

## “Certificates” for Auschwitz

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### Introduction

In the spring of 1944, Yaakov (Benito) Rosenberg and Moshe Weiss, activists in the He-Halutz (Zionist-pioneer) underground in Slovakia, managed to reach Palestine via Hungary. After a brief stay at Kibbutz Haogen, the two immigrants gave the Yishuv leadership and Ha-Kibbutz ha-Artzi a detailed report about the plight of the Jews in Slovakia and other countries. They reported about the deportations and presented information that had accumulated in Slovakia about the extermination camps. Rosenberg also gave Jewish Agency officials a list of fifty-one names, mainly prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau and several prisoners in Majdanek and Theresienstadt. His request was unusual. He asked that these officials urgently issue “certificates” - immigration visas to mandatory Palestine - to the Jews on the list, foremost those interned in Auschwitz.<sup>1</sup>

The list that Rosenberg gave the Jewish Agency Immigration Department - which included personal details (names, serial numbers, residential blocks, etc.) - had been composed on the basis of addresses that the deportees had written in letters they had sent from the camps to Slovakia from late August 1942 on. At that time these addresses had been used for the shipments of parcels from Portugal and other countries to prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau and other camps.<sup>2</sup> When youth-movement activists discovered that visas previously sent to various locations, such as Bergen-Belsen, had been quite

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<sup>1</sup> Yaakov Rosenberg debarked in Haifa on March 5, 1944. See testimony of Yaakov Ronen (Rosenberg), September 1994, and confirmation from the immigration institutions in Haifa, copy in Moreshet Archives (MA), D.1.6301. Yosef Baumer, a Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir activist in Slovakia, also immigrated to Palestine at that time and presented the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem with his own list of Auschwitz prisoners for the purpose of equipping them with “certificates.” See Yosef Baumer, April 14, 1944, Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir Archives, Givat Haviva (5).33.1

<sup>2</sup> See lists of Slovakian Jewish deportees to camps in Poland sent from Bratislava to Switzerland and Constantinople, MA, D.1.1181/1-50.

effective, they believed that such visas could rescue prisoners from Auschwitz as well.<sup>3</sup>

In this activity, the members of the He-Halutz underground were motivated chiefly by the information that had accumulated about the nature of the Auschwitz camp and the dreadful plight of the Slovakian Jewish deportees who were still living there. However, they were also inspired by a sense of mission: the conviction that, after having managed to escape, they must help their surviving comrades in the occupied countries in any way possible. Chief among their concerns were the prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau, whose situation, they knew, was the most critical. They also knew that the list given to the Jewish Agency officials included the last survivors among thousands of Slovakian Jews who had been deported to the extermination camps in 1942.<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg and Weiss believed that their direct, unmediated appeal and their description of the deportees' horrific circumstances would prompt the decision-makers to give the matter high priority and expedite the issuance of the certificates. It was the impression of the youth-movement activists, as the testimonies show, that the Yishuv leaders were previously insufficiently aware of the magnitude of the disaster being inflicted on the Jewish people and the importance of immigration visas as an active means of rescue. This, they believed, explained why the leaders had not tackled the visa matter efficiently and energetically and had not done everything necessary to obtain more visas. At the same time, the two recently-arrived immigrants were probably unaware of the obstacles that the British authorities had placed in the path of Jewish immigration, especially from enemy countries. Neither were they aware that rescuing camp prisoners by means of immigration certificates was not one of the Yishuv leaders' main concerns.

In fact, at that time the Yishuv leadership was concerned about the Auschwitz camp. The passionate and exceptional appeal of the two activists from Slovakia, coupled with the presentation of a detailed list, evidently made an impact and attracted much attention. Public opinion and public pressure at

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<sup>3</sup> See letters from Jewish citizens of neutral and Western countries who had been interned in detention camps, MA, D.1.1179, D.1.1182.

<sup>4</sup> In the matter of the information that leaked from Auschwitz to Slovakia, see letters from Yaakov Rosenberg and Moshe Dachs from Slovakia to Switzerland, MA, D.1.1124/4, D.1 592.

that time also seem to have helped speed up the issuance of immigration visas, especially for Jews in the Nazi-controlled countries in Europe.<sup>5</sup>

The attitude of the Yishuv leadership toward rescue changed in the late spring of 1944. Rosenberg's and Weiss's request to issue Auschwitz prisoners with immigration visas became part of additional rescue actions: the attempt to halt the transports from Hungary, the program for the rescue of children, civilian exchanges, the "Europa Plan," and so on. By this time, the Yishuv leadership knew the facts and had reached the conclusion that European Jewry might face total annihilation unless rescue actions were stepped up.<sup>6</sup> In June 1944, after the information forwarded by Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg (Rudolf Vrba) - the two Jews who had managed to escape from Auschwitz in April and return to Slovakia - reached the leaders of Jewish organizations in Palestine and the free world, the nature and purpose of Auschwitz began to become clear.<sup>7</sup>

On August 27, 1944, in a letter to Nathan Schwalb and Heini Bornstein, who were based in Switzerland, Rosenberg delivered "...the good news...that the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency has asked the Mandate Government to issue immigration visas for our comrades in Birkenau, near Neuberun, and in Theresienstadt, who are listed below"<sup>8</sup>

Rosenberg then listed twenty young Jews (sixteen women, four men) in Auschwitz-Birkenau, their personal details, and the number of the certificate that had been issued for each. Rosenberg added that he had presented the Immigration Department with another list of twenty-one comrades in Birkenau (fourteen) and Theresienstadt (seven) and expected the authorities to issue certificates for them, too, within a few days. This list, too, noted the residential block numbers of most of the Auschwitz prisoners and the serial numbers of seven of them. Rosenberg stressed that the visa recipients would be included

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example Tuvia Friling, *Arrow in the Dark: David Ben Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership and Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust* (Hebrew) (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1998), pp. 763 ff.; Dalia Ofer, "Hostility, Indifference, or Collaboration: Allies and the Rescue Activities of the Yishuv," *Massuah*, 23 (1995), pp. 140-158; Dina Porat, *The Blue and Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust 1939-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Friling, *Arrow in the Mist*, pp. 358 ff.

