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# THE HOLOCAUST IN SLOVAKIA: THE DEPORTATIONS OF 1942 THROUGH THE PRISM OF ORAL HISTORY

By Peter Salner

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## Abstract

On October 28, 1918, after the end of the Great War, Slovakia became part of the Czechoslovak Republic. Two decades later, on October 6, 1938, the country's political leadership declared autonomy, and within a few months, on March 14, 1939, the Slovak National Assembly voted for the establishment of an independent state. Already during the period of autonomy, the government adopted anti-Jewish legislation (this trend would continue throughout the brief lifespan of the new state) aimed at gradually shutting Jews out of social and economic life. This state-sponsored persecution of the Jews culminated in mass deportations which began in 1942. In Central Europe, Holocaust remembrance typically involves events that took place on the territory of the given state. In Slovakia, these include the anniversary of the first transport (March 25, 1942) and especially September 9, 1942, when the Slovak National Assembly issued Decree 198/1941 on the Legal Status of the Jews. On September 13, 2000, the National Council of the Slovak Republic established September 9 as Memorial Day for Victims of the Holocaust and Racial Violence. To understand the criminal nature of the wartime Slovak regime, it is important to examine Constitutional Act 68/1942 on the Resettlement of the Jews, passed by the national assembly on May 15, 1942, by which time nearly 30,000 Jews had already been deported to concentration camps. The assembly thus retroactively legitimated deportations which in most cases ended in the death of the Jewish victims. This article centers on survivors' testimonies about the impact of Act 68/1942 on them and their families. The selected recollections illustrate the process of the deportations as well as ways of avoiding them.

**Keywords:** War-time Slovak Republic; Holocaust; oral history; Law on the Resettlement of the Jews; deportations.

<sup>1</sup>This paper emerged as part of the VEGA project 2/0047/21/10, People in Non-Democratic Regimes 1938–1989 in the Memory of the Slovak Majority and the Jewish Community: An Ethnological Perspective.

On October 28, 1918, following the breakup of the Habsburg Empire, Slovakia became part of the Czechoslovak Republic. Two decades later, on October 6, 1938, the country's political leadership declared autonomy, and within several months, on March 14, 1939, the Slovak National Assembly, under pressure from Hitler, voted for the establishment of an independent Slovak state. In June 1939, that state was renamed the 'Slovak Republic'—a name it would bear until its dissolution in 1945. Already during the period of autonomy, the government began to adopt anti-Jewish legislation (this trend would continue throughout the brief lifespan of the new state<sup>2</sup>) aimed at gradually shutting Jews out of social and economic life. Particularly salient in this regard were the Aryanization laws adopted in 1940. These effectively pauperized Jewish citizens by transferring their property onto new, ethnically Slovak owners who thus became implicated in the regime's crimes. This state-sponsored persecution of the Jews culminated in mass deportations which began in March 1942.

### **Current Holocaust Remembrance in Slovakia**

There are several dates throughout the year when the Jewish community and the Slovak majority commemorate the tragedy of the Holocaust. Some, like January 27 (International Holocaust Remembrance Day, linked to the liberation of Auschwitz) or *Yom HaShoah*, have general, international relevance. In Central Europe, particular attention is accorded to anniversaries of events that took place on the territory of the given countries. In Slovakia specifically, these include the anniversary of the first transport (March 25, 1942) and especially September 9, when the Slovak National Assembly issued Decree 198/1941 on the Legal Status of the Jews, also known as the Jewish Code. On September 13, 2000, the National Council of the Slovak Republic established September 9 as Memorial Day for Victims of the Holocaust and Racial Violence.<sup>3</sup>

Slovakia recently commemorated the 80th anniversary of these events and their impact on the lives of the citizens, Jewish and otherwise, of the wartime Slovak State. The public, as well as leading political representatives and institutions of the present-day Slovak Republic, treated the anniversary with due solemnity. There were scholarly events and

<sup>2</sup>Already on April 18, 1939, the assembly issued a decree "concerning the delimitation of the term 'Jew' and the regulation of Jews in certain free professions". On April 24, it sanctioned the exclusion of Jews from public service. See Katarína Hradská, "Slovník použitých historických a judaistických termínů" [Glossary of Terms – History and Judaic Studies]. In: Peter Salner *Prežili holokaust [They Survived the Holocaust]*. (Bratislava: Veda, 1997), p. 184.

