

Slovakia's Righteous among the Nations

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Slovak-Jewish relations, an important factor in the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust, were influenced in no small part by events that took place in the latter third of the 19th century. That century saw the national awakening of oppressed nations. The Slovak nation, ruled by the Hungarians for 1,000 years, was struggling at the time for its national existence. The creation of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy led in 1867 to the granting of equal civil rights to the Jews in the empire in the assumption that they would assimilate nationally and culturally into the state. At the same time the Hungarian leaders stepped up their suppression of the Slovak nation.

The integration of the Jews into the developing economic and cultural life and the continued improvement in their situation alongside the suppression of the aspirations of the Slovaks, were used by the political and church representatives of the Slovak nation to fan the flames of Jew-hatred and to blame the Jews for the difficult lot of the Slovak People. During this period many Slovak publications also addressed the existence of a "Jewish Question" in a negative sense: blaming the Jews for all of the Slovak society's ills.

During this era, one of the central reasons behind the rise of Slovak antisemitism was the economic factor. At the same time, the slogan "Svoj k svojmu," which, freely translated, means "Buy only from your own people," registered a series of "successes" in neighboring countries. However, when nationalists, using this motto, launched a campaign to persuade Slovaks to boycott Jewish-owned shops, their efforts proved unsuccessful. Perhaps the reason is connected with the Slovaks' lack of commercial ability to efficiently manage the cooperatives established to put the Jewish shops out of business. It is also possible that Slovak-Jewish relations were actually far better than the picture painted in publications disseminated during this period.

The event that had the greatest impact on Slovak-Jewish relations was the decision of the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church to enter the political arena with the creation of the Catholic People's Party (1894). A group of Slovak Catholics, headed by the priest, Andrej Hlinka (1864-1938), joined the new party in the hope that the Hungarian Catholic leaders would help them in the promotion of their nationalist goals. This was, in fact, the beginning of the future Slovak People's Party, which would play a central role in the "solution of the Jewish question" in Slovakia during the Holocaust. Already in the early stages of the party's existence, its members called themselves "Ludaks" ("l'ud" means "people"), a term that is applied to extreme Slovak nationalists to this very day.

Although Hlinka, the founder of the Slovak People's Party, never personally issued any antisemitic statements, he never objected to the vicious verbal attacks unleashed by his colleagues against the Jews or to the vitriolic antisemitic invective published in his own newspaper.

Between the two World Wars

The establishment of the Republic of Czechoslovakia atop the ruins of the Habsburg monarchy in 1918 was accompanied by a number of shock waves. The political vacuum created by the change in regime was exploited for booty. Throughout

Slovakia, with the encouragement and assistance of recently discharged soldiers who had returned to their homes, mobs attacked and looted the homes, shops and factories of Jews, irrespective of their social class.

These attacks, which continued for several weeks, generated instances of Jewish self-defense. A "Jewish Guard," numbering 160 persons, was organized in Bratislava. Most of its members were discharged soldiers. The Jewish Guard undertook the defense of the city's Jewish quarter.

The fact that the Hungarians were unwilling to accept the new Czechoslovak Republic or its borders was a major concern of the new Prague government as it sought to restore peace and order to the country. When calm returned, the Jews, the most sensitive of any ethnic group in Czechoslovakia, began to formulate a positive attitude toward the new state.

Despite its democratic character, the Czechoslovak Republic generated new reasons for antisemitic feelings in Slovakia. In the view of many Slovaks, their expectations from the new republic were being realized much too slowly and were being hampered by many obstacles. Now that they had a new political status, Slovaks attempted to attain positions in the field of commerce and in such professions as medicine and law; however, they discovered that the presence of the Jews in such economic fields was significant and was even steadily increasing. The stiff economic competition between Slovaks and Jews only intensified the friction between the two nations, it was being exploited by some politicians to feed the flames of antisemitism.