<sup>7</sup> The Jewish Agency officials came into possession of the "Auschwitz Protocols" by the middle of June 1944; see Friling, *Arrow in the Mist*, p. 765; see also Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Yaakov Rosenberg to Nathan Schwalb and Heini Bornstein, August 27, 1944, MA, C.38.7/2.

among the candidates for civilian exchanges and requested that Schwalb and Borenstein make contact urgently with the head office of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva to expedite the process.<sup>9</sup>

The two Slovakian Jews' resourcefulness resulted in an exceptional rescue attempt - sending letters of confirmation for the issue of immigration visas to prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau. To date, research on relief and rescue during the war has overlooked this episode. Today, even those who were directly involved in the affair remember it vaguely at best.

Although various archives hold copious documentation on Jewish immigration during World War II, including documents about the mailing of immigration-visa confirmations to Theresienstadt, Bergen-Belsen, and other locations, they contain no documentary evidence about the issuance and mailing of visas to prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The relevant documents were discovered largely by chance and in private collections.

Furthermore, the surviving individuals who were involved in the affair could not add systematic and detailed information about it. Several have no recollection of it at all. A few remembered it vaguely only after being presented with the details and shown the documents, including letters that they had signed.<sup>10</sup> However, survivors of Auschwitz whose names appeared on the lists made an important contribution in reconstructing the episode.

## Formulation of the Idea of Sending "Certificates" to Auschwitz

On October 20, 1941, Heinrich Himmler and the Slovakian leaders - President Jozef Tiso, Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka, and Interior Minister Alexander Mach - held a "working meeting" in Berlin at which they discussed how to "solve" the Jewish problem in Slovakia. Himmler suggested that the Slovakian leaders

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Examined *inter alia* were the archives of Dr. Chaim Pozner at Yad Vashem Archives (YVA) P.12, and Central Zionist Archives (CZA), Record Group 17. The following personalities involved in the affair were asked about it: Nathan Schwalb, Heini Bornstein, Yaakov Ronen (Rosenberg), Rafi Ben-Shalom (Friedel), and Yosef Baumer.

transfer the Jews “to him” for resettlement in the East. Himmler’s diary asserts that the Slovaks viewed his proposal favorably.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, Slovakia was one of the first satellite countries from which Jews were deported to extermination camps. Between late March and late October 1942, nearly 59,000 Jews were transported out of Slovakia, with eighteen trainloads destined for Auschwitz and thirty-nine for camps and ghettos in the Lublin District.<sup>12</sup>

Immediately after the first transports left Slovakia, the Jews began to trace the deportees in order to determine where they had been sent so as to offer them relief. These efforts were made both at the local level, by community functionaries and deportees’ relatives, and at the national level, by officials of the Judenrat, the “Jewish Center” (Ústredňa Židov), and, in the main, by the activist circle that eventually formed the “Working Group.”

Even before the deportations ended, Jewish leaders and other Slovakian Jewish circles knew where most of the transports were heading, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, Lublin, and Sobibór. After the destinations became known, Rabbi Abba (Armin) Frieder wrote in his diary, “...We are deeply concerned about the deportees’ welfare and anxious about their fate....”<sup>13</sup>

However, notwithstanding the fears, Slovakian Jewry was probably unaware of the true nature of these camps at that time (early summer of 1942).

The information about the destinations of the deportations was provided mainly by Slovakian railroad workers who had escorted the transports to the last stop and returned the railroad cars to Slovakia. Slovakian railroad officials who drew up the timetable of the transport departures basically corroborated this information. In some cases, the deportees themselves scrawled the names of their destinations on the walls of the cars that were brought back to Slovakia, using chalk or other writing implements. In other cases, deportees sent postcards from stops on the way, with veiled references to the direction and hardships of the trip. After they reached their destinations, the deportees

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Witte et al., eds., *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42* (Hamburg: Christians, 1999), p. 241.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. table of deportations in 1942 (Slovakia), MA, D.1.5705

<sup>13</sup> See Emmanuel Frieder, *To Deliver their Souls: The Struggle of a Young Rabbi During the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986), p. 93.

attempted - sometimes successfully - to send messages and notes about their fate back to Slovakia.<sup>14</sup>

Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel, a leading figure in the “Working Group,” claimed that communication with the deportees began in the middle of the “counting of the Omer” in the Hebrew year of 5702, i.e., late April or early May 1942. In the course of June 1942, the Jewish leadership and unaffiliated individuals accumulated initial information from the Slovakian deportees, including indications of horrific distress and desperate pleas for help.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the information from the deportees made its way to Slovakia in three main ways:

- (1) personal letters;
- (2) reports from Polish Jews who fled from the ghettos at the beginning of Operation Reinhard and reached Slovakia;
- (3) Reports and information from Jews who had escaped from camps and ghettos and returned to Slovakia.

The deportation decree and the information from the transport destinations led to new initiatives, most of them illegal, in search of effective responses to the new situation. While the transports from Slovakia were still continuing, a two-way flow of couriers began between Slovakia and deportees who had been concentrated in various locations in the Lublin District. Couriers from Slovakia managed to enter several ghettos, deliver money and valuables to deportees, and bring letters from deportees to Slovakia. Some time later messengers on the deportees’ behalf reached Slovakia with letters and brought money and valuables to the deportees. Pursuant to information from the deportation sites in the Lublin District, Jews in Slovakia organized ramified relief activities that lasted as long as the deportees remained in these ghettos.<sup>16</sup>

The most important sources of information about the nature of the deportations and the deportees’ fate were Jews who, in 1942, had managed

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<sup>14</sup> See Gila Fatran, *Struggle for Surviving? The Leadership of Slovakian Jews in the Holocaust 1938-1944* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1992), p. 197, and testimony of E. Green, MA, A.1573.