<sup>3</sup>For more, see Monika Vrzgulová, "Spomínanie na holokaust. Pamätný deň obetí holokaustu a rasového násillia" (9.) [Remembering the Holocaust. Memorial Day for Victims of the Holocaust and Racial Violence] in *Slovenský národopis*, 62, 2014, pp. 382–398.

remembrance ceremonies; members of parliament officially voiced their remorse and apologized, as did Prime Minister Eduard Heger in the name of the government. On March 25, the anniversary of the first transport, President Zuzana Čaputová delivered an address directly from the “scene of the crime.” Speaking at the Poprad train station, she linked the historical tragedy with current events, criticizing the “cynical justification of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine by reference to so-called ‘denazification.’”<sup>4</sup> Also on March 25, the Bratislava Self-Governing Region announced its intention to build monuments in two places in the capital city typically associated with the deportations.<sup>5</sup>

Both of the abovementioned events are certainly deserving of commemoration. However, May 2022 marked the anniversary of another important milestone of the wartime era: on May 15, 1942, the Slovak National Assembly issued Constitutional Act No 68/1942 on the Resettlement of the Jews. In “normal times,” this piece of legislation tends to be on the periphery of public interest. I am nevertheless convinced that it deserves greater attention.

Judging by its title, the Act promised to do what many Jewish citizens of Slovakia actually yearned for: it appeared to offer the opportunity to move away from a country which did not hide its animus toward Jews. The problem was that the legislators’ intentions—and thus the destination of the transport trains—were far from consistent with the hopes of those involuntarily resettled.

### **Constitutional Act 68/1942 on the Resettlement of the Jews**

That the two acts discussed above have drawn such varying degrees of attention may have to do with their differing scope. The 270 articles making up the Jewish Code constitute a monumental legislative effort to strip Jews of their human rights with a level of efficiency quite uncharacteristic of the Slovak milieu. The only right it left for Jews was the right to life, which was subsequently denied to them with the issuance of the Resettlement Act. That Act comprises merely seven articles which can easily fit on a single printed page. Nevertheless, when Slovakia was discussing which day should be standardized as Holocaust Memorial Day, I attempted to convince the relevant decision-makers that May 15 made for an ideal candidate. My reasons for this were fivefold:

1. The Resettlement Act perfectly encapsulates the spinelessness and cynicism of the wartime regime. The Jewish Code may have stripped Jews of most of their entitlements, but

<sup>4</sup> <https://spravy.rtv.s.sk/2022/03/v-poprade-si-pripomenuli-okruhle-vyrocie-od-prveho-transportu-zidov/>. Accessed 26. 3.2022.

<sup>5</sup> <https://spravy.rtv.s.sk/2022/03/v-poprade-si-pripomenuli-okruhle-vyrocie-od-prveho-transportu-zidov/>. Accessed 26.3.2022.

it did at least leave their right to life intact. Constitutional Act 68/1942 effectively constituted a death sentence.