Another cause for the rise of antisemitism among Slovaks was the ideology of Czechoslovakism. The idea propagated by the founder of the Czechoslovak Republic and its first president, Tomas G. Masaryk, that the Slovaks and Czechs were two branches of a single nation led him to champion the concept of amalgamating the two ethnic groups into a single national entity through the creation of the Czechoslovakian people. The fear of the Slovaks that this process would cause them to be "swallowed up" by the Czechs – who were stronger culturally, economically and politically – initially aroused opposition among Slovak nationalists but eventually spread as well to other segments of the Slovak political spectrum. The Slovaks' essential opposition to the Czechoslovakian concept and the ease with which Jews were able to accept it created an additional arena of friction in the relationship between the two ethnic groups.

The Czechoslovak Constitution, which was enacted in 1920, granted Jews full rights. They were also recognized as a national minority and it was this recognition that gave them the right to declare their nationality as Jewish. Proponents of Zionism among Slovak Jews exercised this right in the 1921 Census in which 54 percent of the Jews of Slovakia declared their nationality to be Jewish.

As indicated in census surveys, more and more Jews were beginning to express sympathy for Slovak nationalism. Alongside the small number of assimilationists, this positive feeling was in evidence even among the ultra-Orthodox Jews, who were opposed to the Zionist movement and to Jewish nationalism in the modern sense of the term.

The two decades during which the first Czechoslovak Republic existed (1918-1938) were too short a time for the adult members of Slovakia's Jewish community to sever themselves from Hungary and from Hungarian culture. The process of severing those ties required more time than what history allotted Slovak Jewry.

The rise of a new Jewish generation whose members had a good command of the Slovak language did not put an end to the accusation that the Jews were active

participants in the promotion of Hungarian culture. The Union of Slovak Jews (Sväz slovenských židov), which advocated the integration of Jews in Slovak society, never had any chance of gaining the broad support of the Jewish public in Slovakia. This organization, whose supporters consisted primarily of Jewish university students and intellectuals, was totally rejected by the representatives of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSPP), which, after the elections of 1925, became the country's largest political party between the two world wars and which was the ruling party during the Second World War. Since the HSPP's inception, its political activities were tainted with antisemitism and the party played a major role in the sabotaging of relations between Slovaks and Jews.

Unlike the nationalist politicians and intellectuals who attempted to stir up anti-Jewish hatred, the members of Slovakia's middle and lower classes were relatively open to the idea of good relations with Jews. In day-to-day life in the country's cities, towns and villages, satisfactory and, at times, even friendly relations were formed between Slovaks and Jews. These relations remained in effect even during the persecution of the Jews by the Slovak regime in the Holocaust period and generated a not inconsiderable number of stories of rescue attempts.

Although antisemitic attitudes were openly evident almost in all of Slovakia's political parties, the HSPP was the most clearly antisemitic of all. The rise of Adolf Hitler to power only encouraged the HSPP's activities against the Prague government and against the Jews. **Nástup**, published by a group of young extremist members of the HSPP, was the first newspaper in the first Czech republic to come out openly with anti-Czech, antisemitic and anti-democratic statements.

The long-standing accusation that Socialist and Communist political parties were run by the Jews and therefore they are condemnable spread in the latter half of the 1930s and drew the leadership of the HSPP closer to the Fascist camp and to the Third Reich. This trend was expressed, for example, in the demand made in the spring of 1937 by an HSPP representative in the Prague parliament, Karol Sidor, that Slovakia and Carpatho-Rus be "cleansed" of their Jews, because they are communists. He proposed to send them to Birobidjan.

Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria in the *Anschluss* of the spring of 1938, which posed a substantial threat to the very existence of the Czechoslovak Republic, did not stop Hlinka and the leaders of his party from demanding autonomy for Slovakia. Their opposition to the Prague government, which was being continually threatened by Hitler, remained unabated. A month before the signing of the 1938 Munich Agreement, under whose terms the Third Reich annexed the Sudetenland, Hlinka died. His successor, Dr. Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest, and Hlinka's close associates exploited the republic's weakened position in order to achieve their long-cherished dream and declared Slovak autonomy even before that move was approved by the Prague government.