<sup>15</sup> Fatran, *Struggle for Survival*, pp. 207–208, and Michael Dov Weissmandel, (Hebrew) *From the Straits* (New York: Emunah, 1960), pp. 72, n. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Fatran, *Struggle for Survival*, pp. 197 ff.; Frieder, *To Deliver their Souls*, pp. 89ff.; report of Dionys Lenard, MA, A.1564.



to escape from camps and ghettos and return to Slovakia. In late May 1942, a young man named Dionys Lenard escaped from Majdanek and, after returning to Slovakia, wrote a detailed thirty-six-page report about his deportation and the terrible distress of the Slovakian deportees in the camp. In the summer of 1942, several Slovakian Jews escaped from the Łuków and Lubartów ghettos. In September and October 1942, several Slovakian Jews fled from the Opole-Lubelski ghetto and managed to return to Slovakia. They, too, gave detailed testimonies, which, apart from information about the fate of those deported from Slovakia, included reports about the systematic murder of Jews from Poland and other countries. It is known that several Slovakian Jews also attempted to escape from Auschwitz-Birkenau in the course of 1942, but all of these attempts failed and ended tragically.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding all the efforts, the rescue activists and members of the “Working Group” were unable to make contact with the deportees in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Gisi Fleischmann, who spearheaded the rescue actions in Slovakia, wrote to Switzerland that emissaries of the group had penetrated all locations where Slovakian Jews had been sent except for one - Auschwitz-Birkenau. She noted with great concern that the impenetrability of this camp frightened them severely: “...However, we are not despairing and are re-examining all possible ways of reaching this camp, too.”<sup>18</sup>

The first reports about Auschwitz-Birkenau that reached Slovakia originated in letters that prisoners wrote in late August and early September 1942, and mailed or smuggled out of the camp in various ways. These letters, alluding clearly to the nature of the camp and the fate of the deportees, made the would-be rescuers’ even more fearful. “The reports from Birkenau are so grave ...,” Gisi Fleischmann noted, “that I can hardly believe we will ever see any of our comrades.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Slovakian Jews were an important source of information about the murder of Jews who had been deported to occupied Poland as well as undertaking extensive relief and rescue initiatives. By means of contacts that

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<sup>17</sup> See report of Dionys Lenard, MA, *ibid.*; and testimony of Alexander Billig, who fled from the Opole ghetto, MA, A. 1453; Fatran, *Struggle for Survival*, pp. 152 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Gisi Fleischmann to Nathan Schwalb, September 29, 1942, MA, D.1.626.

<sup>19</sup> See Weissmandel, *From the Straits*, Appendix 23; copies of letters from Auschwitz prisoners to Slovakia, YVA, M.20.93, and M.5.106.

were maintained mainly by the “Working Group” and activists in Zionist youth movements with Jewish and Yishuv organizations in Switzerland and, afterward, in Istanbul as well, the information accumulated in Slovakia was forwarded to the free countries and to Palestine.

In September 1942, shortly after the first deportees from Slovakia were located in various ghettos and camps in Poland, the first lists of deportees’ names, personal details, and whereabouts were sent to the Yishuv missions in Switzerland and Constantinople. The senders asked the Jewish institutions in Switzerland to help the deportees by sending food parcels or by taking other measures. Gisi Fleischmann reported to Dr. Abraham Silberschein, a World Jewish Congress representative based in Switzerland, that more than 2,200 addresses of Jews banished from Slovakia to Poland had been identified so far.<sup>20</sup>

Concurrently, youth-movement activists were compiling their own lists of movement comrades who had been located among the deportees. They, too, handed the lists to couriers in Switzerland and Istanbul and sought ways to aid their comrades. Indeed, shipments of parcels to Slovakian Jewish deportees in Poland began shortly after the lists were received. Heini Bornstein, a Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir activist in Switzerland, informed members in Bratislava that food parcels had also been sent to Jewish young women from Slovakia who had been interned in Auschwitz. Some time later, receipt of the parcels was confirmed.<sup>21</sup>

One of the Slovakian Jews who attempted to provide explicit information about the true nature of Auschwitz-Birkenau was Yaakov Rosenberg of Bratislava. In the summer of 1943, he reported to Switzerland: “[...In Birkenau] there are no ill and frail [inmates]. Anyone who cannot work is stunned with gas and then cremated. The most terrible thing about it is that the bodies of the dead are used to make all sorts of chemicals.” Rosenberg stressed the implicit message of the recent letters (summer of 1943) from Auschwitz-Birkenau to Slovakia: most members of the movement were no longer alive, and only a handful remained. The letters smuggled out of

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<sup>20</sup> YVA, M.20.93, and MA, D.1.626-3.

<sup>21</sup> See “Addresses of Deported Members of Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir,” MA, D.1.1187. Concerning confirmations from young women in Auschwitz of the receipt of parcels, see collection of letters from 1943, MA, 1163/2, and D.1 1117/6.



Auschwitz also clearly hinted that most of the Slovakian Jews who had been deported in 1942 had been murdered. Another Zionist activist, Moshe Dachs, wrote to Geneva on April 7, 1943, on the matter of Auschwitz-Birkenau, that “[...The prisoners] have the right to exist as long as they remain able-bodied, but once their strength runs out or when they cannot work due to illness, they cease to exist.”<sup>22</sup>

As information about the systematic murder of deportees and the desperate plight of the few survivors in the camp accumulated, the relief and rescue activists in Slovakia tackled a daunting issue: What could be done to rescue them? The activists, severely perturbed, were determined to seek irregular ways to help the deportees. Over time several ideas were brought up and several possibilities were explored in this context.

The youth-movement activists and the “Working Group” people knew that the Slovakian authorities honored passports and other documents that attested to foreign nationality and that Jews who possessed such papers were exempted from deportation. Thus, as the deportations continued, the youth-movement activists asked their representatives in Switzerland to send them passports and other documents of neutral countries. In September 1943, Yaakov Rosenberg wrote to Heini Bornstein, expressing his disappointment and resentment: “I am very sorry that you did not obtain even one ‘Paradarchia’ [passport or immigration visa to Paraguay] for us, because one can live here as a foreign citizen and this would give [us] a strong possibility of living here until the end of the war.”<sup>23</sup>

When it was discovered that immigration visas to Palestine could also be used to rescue Jews from deportation, the movement activists in Slovakia sent an urgent request in this matter to Nathan Schwalb and Heini Bornstein and attached lists of youth-movement members for whom “certificates” should be issued. The youth-movement members believed that written confirmation of their inclusion on the list of candidates for immigration to Palestine would postpone their deportation to concentration and extermination camps.