2. The crux of the simple and seemingly dull text is to be found in the three initial articles; the rest are mere technicalities. Article 1 contains a single revealing sentence: “Jews can be resettled from the territory of Slovakia.” The next article lists the exceptions from Article 1. These mostly concern Jews in mixed marriages and “persons who have been or will be granted a presidential exemption according to Article 255 of Decree 198/1941.” Regrettably, the priest-president Jozef Tiso employed this privilege rather sparingly, granting just a little under 800 exemptions.<sup>6</sup> Particularly important are the two short, factual, and cruel sections of Article 3. The first states that “resettled Jews and Jews who have left or will leave the territory of the state will lose their citizenship of the Slovak Republic.” With this, the state relinquished all responsibility for the lives of tens of thousands of its citizens. The justification for the first section can be found in the second: “The property of the persons named in Article 1 will be surrendered to the State. The State is liable to creditors only to the extent of the value of the seized property.” This effectively meant that the state, while seizing Jewish property, treated its former owners as though they had ceased to exist.

3. The above is also affirmed by the fact that, as per its agreement with Nazi Germany, the Slovak State had to pay 500 Reichsmarks for each deported Jew. This was a considerable amount of money, but it appeared well invested, seeing as the German side guaranteed that it “...would not repatriate the deported Jews, nor [would it] lay claim to their property in Slovakia.”<sup>7</sup>

4. The nature of the regime is further evidenced by the date when Act 68/1942 was adopted. Trains carrying young men and women (and, starting on April 11, 1942, for alleged “humanitarian reasons,” also entire families) to concentration camps in occupied Poland were being dispatched from Slovakia from March 25 to October 20, 1942. The first transport had thus left the territory of the wartime state long before the national assembly voted on the legislation designed to (retroactively) legitimate the entire process. By the end of March 1942, 5,003 people had involuntarily left their homes and been loaded onto five transports. 15,889 were deported throughout April, with a further eight trains leaving Slovakia by May

<sup>6</sup>According to the statistics of the Ministry for the Interior, by March 17, 1944, President Jozef Tiso had granted 577 direct and 251 indirect exemptions, amounting to a total of 781. Eduard Nižňanský, *Politika antisemitizmu a holokaust na Slovensku v rokoch 1938-1945* [*The Politics of Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in Slovakia in 1938–1945*]. (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2016), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup>See Eduard Nižňanský, *Politika antisemitizmu a holokaust na Slovensku v rokoch 1938-1945*. (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2016), p. 104.

15.<sup>8</sup> By the time the Act was passed, some 29,000 people on 28 trains had already been deported from Slovakia. Those people made up over half of all victims displaced from the country during the first, seven-month-long wave of deportations.<sup>9</sup> Overall, during those seven months, the authorities would dispatch 57 transports carrying 57,752 Jews.

5. The qualitative difference between the two edicts is indicated by the names of the people who signed them. The Jewish Code, being a governmental directive, was “only” signed by Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka and several ministers. President Jozef Tiso did not sign his name to the Code – a fact his future apologists would interpret as proof of his humanity (some would proceed to add that not one death sentence was carried out during his tenure). The real reason the president did not sign Decree 198/1941 was that ordinary governmental directives lay outside of his sphere of competence. However, where constitutional acts were concerned, his signature was necessary, and so it was that in the case of Act 68/1942, the death sentence for tens of thousands of Slovak citizens was first signed by President Jozef Tiso, Speaker of the Assembly Martin Sokol, Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka, and seven ministers.

### **The Deportations Through the Prism of Oral History**

Having covered the basic facts regarding the Act, I would now like to turn to what the Jewish future victims would have known, either from personal experience or through word of mouth, about the practical aspects and especially the end goal of the deportations. My starting point for the following analysis is the 148 testimonies collected as part of the project Oral History: The Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> The project was carried out between 1995 and 1997, over half a century after the events discussed above. Clearly, the witnesses’ testimonies contained information that they would not have found out until after

<sup>8</sup>The Act was published in the Slovak Legal Codex on May 23, 1942. Between May 15 and 23, 1942, five transports were dispatched, carrying approximately 5,000 people. A further five transports were dispatched by the end of the month. Eduard Nižňanský, *Politika antisemitizmu a holokaust na Slovensku v rokoch 1938-1945* (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2016), p. 347. By the end of May, 39,805 people overall had been deported from Slovakia. Juraj Špitzer, *Svitá, až keď je celkom tma. Eseje. [Dawn Only Comes When the Night Is Darkest. Essays.]* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 1996), p. 84.

