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CHANGES IN THE ATTITUDES OF THE SLOVAK POPULATION REGARDING THE SO-CALLED SOLUTION TO THE “JEWISH QUESTION” (1938 — 1945)

By Ivan Kamenec

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The course of the Holocaust in Slovakia has been comprehensively and reliably reconstructed in both the domestic and foreign historiography. We know about the mechanisms of anti-Semitic policy and their Slovak particularities, as well as of the tragic fate of the 89,000 Slovak Jews of whom about 70,000—approximately two thirds of all the Jews living in the Slovak State in 1939—perished in the Final Solution.

However, the so-called Final Solution to the Jewish Question was not only a tragedy for the victims, but also a tragedy for European culture and civilization. More specifically, it was a tragedy for the prevailing non-Jewish population, who played both a passive and active role in this process. This fact has traumatized Slovak society and, to a certain extent, also Slovak historiography over the last 50 years, creating the ideal conditions for the development of various myths and anti-myths. The mythologization of this problem, perhaps not unique to Slovakia, is based on the absence of critical self-reflection on our own history. In addition, previous historical and sociological research has provided a very limited amount of source material and authentic arguments concerning the attitudes of the population to the Holocaust, its individual stages and implementation. The interpretation of these attitudes is generally oppositional—either idealizing or demonizing the anti-Semitic policies of the then government.

Both the rational and emotional relationship to the persecuted Jewish citizens of Slovakia (also visible in other countries) is directly related to the degree, intensity and roots of anti-Semitism over previous historical periods. The Jewish issue, and therefore the issue of anti-Semitism as such, took on its modern form in Slovak society and Slovak policy during the last third of the nineteenth century following the Compromise (*Ausgleich*) of 1867. It appeared in ideology, propaganda, and practical policy on three levels: traditionally, it was clerical, anti-Judaic, and anti-Semitic. There was also an economic initiating factor—anti-Semitism assigned the greatest blame to the Jews for the existing and real social problems of the Slovak population, which were mass emigration, alcoholism, poor educational level, and other ills. Anti-Jewish propaganda had a very strong impact on national policy that was and remained especially sensitive for Slovak society. Slovak Jews were specifically accused of not only an unwillingness to join the efforts on behalf of Slovak national emancipation, but of a single-minded denationalizing anti-Slovak policy. Such a colored view of Slovak-Jewish relationships (already partially corrected by historiography and ethnology) had also penetrated Slovak literature, undoubtedly influencing some groups in society. In this way a stereotype of the “negative Jew” was established, which several powerful Slovak political parties used to radicalize their social and national programs.

The Hlinka’s National Slovak Party misused this tendency to the greatest extent when it became the ruling party in Slovakia immediately following the Munich Pact and then over the existence of the satellite Slovak State. Inspired and influenced by Nazi Germany, but leveraging its own incentives and goals, this party used the Jewish issue to form an essential and stable part of its official domestic policy, and also partially its foreign policy. By 1939, the Jews had been declared not only as enemies of the new state but also as enemies of the Slovak nation. The Jewish population was presented in such terms in official documents (“... it is necessary to consider the Jews not only as a foreign element but also as a constant enemy of the Slovak nation ...”¹), as well as in massive, unbelievably vulgar and primitive propaganda (“Is the Jew a human being like us? We cannot be taken in by the ridiculous phrase that a Jew is also a human being. Jews are agents of the Devil. When the Devil wanted to be like humans, he created the Jews. So the Jew is not God’s creature but the Devil’s and, therefore, no Jew is a human being, he only looks like one.

¹ Slovak National Archive (*Slovenský národný archív - SNA*), Ministry of the Interior (*Ministerstvo vnútra - MV*) 23619/1939, D/IV/1.

Anybody who supports or protects Jews shall be punished by God.”)² However, at the same time, these slogans indicate that there was resistance among the majority of the non-Jewish population from the beginning of the persecution of the Jews, or at least non-agreement. Such people were constantly intimidated, and the propaganda called them “white Jews.” Any assistance or demonstration of solidarity towards those who were persecuted was considered a crime and treated as an enemy act against the new state and nation. In this way, a constant feeling of threat and anxiety was evoked, undoubtedly removing or at least neutralizing the potential lack of agreement among the population on the anti-Semitic policy of the then government.