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<sup>22</sup> Yaakov Rosenberg to Nathan Schwalb and Heini Bornstein, August 27, 1943, MA, D.1.1124/3; Moshe Dachs to Nathan Schwalb, April 7, 1943, MA, D.1.592.

<sup>23</sup> Yaakov Rosenberg to Heini Bornstein, September 27, 1943, MA, D.1.1124/3.

As time passed, the rescue activists in Slovakia discovered that sometimes the Germans also showed consideration to the holders of documents attesting to nationality of certain countries or of immigration visas to Palestine. In this context, Moshe Dachs wrote, on May 5, 1943, from Bratislava to Switzerland:

Yesterday we received a report from Tsvia-land [Poland] that if people have Hungarian or some other citizenship...then the men and women do not have to live in the ghetto. Think it over; if you are able to help this way, by [providing us with] papers, do it.<sup>24</sup>

The relief and rescue activists understood that this might be another path to rescue; it might be worth trying for Jews who had already been deported to the camps.

On the basis of the information given by refugees from Poland, the activists in Slovakia and some members of deportees' families had begun looking into the possibility of helping Auschwitz prisoners, too, by issuing them with passports of a satellite or neutral country or by obtaining documents attesting to foreign citizenship. In 1943, for example, several young women from Slovakia who had been imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau were "issued" with Hungarian citizenship papers; for this reason the Hungarian authorities asked Germany to turn these Jewish women over to them. The foreign ministries of Germany and Hungary conducted a lengthy correspondence on this matter until the Gestapo tendered a final opinion, which both sides accepted: "It cannot be done for security reasons."<sup>25</sup>

From the testimonies it cannot be determined with certainty when the idea of trying to rescue Auschwitz prisoners by issuing "certificates" was first raised. Neither is it clear who conceived of the idea. Since it is not mentioned in the extensive correspondence of the "Working Group" with Jewish and Yishuv organizations in those years, it was probably the youth-movement activists in Slovakia who first brought it up. Evidently the notion began to take shape after

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<sup>24</sup> Moshe Dachs to Nathan Schwalb, May 3, 1943, MA, D.1.626/2. See also letter from G. Foeldi to Menachem Bader in Constantinople, March 31, 1943, MA, D.1.1.592/8. For the lists of Ha-Shomer ha-Za"ir members that were sent from Slovakia, see MA, D.1.1187/1-50.

<sup>25</sup> See photocopy of letter from German Foreign Ministry, April 24, 1944, concerning the release of a Jewish woman named Helene Brody, in Lore Shelley, *Secretaries of Death: Accounts by Former Prisoners Who Worked in the Gestapo of Auschwitz* (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1986), p. 194. See also Aurelia Pollak, *Three Years of Deportation* (Herzliya: Doco-Story, 1999), p. 150.

refugees who had escaped from Poland to Slovakia reported that Jews who held the citizenship of certain countries, including the holders of “certificates” and confirmations that such certificates had been issued, were interned in special camps in the event of the need for people to exchange for German citizens held by the British. Dr. Chaim Pozner, who dealt extensively with this matter as assistant director of the Palestine Office in Geneva, claimed that he had considered the very issuance of official and official-looking documents and sending such papers to occupied countries as potentially useful in rescue or even in the postponement of deportation. Pozner claims to have rescued many Jews, mainly from the Netherlands and Belgium, in this fashion.<sup>26</sup> The youth-movement activists in Slovakia believed that if this method proved effective for one group of Jews, they must try it for prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau and other camps.

Notably, while Dr. Pozner’s personal archives do contain much material about the forwarding of confirmations and “certificates” to prisoners in Theresienstadt and Bergen-Belsen, they do not even allude to the issue of such documents for prisoners in Auschwitz.<sup>27</sup>

Among those involved in the episode, only Yosef Baumer remembers a few details. The idea of sending “certificates” to Auschwitz, he says, came up after letters were received from deportees from Slovakia and after the true purpose of this camp had become clear. In view of the information given over by the refugees from Poland, “The comrades assumed that the Palestine certificates would give some safety and could help them for some time, and that maybe they would be included among the candidates for exchange.”<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, it was decided to send to Switzerland and Constantinople updated lists of Slovakian Jews who had been deported to Auschwitz, Majdanek, and other locations, and to ask the officials there to issue the people on the lists with “certificates.” Such lists were sent out from Bratislava from the early summer of 1943 and the first half of 1944. The response came

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<sup>26</sup> Ruth Zariz, “Rescue of Jews from the Netherlands by Means of ‘Certificate’ Confirmations” (Hebrew), *Yalkut Moreshet*, 23 (April 1977), pp. 136–162.

<sup>27</sup> On the mailing of certificate confirmations to Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt, see YVA, P.12.15, 22, 34, and JM.2987-2.

<sup>28</sup> Testimony of Yosef Baumer, given to the author on May 25, 1999. Updated lists of immigration candidates among Slovakian deportees in Auschwitz were sent to Switzerland in June 1943. See MA, D.1.1187/5.

quickly. In early August 1943, Heini Bornstein wrote from Geneva to Bratislava: “Fifty certificates have been prepared for the comrades in Poland.”<sup>29</sup>

One cannot tell from Bornstein’s letter whether the certificates were issued for Slovakian Jews who had been deported to Auschwitz and Majdanek or for Polish Jews in ghettos. He mentions the episode neither in his postwar testimonies and reports nor in his book.<sup>30</sup> The fact that no testimonies were found about the issue of certificates for Auschwitz and Majdanek prisoners at that time (1943) speaks for itself.