<sup>9</sup>The second wave of deportations began after the occupation of Slovakia by the Nazi German army in the autumn of 1944. It was organized and carried out by German authorities, with some help from the Slovak bureaucracy. It took place between September 30, 1944, and March 31, 1945, affecting a total of 11,532 people. Eduard Nižňanský, *Politika antisemitizmu a holokaust na Slovensku v rokoch 1938-1945* (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského národného povstania, 2016), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup>This international research project was organized under the auspices of Yale University, and the original recordings are stored in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. I personally took part in most of the Slovak interviews. Despite the decades that have passed, I still vividly remember not only the verbal content of the testimonies but also the details that would not make it into the final transcript: facial expressions, non-verbal communication, laughter, tears, the words the witnesses uttered off-record.

the war. Still, a critical survey of the testimonies allows us to sketch out the contours of the historical reality. I purposely base my analysis on this single source, making only limited use of complementary information. I focus on the testimonies of people who, during the first wave of deportations, were at an age when they perceived and could reflect upon what was happening around them.

As is evident from the diary of Rabbi Armin Frieder, information about the planned deportations had reached the community some time in advance. The first entry indicating as much is dated February 25, 1942. “Ludovít and Heinz Tauber came to call me to an urgent meeting in Bratislava which was convened in response to the government’s plans to deport all Jews to Poland.”<sup>11</sup> As the participants of the meeting went on to discover, “the Ministry for the Interior had founded Department 14, which was dedicated to solving all problems having to do with Jews, collecting statistical information about Jewish communities in Slovakia, and executing a predetermined agenda: first, they would deport the youth, then adults and their families, until all Jews had been expelled.”<sup>12</sup> The representatives of the community immediately carried out several attempts to stop the planned deportations. Their efforts culminated on March 8, 1942, when Armin Frieder personally presented the “Esteemed President of the Slovak Republic” with an emotionally worded memorandum. Frieder characterized his meeting with Tiso as follows: “I had assumed that, while reading these words, which I had written from the heart, even the most callous man could not help but be moved. However, leaving the president’s office, I did not feel that my words had either moved him or spurred any change in course.”<sup>13</sup> So much for my point of departure. I will now proceed to analyze selected excerpts from the testimonies, which contain authentic memories of the deportations. They can be divided into three categories:

#### **a) The Witnesses Describe Their Own Experiences**

Several testimonies, with varying degrees of emotion, detail the first impressions of the deportations. The witnesses recall the involvement of the local population (constables, firemen, members of the Hlinka Guard) who, while transporting the victims from their

<sup>11</sup>Emanuel Frieder, *Z denníka mladého rabína*. [From the Diary of a Young Rabbi] (Bratislava: Slovenské národné múzeum – Oddelenie židovskej kultúry, 1993), p. 45.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>13</sup>Emanuel Frieder, *Z denníka mladého rabína*. (Bratislava: Slovenské národné múzeum – Oddelenie židovskej kultúry, 1993), p. 51.

hometowns to the transit camps, often resorted to violence. Also present are descriptions of the circumstances in the transit points in Poprad, Žilina, and Bratislava:<sup>14</sup>

*I was the first to be taken away from home. It was March 22, 1942. My parents [...] were so distraught when the constable came to fetch me in the morning, saying that I had to go to town. I packed a few things in my suitcase; my brother hitched up two horses; [...] and the constable and I headed to town. When we arrived, there were already around 300 girls there, gathered in a large hall. The buses were ready, and soon they started to ship us off. All the processing was done within an hour, and off they drove us to Prešov. There, we met some girls from Bardejov. It was already past noon. In the afternoon, we got on a proper train, and onwards we travelled to Poprad. When we arrived in Poprad—of course, we had been escorted by [Hlinka] Guards—they put us in a school to get some rest. I guess they hadn't yet wheeled the train cars over, the cars to Poland, so we had to... They spread some straw on the floor, and we just sat there, waiting to be loaded into the train cars. The cars arrived around dawn, and we were herded inside like cattle. We traveled all day, all night, until, in the afternoon of the next day, we arrived in Auschwitz. It was, regrettably, an awful journey. (Woman 1921/1)*