All the political, social, and economic problems that the established totalitarian regime had to face (the number of which was not inconsiderable) were blamed from the beginning on domestic and world Jewry. The Jews were blamed for the territorial losses of Slovakia, the ongoing war and its impact, domestic resistance activities, anti-Fascist resistance, supply problems, and similar issues: “We have always had reasons to view the Jews with reserve and scorn, but today we can legally blame them for the lack of success and afflictions affecting our nation.”³ It is not known in what ways this largely primitive propaganda really influenced the population; however, at the very least it established a favorable basis for the anti-Semitic policy of the government, justifying anti-Jewish persecution. With the first mass appearance of such persecution dates from November 1938, prior to the establishment of the Slovak State and following the Vienna Award, physical attacks on local Jews or their homes and shops occurred, and more than 7,000 Jews were forced to leave Slovak territory and flee to territory that had been surrendered to Hungary. Those expelled were accused of disloyalty and sympathy for Hungary, which had allegedly led to the loss of southern parts of Slovakia. This was an absurd statement that indirectly claimed that the Vienna arbiters—Ribbentrop and Ciano—had merely carried out the will of Slovak Jews.

Though national motives did play a specific role in the perception of Slovak society on the so-called solution of the Jewish issue, these were not primary. People’s attitudes toward the Holocaust were primarily formed and changed in the economic, social, and religious spheres. The regime was able to act effectively with this “Jewish card,” misusing it in a very dangerous way: “... We will sort out all those Jews who possess gold, jewelry, and wealth. We will take from all

² SNA, MV 726/1939, D/IV.

³ *Slovák*, 23.September 1940 (*Denník Slovák bol tlačovým orgánom samovládnucej Hlinkovej slovenskej ľudovej strany*).

of those who have been stealing from us here. We do not recognize Jewish assets, only Slovak national capital."⁴ At this time, Jewish citizens generally held relatively strong economic positions in public life, and their property became not only an inviting goal for the ruling circles, but also an instrument for establishing a new following for the regime from the population: "... First of all, it is necessary to feed our people with Jewish assets, and only then to ask particular duties of them."⁵

The Aryanization or liquidation of Jewish businesses, houses, and land promised the easy removal of Jewish competition and an illusion of quick enrichment. Propaganda presented this process as assistance for socially weaker groups in the society and the individual. The chief of the Central Economic Authority, who was managing the Aryanization process, promised the following: "... The Slovak working community will know about it when hundreds of millions of assets and tens of millions of earning possibilities are systematically transferred to Slovak hands without failure. Traders, craftsmen, and businessmen have been excluded from tremendous and sophisticated competition, and their business and living conditions are to be improved."⁶ It should be stated that this demagoguery was successful in the beginning, and it echoed among the population in the illusion of an automatic work-free increase in their own living standard. Such false ideas were also strengthened by Jozef Tiso, President of the Republic, who argued that: "... Such favorable conditions for enforcement will not be here for a long time here as they have been here today ... Nothing, unjust is occurring now. I will not let my nation die for the Jewish community."⁷ The Aryanization process, which knowingly and systematically violated the basic traditional standards of private ownership, was considered in the beginning by the majority of Slovak society as a justified effort to remedy social injustices and inequalities. (It should be noted that several years later the so-called socialization process implemented by the totalitarian Communist regime was linked to similar demagogic pledges—but this time on behalf of "working people." The legal awareness and morals of Slovak society had already been significantly devastated.)

In fact, the Aryanization process aimed at 13,000 businesses and shops, 100,000 hectares of agricultural land, and hundreds of homes, which devolved into wild enrichment and simple robbery, impacting negatively not only on the original Jewish owners but also on the state economy, particularly banking institutions. In addition, non-Jewish people paid for it, especially

⁴ *Slovák*, 7. Február 1939.

⁵ SNA, f. *Národný súd* (NS), Karol Danihel, *Tn'ud.28/45, hlásenia Hlinkovej gardy* (HG).

⁶ SNA, Central Economic Office - *Ústredný hospodársky úrad* - ÚHÚ), 3550, presidential files.

⁷ *Slovák*, 10. August 1940; *Slovák*, 30 October 1941.

the employees of former Jewish entities. The regime's favorites profited from the Aryanization process first of all, perceiving Jewish assets as a reward for their political loyalty toward the ruling political party. They were either unable or unwilling to manage the acquired assets properly using standard economic principles. Usually, they considered them merely as a source of collateral for their income. During the spring of 1941, a representative of the state stated with disappointment and concern that:

... Unsuitable individuals have Aryanized who are seeking royalties without any frugality, but they have done nothing to improve the business and done nothing for the goal of Aryanization. The custodians of these businesses are often habitual sentenced criminals, who are absolutely incompetent at Aryanization, either as a result of their character or their knowledge. Today, People who have been convicted of tax fraud and who have no experience running a business are taking over assets that are worth millions. The solution to the "Jewish Question" has been totally blurred by rigid economic interests.⁸