During the Holocaust period

Autonomous Slovakia, October 6, 1938-March 14, 1939

With the creation of an autonomous Slovakia, the HSPP became the sole ruling party. The country's other political parties – except for the leftist and Jewish parties, which were outlawed – were allowed to become part of the HSPP. The term "Strana národnej jednoty" (National Unity Party) was now added to the party's official name;

however, the addition to the party's name never became a household term among Slovaks.

In his first written political statement, the HSPP's new leader, Tiso, promised "to stand at the side of those nations which are fighting the Marxist-Jewish ideology that is sowing the seeds of violence and destruction." Although this accusation was already a cliché, it managed, under the new circumstances, to strike fear in the hearts of Slovak Jews. The establishment of the Hlinka Guard (Hlinková Garda or HG for short) and the "Defense Division of the Volunteers" of the German Minority (*Freiwillige Schutzstaffel* or FS) constituted the first real threat to the physical survival of Slovakia's Jews.

One of the prominent features of autonomous Slovakia was the focusing on the Jewish problem as an issue demanding a solution. The long-standing anti-Semitic positions of the HSPP's leaders could now be implemented. On October 11, 1938, a senior member of the new Slovak government, Ferdinand Ďurčanský promised Hermann Goering that the recently installed Slovak government would solve the Jewish problem in Slovakia along the lines of the German model.

The readiness of Slovak leaders to treat the Jews in accordance with the wishes of the new "Masters of Europe" did not ensure the integrity of their country. On November 2, 1938, the representatives of Germany and Italy decided to annex to Hungary Slovakia's southern territories. This severe blow to their national aspirations was delivered to the Slovaks in the midst of the euphoria that the nation was enjoying in the wake of the declaration of Slovak autonomy. Those responsible for this calamity were soon discovered. They were the Jews, who showed a marked preference for Hungarian culture. The reaction quickly followed.

Thousands of Jews who were without means, who were foreigners or who lacked a residence permit were brutally removed from their homes in the middle of the night on November 4. They were permitted to take only a limited quantity of belongings and were transported by truck to the Hungarian border (except for a small number of Polish citizens, who were sent to the Polish border). The evacuation was accompanied by acts of looting. The Hungarian authorities' refusal to accept the evacuees and the Slovak authorities' refusal to readmit them led to the evacuees' being transferred to the no-man's land between the two countries. The Jewish leadership in Slovakia immediately mobilized in order to help the prisoners who had to contend with the winter rains, with no roof above their heads and with no provision made by the Slovak authorities for their basic needs. Realizing after a short while that they were making a tactical mistake in this impulsive action, the Slovaks began to ease the pressure on the Jewish evacuees. They gradually released some of the evacuees, allowing them to return to their homes. Weeks of negotiations with representatives of the new Slovak regime finally led to the release of the remaining group of 650 prisoners in December 1938. Their return was made conditional upon the promise of the representatives of the Jews that the evacuees would emigrate without delay and that, until the evacuees' departure, their maintenance would be the responsibility of the Jewish community. The evacuees whose homes had already been confiscated were housed in an abandoned factory on the outskirts of Bratislava. The leaders of the Jewish community eventually managed to arrange for the emigration of some of the evacuees to British Mandatory Palestine in the spring of 1939.

The disgraceful behavior displayed by Tiso – who was now prime minister and who personally ordered that the "guilty" Jews be removed from their homes – and the brutal actions of the members of the Hlinka Guard toward the evacuees were dramatically contrasted by the reaction of the mayors of two provincial cities, Nové

Mesto nad Váhom and Banská Štiavnica. Both mayors refused to permit the uprooting of their Jewish residents. They offered various explanations for their humane motives: technical difficulties, the negative impact the deportation would have on economic life in their respective cities, and the crude behavior of some members of the Hlinka Guard.

The long-standing argument of the leaders of the HSPP regarding the need for defending the Slovak people from the exploitation and corruption of the Jews led in January 1939 to the establishment of a commission charged with the task of solving Slovakia's "Jewish problem." At mass rallies held in various cities, the enthusiastic crowds were promised that the property that the Jews "had stolen" from the Slovak nation would soon be restored to its "rightful owners." Dramatic political events – which, within a period of two months, led, in accordance with Hitler's instructions, to the creation of an independent Slovakia and to the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia by the Germans – prevented the approval of the commission's recommendations by parliament during the existence of autonomous Slovakia.

