

# Church, wartime Slovak State, and Jewish community in Nitra

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## 1. Introduction

This paper discusses the interactions of law and Jewish and Roman Catholic religions in Slovakia before and during the Second World War. It focuses on Nitra, one of the oldest towns in the country. The town was not chosen by random as it has been an important hub for both Christianity and Judaism in Slovakia – both a seat of a Catholic diocese and a home of a large Jewish community. In the first chapter, I am going to outline a brief history of the wartime Slovak State (Slovak Republic 1939-1945), including its constitution and its legal regulations concerning Jewish people. Next, I am going to focus on Nitra and describe the life in this town during the war, pointing out the hate propaganda in the media, the transports to death camps in German-occupied Poland, the efforts of the local Jews to survive, the role of Catholic church (namely the Bishop of Nitra), and the final tragedy of the Jewish community in the city.

## 2. The Slovak State

For centuries, the Slovak nation was living in what was a part of Hungary under a strong Hungarian influence. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there were some minor attempts held for greater autonomy of the Slovak people, but the major changes did not come until 1918 when the First World War ended, the Austro-Hungarian Empire broke down and the First Czechoslovak Republic was established in the northern parts of former Kingdom of Hungary. While some Slovaks were satisfied with living in Czechoslovakia, there was also a significant autonomist movement led by a catholic priest Andrej Hlinka, who established Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (*Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana, HSLS*). However, the calls for Slovak autonomy were not the most important issue for the Czechoslovak government, as it was dealing with more serious problems with irredentist German national minority, backed by neighboring Nazi Germany.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Michaela Krajčovičová, *Slovensko na ceste k demokracii*, Prodama, Bratislava 2009, 85.

In 1938, Czechoslovakia was put under strong pressure of its neighbours, dealing with a crisis of its existence. Especially Germany led by Adolf Hitler wanted to break the state down. After the Munich Agreement (signed on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1938), the Czechoslovak state was extremely weakened – it has lost one third of its territory (so-called Sudetenland – areas near German borders mostly with German national majority), millions of its inhabitants and all its border fortifications, so it was practically disabled to defend itself against any eventual German attack and was left at the mercy of Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> The Slovak autonomists took advantage from this and were able to achieve enough votes in National Assembly for declaration of autonomy of Slovakia, making the state, called Second Czechoslovak Republic, a *de facto* federation.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the German annexation of so-called Sudetenland, Poland and Hungary also claimed their rights for parts of Czechoslovak territory as they knew that Czechoslovakia is too weak to resist. After Vienna Arbitration held on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1938, southern parts of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia were invaded by Hungary on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1938. Slovakia lost a significant part of its territory – 10 390 square km, including the most fertile parts of the country and Košice – the second largest Slovak city. The Hungarians demanded even the cities of Bratislava and Nitra but eventually did not get those; still, they annexed a territory with more than 800 000 inhabitants, including not only Hungarians, but also 272 000 Slovaks and 25 000 Jews.<sup>4</sup>

The Second Czechoslovak Republic existed only for few months. In March 1939, it was eventually destroyed. The Czech part was occupied by Nazi Germany and turned into “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia”. The Slovak part was forced to declare independency. Jozef Tiso as the Prime Minister of Slovak autonomous government was invited to Berlin on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1939, and although he argued that Slovakia is not prepared for independency, Hitler forced him to declare it anyway – under the threat of dividing the territory between Germans, Poles<sup>5</sup> and Hungarians. In “stifling and depressing atmosphere” as described by member of parliament Pavol Čarnogurský, independent Slovakia was proclaimed in Bratislava on 14<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>6</sup> Monsignor Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest, initially continued as the Prime Minister; since

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<sup>2</sup> Andrej Krawczyk, *Kněz prezidentem: Slovensko Jozefa Tisa*, Academia, Praha 2019, 103.

<sup>3</sup> Ústavní zákon č. 299/1938 Sb.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

<sup>5</sup> There is no evidence that Poland then actually had any plans for occupying northern Slovakia; most likely the information was made up by Hitler.

<sup>6</sup> A. Krawczyk, 147-148.

27<sup>th</sup> October, he became the president while Vojtech Tuka, a representative of the radical fascist wing of HSĽS, led the government.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.1. The legal background of the Slovak State

Because the Slovak State was proclaimed under duress and even its leaders did not expect its genesis, no laws were prepared in the beginning. The constitution was enacted as Constitutional Act No. 185/1939 Coll. on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1939.<sup>8</sup> It stated the name of the country as “Slovak Republic”, but the name “Slovak State” continued to be used frequently. It is still used nowadays for distinguishing between first Slovak state in years 1939-1945 and modern Slovak Republic, existing from 1993.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst from the rest of the constitution we can learn it was a one-party state with Christianity as a *de facto* state religion and fascist characteristics, Article 81 of the Constitution seems like it does not even fit there. It expressly says “*all inhabitants without any difference based on origin, nationality, religion or profession*” have a right to life, freedom and ownership of property, and these rights could be only restricted by law.<sup>10</sup> While this provision should in theory guarantee certain level of civil rights to everybody, including the Jews, it was practically ignored throughout the existence of Slovak State.