Over the period from 1942 to 1943, disillusion among the population based on the collapse of the Aryanization process grew. Numerous corruption and favoritism scandals also tainted the top political elite of the state, who were already in a deep moral and political crisis. At a session of the National Council it was stated that: "... the national idealism that was present at the beginning of the solution to the "Jewish Question" no longer exists. There have been signals in our towns that the 'Jewish Question' only concerns Aryanizers and their interests."⁹ Reports from authorities in individual regions also noted that: "... the Jewish issue is losing its economic and political importance among the people. The people survived the disillusion and elements of mistrust are penetrating it. Rural people waited in vain for the Jews' land. They were able to see what happened. They will not be satisfied because they did not get and they will not receive anything."¹⁰ Even official state propaganda, responding to the disappointment of the population, stated resignedly:

... Slovak life has never been so corrupt and material as it is today. We would be fooling ourselves if we thought that social inequities are balanced today and becoming more balanced than they were before. Professionally incompetent and morally weak individuals have taken over Jewish assets, and they are using problems—cashing in on all existing supply difficulties, trespassing on their co-citizens in an un-Christian way which even the worst bloodsucker would not do.¹¹

The Aryanization of moveable and personal property of Jews also resulted in a similar

⁸*Slovák*, 14. March 1941.

⁹ SNA, NS, Otomar Kubala, *Tn'ud*. 13/46.

¹⁰ SNA, NS, Peter Starinský, *Tn'ud*. 49/45, situational report from the Central Security Office.

¹¹ *Gardista* (newspaper of the Hlinka Guard), 12. July 1942,

problem when individual items were gradually confiscated in 1939 (e.g., motor vehicles, cameras, optical equipment, valuables, radios, hunting weapons, sporting gear, *objets d'art*, furs, and other items). The majority of these objects were transferred to state property, the armed forces, the ruling party and its organizations such as *Hlinkova Garda* (Hlinka Guard) or *Hlinkova Mládež* (Hlinka Youth). However, representatives of the administration and the authorities who directly implemented the persecution measures against Jewish citizens stole a large proportion of the confiscated assets. This mainly happened over the period of the forced transfer of Slovak Jews to extermination camps in 1942. The Jews' remaining property was confiscated during the horrific atmosphere of the deportations. Auctions were then conducted for the selling of this property from those who had been deported from Slovakia, such as clothing, furniture, carpets, curtains, other household items, sewing machines, crockery and dinnerware, and similar items. While there were some fraud and favoritism during these auctions, the general public, compromised and corrupted by the regime through anti-Jewish policy, also received something from these auctions. The regime held them jointly responsible for the crime, blackmailing them with the threat that if the Jews returned they would seek revenge on the new owners of their former property. Admittedly, such blackmail significantly influenced the attitude of a part of Slovak society towards the Holocaust in Slovakia, which was also negatively demonstrated following the end of WWII. The attitude of the majority of the population towards the Holocaust from the view of morality and religion remained very complex and has only been clarified in a limited way. The situation in Slovakia was very specific—95% of the Slovak population identified as Christians with an absolute majority belonging to the Catholic Church. The state aligned itself towards Christianity, particularly Catholic ideology. Many priests held senior posts in Hlinka's ruling party and other state bodies. In addition, the post of prime minister and president was in the hands of Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest. These facts certainly influenced the attitude of the strongly religious population in terms of the solution to the "Jewish Question." However, its drastic course, and mainly the tragic consequences for the victims, resulted de facto in internal conflicts among Catholic believers, casting increasing doubts regarding the frequently stated Christian character of the state and the regime. The daily experience of the escalating persecution of the Jews was in contradiction with the claims of Catholic priests engaged in politics, who argued to believers that this process was in accordance with Christianity. The Catholic priest holding the highest position in the state, the president and leader Jozef Tiso, even made efforts to convince the population of the course of the

brutal deportations as “God’s instruction” and “a Christian act through which the nation wants to rid itself of its eternal enemy.”¹²