*In the meantime, when I was in Nováky,<sup>15</sup> there were two deportations. The last deportation took place on the most important Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur. Twenty years after the war, I found out from my sister about something that had happened then and that had since had a decisive impact on my life. I wasn't aware of this, but my name was on the list of deportees for the Yom Kippur train. My sister was the manager of a tailoring shop in Nováky, and she made clothes for Mrs. Polhorová, the wife of the camp commander. When my sister found out that my name was on the list, she went to Mrs. Polhorová and asked her to go to Mr. Polhora, and Mr. Polhora struck my name out. That's the reason I sit here today. I found out about this from my sister twenty years after the war because she'd been reluctant to tell me, and I understand why—because someone else had gone instead of me. They had to fulfil the quota—one thousand people per transport—and whenever a person was missing, they just took someone else. And my sister wanted to spare me the knowledge that I had only survived because someone else had gone to die instead of me. (Man 1919/71)*

## **b) The Witnesses Were Not Themselves Deported; They Describe What They Were Seeing in the Streets**

Several testimonies make clear that the violence erupting in the streets of Slovak towns and villages was witnessed not only by Jews but also by many people from the

<sup>14</sup>Translator's note: In the original, these testimonies are unedited and frequently reflect a variety of local dialects. The translator has therefore taken the liberty to edit them for the sake of clarity and consistency while preserving their spontaneous, unrehearsed style.

<sup>15</sup>The biggest concentration and labor camp in Slovakia, the Nováky camp was operational between October 2, 1941, and August 29, 1944, the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising. It was located in former military warehouses in the town of Nováky. Igor Baka, *Židovský tábor v Novákoch 1941-1944 [The Jewish Camp in Nováky 1941-1944]*. (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, Vojenský historický ústav Bratislava, ŽNO Bratislava, 2001), p. 36.



majority. Out of the numerous stories collected as part of the project Oral History: The Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust, I have selected two that I consider most representative:

*Even more extreme and terrifying was a situation I experienced at the station in Žilina, when these people, Jews from eastern Slovakia, including my parents, were being herded into the transit camp. The Guards were prodding them on, [...] the sadists were beating them, some were kicking them, and at that moment, as this stream of people, downtrodden people, was heading toward the transit camp, we could hear the singing of believers, Catholics, who were just walking by with their holy pictures in hand. There was a footpath leading past the camp—I don't know if it led to a calvary or something, a church, perhaps. Basically, there was a procession of believers, and as they were walking past—I would almost say it was like two parallel streams. One stream was made up of the poor people being herded into the transit camp, who were being beaten, and the other, that was the Catholic believers who, singing their religious songs, were probably on their way to mass, to a worship of some sort. And that's when the Guards, who just moments before had been kicking and beating the poor women and other people, suddenly stood to attention, saluted, and paid tribute to the holy pictures, one of which, of course, depicted Mother Mary. Mother Mary, who was the Jewess, Myriam. So, they were saluting one Jewess, this Jewess who had been dead for two thousand years, and the hundreds of living Jewish women around them, they were punishing, even though they had done nothing to deserve their punishment, just as—I am sure—the biblical Myriam of the New Testament had done nothing to deserve her punishment, let alone to lose her son. I came back, shocked, my mother saw me, waved at me, and I yelled that I would try to rescue her. (Man 1916/2)*