Independent Slovakia 1939-1945

On March 14, 1939, an independent Slovakia was declared according to Hitler's order. The existence of the "Jewish problem" and the need for solving it were priority items on the agenda of the Ludak regime. Its spokespersons presented it as a necessary condition for national survival. The Jews were identified not just as an alien element but also as the eternal enemy of the Slovak people.

With these steps, the seeds were sown for the destruction of Slovak Jewry. Only a month after the new state had been created, the term "Jew" was given an official definition still based on religion. Along with this step, the authorities initiated the process of restricting the number of Jews in professions such as medicine and law, removing Jews altogether from the civil service and for denying Jewish children the right to anything more than an elementary school education. The first expression of the desire to isolate the Jews from the Aryan population was the expulsion of Jewish children from the public school system.

Many Slovaks, who had been told that Jewish property would be returned to the Slovak people, eagerly awaited the day when the looting of this property could begin; however, in their view, the pace of the process of confiscation was too slow. An accelerated process of aryanization would perhaps deliver too severe a blow to the wobbly economy of the new state and the experts demanded a slow, cautious pace. The Slovaks had already begun to rob the Jews of their assets in 1939; however, this process accelerated a year later, after the Nazis had reinforced the position of Vojtech Tuka, a champion of National-Socialist ideology who, as prime minister and foreign minister, actively promoted the looting. He initiated the establishment of the Central Ministry of the Economy (Ústredný hospodársky úrad or ÚHÚ), whose function was to coordinate aryanization activities and to distance the Jews from economic and social life in Slovakia.

The Ludaks had long argued that the Jews had become affluent through their ruthless exploitation of the Slovak people and through their expropriation of its assets. The country's new rulers used this argument to justify, on the one hand, the process of aryanization as a means of returning the "stolen goods to their rightful owners" and, on the other hand, the distancing of the Jews from Slovak society as a means of defending the country's Christians from an unscrupulous enemy bent on subjugating them. The tendency of the Slovak population, which was characterized by profound

religious devoutness, to identify with such twisted interpretations, liberated many Slovaks from pangs of conscience in the face of the seemingly endless series of decrees enacted against the Jews.

The large number of anti-Jewish decrees and the pressure exerted by extreme nationalists to base all anti-Jewish legislation on Nazi Germany's Nuremberg Laws led to a revision of the decrees and to their centralization within the context of a single law. The term "Jew" was redefined – this time on a racial basis. The decrees became 270 sections of this new law, "The Legal Status of the Jews in Slovakia," which became known as the Jewish Code (*Židovský kódex*). The Code, which was approved by parliament on September 9, 1941, was welcomed by the Nazi leaders in Berlin and by Slovak radicals.

The abandonment of the religious principle in the definition of the term "Jew" and its replacement by the racist principle generated, for the first time, a protest from both the bishops of Slovakia and the Vatican. The reason the Vatican and the Slovak Bishops gave for their demand for a revision of the Jewish Code was their concern for Jews who had converted to Christianity and who might be jeopardized by the new criterion for the definition of the term "Jew." Even if President Tiso – in this function since December 1939 - might not have been personally involved in the preparation of the Code, he backed it with all his political and spiritual authority. As a Catholic priest and as the head of a state that claimed to conduct its affairs in accordance with the principles of Christianity, he did not hesitate to declare on numerous occasions that the treatment of the Jews of Slovakia was in complete compliance with the spirit of Christianity.

One of the sections in the Jewish Code authorized the uprooting of Jews from their communities. In October 1941, just one month after the Code's publication, it was decided to transfer 10,000 Jews from the capital to provincial towns. The uprooted Jews were permitted to take with them only a limited quantity of baggage. Whatever they left behind was confiscated. By March 1, 1942, 6,720 of Bratislava's 15,102 Jews had been evacuated. The agreement that the Slovak authorities reached with the Third Reich over the deportation of Jews from Slovakia ended the evacuations. Jews who had been uprooted from the cities in which they had been living for decades and in which they had formed good relations with their gentile neighbors were now highly vulnerable and exposed on the eve of the deportations from Slovakia.