The Slovak State was quite unique in its relationship of state and church as it was a satellite state of Nazi Germany, adopted much of its national socialist ideology, but at the same time favoured Christianity in its constitution and its president was an active Catholic priest. There are of course many discrepancies between Nazi and Christian ideas, but as will be shown later, president Tiso was often claiming that Catholic faith and national socialism are perfectly compatible, which concerned even the Vatican. From the point of view of the Holy See, Tiso was not only the representative of Slovakia, but even more a very visible representative of the church.<sup>11</sup>

First antisemitic legal actions were taken by the autonomous Slovak government in 1938, immediately after losing the territory to Hungary. On 4<sup>th</sup> November, Jozef Tiso as a head of autonomous government ordered that every Slovak district must deport all Jews who live there but lack Slovak citizenship and domicile. The order was unexpected and some district

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<sup>7</sup> *Tesnopisecká zpráva o 12. zasadnutí snemu Slovenskej republiky v Bratislave vo štvrtok 26. októbra 1939*, Parlament České republiky, Poslanecká sněmovna, Praha.

<sup>8</sup> Ústavný zákon č. 185/1939 Sl. z.

<sup>9</sup> Igor Baka, *Politický systém a režim Slovenskej republiky v rokoch 1939-1940*, Vojenský historický ústav, Bratislava 2010, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ústavný zákon č. 185/1939 Sl. z.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan Kamenec, *Tragédia politika, kňaza a človeka*, Premedia Group, Bratislava 2013, 121.

authorities<sup>12</sup> refused to execute it, arguing with economic impact or humanitarian reasons. Eventually, around 7 500 Jews were deported to the territory subject to annexation.<sup>13</sup> The propaganda was trying to make the Jews responsible for the Hungarian occupation, saying that they were collaborating with Hungary.<sup>14</sup> We can observe that antisemitism, supported by the autonomous government, was raising.<sup>15</sup>

The Czechoslovak constitution and laws which would protect people from hate crimes were often enforced insufficiently by the Slovak autonomous government: for example, a synagogue in Trnava was vandalized in December 1938. There was no response from the local authorities. On 24<sup>th</sup> January 1939, Trnava rabbis openly complained to the autonomous government in Bratislava. Only after that, the police started investigating the case, but later dropped it and nobody was punished, although the offenders were known.<sup>16</sup> *Slovák*, the official newspaper of HSEŠ, informing about anti-Jewish riots, talked about “just wrath of Slovaks” and claimed the actions were understandable due to the alleged previous impoverishment and pauperizing of Slovaks by the “non-Aryan element”.<sup>17</sup>

After the proclamation of the independent Slovak State, the antisemitic laws started to be issued. By governmental decree No. 63/1939 Coll., the term “Jew” was defined (on religious, not racial basis) and numbers of Jews in some professions were limited. Many more laws and decrees were issued in the first two years of the existence of independent Slovakia; for example, according to the Act No. 113/1940 Coll., all Jewish businesses had to be marked as Jewish property. Some of them were later gradually “aryanized”, meaning the Jewish owners were forced to give up their property which was then confiscated by the state and sold to non-Jewish persons – “aryanizers”. This was the better alternative as the businesses survived and the former Jewish owners were sometimes still employed in their firms, cooperating with the new “Aryan” owners on its management.<sup>18</sup> Some Jewish firms were liquidated instead, which meant the businesses ceased to exist and their owners lost their source of income.<sup>19</sup>

As of 1941, there were so many rules that the authorities often did not know which one to apply in a specific situation, and some of the rules were even contradictory. Therefore, there

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<sup>12</sup> Including districts Nové Mesto nad Váhom and Banská Štiavnica.

<sup>13</sup> A. Krawczyk, 217.

<sup>14</sup> That obviously did not make sense as it was a decision of Germany and Italy, which certainly did not care about the wishes of Slovak Jews.

<sup>15</sup> Jan Mlynárik, *Dějiny Židů na Slovensku*, Academia, Praha 2005, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Ladislav Lipscher, *Židia v slovenskom štáte 1939-1945*, Print-servis, Bratislava 1992, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Protižidovské demonštrácie v Bratislave, *Slovák* 251/1938, 4.

<sup>18</sup> A. Krawczyk, 224.