The Palestine missions in Geneva and Istanbul also responded vaguely to the repeated appeals from Slovakia concerning the issue of certificates for Auschwitz deportees. Thus far, only a few documents and testimonies about the affair have been discovered, and clear conclusions cannot be drawn. One cannot determine, for example, whether the appeals from Slovakia were given special attention and appropriate treatment. The scanty material available suggests that the appeals from Bratislava were mostly one-way and unrequited, possibly because they were aberrant and considered irrelevant. However, those involved in the matter may have treated the issuance of Palestine immigration visas for Auschwitz prisoners in accordance with standard procedure, as they did with scores of similar requests that reached Geneva and Istanbul from various countries in the Nazi sphere.

Although the activists in the missions probably had general information about Auschwitz-Birkenau by this time, they do not seem to have understood the true nature of the camp. The Yishuv leadership in Palestine was equally uninformed. It is a fact that certificates for Auschwitz prisoners were not issued until the summer of 1944, approximately a year after the first requests and lists were sent to the missions in Switzerland and Turkey. The certificates were issued in circumvention of standard operating procedures and only after youth-movement activists in Slovakia who had reached Palestine applied directly to the relevant institutions in Jerusalem.

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Heini Bornstein to members of Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir, Bratislava, August 1, 1943, MA, D.1.1117/7.

<sup>30</sup> Heini Bornstein, *Switzerland – An Island: Rescue Activities 1939–1946* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, 1996), pp. 124ff.

What became of the lists of Auschwitz prisoners that were sent from Bratislava to the missions in Geneva and Istanbul in 1943? Evidently, they were used at that time mainly as addresses for sending parcels. Although several people who appeared on the lists did receive food parcels over time, we have no testimonies about the sending of lists of Auschwitz prisoners to the institutions in Jerusalem with respect to “certificates.” The lists probably remained in Switzerland and Turkey until the end of the war and were later handed over, along with the rest of the paperwork, to the competent institutions or were preserved in private collections.

### Issue of “Certificates” for Auschwitz Prisoners

The youth-movement activists and members of the “Working Group” in Slovakia complained angrily and repeatedly to the missions in Constantinople and Geneva about the lengthy and cumbersome treatment of their cause. The absence of utmost urgency in the issuance of certificates for Auschwitz prisoners led to severe frustration and the fear that the candidates would no longer be alive by the time the certificates reached their destination.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, in addition to the accepted vehicles - the missions in Turkey and Switzerland - they began to act on their own counsel. A few activists from Slovakia who had managed to obtain certificates in early 1944 moved to Palestine and took lists of deportees with them in order to deliver them to the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency. In the spring of 1944, Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir activists in Slovakia forwarded several lists of prisoners in Auschwitz, Theresienstadt, and other camps, and asked the authorities to issue and mail certificates to these people.<sup>32</sup>

The available lists include the names of fifty-five prisoners who had been deported from Slovakia in 1942, forty-three in Auschwitz, seven in Theresienstadt and five in the Dęblin labor camp in the Lublin District. The criteria used in composing the lists are not clear. Twenty-two of the Auschwitz prisoners listed were evidently members of Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir. The others were unaffiliated with Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir, and several had never belonged to

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<sup>31</sup> Yaakov Rosenberg to Borenstein, September 27, 1943, MA, D.1.1124.

<sup>32</sup> Notes from complementary talks with Yosef Baumer and Yaakov Ronen in 1999 (in the author’s possession).

any Zionist youth movement. Lilli Sonnefeld (today Kopecky), for example, was married and deported to Auschwitz together with her husband; Alica Reiner (today Holländer) was affiliated with an ultra-Orthodox girls' group in Slovakia. Several women on the lists, although unmarried, were over youth-movement age. Similarly, Ernst (Arnošt) Rosin was listed, even though he had managed to escape from Auschwitz-Birkenau in early June 1944, and had returned to Slovakia. Obviously, the lists were submitted before the youth-movement activists became aware of the successful escape of Rosin and his comrade, Czesław Mordowicz.

The lists presented by Rosenberg, apparently in May 1944, included forty-three Auschwitz prisoners; twenty-eight were women. Next to seven names, the word “*Stabsgebäude*” was recorded as the place of residence. Most prisoners who were housed in the *Stabsgebäude*, which was situated outside the prisoners' camp, were office workers in the proximity of SS people. Most of the other women are known to have been nurses in the camp infirmary, skilled workers, or having positions in the internal administration of the women's camp (see Appendix 1). Due to their relatively high position in the social hierarchy of camp prisoners, members of this group were occasionally allowed to write to surviving relatives and acquaintances in Slovakia. After the letters reached their destinations in Slovakia, members of the “Jewish Center” compiled lists of the correspondents and their personal details. The youth-movement activists then copied the names and attached them to their list of candidates for “certificates.”

The direct approach adopted by the immigrants to Palestine from Slovakia seems to have worked. The Jewish Agency responded efficiently; in early August 1944, apparently, the Immigration Department sent the Palestine Office in Geneva a list of twenty Auschwitz prisoners for whom certificates had been issued and made note of the serial number of each certificate. The certificates issued to this group belonged to the series M/438/43/Yh. Sometime later the office in Geneva received another list of certificate recipients with twenty-one names - fourteen from Auschwitz and seven from



Theresienstadt - for whom certificates starting with M/438/43/H were issued.<sup>33</sup>

The certificates allocated to the Auschwitz prisoners may have been among those that had not yet been used for various reasons.

In his testimony, Chaim Pozner explained that once his office received official confirmation from Jerusalem regarding the receipt of the certificates and their numbers, he immediately sent the following letter to the candidates:

Dear Sir/Madam:

We hereby inform you that you appear on a list [number] \_\_\_\_\_ of special cases for certificates for veteran youth-movement members from Germany, and your number is M\_\_\_\_. We also inform you that this list was forwarded to the Foreign Office in London for the purpose of its transfer to the Schutzmacht, so that it may be forwarded to the German authorities for continued processing.