After 1939, representatives of the Catholic Church commented and expressed their opinions about the individual stages and measures of the “solution” to the Jewish question. From the beginning, their attitudes also reflected an anti-Judaic thesis: e.g., “the Jewish nation is in original sin because it failed to confirm the Messiah, prepared his terrible death on the crucifix, and is also antagonistic to Christianity today.”¹³ However, the critical tone of those representatives of the Catholic Church arose gradually, particularly when the racial principle was enacted in anti-Semitic legislation. This principle also concerned the growing number of Jews who had converted to Christianity. These converts were also impacted by discriminatory measures such as their exclusion from schools, a ban on freedom of movement and choice residence, the ban on public gathering, traveling, compulsory marking, and further limitations of civil and human rights—if they were not included in a list of exceptions, which finally resulted in their violent deportations. Although Christian churches respected the right of the state to solve the Jewish issue, they repudiated state interference in religious issues concerning the baptism of Jews. Propaganda reproached them for “an over-willingness that has evidently been recently directed towards Jews, particularly in church circles, even though these originations should make efforts to assist in the removal of Jews from Slovakia.”¹⁴ After 1943, the criticism of the church to the “solution” of the Jewish issue even intensified. This was not only limited to the issue of converts. However, this change in attitude came too late and, obviously, after strong interventions by the Vatican vis-a-vis the Slovak government and the Slovak President, Jozef Tiso. The tragedy of the Slovak Jews reached its pinnacle. The Slovak State, as the only German satellite not directly occupied by the Nazis, carried out deportations of its own Jewish citizens to extermination camps using its own powers and administrative means.

This act probably also caused a visible shift in the attitude of the majority of the population towards the persecutions of the Jews, which occurred daily in its drastic form in the public eye. Citizens who realized much earlier than the political elite, began to be aware that the deportations were not only contrary to domestic and international law but were also an evident crime against

¹² SNA, NS, Jozef Tiso, *Tnľud.* 6/46, Report from the Sloval Press Agency.

¹³ Catholic News (*Katolícke noviny*), 26. April 1942.

¹⁴ *Gardista*, 25. March 1942.

humanity and Christian morality. Until then, anti-Semitic sentiment and passivity to the Holocaust were partially alleviated by demonstrations of individual resistance, assistance, and mainly compassion for the persecuted. This also happened after the spread of the horrific, often barely believable news about the extermination camps. Official propaganda was aimed at negating the natural demonstrations of humanity, solidarity, and compassion, cynically challenging the growing concerns over the real destiny of the deported Jews: "... When the Jews were initially deported from here, there was a lot of noise and sympathy here. There are also now wild stories of the treatment of the Jews in their new native country in the fantasy of many people."¹⁵ The then German ambassador in Bratislava noticed a change in the attitudes of the population when he stated: "... the deportations of the Jews is very unpopular among the Slovak people and it has hit a low point."¹⁶ However, protection of the persecuted Jews usually took place only on an individual basis and failed to grow into an organized mass action. An exception to this was aiding the escape of Jewish refugees to Hungary, where no deportations had occurred by 1942. In addition, the formation of illegal anti-Fascist resistance groups in the Slovak mountains provided a sanctuary for endangered individuals.

It should be noted that the local anti-Fascist resistance did not deal with the Jewish issue individually until the autumn of 1944, when the Slovak National Uprising began. Even many participants in the Uprising were not immune to anti-Semitic prejudices.

The significant change in the attitudes to the Jews by the majority of the population occurred in the autumn of 1944, following the start of the Slovak National Uprising. On one hand, the Slovak Jew became an equal citizen again after a period of six years, even if this was only on the territory captured by the partisans. This was gradually reduced when the new political authorities abolished all anti-Semitic legal standards. On the other hand, the German occupation troops renewed deportations to extermination camps (more than 13,000 victims), and they killed an additional 1,200 Jews on Slovak soil. In spite of this, approximately 10,000 Jews were rescued in Slovakia at that time. If it is possible to speak about a period of mass assistance by the Slovak population towards persecuted Jews during the Holocaust, then it is just during this period (from the autumn of 1944 to the spring of 1945), when endangered individuals were hidden in the attics

¹⁵ Our Struggle (*Náš boj*) (Hlinka Garda magazine), 1. October 1942.

¹⁶ Eduard Nižňanský, (editor): *Holokaust na Slovensku. Dokumenty 4. Dokumenty nemeckej proveniencie*, (Bratislava, 2003, dokument číslo 59), pp. 150-151.

and cellars of rural houses, lived on false papers in the towns, and found shelter in mountain bunkers, secluded houses, and with partisans. Some Jews survived in rectories, hidden behind the walls of convents and church orphanages whose sanctuary was at least partially respected by the occupying troops. In addition, it should be noted that the provision of assistance to save the life of a Jew resulted in direct risks to the rescuer and his or her family. It made no difference whether this action was for financial or other material reasons, or exclusively for reasons of humanity or indemnity.

The relationship of the Slovak population to the Holocaust evolved over several periods and for several reasons. It was influenced not only by domestic factors but also by foreign military and political events. However, an adequate historic reconstruction awaits serious scientific research and a relevant interpretation.