<sup>19</sup> I. Baka, 243.

was a demand for unification of anti-Jewish legislation.<sup>20</sup> As a result, a comprehensive Jewish Codex, a decree No. 198/1941 Coll., was issued. Unlike the previous regulations, and like Nuremberg Laws in Germany, it defined Jews on the racial (not religious) basis – which meant some christened or atheist people who were not seen as Jewish before “became” Jews. It limited some of their fundamental rights, ordered them to wear a sign (later specified to be a yellow star), banned them from many activities including higher education, driving a motor vehicle, fishing, marrying a non-Jewish person or participating in elections.<sup>21</sup>

From the legal point of view, the Codex (just as many of the previous antisemitic regulation) was not only inhumane, but arguably also unconstitutional; it was issued as a governmental decree, however the Article 81 of the Constitution allowed limiting certain human rights only by an Act. Even if it was enacted in a standard procedure, it would be problematic as the Constitution allowed limiting the basic rights if necessary, but the extent of limitation in some paragraphs of Jewish Codex was obviously excessive.

Another clearly unconstitutional, from the legal point of view absurd, situation happened in 1942, when the transports of Jewish people to Germany began. The Jewish Codex did not deal with this situation. Only on 15<sup>th</sup> May, a Constitutional Act No. 68/1942 Coll. was issued, legalizing the displacement of Jewish people from Slovakia and loss of their citizenship immediately after leaving the state territory. However, the first transports departed on 25<sup>th</sup> March. The Act was nevertheless – in contrary to the basic legal principles – applied retrospectively on those who have been deported before its effect; that included the fact that they were no longer Slovak citizens and even if they survived the concentration camps and got out, they could not come back to their homeland legally until the end of the war.<sup>22</sup>

According to the Article 98 of the Constitution, the authority appointed to supervise the compatibility of Acts and decrees with the Constitution was the Constitutional Senate. It consisted of judges of Supreme Court and Supreme Administrative Court, but only theoretically – it was not even once in session throughout the existence of the state.<sup>23</sup> We may only suppose that if this institution was functional, it would have to declare many regulations unconstitutional. Yet it was not; the rule of law in the Slovak State was therefore extremely limited.

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<sup>20</sup> L. Lipscher, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Nariadenie č. 198/1941 Slov. z. o právnom postavení Židov.

<sup>22</sup> Tomáš Čentěš, Komparácia ochrany ľudských, občianskych a politických práv občanov v medzivojnovnej Československej republike a vojnovnej Slovenskej republike, *Právněhistorické studie* 2/2018, 155.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

We may also mention that as some Jews were doing activities important for the state economy and were not easily replaceable, the president had according to the Article 255 of the Codex power to issue an exemption from its effect. Families of those affected could have been affected as well. The exemption could be full or partial, and could be revoked anytime. In practice, President Tiso transferred this agenda to the ministries, too; he issued only minority of exemptions himself. It is estimated that approximately 20 000 people were protected by some kind of exemption up until 1944.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Nitra

Nitra is located in southern Slovakia, on a way from Bratislava – the Slovak capital – to Banská Bystrica. It is probably one of the oldest Slovak towns. Throughout the centuries it has been one of the largest and most important towns in the country, a seat of Roman Catholic Diocese of Nitra (established around 880), and a hub of commerce and education for the Ponitrie region.

#### 3.1. The Jewry of Nitra before the war

First Jews probably settled in the city as early as in 10<sup>th</sup> century. Later the Jewish population formed their own municipality in today's neighborhood of Párovce, next to the city center – it was mentioned in Privilege of Nitra from 1248 as *Castrum Judeorum* (meaning Jewish fort). The Jewish community was expelled or decimated several times, but it was always re-established. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nitra was well known as one of the largest centers of Jewish population in the country – several thousand Jews lived in Nitra and in its suburbs, mainly in Párovce, which were slowly absorbed by the growing city. The leader of the community in 1840's, Rabbi Ezechiel Banet, established a Jewish religious school – *yeshiva* – which quickly became famous for its quality both in Austria-Hungary and abroad.<sup>25</sup>

After 1848 the community was generally flourishing, having significant economic power and good relations with the Christian majority. Meanwhile, some Jews wanted to further cooperate with the rest of the society and had more progressive views, while some were more conservative and isolationist in their beliefs. In 1907, the Jewish religious organization (*kehila*) in Nitra split in two – Orthodox faction and reformist Neolog faction. They were both acting

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<sup>24</sup> I. Kamenec, 127-128.

<sup>25</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra, <http://edah.sk/zidia/historia-zidovskych-nabozenskych-obci/nitra/>, last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

independently – until the perishing of the Neologists during the acts of genocide during the war.<sup>26</sup>

Until 1918, Nitra was a part of the Kingdom of Hungary. Whilst the majority of inhabitants spoke Slovak language, many Jews usually communicated in Hungarian, German or Yiddish, and had connections to Hungarian Jewish authorities in Budapest. When the First Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed in 1918, some Slovak nationalists were therefore probably seeing the Jewish people as a Hungarophile element, hostile to the newborn republic; it is recorded that members of municipal national guard had to prevent looting of Jewish property after the revolution in the last months of 1918.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the community quickly adapted for living in the new state. In 1930 census, majority of Jews in Nitra stated they were of Czechoslovak nationality<sup>28</sup>; it can be also assumed that most of those who had not used Slovak language before learned to speak it. They also participated in the public affairs more than before. This peaked in municipal elections in 1931, where a Jewish candidate Dr. Vojtech (Béla<sup>29</sup>) Szilágyi was elected a city mayor.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to notice that this was only 10 years before the Jews were excluded from participation in elections by the Jewish Codex.

