

Emil Kjerte

B.A., History, University of Copenhagen, 2011

M.A., Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Uppsala University, 2015

Hanne and Howard Kulin Fellow Emil Kjerte researches Jasenovac, the largest concentration camp in the fascist Independent State of Croatia for his dissertation, *Ustaša Killing Specialists*. The only regime that organized and ran concentration camps independent of the Nazis, the Ustaša, implemented destructive policies against Jews, Roma, and Serbs. Yet, compared to the rich historiography on Nazi perpetrators, they remain much less explored. Kjerte researches the lifepaths and prior careers of the Jasenovac personnel, their war-time activities, and postwar trajectories. He considers the group dynamics and sense of community that existed among the guards as well as their conflicts. Inspired by micro-sociological approaches, Kjerte also examines the dynamics of perpetrator-prisoner interactions and analyzes the situations that tended to generate or amplify physical violence. While violence was integral to their activities, his research considers whether some guards acted less cruel when not observed by peers and superiors.

During winter 2021, Kjerte located documents at the Croatian State Archive in Zagreb that shed light on the behavior of the Jasenovac perpetrators. The testimonies of survivors who worked in the camp's administration detail how officers often flouted directives and regulations issued by the central police authorities in Zagreb. An unexpected finding was that orders for the release of specific prisoners commonly resulted in their execution, which reveals the wide autonomy of the Jasenovac camp leadership vis-à-vis the police apparatus in the Independent State of Croatia.

In the postwar period, Yugoslav authorities tracked down and prosecuted numerous former Jasenovac guards. A grant from the Holocaust Educational Foundation funded Kjerete's research in the towns of Karlovac, Osijek, and Slavonski Brod where he culled cases from the criminal investigations and legal proceedings. The Jasenovac perpetrators are often portrayed as depraved sadists or fanatical ideological zealots, yet some investigation and trial records suggest more complex characteristics. For instance, a former guard who did not hesitate to shoot escaping prisoners, protested when ordered to participate in a mass killing. Kjerete also discovered that Bruno Divić, an infamous Jasenovac officer, had a Serb fiancée who had converted from Orthodoxy to Catholicism. Despite the assurances of the Ustaša regime, conversion rarely offered protection against persecution, and Divić's fiancée was arrested and incarcerated in Jasenovac in September 1944 together with the other Serb citizens of Novska. Although Divić managed to secure her release, she was later captured and murdered.

Besides his dissertation research, Kjerete coauthored a report about the 24th Workshop on the History and Memory of National Socialist Camps and Killing Sites in Salzburg. He continues research and writing during academic year 2021-22 with a Fellowship from the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah.