

## **Title: “Jewish, Balkan, Female. The Literature of Balkan Jewish Women as a Minority Experience”**

### **Summary:**

The history of the presence of Jewish culture in the Balkans is complex, divided by many political boundaries, and its horizon is marked by the fundamental cultural boundary between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. The documented history of Jews in the Balkans dates back to the early Middle Ages and has been the subject of researchers' interest at many times from various points of view. However, there are still cognitive gaps regarding the past of this group. One of these gaps is the story of Jewish women. This project is a comprehensive and synthetic analysis of multilingual (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Slovenian, Macedonian, Ladino, Hebrew, German, Hungarian, Yiddish) literature written by Balkan Jewish women (Sephardi and Ashkenazi). The aim is to reconstruct the internal dynamics of a process that began in the 19th century and continues today: Balkan Jewish women expressing and describing their changing identities through literary texts. I am interested in how – acting independently from each other and outside any institutional frames – certain women (and not men) initiated literary activities, and played a pivotal role in sustaining and transmitting Jewish tradition of that region. My research questions are when, how and why specific authors, both in the Balkans and beyond (Israel, England, France, USA), reflected on the problem of Jewishness in their texts, and how they saw their identity in the cultural environment. The group that is the focus of the project is Balkan Jewish women, described as a multiple minority, whose non-presence and non-visibility in the research so far is the result of its liminal and subversive nature: these women kept crossing all the primary divisions underlying the basic ways of understanding and describing the dominant cultures of the Balkans. Therefore, the literature of Balkan Jewish women will be described through an intersectional approach, taking into account a number of historical, social, cultural and religious factors. The group will be analyzed in oppositional categories, primarily gender (man vs. woman), religion (Christian [Catholics and Orthodox], Muslim, Jews), education (educated vs. not educated), region (influences of political systems, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Republic of Venice), culture (Ashkenazi vs. Sephardi), nationality (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Jewish, Yugoslav), and language (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Ladino, Hebrew, Yiddish etc.). This multitude of factors that influenced the formation of Jewish culture means that today it should not be referred to as a monolith, but as Jewish cultural pluralism, and should be examined in its local manifestations. In this project I treat the writings as a non-obvious literary practice, in which I understand literature in its broadest sense: fictional, paraliterary and documentary works, i.e. testimonial literature. I will consider a culturally embedded text as a literary representation of specific problems of culture (Jewishness, Balkanness and femininity). I will approach texts written by Jewish women as a minority discourse expressing the complex, fluid and historically variable identities of the authors. I am interested in how the fundamental problems of ideological movements, Jewish and otherwise, manifest in this group, and how the process of defining one's own boundaries is shaped – the process of taming one's “I” in the narrative act, through selfattribution and exclusion. In this project I am going to investigate: 1) when and under what social circumstances women, often outside any institutional frames, started to write texts focused on transmitting the Jewish traditions of the Balkan region, 2) textual representations (written by women) of the problems of Jewish, Balkan and feminine awareness and identity, and their interdependencies. I will show that, in the case of Balkan Jewish women – living at the intersection of several cultures and social groups – there are many intercultural and transcultural

identification characteristics based on several specific reference points. This project analyzes the activities of a group that has thus far remained beyond the interest of not only Jewish studies, but historical and literary research in general. I want to enrich the state of research on the history of Jewish women and on the history of the Jews in particular as an integral part of heritage in the countries of the Balkans. The proposed research will, on the one hand, significantly enhance knowledge about the past of this group, and, on the other hand, present a new approach to the research of Jewish groups as minority groups, and as an excluded minority group in a multicultural environment. The identity research based on writings will allow me to describe (reconstruct and reflect on) the original hybridity of the local community and develop research that is meaningful to understand the Balkan area. The project is therefore a pioneering venture into studying minority groups in multicultural areas in Europe.