In the same year, Samuel David Ungar was appointed a rabbi in Nitra. He had already been a rabbi in Trnava before, and he was a respected person not only among Slovak Jews but even among non-Jewish people. Under his leadership, the Nitra's yeshiva was extended and attracted more than 300 students coming from Czechoslovakia, but also Belgium, France, United Kingdom or the USA<sup>31</sup> – we can conclude it was an exceptionally prestigious institution. In 1935, Ungar became the vice president of worldwide Orthodox Jewish movement *Agudat Yisrael*.<sup>32</sup> From that it is clear he must have been extraordinary competent and honored person. One of rabbi Ungar's most important colleagues there was Chaim Michael Dov Weissmandl, a scholar and an expert in ancient manuscripts; in 1937, he married Ungar's daughter Bracha Rachel.<sup>33</sup> Later in the wartime, he would become one of the most important figures in the Jewish resistance movement.

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<sup>26</sup> Z histórie nitranskej obce, <http://www.znonitra.sk/historia/z-historie-nitrianskej-obce/>, last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra (op. cit.)

<sup>29</sup> Hungarian form of his name.

<sup>30</sup> Natália Jordanová, *Židovská komunita v Nitre pred a počas druhej svetovej vojny*, bachelor's thesis, Masaryk University, Faculty of Education, Brno 2020, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra (op. cit.)

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Abraham Fuchs, *The Unheeded Cry: The Gripping Story of Rabbi Chaim Michael Dov Weissmandl, the Valiant Holocaust Leader Who Battled Both Allied Indifference and Nazi Hatred*, Mesorah Publications, New York 1984, 17-41.

### 3.2. From the autonomy to the deportations

Shortly after HSL'S-led autonomous government of Slovakia was established in 1938, first attacks on the Jewish community in Nitra happened. On 4<sup>th</sup> November, the District Authority of Nitra forcefully moved all Jews without domicile in Slovakia (95 Jewish families, 209 people in total) to the territory which was occupied by Hungary the next day. On 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> November 1938, radical Slovak nationalists attacked Jewish shops, wrote antisemitic phrases on the houses and broke the windows.<sup>34</sup> While the actions were not pre-approved by the government, there was not much effort to investigate them or to penalize the offenders, either.

In a life of an average Jewish person in Nitra, the first major changes happened in 1940. A decree was issued by the District Authority of Nitra, banning Jews from going to the city park and to public spa.<sup>35</sup> So-called aryanization started in the same year. Data for the city proper are not available, but we know that in the whole district of Nitra, 1118 Jewish-run companies were liquidated and 269 aryanized.<sup>36</sup> The aryanization laws were highly effective in impoverishing the community, as hundreds of families have lost their source of income.<sup>37</sup> The Jews, formerly a rich community, had been pauperized to the point they became a social problem.<sup>38</sup> Later, it was enacted that every Jew between 16 and 60 years of age who was not working otherwise had a work duty, which meant they were often doing inferior jobs for a low wage.

Another major change which occurred in September 1940 was that the Jewish children could not visit non-Jewish schools anymore, so the Jewish elementary school in Nitra got many new students and was expanded for that purpose.<sup>39</sup> The Jewish hospital, established in Nitra in 1936, was shut down some time before July 1942; some of its medical equipment was later used in a hospital in a Jewish labour camp in Sered'.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.3. The possibilities of emigration

Shortly after the genesis of the Slovak State, rabbi Michael Weissmandl was making plans to save Jewish population from Nitra and Trnava by emigration to Canada. These were

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Synagóga, <https://www.nitra.sk/zobraz/obsah/13484>, last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Slovak author Eduard Nižňanský estimates that out of approximately 90 000 Jews in Slovakia, 65 000 were deprived of their pre-war sources of income.

<sup>38</sup> A. Krawczyk, 236-237.

<sup>39</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra (op. cit.)

