

The Fashion World of the Kalef Family

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Abstract

In 2019, the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade received as a gift 33 color fashion plates, published in the German fashion magazine *Die Modenwelt* during the 1890s. The plates were given by the descendants of the Kalef family, one of many Sephardi families from Belgrade who were engaged in the textile and fashion trade and crafts. Preserved photographs of the family members, dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are mostly kept in the National Library of Serbia.

At the exhibition *The Fashion World of the Kalef Family*, held in the Museum in June 2022, the bestowed fashion plates were shown together with the family photographs, providing an insight into fashion's important role in the visualization of public and private identity through the use of clothes, as well as into the life of the Belgrade Sephardic community. Among other things, the photographs showed how the clothes were used in everyday and particular family rituals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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Introduction

The story about the fashion world of the Kalef family was told in the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade at the exhibition of the corresponding name held from June 11 to July 2, 2022 (Maskareli 2022; Museum of Applied Art 2022) (**Fig. 1**).¹

The Kalef family is an old Belgrade Sephardic trading family whose members, like many other members of the Jewish community in Belgrade and Serbia, were involved in fashion and textile crafts and trade. In the first decades of the 20th century, the family had three shops in Belgrade: a men's and children's ready-to-wear store *Kod prvog pariskog šika* (At the First Parisian Chic) in Kolarčeva Street, founded in 1903; a draper's shop in Vasina Street; and a fabric store in Višnjićeva Street.²

¹ The article presents a concise and adapted version of the text for the catalogue of the exhibition *The Fashion World of the Kalef Family*, focusing on the use of clothes in family rituals and self-presentation.

² The data on the Kalef family mentioned in the text was obtained from the family's descendants or from the recorded testimonies of Matilda-Lidija Čerge on *Centropa* (Centropa 2005), the Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names of the Yad Vashem Remembrance Center (Yad Vashem 2021) and the Kalef family tree on the portal *Geni*, compiled by Emil Eskenazy Lewinger (Geni 2021).



Fig. 1: View of the exhibition *The Fashion World of the Kalef Family*, June 2022. Photo: Jovana Jarebica / Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

The key figure in the Kalef fashion story is Matilda Kalef (1879–1942), a lady’s seamstress whose salon was located at the back of the Kalef family fabric store in Višnjićeva Street. Matilda was one of six children born to Moric-Moše Kalef (1845–1909) and Rahela née Eškenazi. She had brothers Menahem-Maks (1870–1920), Avram (1884–1941) and Jacob (1882–1941), and sisters Lenka (1876–1941) and Sara (1895–1915). Matilda was married to a distant cousin, the merchant Nisim Kalef, and she became a widow in her early thirties. In addition to sewing clothes, she rented apartments and helped her brother Jakov run the family businesses. Matilda and Nisim had three sons, Avram (1902–1942), Moše (1904–1914) and Isak (1907–?).

As a seamstress, Matilda also followed the fashion press. In 2019, the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade received a gift from Matilda’s descendants consisting of 33 fashion plates from the famous German fashion magazine *Die Modenwelt* (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). These plates, published between 1892 and 1898, were very important for the Museum as the first fashion plates acquired for the collection during 70 years of work. For that reason, the Museum wanted to exhibit the plates as soon as possible, avoiding the making of an exhibition that will only tell a story about the Western fashion of the last decade of the 19th century. In the exhibition *The Fashion World of the Kalef Family* the plates were used to map the clothing styles and types that the members of the family used in their self-presentation for everyday and special family rituals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was possible to do this thanks to the preserved Kalef family photos dating from the early 20th century, which are kept in the National Library of Serbia and in private ownership.

Wedding fashion

When we look at the Kalef wedding photos, one of Matilda and Nisim Kalef (**Fig. 2**) and another of her brother, Jakov Kalef and Lenka Almozlino, we see that they chose the clothes following the current fashion trends as shown in *Die Modenwelt*. In the photos, both brides wear modern white wedding dresses while both grooms wear elegant men's suits.



Fig. 2: Studio *Kenig*, Wedding Photography of Matilda and Nisim Kalef, Belgrade, around 1900. [National Library of Serbia, call no. 6624-2 / CC BY-NC 4.0](#)

Clothes that follow the fashion trends are the most common choice of the Kalefs, as well as of the other members of the Serbian bourgeoisie at that time, but when we look at other Kalef photographs we can find some interesting examples related to the use of different types of costume on different occasions.

Purim costume

At the beginning of each calendar year, *Die Modenwelt* published fashion plates showing picturesque fancy-dress costumes (**Fig. 3**). On the other side, a common example of costuming in the Jewish tradition is costuming during the celebration of Purim. In the preserved photo of Matilda's husband, Nisim Kalef celebrating Purim with friends, the costume was not worn, but the carnival atmosphere stems from the informal stances of the depicted people, some of whom are holding various decorative figures. For example, Nisim Kalef, first from the left in the front row, is holding a figure of Napoleon (**Fig. 4**).



