger to the ŽO, 8 October 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 12.252/un-numbered; Ustaša police directorate to the Ustaša police office in Zagreb, 23 October 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 2.252/6278/8/11041.

A subsequent internal investigation was ordered by the assistant director of the Ustaša police directorate on 5 November 1941. He asked the directorate to investigate the whereabouts of the Schlenger brothers who, according to Marija Schlenger's statement, had been "apparently taken away on 30 May 1941 for state labour," who took them away, and for what reason. On 18 November, the police superintendent for the city of Zagreb replied to the ŽO stating that "the sought Miroslav and Petar Schlenger were not despatched for forced labour through this police force, nor does there exist any kind of information about them in the records."⁴⁷

As Levin and Marija Schlenger waited desperately for news of their sons alone in their apartment, days turned into weeks. With no phone line to the outside world, temperatures dropping, and the days growing darker, their personal situation became ever more perilous in "the waiting room of death."⁴⁸ On 31 December 1941, Levin Schlenger wrote to the ŽO asking it to issue him with written confirmation that he had been released from the transit camp of Zavrtnica "as a result of my serious disease of the nervous system," affirmed by a medical certificate issued by the Physician Chamber in Zagreb. This suggests that he was already anxious about the possibility of being deported to a concentration camp and meeting the same fate as his sons.⁴⁹ Likewise, on 25 January 1942, Marija wrote to the director of the ŽO appealing for her husband not be deported owing

⁴⁷ Assistant director of the Ustaša police directorate to the Ustaša police directorate in Zagreb, 5 November 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 2.252/6278; "Schlenger Marija – molba," 18 November 1941, HDA, NDH, RUR/ŽO, 9.252/27749-I-B-1941.

⁴⁸ The phrase comes from Jean Amery's essay about the Warsaw Ghetto. See Jean Amery, "In the Waiting Room of Death: Reflections on the Warsaw Ghetto." In his *Radical Humanism: Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Sidney and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington, IND: Indiana University Press, 1984), 223-45.

⁴⁹ Levin Schlenger to the ŽO, 31 December 1941, HDA NDH, RUR/ŽO, 2.252/1791/11941/1942/2068, inventory number 28822. It is not clear when Levin was interned in Zavrtnica. In his police file, his only arrest prior to his final deportation is listed as 24 May 1941. However, according to Zdravko Dizdar, Zavrtnica transit camp was not established until August 1941 so this might refer to a different incident. See Zdravko Dizdar, "Logori na području sjeverozapadne Hrvatske u toku drugoga svjetskog rata 1941–1945. godine," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 22, br. 1-2 (1990): 99.

to his “progressive paralysis” – confirmed by Gjuro Vrančić, professor of nervous diseases at the University of Zagreb – adding that she was “urgently needed” for “the constant care which the serious illness of my husband requires.” The illness, she wrote, “is unrelenting.”⁵⁰ But there was to be no greater mercy for Levin or Marija than there had been for their sons. On 15 June 1942, on the orders of the UNS, Levin and Marija were arrested during the Ustaša police action “cleansing Samobor from Jews,” processed and photographed. Three days later, on 18 June 1942, they were sentenced to a period of three years’ incarceration and deported, Marija to the women and children’s concentration camp of Stara Gradiška and Levin, paralysed, to the adjacent men’s camp at Jasenovac.⁵¹ But the passage to the Jasenovac-Stara Gradiška concentration camp was a journey, like that taken by their sons, with no return. Levin and Marija quickly perished, both dying sometime in late 1942.⁵²

Conclusion

The Jewish historian Amos Goldberg has called for a paradigm change in the writing of the Holocaust which looks at Jewish communities and individuals during the Holocaust from the perspective of trauma rather than crisis. Arguing that the diary is not a “transparent window through which man or historical reality may be observed, while ignoring the window itself,” he writes that close reading, through examining the discourse and narrative of writers, should aim to bring insight into the writers themselves and their “existential state” at the time they were recording their diaries. In contrast to the prevailing approach of Holocaust historians, who, as Goldberg saw it, related to diaries as documentary texts and histo-

⁵⁰ Marija Levin to the ŽO, 25 January 1942, HDA RUR/ŽO 2.252/1791, 1941, 1942 2068, inventory number 28822.

⁵¹ Police records for Levin and Marija Schlenger, HDA, 2,252, 259-2-1-4363/4207c and HDA 2.252, 259-2-1-4364/4207c.

⁵² Entries for Levin Schlenger and Marija Schwarz-Schlenger, Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database -- LEVIN SCHLENGER and Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database -- MARIJA SCHWARZ-SCHLENGER. Last viewed 24 August 2025.

rical sources through which to observe social processes, worldviews, and concrete events, Goldberg instead argued for approaching the text of the diaries and the event of their writing as the subjects and objects of his research, thus seeking to understand the *individual* in the text rather than existing studies which had focused on reconstructing the *event* from the text. As such, the crisis paradigm in history writing about the Holocaust which claimed that the inner life of Jews had been unaffected by Nazi persecution and ghettoization was popular since it offered comfort and presented the victims of the Holocaust as heroes engaged in preserving their humanity. This historical paradigm usually made a sharp distinction between the “outside” of the Jewish subject, directly affected by Nazi policies, and the Jewish “inside” – perceived as infinitely more decisive for the identity of the victim – which was ultimately whole and never reduced to helplessness. Such interpretations, he writes, mitigated the “traumatic and disintegrative aspects of the autobiographical texts written during the Holocaust.”⁵³