Respectfully, Dr. Pozner.<sup>34</sup>

It turns out that, in the matter of certificates for Auschwitz prisoners, as with the others, the institutions seem to have followed standard operating procedures, as noted above. After the lists were forwarded to the Jewish Agency for confirmation from the British administration, which would send them to London and then to Switzerland, Dr. Pozner evidently also sent similar letters to candidates among the prisoners at Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>35</sup>

The first mailing of certificate confirmations from Geneva was apparently in mid-August 1944; the second mailing was on August 25, 1944. The number of such confirmations sent by Dr. Pozner to Auschwitz is not known.

Yaakov Rosenberg's letter to Geneva on August 27, 1944 (cited above), mentions forty-one prisoners in Auschwitz and Theresienstadt for whom certificates had been issued. Evidently, confirmation of the receipt of the certificate, under Dr. Pozner's signature, was sent out for each of them at this time. Only one such confirmation has been found thus far – the confirmation given to Adolf Burger, one of the immigration-candidate inmates. Miraculously, he managed to preserve it throughout his incarceration in the concentration camp, and he has kept it to this day (see below).

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Yaakov Rosenberg to Nathan Schwalb and Heini Bornstein, August 27, 1944, MA, C.38.7/2.

<sup>34</sup> Zariz, "Rescue of Jews," p. 140; The Schutzmacht was the Swiss office that represented British interests in Germany.

<sup>35</sup> For the procedures used in issuing and forwarding certificates, see *ibid.*, p. 142.

## Sending Certificate Confirmations to Auschwitz Prisoners

In accordance with standard procedures, the certificates that had been issued for Auschwitz prisoners were sent out by the Jewish Agency. It handed over the lists of candidates to the British government, which, in turn, forwarded them to the Schutzmacht.<sup>36</sup>

As a rule, the Swiss legation in Berlin sent the lists of candidates, including the serial numbers of the certificates, to the German Foreign Ministry for “further processing.” At the German Foreign Ministry, Jewish affairs generally and this matter particularly were handled by the Inland (II A) Department. The two SS officers who headed this department, Horst Wagner and Eberhard von Thadden, were known for their close relations with the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt, Reich Security Main Office).<sup>37</sup> This chain of transmission was used to forward certificate confirmations to detainees in Bergen-Belsen and other detention camps.<sup>38</sup> Was it employed to confirm the issue of certificates for the Auschwitz prisoners as well? There is no unequivocal proof; we have only circumstantial evidence and post-factum testimonies.

Notably, the Nazis also distinguished at that time between prisoners in Bergen-Belsen and those in Auschwitz. Bergen-Belsen had been established *ab initio* as a detention camp (*Aufenthaltslager*) to which Jews who held “alien papers” were sent. The Nazis also considered these Jews candidates for civilian exchanges. Himmler himself ordered his subordinates: “Do not evacuate these Jews to the East.”<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Jews who were taken to Auschwitz were intended from the outset for extermination. Thus, the issuance of certificates for Auschwitz prisoners was plainly an exceptional case and required totally different treatment from that employed vis-à-vis Dutch Jews who had been concentrated in Bergen-Belsen.

If confirmation of the issue of certificates for Auschwitz prisoners did reach the officials at the Foreign Ministry Inland Department, one must presume that

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<sup>36</sup> See *Documents Diplomatiques Suisses* (Bern: Bentei Verlag, 1991), Vol. 13, pp. 331–332.

<sup>37</sup> *Dienstkalender*, p. 86.

<sup>38</sup> Zariz, “Rescue of Jews,” p. 141.

<sup>39</sup> Monika Gödecke, *Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen, Berichte und Dokumente* (Hannover: Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen, 1995), Document 4/1, p. 3.

they considered the matter as out of the ordinary. Some time later, it seems, the lists were forwarded for further processing to the Gestapo, which, in any case, was involved in all aspects of civilian exchanges.<sup>40</sup>

It is not clear whether the certificate confirmations that Dr. Pozner sent to Auschwitz prisoners were also sent to the competent institutions in Berlin, but it is known that they were received by mail at the office of the camp command. The confirmations were sent by registered mail (a procedure that required the addressee's signature), in each prisoner's name, to "Birkenau Labor Camp near Neuberun" (*Arbeitslager Birkenau bei Neuberun*), and the individual's serial number and/or residential block was usually added (see Appendix 2). The letters reached the camp post office and were then handed on to the Political Department, which, practically speaking, was the Gestapo's extension there. Pozner's certificate confirmations were probably also examined by the office of the censor – another arm of the Gestapo at that time – like all postal items from abroad that reached Germany. It stands to reason that the Gestapo had prior knowledge of the affair and instructed the Political Department at Auschwitz how to handle it.

The Political Department officials investigated the affair in a way that suggests that the matter of issuing certificates to prisoners confused the Nazis greatly. Especially disturbing to them was the question of where the Jewish organizations in Switzerland and Palestine had obtained detailed information about the camp, including the prisoners' names, serial numbers, and residential blocks. Above all, the SS were concerned about a leak of information from one of the best-guarded places in the Third Reich.

In order to reenact what happened after the certificate confirmations reached Auschwitz, it is necessary to trace the certificate candidates and their fates. Rosenberg's aforementioned letter, with its attached list, included the names of thirty-four Auschwitz prisoners among the forty-one certificate candidates as well as the numbers of the certificates issued for them. A review of the lists of Jewish survivors from Czechoslovakia and the relevant testimonies indicate with certainty that twenty-two of the Auschwitz prisoners listed, including

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 31–32.

seventeen women, survived.<sup>41</sup> There are no clear and unequivocal testimonies about the others. We know that several were murdered during the evacuation of the Auschwitz camp and that several others perished in the last few months of the war in other camps and in the course of death marches.

Nine survivors were located and interviewed for this article regarding the certificates' affair.<sup>42</sup> Seven of them who were shown the findings, including Rosenberg's letter of August 27, 1944 – in which their names were listed – had not heard of the affair before. Only after they internalized the information did a few of them vaguely recall some harsh experiences they had undergone in the middle of 1944, which were evidently related to the certificates story of which they were not made aware. It seems that, in the summer of 1944, most of them were summoned to the Political Department and interrogated by the SS with regard to contacts with Palestine.