*And that was when the corporal came. I was at the cash register. Unfortunately, there was no one in the café. He sat down at a table by the door—there was this glass door; it was already May, and so the door was open—and he called me over. I asked what he wanted, and he said, "Look at how beautiful the town is." I wondered, "What's so beautiful about it? It's spring. Of course, the town is beautiful, as always." And he replied, "No, the town is especially beautiful today because today, when I see a well-dressed woman in the street, I know she's not a Jew. The last transport has been dispatched. We can hang out the white flag. There are no more Jews around." And I stiffened and began to tremble, I was even a little pale, and if he had only looked at me, he would have surely noticed, but he didn't look at me, and I barely managed to sputter out that I had to go because my boss could come back, but the man beckoned me back over and said, "Come back here! Look at that Gypsy, miss. We'll get rid of them, too, and then you'll have a nice, beautiful, clean town. They'll be gone, too." (Dancigerová/78)*

### c) "Second-hand" Testimonies

In this case, the witnesses were not direct participants of the event in question; they are merely interpreting what they learnt about the fates of their loved ones from eyewitnesses.

*Some two kilometers from our village flowed a little river called Čierna Voda [Black Water]. And my poor mother would go there in the winter, cut a hole in the ice, [...] and she would bathe in the flowing water as part of some ritual. Poor woman, she got*

*such a bad case of rheumatism doing this that, for the final two years before she was deported to the concentration camp, she was bedridden. [...] And in 1942, this poor woman was dragged out of bed and loaded onto a cart, wrapped in her blanket, and allegedly—two people told me this independently of each other—she was trampled to death... It's so sad and painful to think about, even after so many years. How this poor woman—a good, simple, rural Jewish mother—left the world. (Man 1919/6)*

Considering these memories of the deportations, we can differentiate between several attitudes of the witnesses:

a) they did not know what awaited them; they worried about the upcoming journey into the unknown and about having to part with their families; they simultaneously believed that they would have no trouble coping with the work ahead.

*And so they came to get me from my brother's house. They told him that if I didn't show up, they would take him away instead. My brother was already married then, and the rumor around Slovakia was that these transports were taking people to work in Slovak factories. That was the generally accepted opinion. And so I went voluntarily to the transit point; I didn't want to put my brother in danger, and I also thought that it wouldn't hurt me to go working in a Slovak factory. (Woman 1922/10)*

b) they knew from various sources that the deportations were in preparation, but they did not know what their end goal was.

*In the spring of 1942, I received a message from Hashomer Hatzair that the government was planning to deport Jews from Slovakia and that I would do well to pack up and leave, to avoid it all. (Woman 1923/3).*

This witness chose to immigrate to Hungary.

c) younger people from rural areas were used to manual labor and thus did not worry too much about the hard work ahead:

*In 1942, my name appeared on a list of women and girls who were supposed to go to an alleged labor camp. I didn't know where it was, but I tried to avoid thinking in catastrophic terms. I was used to hard work. Hard work would have caused me no problems.<sup>16</sup>*

d) that the would-be victims did not appreciate the danger they were in is further evidenced by the fact that some of them, never minding a variety of warnings and offers of help, refused to go into hiding and voluntarily joined the transports to avoid endangering their loved ones, perhaps operating under the illusion that by doing so they could lighten their family's load.

<sup>16</sup> <https://presov.korzar.sme.sk/c/22881947/zomrela-laura-spanikova-posledna-z-nasho-prveho-zidovskeho-transportu.html> ; Accessed 10.4.2022.