Fig. 3. Above: Fashion plate from *Die Modenwelt* magazine, Berlin, 1 January 1895. Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, accession no. 25414/10.



Fig. 4: Nisim Kalef at the celebration of Purim, early 20th century. [National Library of Serbia, call no. 6624-23 / CC BY-NC 4.0.](#)

Generational shift, urban dress and national costume

Following the spirit of the times, some plates from *Die Modenwelt* contain drawings of clothes marked for “elderly ladies” (Fig. 5). On the other hand, among the photographs of the Kalef family, only one shows an elderly member. It is a photograph of Rahela Kalef, mother of Matilda and Jakov Kalef, dated around the beginning of the 20th century (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. Above: Fashion plate from *Die Modenwelt* magazine, Berlin, 15 November 1896. Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade, accession no. 25414/18. Fig. 6. Below: Sima Alkalaj, Rahela Kalef, Belgrade, early 20th century. Private owner.



In the photo, Rahela is wearing a 19th-century urban dress in which, in addition to clothing features inherited from the Ottoman fashion system, European influences are also visible. The most important feature in Rahela Kalef’s self-presentation is a traditional Sephardic cap called a *tokádo*. It is a solid circular-shaped cap, not very high, and often embellished with a ducat string called a *frentéra*. It was mostly made of brocade, with long black tassels on the back of the head that emulated women’s hair, which was hidden under the cap (Juhász 1990b, 162–163; Radovanović 2013, 188).

Rahela also wears a type of fur coat characteristic of the 19th-century urban dress that had features of European fashion. The coat was open in the front, with wide sleeves, the length being below the hips,

adjusted in the lower part to the skirt line, and with fur along the entire length of the front part and around the neckline. This type of fur coat was most often made of satin and velvet as well as cloth, while the inside was lined with fur or a quilted cotton lining (Stojanović 1980, 30, 68–69; Juhasz 1990b, 166; Radovanović 2013, 188). An identical mode of self-presentation can be found in numerous funerary photographs of Jewish women of Rahela's age at the Jewish Cemetery in Belgrade (Jewish Cemetery Belgrade 2022).

Around the same time, at the beginning of the 20th century, Lenka Koen, daughter of Rahela and sister of Matilda and Jakov, was also photographed in an urban dress (**Fig. 7**). Unlike her mother, Lenka wears a clothing style that was widespread among the Serbian bourgeoisie and poses in a national costume, which was created by selecting characteristic garments from the dress inventory of the urban population living in formerly Ottoman cities. The new bourgeois elite perceived the constructed costume as authentically national dress and as a sign of visual identity, so it was often used in family portraits, both painted and photographed (Prošić-Dvornić 1981, 12,16; Makuljević 2006, 43; Maskareli 2019, 26–27).

Lenka Koen wears a late variant of the national costume where elements taken from both the Ottoman and the European fashion systems are distinguishable. *Libade*, a short, open jacket, with the sleeves flaring out at the bottom, and *tepeluk*, a shallow red cap embroidered with pearls arranged in cones, come from the Ottoman fashion system while the dresses and various accessories belong to the European fashion system.

While the visual appearances of the outfits worn by Rahela Kalef and the members of her generation, who remembered the time before emancipation, unequivocally emphasized their Jewish identity, Lenka Koen and Lenka Kalef are wearing the national costume which at the beginning of the 20th century can be seen being worn by various known and unknown Serbian bourgeois women.

Fig. 7. Lenka Koen in a national costume, Belgrade, ca. 1900. [National Library of Serbia](#), call no. 6624-6 / [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).



Ethnic dress

In addition to the urban dress that had taken over the role of the national costume, the Serbian bourgeoisie was also keen on wearing the folk costume and often wore it at popular costume balls (Prošić-Dvornić 2006, 203–207; Maskareli 2019, 39–40). Numerous photographs of citizens posing in folk costumes have been preserved, including two photographs of the Kalef family taken at the beginning of the 20th century: one shows Matilda

Kalef with her husband Nisim and the other Matilda's brother, Jakov with their sister Sara and another unidentified woman (**Fig. 8**).³



Fig. 8. Samuilo-Sima Alkalaj, Jakov and Sara Kalef in folk costume (with a relative or friend), early 20th century. [National Library of Serbia, call no. 6624-7 / CC BY-NC 4.0.](#)

If the preserved photographs of the Kalef family members in folk costumes were compared, it could be seen that both were taken at the same photographic studio of Samuilo-Sima Alkalaj in Belgrade, in an identical interior. Also, Nisim and Jakov Kalef wear exactly the same set of men's folk costumes, while Matilda Kalef and an unknown woman photographed with Jakov and Sara Kalef wear the same set of women's folk costumes.