Although a summons to the Political Department was a terrifying experience for any Auschwitz prisoner, the event did not seem to leave a lasting impression on the people in question. Most of the survivors did not know why they had been interrogated, had never gotten to the root of the matter, and, therefore, did not consider the episode of special importance. They regarded it as one of many schemes that the Nazis devised against the prisoners from time to time, and after the interrogators finished with them they forgot the incident.

The testimonies also show that the Political Department officials did not treat the affair in a standard way. They did not interrogate all the prisoners who were listed as certificate recipients. Lilli Sonnenfeld and Alica Reiner, for example, were not interrogated, even though they actually worked for the interrogators, i.e., the Political Department. They had not heard about the certificates' affair, even though they were well aware of events at the department and had daily access to sensitive and secret information with

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<sup>41</sup> *Register of All Persons Saved from Anti-Jewish Persecution in Slovakia*, Vol. I–III (Bratislava: American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1945).

<sup>42</sup> The survivors located were Magda (Malka) Hellinger, Malvina (Malka) Gertner, Manca-Margite Schwalb, Shoshana Schweit, Lilli Sonnenfeld, Leah Schaiowitz, Alica Reiner, Magda Cohen, and Adolf Burger.

which the department dealt.<sup>43</sup> Were they spared because they were part of the Political Department staff? The question is unanswerable.

The recollections of Auschwitz survivors for whom certificates were issued in 1944 are informative.<sup>44</sup> Those who remembered the interrogation in the summer of 1944 mentioned three SS men: Wilhelm Friedrich Boger, August Bogusch, and Anton Brose.

Magda Cohen was a member of a group of Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir girls who had been deported to Auschwitz on April 1, 1942. She recalled:

One day in the summer of 1944 I was ordered to go the Political Department. I did not know why they had called me. I was terribly frightened because every prisoner in the camp was very afraid and anxious about the department. I was received by an SS man named Boger, who interrogated me about whether I had contacts with people outside the camp and about the contents of letters I had been writing to Slovakia. It was a violent and brutal interrogation, and I was beaten. At the end, he ordered me to get out and rudely pushed me out of the office. Afterwards, they brought me back to the camp. I was in shock; I had no idea what it was about and why they interrogated me. Later on, I found out that the Political Department had interrogated other young women from Slovakia at the same time and the SS men also treated them roughly, and they, too, were beaten. I had no idea that it happened because of the certificates that had been received for us. That was unimaginable. This is the first time I've heard about it.<sup>45</sup>

Magda Hellinger, another member of Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir who had been deported to Auschwitz in the March 25, 1942 transport from Slovakia, recalled:

In the late summer of 1944 I was summoned to the Political Department and several SS men interrogated me about relatives of mine in Palestine and contacts that they said I had had with people outside the camp. The Political Department man treated me very roughly and ordered me to sign some paper ....

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<sup>43</sup> See Shelley, *Secretaries of Death*, pp. 163 ff.

<sup>44</sup> One woman survivor, Shoshana Schweit, today living in the Czech Republic, asked not to publish her testimony.

<sup>45</sup> Conversation with Magda Cohen (today Leah Horowitz), February 23, 1993.

She did not know that she had been questioned because she had been sent a certificate and did not know what document she had signed.<sup>46</sup>

Leah Schaiowitz was summoned to the Political Department and brutally interrogated by a SS man. “How do the people in Palestine know you’re in Auschwitz?” he wanted to know. She could not fathom the investigator’s thinking and did not understand what the Nazis wanted of her.<sup>47</sup>

Lilli (Leah) Sonnenfeld was deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz on July 4, 1942, and worked for the Political Department. She did not recall the receipt of certificates for Auschwitz prisoners at all. “This is the first time I’ve heard that they sent me a certificate,” she said. “I was not a member of Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir but my husband was active in the movement before the war.” Since she had not been interrogated and had not heard about the matter before, Sonnenfeld considered the whole affair unlikely. Sonnenfeld has been in close touch with woman survivors of Auschwitz for many years and asserts that none of them, in her conversations with them and in testimonies that she recorded, ever mentioned the certificates’ affair.<sup>48</sup>

Margite (Manca) Schwalb of Bratislava was a member of Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir who was deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz on April 1, 1942. In Auschwitz, she served as a physician in the infirmary of the women’s camp. Her postwar memoirs<sup>49</sup> do not mention the certificates’ affair. Only in 1994, after she was located and shown that a certificate confirmation had been sent to Auschwitz in her name, did she become aware of it.

I was ordered to go to the Political Department in the summer of 1944. All of us in the *revier* [the camp infirmary] were scared because we thought the SS discovered that we had been smuggling medicines from the infirmary to the women’s camp. I said goodbye to my friends because I thought I would not return to the camp again. At the department, I stood before an SS man who worked there and was stunned when he asked about the contents of letters I had been sending from the camp to relatives in Slovakia. He also interrogated me about Palestine and wanted to know if I had relatives there. After I claimed that I had none, he made me sign some document and let me

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<sup>46</sup> Conversation with Magda Hellinger (today Magda Blau), January 6, 1995; see also testimony of Magda Blau, MA, A.986.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in the testimony of Yosef Baumer, May 23, 1999 (in the possession of the author).

<sup>48</sup> Conversation with Lilli Sonnenfeld, January 14, 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Manca Švalbová, *Vyhasnuté oči* (Bratislava: Requiem, 1948).



go. When I was returned to the infirmary, I could not explain to my friends why I had been called to the Political Department....

