

The Churches and the Deportation and Persecution of Jews in Slovakia Livia Rothkirchen

The Slovak People's Party, founded before World War I by the Catholic priest, Father Andre Hlinka, became a significant political vehicle in the Slovak struggle for national identity. It was actually during the period of the Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) that the Catholic clergy began to play an important role on the parliamentary and social scene. Dr. Jozef Tiso, a priest, became the leader of the Hlinka party in 1938 and then the first Prime Minister and President of newly independent Slovakia. The Slovak State, proclaimed in March 1939 "in the name of God and from the will of the Slovak nation", adopted a National Socialist program and, in fact, became a satellite of Nazi Germany. The paradox of the "National Socialist State", which boasted of being Christian as well, seemed contradictory and as such was viewed critically by the Holy See. Although the revival of Church life and the growing prestige of Catholicism were appreciated by the Vatican, the involvement of the hierarchy in state affairs "when a war is raging", was opposed by Pope Pius XII himself and criticized by certain cardinals.

Following the anti-Jewish legislation, already in the first months of Slovakia's independence, a number of restrictions were inflicted on Jews to oust them from economic life. The Jewish Codex, promulgated on September 9, 1941, containing 270 articles, was drafted largely upon the German model. Both the Catholic and Protestant churches reacted in letters of protest against the Jewish Codex; however, their sole concern was the baptized Jews. The State Secretary of the Vatican, Cardinal Luigi Maglione, expressed the grievance of the Holy See in a note of November 14, 1941, re-emphasizing the fact that a pronouncedly Catholic state was about to initiate legislation based on the principle of race which contradicted the principles of the Catholic religion.

While the Wehrmacht made its victorious advance on the Eastern Front, assisted by Slovak troops, Tiso and his Prime Minister, Voytech Tuka, visited Hitler's headquarters in October 1941. During this meeting Tuka advanced the

date of the deportation of the Jews from Slovakia. Consequently, in February 1942 the Slovak government and the German Ambassador in Bratislava concluded the agreement for the first transports of young Jewish men and women aged 16 to 35. The Slovak government agreed to pay 500 Reichsmark for every deported Jew. At the beginning of March five assembly points were set up where deportees were being concentrated before their deportation. The first transport of 999 young women left from Poprad to Auschwitz on March 26, 1942. Thereafter, transports regularly left for Auschwitz and Lublin. From the beginning of April 1942, entire families were dispatched. About 60,000 Jews were deported until October 1942, when the deportations came to a standstill.

Slovak military personnel had witnessed massacres of Jews perpetrated by the mobile killing units in the Soviet territories. Wild rumors circulated about the fate of the stateless Jews who had been deported from the former Slovak areas annexed to Hungary and who had been massacred in Kamentetz Podolsk by the SS. While the public learned of the atrocities from hearsay and from occasional references of soldiers on leave, the higher echelons were briefed officially and in detail. The chaplain of the Slovak army, informed Msgr. Giuseppe Burzio, the Apostolic delegate in Bratislava, already in late summer 1941 about the mass killings. President Tiso also was briefed by one of his generals.

When rumors of the imminent deportations reached Msgr. Burzio, he informed the Vatican and protested to Prime Minister Tuka. He then reported to Rome that Tuka saw “nothing inhumane or contrary to Christian principles” in the expulsion. The Jewish leadership launched appeals in the name of the Jewish communities and the Rabbis of Slovakia. The appeals were circulated amidst various religious and political leaders and a copy was sent to the Nuncio of Budapest, Msgr. Angelo Rotta, who in turn forwarded it to the Holy See. The plea of the Rabbis, addressed to President Tiso, implored him to consider “that in existing circumstances the deportations meant physical extermination”. The Jewish community and its leaders who had hopes of getting assistance from the Church were gravely disappointed by its indifference. Although both churches of Slovakia, the Protestant and the

Catholic, sent letters of protest against the deportation, they were concerned only with obtaining privileges for baptized Jews.