But perhaps sometimes the words of Holocaust victims can tell us important things about both events *and* individuals. Exploring the fate of the Jewish youth deported to Jadovno, including the Schlenger brothers, through the letters and petitions their families wrote appealing for their release tells us important things about the impact of the Holocaust not just on the external life of the Jewish community but also the internal life of individual Jewish families. At the level of external impact, the petitions written by Levin and Marija Schlenger and the other families reveal the straitened and frightened circumstances in which Jews were living amid the state’s antisemitic terror, reduced to penury and constant fear. At the same time, the petitions reveal the extent to which the families felt compelled to represent themselves as supplicants, employing the language of a state they had been written out of to claim a common identity with it. Thinking about internal impact, however, the petitions of the families and, in particular, the increasingly desperate appeals of Marija and Levin,

⁵³ Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust*, trans. Shmuel Sermoneta-Gertel and Avner Greenberg (Bloomington IND: Indiana University Press, 2017), 20, 60-1, 65.

written with pencils on scraps of paper in shaky handwriting or typed imperfectly on yellowing script, underline the extent to which the terror as everyday life of the Ustaša regime transformed not only the material conditions of Jewish families but their interior lives too. In the case of Levin and Marija and their two sons, a prosperous and happy family unit was replaced by an isolated, terrified couple, plagued by chronic disease and numbing dread, begging for the lives of their sons and then, finally, their own.

What emerges from the petitions of the families of Jewish youth and the correspondence of the Schlengers is the emotional nature of the petitions to which we as historians have no choice but to react emotionally. These petitions and the way in which they are expressed highlight the limits of both the objective and rationalistic approach to the study of the Holocaust and the utility of engaging with the subjectivity of the victims. Through reconstructing the petitions of the families of the Jewish youth deported to Jadovno, we gain insight into what it must have *felt* like for the Jewish victims of Ustaša terror and their lived experience in a deeply antisemitic state as much as what *happened* to them. Most of all, perhaps, in reconstructing the experiences of the Schlenger family and the other families of the Jewish youth in their own words in real time, we are forced to confront who we are through reading them.

Summary

This article reconstructs the fate of the Schlenger family, a prosperous Jewish household in Zagreb, to explore how emotion and subjectivity can be integrated into Holocaust historiography. It situates their story within the broader context of antisemitic persecution in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), where legal discrimination, economic dispossession, and arbitrary arrests rapidly transformed Jewish life after 1941. Particular attention is paid to the arrest of 165 Jewish youths, including the Schlenger brothers, and their deportation to the Jadovno concentration camp, where most were killed.

The core of the study lies in a close reading of petitions submitted by Jewish families to Ustaša authorities. These documents

reveal not only the strategies families used to appeal for the release of their relatives—emphasizing loyalty, usefulness, and Croatian identity—but also the emotional intensity underlying such appeals. The increasingly desperate petitions of Levin and Marija Schlenger illustrate the psychological toll of uncertainty, fear, and loss, as well as the gradual erosion of hope.

Engaging with historiographical debates about objectivity and affect, the article argues that such petitions provide valuable insight into the inner lives of Holocaust victims. Rather than treating them solely as administrative sources, it proposes reading them as expressions of trauma, subjectivity, and lived experience. In doing so, the study challenges conventional approaches that privilege detached analysis and instead calls for a more empathetic engagement with the voices of victims, restoring them to the centre of their own historical narratives.

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О емоцији, писању молби властима и Холокаусту. Живот и смрт јеврејске породице у Загребу током Другог светског рата

Резиме

Овај рад реконструише судбину породице Шленгер, имућне јеврејске породице из Загреба, како би се испитала улога емоција и субјективности у историографији Холокауста. Њихова прича смештена је у шири контекст антисемитског прогона у Независној Држави Хрватској, где су правна дискриминација, економска експропријација и произвољна хапшења нагло изменили свакодневицу Јевреја након 1941. године. Посебна пажња посвећена је хапшењу 165 јеврејских младића, међу којима су били и браћа Шленгер, као и њиховој депортацији у логор Јадовно, где је већина страдала.

Средиште рада чини пажљива анализа молби које су јеврејске породице упућивале усташким властима. Ови документи откривају не само стратегије којима су породице настојале да издејствују ослобађање својих ближњих – наглашавајући лојалност, корисност и хрватски идентитет – већ и снажну емоционалну компоненту тих обраћања. Све очајније молбе Левина и Марије Шленгер показују психолошки терет неизвесности, страха и губитка, као и постепено гашење наде.

Полемишући са историографским расправама о објективности и афекту, рад указује да овакве молбе пружају драгоцен увид у унутрашњи живот жртава Холокауста. Уместо да се посматрају искључиво као административни извори, предлаже

се њихово читање као израза трауме, субјективности и проживљеног искуства. На тај начин, рад доводи у питање конвенционалне приступе који фаворизују дистанцирану анализу и залаже се за емпатичнији приступ, враћајући жртве у средиште сопствених историјских наратива.

Кључне речи: НДХ, Јевреји, Холокауст, Загреб, микро историја, писање молби властима.