I forgot about the incident over the years, and the matter didn't become clear to me until I examined the documents you showed me. Now, fifty years after the fact, I realize that somebody looked out for us and sent certificates to Auschwitz. The story is so far-fetched that it's hard to believe.<sup>50</sup>

Alica Reiner was deported to Auschwitz on March 25, 1942, in the first transport of Jewish girls from Slovakia. She was a member of a group of religious girls who were housed in the *Stabsgebäude*, outside the women's camp, and she worked for the Political Department. She related:

... I never heard a thing about this attempt. Now I'm hearing for the first time that certificate confirmations were sent to Auschwitz. I have no idea who put my name on the list of candidates. It's true that in Auschwitz I worked for the Political Department but I know nothing about certificates being sent for the camp prisoners.<sup>51</sup>

Only two of the witnesses located, Malka (Malvina) Gertner and Adolf Burger, actually recalled the affair of certificates for Auschwitz prisoners. Malka Gertner, another member of Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir, was deported to Auschwitz on March 28, 1942. She related:

In 1944, they called me to the *Stabsgebäude*, where they told me that I had received a certificate for Palestine. I was astonished. I didn't believe a word; I thought it was a trick and a crude lie. They ordered me to sign that I had received the document. The SS man who told me about this treated me reasonably, not crudely. After I signed, he burst into mighty laughter and said, "What a crazy idea." Of course he did not hand me the certificate; he didn't show it to me either. I remember the incident well, and I think I signed some document to the effect that I had received the certificate. Something similar happened to a friend of mine. She was also summoned to the *Stabsgebäude* in regard to a certificate that, they said, had been sent in her name. But the SS people treated her very badly and beat her severely. Maybe it was because she was a prisoner at Birkenau, whereas I was treated more reasonably because I was at the Rajsko Farm, where conditions were better.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Testimony of Margite Schwalb, MA, A.1596.

<sup>51</sup> Conversation with Alica Reiner, November 3, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Conversation with Malka Gertner, February 3, 1993. See also Doris Fürstenberg, *Jeden Moment war dieser Tod* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1986), pp. 160–161.

Adolf (Avri) Burger lives in Prague, and his testimony makes a decisive contribution to the reenactment of the affair. A member of Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir, he was deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz in September 1942. In May 1944, he was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp as a skilled printing worker and was attached to a labor group that produced counterfeit banknotes and miscellaneous documents. The Sachsenhausen print shop turned out, among other things, stationery headed "Palestine Office in Geneva" in Hebrew and German. The letterhead was probably copied from the confirmations that Dr. Pozner had sent to Bergen-Belsen and, perhaps, to Auschwitz. Burger says that Nazis used the papers after the war to escape from the Allies' pursuit of German war criminals.<sup>53</sup>

Confirmation of the receipt of a certificate in Burger's name was sent to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944, but by then he was already in Sachsenhausen. Evidently, however, the rules of "German order" were upheld even between the electrified barbed-wire fences of the concentration camps, and the confirmation was forwarded to Burger in Sachsenhausen. Like the women prisoners in Auschwitz, he was ordered to report to the Political Department of that camp, where, after a brief interrogation, he signed a paper confirming that he had received a document that had been handed to him. Burger had no recollection of the subsequent events and could not provide accurate details about the matters investigated. According to his testimony, the interrogation was brief and perfunctory, and when it ended a SS man informed him that liberation from the camp was out of the question. Burger kept the document throughout his internment in Sachsenhausen and, afterward, in the Mauthausen and Ebensee camps. After the war Burger published several books about his experiences in the camps and gave several testimonies, but in none of them did he mention the certificates affair.<sup>54</sup> Only in a new, 1997 edition of his book, did he add a photocopy of Dr. Pozner's letter.

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<sup>53</sup> Adolf Burger, *Unternehmen Bernhard: die Fälscherwerkstatt im KZ-Sachsenhausen* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1992), p. 166.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Burger's testimonies and publications, MA, A.293, A.332; Adolf Burger, *Des Teufels Werkstatt. Im Fälscher Kommando des KZ Sachsenhausen* (Berlin: Neues Leben, 1983); idem, *Dalšie svedectvo* (Bratislava: Naše vojsko, 1981).

letter. Even then, however, he made no reference to the affair in the book itself.<sup>55</sup>

The certificate confirmation bearing the number M/438/43/H/9, sent by Chaim Pozner on August 25, 1944, to “Adolf Burger, Birkenau Labor Camp near Neuberun,” is the only confirmation sent to Auschwitz that has been discovered thus far.

## Conclusions

Slovakian Jewry had always been noted for a well-developed sense of solidarity and a tradition of mutual assistance – both of which became even more evident during the Holocaust. The geographic location of Slovakia, between the two large Jewish communities in Poland and Hungary, and the corrupt regime that ruled the country gave Slovakian Jewry an important role to play in rescue actions. During World War II, Slovakian Jews indeed initiated several relief and rescue operations that extended beyond the country’s borders. One of these initiatives was the attempted rescue of Auschwitz prisoners by means of “certificates.”

Jews who had been deported from Slovakia to camps and ghettos in Poland also played a crucial role in this endeavor. Information about the nature of the deportations and distress signals from the deportees prompted the surviving Jews in Slovakia to spare no effort to evade deportation and, concurrently, to seek every possible way to relieve fellow Jews in the camps of their horrific distress. The same picture emerges clearly in the report by the two Slovakian Jews – Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg – who escaped from the Auschwitz extermination camp. As soon as Wetzler and Rosenberg reached Slovakia, Egon Roth, a leading figure in the Ha-Shomer ha-Za’ir underground in Slovakia, contacted Menachem Bader and Nathan Schwalb and asked them to arrange certificates for the two escapees urgently, “because it is of supreme importance for them to stay alive and give testimony about the death camp.” He sent photographs and personal details of the escapees to Switzerland and Istanbul.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Idem, *Ďáblova dílna* (Prague: Svoboda, 1991), p. 109.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Egon Roth, June 23, 1944, MA, D.1.577.

Most relief and rescue attempts initiated by Slovakian Jews have been copiously documented and covered, yet the Auschwitz certificates have never been mentioned in the literature. This episode was another rescue attempt that did not bear fruit. Still, the idea of sending certificates to Auschwitz attests to the activists' creativity, resourcefulness, and resolve in their quest for a way to rescue their brethren.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood*

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