<sup>40</sup> Katarína Duffeková, Pracovné tábory v Slovenskom štáte, Gabriel Eštok, Renáta Bzdilová, Jakub Bardovič (eds.), *Občianstvo a občianska spoločnosť: Stav – Kontexty – Perspektívy*. Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Šafárika v Košiciach, Košice 2016, 237.



eventually never realized, probably mainly due to the war which made the international travelling hard and dangerous.<sup>41</sup>

However, in late 1938, Slovak elites yet seemed to support the dignified emigration of Jews. Jozef Tiso as the then Prime Minister even met with Jewish National Fund director Selig Eugen Soskin to discuss possibilities of moving Slovak Jews to Palestine; the government was entrusted to make plans on this eventuality.<sup>42</sup> Later in the wartime, the possibility of freely leaving the country was nevertheless strongly restricted. The reason was mainly economic: the escape of Jews would also mean the escape of valuable Jewish property.<sup>43</sup> By an order of District Authority of Nitra from 12<sup>th</sup> March 1942 (shortly before the start of the deportations to Nazi concentration camps), travelling abroad was definitively forbidden to all Jews in Nitra (except of a few holders of dispensations issued by Jozef Tiso.)<sup>44</sup>

### **3.4. The “final solution to the Jewish question” in Nitra**

In February 1942, Slovak Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka met with German SS leader Dieter Wisliceny to talk about the next fate of Slovak Jewish population.<sup>45</sup> Shortly after that, on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1942, 222 young Jewish men from Nitra district were displaced to a camp in Nováky and a few days later, further to Majdanek in occupied Poland. (The system was not yet perfect, as 476 orders were sent, but more than a half of the called people avoided the transport for now – some said they were ill, some deserted without reasoning.)<sup>46</sup> From 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> April 1942, three trains were sent to Poland, carrying 3108 Jewish people in total; later in the summer, there were lesser transports of hundreds of people in total. Totally, approximately 75 % of Jews in Nitra District were deported.<sup>47</sup> Their properties were later being sold in a public auction in Zobor barracks.<sup>48</sup>

Few people knew what would happen to the Jews sent to the German concentration camps. The official propaganda was saying they went there for work. The Minister of Interior Alexander Mach held a speech in the radio in the spring of 1942, where he said that “we shouldn’t get confused by lies that the Jews are going to be murdered... the only thing that

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<sup>41</sup> A. Fuchs, 1984, 17-41.

<sup>42</sup> Židia do Palestíny!, *Slovák*, 256/1938, 4. – I found an information about this in the newspaper archive but have not seen any mention of this in the literature yet.

<sup>43</sup> L. Lipscher. 55-56.

<sup>44</sup> N. Jordanová, 39.

<sup>45</sup> A. Krawczyk, 244.

<sup>46</sup> Synagóga (op. cit.)

<sup>47</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra (op. cit.)

<sup>48</sup> Po židovskej obci zostala v meste iba synagóga a Nitrianska ješiva v USA, <https://mynitra.sme.sk/c/7790425/po-zidovskej-obci-zostala-v-meste-iba-synagoga-a-nitrianska-jesiva-v-usa.html>, last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

threatens them is that they will have to work. That is all!”<sup>49</sup> In reality, President Tiso probably knew that the German labor camps are harsh places and mortality rates are high there but did not know about the mass murdering at least until August 1942 when he got a letter from Polish priests who knew about the dreadful reality of the camps from the refugees.<sup>50</sup>

It should be noted that in the Slovak press, the deportations were usually mentioned as good news – for example, the journal *Nitrianska stráž* (Guard of Nitra) published an article headlined *Odpadnuté pijavice* (Fallen off leeches) on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1942, where the Jews are described as parasites of the Slovak nation, their deportations are openly celebrated and the guardians who had patrolled the transports are praised.<sup>51</sup> The author for some reason – probably to inflate the “merit” of the guardians – exaggerated the numbers of people in the transports: there is written that 7 000 Jews were deported, in fact the figures then were somehow lower.<sup>52</sup>

### **3.4. Reactions of the ordinary people**

The ordinary people, whose Jewish neighbours have disappeared in 1942, reacted in different ways. Some were so indoctrinated by the antisemitic propaganda which they have been listening to in the past four years that they were indeed happy about the events, but there are reasons to believe they were not in the majority. An average citizen of Nitra would rather react to the persecution of the Jews with indifference, afraid to be himself / herself persecuted for criticizing the antisemitic policies. Meanwhile, as shown above, people were told that the Jews are going to work in labor camps; it long remained secret most of them were murdered immediately after their arrival. From this fact we can conclude that majority of people, including those who had some antisemitic prejudices, would not approve the slaughtering of the Jews, despite of the propaganda. Dozens of non-Jews in Nitra were nonetheless secretly helping their Jewish neighbours and friends; 12 of them later got the Righteous Among the Nations award from the Yad Vashem institution in Israel for their heroism.<sup>53</sup>

As several specific examples of brave people in Nitra, I would mention František Melo from Párovské Háje (a neighborhood west of Nitra city center) who was hiding his former employer, Vojtech Lamm, and his family of five together with four more Jewish people in a basement since 1942 to the end of the war.<sup>54</sup> Emerencia and Július Meňhart have been helping

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<sup>49</sup> A. Krawczyk, 256.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-283.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251-252.

<sup>52</sup> N. Jordanová, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra (op. cit.)