While the majority of the Catholic hierarchy supported the government's anti-Jewish polity, some leading Slovak Church representatives nevertheless spoke out in strong terms. On April 20, 1942, the Vicar of Bratislava, the Reverend Augustin Pozdech, addressed a moving appeal which reached the Vatican through the good offices of Msgr. Angelo Rotta, the Papal Nuncio in Budapest: "I am distressed to the depth of my heart that human beings whose only fault is that they were born Jews should be robbed of all their possessions and should be banished, stripped of the last vestiges of their personal freedom, to a foreign country, and, moreover, as slaves...It is impossible that the world should passively watch small infants, mortally sick old people, young girls torn away from their families and young people deported like animals: transported in cattle wagons towards an unknown place of destination, towards an uncertain future." Another appeal by Msgr. Jozef Carsky, Bishop of Presov, urged his colleagues to take decisive steps: "If we remain passive while the daughters of the Jewish people are forcibly torn from their families, what shall we do when our own maidens will be taken away?" The Greek Catholic Bishop of Presov, Msgr. Pavol (Petro) Gojdic, beseeched the Vatican in his letter of May 1942 to induce Tiso, in the interests of the Church, to resign, and have a secular statesman take over his function and thus avert impending worse evil.

The majority of the Slovak population reacted to the persecution of the Jews with complete indifference. The Catholic priests in Slovakia had an immense influence on the mainly Catholic population whose religious beliefs were deeply rooted and connected with their every-day life. In addition to anti-Semitic traditions, the Churches' unconcern was to a certain extent the outcome of Hlinka Party propaganda to the effect that if "Judo-Bolshevism" conquered Germany, the Church and religion would be destroyed. Furthermore, the fact that the head of the State was a Catholic priest, acknowledged by the Holy See, gave a priori sanction to the Government and weakened any resistance of ecclesiastical authorities. President Tiso, preaching at a holiday mass, on August 15, at Holic, declared that it was a

Christian deed to expel the Jews, since it was to the benefit of the Slovak nation to free itself of “its pests”. On this occasion he also cited Hlinka’s dictum that “a Jew remains a Jew even if he is baptized by a hundred bishops”.

A few months after the deportations came to a standstill, Minister Alexander Mach, in a speech held in February 1943, alluded to the renewal of transports. The Jewish organizations launched a protest campaign. Their appeal was brought to the knowledge of the Papal Nuncio in Istanbul, Msgr. Angelo Roncalli (later Pope John XXIII). His energetic intervention with the Vatican, together with the steps taken by the Apostolic Delegate at Bratislava, bore fruit. The Holy See intervened in vigorous terms. Msgr. Burzio, in a meeting on April 7, 1943, remonstrated with Tuka on the fate of the Slovak Jews exterminated in Poland and the Ukraine, warning him of the “verdict of history and consequences of the post-war world”. Tuka replied that he was a practicing Catholic, that he had a clear conscience and the consent of his confessor. In addition to this demarche, the Vatican expressed its condemnation of the renewal of the deportations in a note of May 5, 1943.

A pastoral letter condemning totalitarianism and anti-Semitism was issued on March 8, 1943, by the Catholic episcopate. It was read in Latin from the pulpits, but many priests modified the original text. In reality, some official Slovak circles were inclined to keep the Jews concentrated within the State rather than to expel them from the country. One has, of course, to remember that the most vociferous protests against the deportation of Jews coincided with the period that followed the German debacle at Stalingrad and the political climate created in the country by the turn of the tide of the war. Heavy losses in fighting on the eastern front and the great number of Slovak soldiers defecting to the Soviets affected many Slovak families. With the approach of the Red Army towards the frontiers of the country, the Slovak underground movement called on the people to revolt. The suppression of the uprising sealed the fate of the remaining Jews. German troops together with Hlinka Guards organised round-ups for Jews. Between October 1944 and March 1945, about 13,500 Jews were deported. The first five transports were

directed to Auschwitz and the rest were dispatched to other concentration camps in Germany.

Msgr. Burzio visited President Tiso on October 6, 1944, and begged him to spare at least the lives of the Bratislava converts concentrated for deportation. Upon the instructions of the Pope, the Apostolic Delegate delivered a grave warning to Tiso to say: “the injustice wrought by his government is harmful to the prestige of his country and enemies will exploit it to discredit clergy and the Church the world over.” Tiso remained adamant, and Burzio reported to the Vatican: “I couldn’t see a shred of compassion or understanding for the persecuted”.

In the final analysis, Tiso had been reprimanded, curbed and warned by the Holy See. The fact that Slovakia was Catholic state, headed by a clergyman made the Vatican more sensitive to its actions. Nevertheless, Dr. Tiso was not excommunicated. “Vatican diplomacy . . . was content to limit itself to the narrow confines of strictly Catholic interests, and an opportunity for a great moral and humanitarian gesture was lost”, wrote Father John Morley in his book, *Vatican Diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1945*.

Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith & Ireana steinfeldt, *The holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000. pp. 104-107