*... my father said, 'What would be the point of taking these children away?' And I was ashamed that I was so afraid for my life, so I didn't do it. I stayed home, and then I was the first to be taken away. The others went into hiding, at least for that one Saturday, because it was already known that that was when they were taking people away to concentration camps. A fireman came to get me, wearing a Guard uniform – not a firefighter's uniform, a Hlinka Guard uniform. I was taken away on March 21, the first day of spring. I remember the weather was very nice, and I even—how ridiculous are people... Given that I was the only one from my family to be taken away, they packed my suitcase full of things, and I was so happy because I had never had that many things before. /.../*

*I left my family, I was leaving Prešov, and it was my first time on a train. Because we were so poor that, you know, travelling by train... I had grown up in the city, I'd had no reason to travel, I'd had nowhere to travel to. I just remember having trouble with the train going one way and me going the other way and so on. And that image of them leaving the train has really stayed with me. And then we arrived in Poprad” (Woman 1924/7).*

*And then suddenly the girls got their summons – one of them was my youngest sister. I was still working in the office, and I didn't get a summons, so I went to the municipality and said, 'If my sister is going, I want to go with her.' We didn't know where we were going. Many people today tell me they knew, but that's not true. I'm serious – because it was March 1942. They couldn't have known. And so they took us to Poprad—not to Bratislava, to the transit camp, but to Poprad. And we still didn't know. Once there, we found out our schedules, the numbers of the trains we would be taking, that the transports would be leaving at such and such a time... (Woman 1913/65)*

e) in April 1942, family transports began. This fact was viewed ambivalently. On one hand, the deportees welcomed that families would stay together and that the young would be able to help the old. On the other hand, there was concern about how the older generations would cope with the new environment and difficult circumstances.

f) a separate chapter consists of information about the actual conditions in the camps, which some witnesses had allegedly acquired from various sources. Most frequent were allusions in letters that the deportees wrote home after arriving in the camps to ostensibly assure their families that everything was all right.<sup>17</sup> To indicate the contrary, they would often mention meeting long-dead relatives or use more or less penetrable allegories. The word “gas,” which would have referred to the existence of gas chambers, was also apparently mentioned. This, however, is almost certainly a confabulation, because if such a message really had arrived in 1942, the addressees would not have been able to decipher and understand it, if for no other reason, then because the first information about the situation in the death camps was received

<sup>17</sup>For more on this, see Nešťáková 2021.

by both the Jewish and the majority public with notable skepticism. This attitude was still prevalent in the spring of 1944 when Wetzler and Vrba presented their report about the conditions in Auschwitz. People could not imagine that the cultured German nation was capable of such heinous crimes in the 20th century.

## Conclusion

Constitutional Act 68/1942 on the Resettlement of the Jews represents an important testimony about the atmosphere of the times. More importantly, however, it exposes the character of the wartime Slovak State. The Slovak National Assembly used the Act to retroactively legitimate the effort to displace and annihilate the entire Jewish community. Furthermore, the Act was adopted at a time when nearly 30,000 Jews had already been deported from Slovakia.

Available documents and testimonies show that a significant part of this process took place on the territory of Slovakia, often in broad daylight and before the eyes of the public.<sup>18</sup> Despite visible manifestations of violence, dramatic scenes, and the death of a considerable percentage of the Jewish community, not only the state's highest representatives but also a non-negligible segment of the majority approved of the process. Many would not change their attitudes even after the reality of the Holocaust had become public, and they often passed their views on to their descendants through intergenerational communication. This is illustrated by statements to the tune of "More Jews have come back than initially left" or "It's a shame that Hitler couldn't finish the job" concerning survivors who were returning to their homes from concentration camps or various hideouts. In consequence, parts of society still harbor sympathies for President Tiso and his regime as well as for political movements that more or less openly claim the legacy of the wartime Slovak State. Although many people today find such views abhorrent, they have a pragmatic and even logical explanation. The deportation of Jews to "a place of no return" guaranteed the preservation of rights to Jewish movable and immovable property which these people or their forebears acquired during Aryanization, either by buying it in auctions or stealing it or by settling in abandoned flats and houses.

*Translated from the Slovak by Jakub Tlodka*

<sup>18</sup>For more, see Monika Vrzgulová, *Nevyroprávane susedské histórie. Holokaust na Slovensku z dvoch perspektív* [Untold Neighbors' Histories. The Holocaust in Slovakia from Two Perspectives]. (Bratislava: Veda, 2016).

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