

## **BOSNIA: First Synagogue Since 1945 to be Built**

**by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 9 May 2001**

The foundation stone for the new synagogue in Bosnia's southern city of Mostar in the Muslim-Croat Federation was laid on 24 April. The synagogue, which will form part of a future Jewish Cultural Centre, is the first to be built in any of the former Yugoslav republics since 1945. Building work will last until the end of 2002 and after that, Mostar will become the third city in the world (after Sarajevo and Jerusalem) to have Orthodox and Catholic churches, a mosque and a synagogue within a range of 100 metres.

'This is the first such object not only in the states of former Yugoslavia but in the whole Balkans since 1945,' Jakob Finci, president of the Association of Jewish Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, told the Belgrade-based radio B-92 on 5 May. 'The ground and first floors will be for cultural purposes, including a reading room and museum, while in the basement we will have a mikva [ritual] bath and a prayer room.'

Zoran Mandlbaum, president of Mostar's Jewish community, viewed the inaugural ceremony as a hopeful sign. 'We were delighted to be able to host the representatives of the Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim confessions, seven ambassadors, and two members of the Bosnia and Herzegovina presidency at our opening session, which testifies to our good relations and desire to live in peace again,' he told Keston on 7 May by telephone from Mostar.

The two members of Bosnia's collective presidency who attended were Jozo Krizanovic, the Croat member, and Beriz Belkic, the Muslim member. This was their first joint trip out of the Bosnian capital Sarajevo. The Serbian presidency member did not attend.

'The synagogue was given to city officials back in 1952 to become a puppet theatre,' Mandlbaum added. 'In 1992 the synagogue building that was returned to us was damaged when the neighbouring Orthodox Cathedral was blown up by explosives. We then again decided to give the building away to the city.' City officials promised to build a new synagogue for the community in 1995. 'They recently received a 15 million US dollar credit from the World Bank for the rebuilding of the Old Bridge, the Orthodox Cathedral, our synagogue and for the Croatian Cultural Society Naprijed.'

The Jewish community in Bosnia and Herzegovina has six local communities with 985 members, but is without a single rabbi. The Mostar community has only 45 members.

The inauguration ceremony of the Mostar synagogue took place less than two weeks before similar ceremonies to lay foundation stones for the rebuilding of historic mosques in the southern town of Trebinje and the northern town of Banja Luka were marred by violence from mobs determined to prevent the mosques' reconstruction (see KNS 8 May 2001). The violence was condemned by the Muslim community, the Bosnian Serb government and the international community. The Trebinje ceremony was attended by

Muslim presidency member Belkic, but no members of the presidency attended the Banja Luka ceremony. (END)