<sup>54</sup> Príbeh odvahy a ľudskosti väčšej ako strach,

<https://embassies.gov.il/bratislava/NewsAndEvents/Pages/Spravodlivi-medzi-narodmi-Nitra.aspx> last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

more than twenty Jews throughout the wartime. Július claimed that a little Jewish girl, Eva László, was his illegitimate child and adopted her; that meant she avoided the deportations. They were hiding their neighbor, Mrs. Adler, inside their house in 1942 when she deserted from a transport to Poland; later in 1944 they accepted two more Jewish families at home. Their house was searched several times, but the Jews were never found. The family cooperated with captain of the Slovak army, Ladislav Babjak, who had information about the planned actions from local authorities and warned them if necessary. He was also himself hiding some Jewish people in his garden in the hills north of the city. Mrs. Emerencia Meňhart once confessed to the priest that she was helping Jews; he assured her she was doing nothing wrong.<sup>55</sup>

### **3.5. Reactions of the church**

In an absence of relevant political opposition in the totalitarian Slovak State, the most important criticism of the genocidal policies came from the institution protected by the government – the Catholic Church, both outside Slovakia (mainly in Vatican) and in the country.<sup>56</sup> Bishop of Nitra, Karol Kmeťko, was one of the few Slovak figures who dared to comment on the situation in wartime Slovakia, criticizing not only the Slovak government, but also Nazi Germany and its racial policies. Specifically, he argued that the racial principles are harmful for Slovaks, as they are a little nation, and if a larger nation – like Germans – claims to be a “superior race” to them, they are always in danger of being assimilated or displaced. He also said later in 1943 that the Slovak approach to the “Jewish question” was unfair and cruel, and “the nation was taken aback by the persecution of helpless old people.”<sup>57</sup>

Kmeťko was in a unique position as he was a former colleague of President Tiso – he was also a priest and a politician. He signed the Martin Declaration in which the Slovak nation joined the union with Czechs and Czechoslovak Republic was formed,<sup>58</sup> he was a former HSLS member, a member of Czechoslovak Parliament from 1918 to 1920, and Tiso’s teacher in the theological seminary in Nitra.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, in the church hierarchy, Kmeťko was always superordinate to the president. Jozef Tiso was a parish priest of Bánovce nad Bebravou parish, which is within Diocese of Nitra, administered by Kmeťko from 1920 to 1948. Therefore, Tiso would certainly have a moral problem with taking actions against him, and he indeed never did. However, the bishop personally visited Tiso several times and told him his objections, which

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<sup>55</sup> Tomáš Holúbek, *Storočná hrdinka: ľudí zachraňovala pod hrozbou poprav*, <https://mynitra.sme.sk/c/6243703/storocna-hrdinka-ludi-zachranovala-pod-hrozbou-poprav.html>, last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

<sup>56</sup> I. Kamenec, 125-126.

<sup>57</sup> J. Mlynárik, 227-228.

<sup>58</sup> A. Krawczyk, 63.

<sup>59</sup> I. Kamenec, 48.

were in the end usually ignored (just as the letters from Vatican). After the war, Kmeťko testified against Tiso in his trial.<sup>60</sup>

On 11<sup>th</sup> May 1944, Kmeťko was appointed a personal archbishop by the Pope Pius XII – this might suggest that the Holy See knew about his efforts and approved them. He has made hundreds of interventions to help persecuted people in Nitra and elsewhere, regardless of their religion, during the wartime. The results of his efforts remain largely unexplored. He was quite unpopular with the post-war Czechoslovak government, because although he was a critic of the clerofascist Slovak government, he remained loyal to the Catholic church and the idea of independent Slovakia.<sup>61</sup> Both those things were later seen as reactionary by the ruling Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and Kmeťko was more or less forgotten after he died in December 1948.

Monsignor Tiso acknowledged the clergy's criticism of the harsh antisemitic policies and answered them in a long speech at harvest festival in Holíč on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1942. He said that the Jewry was an “eternal enemy” of the Slovak nation, which should be eliminated according to the divine commandment of self-love. He mentioned Nitra in his speech, saying there were only thirty or forty Jews living there in 1840 but the numbers have increased a hundredfold since then.<sup>62</sup> In the end, he once more claimed that getting rid of the “parasite” of Slovak nation was in compliance with the Christian morals.<sup>63</sup>

### **3.6. The yeshiva in Nitra and the Working Group**

According to the Jewish Codex, all Jewish associations and organizations were banned except *Ústredňa Židov* (literally Jewish Headquarters, but usually translated as Jewish Council). This organization was very similar to Jewish councils (*Judenrat*) in Nazi Germany, and indeed was probably established according to the advice of German SS-man Dieter Wisliceny, who came to Slovakia in 1940 as an official advisor.<sup>64</sup> The Jewish Council was officially appointed to represent the interests of the Slovak Jews, but in fact it was a collaborationist organization – it co-operated with the Slovak officials on the quest of exterminating the Slovak Jewry.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> A. Krawczyk, 64.