It can be assumed that the Kalef family members were photographed in folk costumes following the standard way of self-presentation that was common for the bourgeois class. In the 19th century, the costume in Serbia was often used as an important component of the national image of the ruler. It also served as a basic visual factor in the presentations of ordinary people who appeared on picture postcards in the late 19th and early 20th century (Perać 2009, 340–341, 373). Adapted variation of ethnic dress is sometimes also shown on the plates from *Die Modenwelt* in the function of a fancy-dress costume (**Fig. 3**).

³ A fragment from this photograph was also used as a funerary photograph of the early deceased Sara Kalef (1895–1915), who was buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Belgrade.

Bindalli Dress

Two photographs in which the sisters Matilda Kalef and Lenka Koen posed separately in a *bindalli* dress are particularly interesting (Labudović 2000, 28; Maskareli 2019, 70–71) (Fig. 9). Just as in the case of the photos of the members of the Kalef family taken in folk costume, we can see that both photographs were also taken in the studio of Samuilo-Sima Alkalaj, in the identical artificial environment, with both sisters wearing the same *bindalli* dress. This time, unlike the photographs of them in a Serbian national costume and a folk costume, Matilda Kalef and Lenka Koen's choice of clothes shows their affiliation with the Jewish community.



Fig. 9. Samuilo – Sima Alkalaj, Matilda Kalef in a *bindalli* dress, early 20th century. [National Library of Serbia, call no. 6624-1 / CC BY-NC 4.0.](#)

Bindalli (*bindallı*) in Turkish means “a thousand branches” and the name comes from the rich adornment in the form of flower branches, which was applied onto these dresses by using embroidery. As a typical product of late Ottoman fashion, the *bindalli* dress became a distinguishable part of the visual identity of the Ottoman Jews. Among the Jewish population, as well as among other ethnic and confessional groups in the Ottoman Empire, these dresses were most often worn during various wedding ceremonies and were also part of the bride's dowry (Juhász 1990c, 211–212; Labudović 2000, 8; Görünür 2010, 24, 47, 51–52; Maskareli 2019, 68–70).

During the Ottoman Empire, the *bindalli* dress played a singular role in the visual culture of the Jews, as it was donated to the synagogues and refashioned into synagogue textiles. In Synagogues, as well as in the museums and collections of Jewish art and traditions around the world, examples of synagogue textiles were made from these dresses and have been preserved (Juhász 1990a, 80–81; *idem* 1990c, 212; *idem* 2012, 306–307, 312–313; Maskareli 2019, 72–73). *Bindalli* dresses were donated to synagogues and changed over into synagogue textiles mainly in the period between the two World Wars, at the time when they went out of fashion and lost their primary function. During that time, they also appeared in a new role, that of colorful costumes for the celebration of Purim (Dorn Sezgin 2005, 227).

Conclusion

At the exhibition *The Fashion World of the Kalef Family*, held in the Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade in June 2022, the 33 fashion plates from the German fashion magazine *Die*

Modenwelt, dating from the 1890s and donated to the museum by the descendants of the family, were shown. Besides providing the visitors with information on the fashion trends of the time, these plates offer a glimpse into the use of clothes in everyday and special family rituals, preserved by the family photographs from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and mostly kept at the National Library of Serbia.

At the beginning of the Second World War, seeing the coming evil, Matilda Kalef, a seamstress and first owner of the fashion plates from *Die Modenwelt*, hid different items from her household under the roof construction of the family house. Years after, when the survivors and their descendants entered the old family home, they found under the roof, among other things, the fashion plates and the family photographs that were later used to create the exhibition *The Fashion World of the Kalef Family*. In the Holocaust in Belgrade, more than 20 members of the family, including Matilda, were killed. Matilda's granddaughters, Matilda-Lidija and a famous Serbian mezzo-soprano Rahela-Breda, both today in their nineties, are the rare survivors (**Fig. 10**).

The Fashion World of the Kalef Family was the first exhibition held in the Museum of Applied Art that was dedicated exclusively to the visual culture of the Jewish community and that showed the community's contribution to the development of modern Belgrade. In the anniversary year marking 30 years since the renewal of diplomatic relations between Serbia and Israel, the exhibition was opened on June 10, 2022 by H. E. Yahel Vilan, the Israeli Ambassador in Serbia.



Fig. 10: Breda Kalef and H. E. Yahel Vilan, Israeli Ambassador in Serbia at the opening of the exhibition *The Fashion World of the Kalef Family*, 10 June 2022. Photo: Jovana Jarebica / Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade.

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