<sup>61</sup> Jan Rychlík, *Češi a Slováci ve 20. století: spolupráce a konflikty 1914-1992*, Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, Praha 2012, 305-306.

<sup>62</sup> This was an obvious lie – there were approximately 2000 Jews in 1840's. Tiso indicated the Jews were overpopulated in the country, but that was not true; actually, their percentage has descended since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>63</sup> Čo nám patrí, z toho nikomu nič nedáme, *Slovák*, 186/1942, 3-4. (A full transcription of Tiso's speech published in the newspaper).

<sup>64</sup> A. Krawczyk, 237.

<sup>65</sup> J. Mlynárik, 154-155.

However, in Nitra, there was another organization – the yeshiva. It was operating throughout the war as the single surviving Jewish religious school not only in Slovakia, but in the whole Nazi Germany’s sphere of influence. From the legal point of view, it was working in a “gray zone” – it was the only organization of its kind and no law issued by the Slovak State was regulating it. Its existence was nevertheless tolerated by an unofficial agreement between the city mayor František Mojto, the Diocese of Nitra (namely the aforementioned Bishop of Nitra Karol Kmeťko), and the rabbis.<sup>66</sup> The Minister of Education Jozef Sivák was also mentioned as a protector of the yeshiva; he was awarded for his help after the war by the Jewish community.<sup>67</sup>

In 1940, there were approximately 200 students in the yeshiva. During the war, several dozen rabbis and Jewish scholars not only from Slovakia, but also occupied Poland came to the yeshiva which provided them refuge. Due to the unusual concentration of Jewish clergy, the complex of buildings which belonged to the institution was known as “Jewish Vatican”.<sup>68</sup> There, in the hub of Jewish intelligence, an idea of establishing an underground organization helping the Jewry arose.

Rabbi Chaim Michael Dov Weissmandl, teacher in the yeshiva, was one of the most active Jewish personalities of his era. He was tirelessly trying to save as many Jewish people as possible.<sup>69</sup> After the deportations were started, he travelled to Bratislava united with Zionist activist Gisi Fleischmann and several other people. Together they formed the so-called Working Group. Weissmandl had an idea to bribe competent people to persuade them to stop the deportations. In the summer of 1942, the group indeed managed to obtain 50 000 US dollars and then to give the money to Dieter Wisliceny through the Jewish Council officer Karol Hochberg. In the autumn, the deportations were indeed halted.<sup>70</sup>

Weissmandl’s strategy of bribing the Nazis was later seen as controversial,<sup>71</sup> but it was probably effective (although it is not clear if the actions of Working Group were the main reason for halting the transports, or if other factors such as criticism from Vatican, or even Tiso’s personal guilty conscience after he acknowledged what was happening in concentration camps,

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<sup>66</sup> Nitra, [https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas\\_slovakia/slo351.html](https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_slovakia/slo351.html), last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Po židovskej obci zostala v meste iba synagóga a Nitrianska ješiva v USA (op. cit.)

<sup>68</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra (op. cit.)

<sup>69</sup> Marek Čejka, Roman Kořan, *Rabini naší doby: autority judaismu v náboženském a politickém dění 20. století a současnosti*, Barrister & Principal, Brno 2010, 261.

<sup>70</sup> A. Fuchs, 17-41.

<sup>71</sup> M. Čejka, R. Kořan, 264.

were more important in the issue).<sup>72</sup> Anyway, from October 1942 to September 1944, no more Jews were deported from the Slovak State.

### 3.7. The final tragedy

After the deportations in 1942, there were approximately 600 Jewish people left in Nitra; the official figure for the whole district was 1190 (not including people who were living there illegally). Until 1944, the number has increased by 200. Some towns were affected by the holocaust to the point of total destruction of the local Jewish community, so the survivors were leaving those places and went to the cities like Prešov, Nitra or Bratislava where the communities were still active.

On 29<sup>th</sup> August 1944, the Slovak National Uprising – an armed action of partisans against the Nazis – started. Therefore, the Nazi Germany occupied Slovakia to suppress the rebellion.<sup>73</sup> Most of the Jews<sup>74</sup> who stayed in Nitra were arrested and later transported to Auschwitz. The tragedy was completed – the Jewish life in the city practically ceased to exist; only a few people were hiding in shelters. If found, they were usually shot by the SS.<sup>75</sup> Of course, this was an obvious, blatant violation of Slovak law (the Constitution guaranteed the principle of *nulla poena sine lege* – no penalty without a law – in Article 82), but the Slovak State was already near its collapse and took no action against the cruelty of the occupation forces.<sup>76</sup>

Rabbi Weissmandl was arrested, too. When he was on a train to Auschwitz with his family, he managed to saw the lock of the carriage door with a handsaw hidden in a loaf of bread and to jump out of a moving train. He broke his leg, but eventually managed to secretly move to Bratislava where he stayed in a bunker.<sup>77</sup> However, he “wept day and night because he had not succeeded in saving the Jews and because his wife and children had stayed on the train to Auschwitz.” He eventually survived the war but never came back to Nitra. He moved to Mount Kisco, USA, where he led a religious school named The Nitra Yeshiva, in memory of the famous institution of Nitra.<sup>78</sup>

After the war, several hundred Jewish people – probably less than 10 % of the pre-war numbers – came back to Nitra. However, in the next years, most of them later moved to newly

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<sup>72</sup> A. Krawczyk, 259-261.

<sup>73</sup> Židovská náboženská obec Nitra (op. cit.)

<sup>74</sup> No exceptions issued by Slovak authorities according to Articles 255 and 256 of the Jewish Codex were accepted by the Germans. The only way to avoid the arrest was to hide.

<sup>75</sup> Po židovskej obci zostala v meste iba synagóga a Nitrianska ješiva v USA (op. cit.)

<sup>76</sup> I. Kamenec, 146.

<sup>77</sup> M. Čejka, R. Kořan, 264.

<sup>78</sup> A. Fuchs, 1984, 17-41.

established State of Israel. The yeshiva did not open again after the uprising and its building was finally demolished in 1967.<sup>79</sup> Nowadays, the Jewish community in Nitra, once numbering thousands of people, still exists but consists of only approximately fifty members.<sup>80</sup>

## 4. Conclusions

In this paper, I tried to outline the situation of the Jewish community in Nitra in the wartime Slovak State. In the beginning, I mentioned some facts about the history of the state and its legal aspects including its anti-Jewish legislature in order to introduce the historical context. In the next chapters, I have outlined the pre-war Jewish history in Nitra, analyzed the impacts of antisemitic policies introduced after 1938 on the lives of the Jewish people, and described the deportations in which approximately 75 % of Jewish people in Nitra District were taken to the concentration camps and murdered. I mentioned a few examples of reactions to the anti-Jewish policies in the then press (*Slovák, Nitrianska stráž*) which seems to be uncritical and approving of all antisemitic actions. I have not found any questioning of the legality of the actions in the media, although it was definitely debatable as the constitution of the republic guaranteed equal protection of the lives, property and freedom of all people, which was blatantly violated. From that, we can make a conclusion that the constitution was practically ignored in the Slovak State.

Next, I have been writing about the reactions of church to the aforementioned events, particularly to the deportations in 1942. I have mentioned the efforts of Karol Kmeťko, the Bishop of Nitra, to reduce the suffering of the Jews and to persuade president Tiso to be less harsh; while researching on this topic, I discovered that Kmeťko was quite forgotten after the war because he had inconvenient opinions from the point of view of incoming communist rulers and that his activities would deserve further research. I have mentioned some of the brave non-Jewish people who lived in Nitra during the war and were helping their Jewish neighbours although it meant they risked their lives, especially after the German occupation in 1944. However, I managed to find only a handful of stories of the specific people, while there are certainly much more in the archives.

In chapter 3.6., I have been talking about the yeshiva of Nitra, its legal regime (or, better said, absence of any legal regulations for it due to its uniqueness in the Europe under Nazi rule) and the activities of Jewish leaders (rabbis) from Nitra during the war, especially of Chaim

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<sup>79</sup> Z histórie nitranskej obce (op. cit.)

<sup>80</sup> Židia v Nitre slávia Chanuku v duchu tradícií predkov, <https://www.webnoviny.sk/zidia-v-nitre-slavia-chanuku-v-duchu-tradicii-predkov/>, last visited on 18. 3. 2021.

Michael Dov Weissmandl whose efforts greatly succeeded the city of Nitra: after his Working Group bribed the chief German officer Wisliceny, the deportation of Slovak Jews to the concentration camps was stopped for two years, and thousands of lives were likely saved. I have also mentioned that there are multiple possible reasons for it apart from Weissmandl's interventions, though; the secret interventions of Vatican should be considered, too. However, little is still known about the secret letters between Slovak leaders and the Holy See; I think that might be another interesting topic for further research.

In the last chapter, I have been talking about the tragic events of 1944 when the Jews of the city was practically annihilated. Although some survived the concentration camps or managed to hide in shelters with the help of local people, most of them emigrated after the war. The Jewish community in Nitra, once one of the biggest and most important in the country, was never properly reestablished, and the yeshiva – an important center of Jewish religion and culture before the war and during it – was demolished after the war. The people generally wanted to forget about the dreads of the past; as a result, there are not many publications talking about the impacts of the war specifically in Nitra (or other Slovak towns). By this paper, I hope for contributing to the remembrance of the recent events in which a centuries old community was almost exterminated for no reason in particular.



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