Slovakia's accelerated process of aryanization by which Jews were removed from the country's social and economic life, and the liquidation of Jewish businesses turned thousands of Jews into jobless, destitute individuals. The "recruitment" of Jews into forced labor units had already begun. Even as early as the winter of 1939-40, the representatives of several Slovak cities initiated the recruitment of Jews for cleaning jobs and for the shoveling of snow from city sidewalks. For the most part, these were local initiatives of the Hlinka Guard to humiliate the Jews gratuitously.

Jews and Gypsies were removed from regular army units and, as of early 1941, were required to serve in work companies operated by the Ministry of Defense. Their lowly status was publicly expressed in their uniforms that bore no rank and which were a different color from that of the uniforms of soldiers in the regular Slovak Army. In addition, a company of gentile prisoners defined as anti-social individuals was attached to their battalion, which was referred to as the Sixth Battalion.

In the autumn of that year, work camps began to be established. Some of the local Jewish leaders, who thought that the last stage in the solution of the Jewish

problem would be deportation, supported the idea of concentrating Jews in work camps. They hoped that the economic benefit that the forced Jewish laborers would bring Slovakia would persuade the authorities to allow the Jews to continue to live within the country's borders.

The deportations of 1942

In January 1942, in the context of the agreement between Slovakia and the Third Reich, the Germans demanded that the Slovaks supply an additional 20,000 people for work assignments in the Reich. The ever-increasing reluctance of Slovaks to work in Germany led the representatives of the Slovak regime to propose to the Germans that Jewish workers be sent instead. The Germans' agreement to this idea was the first practical step in the process of the deportation of Slovakia's Jews, which was initiated by the Slovaks themselves.

On the eve of the deportations, the Jewish population of Slovakia numbered 90,000. It was obvious that this population did not include 20,000 young unmarried men fit for work; thus, the minimum age for "work" candidates was lowered from 18 to 16.

The interior ministry mobilized the transport ministry and other governmental agencies in the implementation of the deportation program. Because of the fear that, in the wake of the deportation of the younger members of the Jewish community, they would be left – even if only temporarily – with a sizeable population of elderly persons, women and children, the Slovak authorities, during the preparations for the deportation of the young Jewish workers, demanded that the Germans deport the entire Slovak Jewish population. To achieve this goal, the Slovak authorities accepted the conditions of the head of the Jewish section in the Reich Main Security Office, Adolf Eichmann: First, the Jewish deportees would lose their citizenship and, second, Slovakia would have to pay 500 RM (Reichsmarks) for each deportee.

In February 1942, leaders of the local Jewish community began receiving information that the Slovak authorities intended to begin deporting Slovak Jews to Poland. To prevent this decree from being implemented, a group of Jewish leaders initiated large-scale operations. These lobbying activities were backed by some leaders of the Roman Catholic Church and representatives of the regime who considered the deportations of Slovakia's Jews to be an inhuman act. However, the Slovak government's determination to rid the country of its Jews was naturally congruent with Nazi Germany's antisemitic policy and thwarted all of these lobbying efforts.

The letters of protest sent by rabbis and by representatives of the Jewish communities in Slovakia to Tiso, whom they addressed as a Catholic priest and as the supreme political authority in the country, proved to be of no avail. Even their warnings that the deportation of Slovak Jews to occupied Poland meant their physical extermination failed to move Tiso. The leaders of Slovak Jewry who sent the protest memorandums to Tiso had no knowledge of the nature of the Final Solution that had been conceived by the Nazis. Their prophecy of the results of the deportations as fateful was based on their knowledge of both the cruelty of the Nazis and the severe wartime conditions in occupied Poland.

The intervention of Catholic clergy on behalf of the Jews – such as the intervention by Father Augustin Pozdech and Bishop Dr. A. Jantusch and the letters of protest from the Vatican – failed to elicit any response from Tiso, who was determined to stay passive in face of the decision to deport Slovakia's Jews.

On March 26, at a session of the State Council, one of its members, Jan Balko, courageously spoke out against the deportations, arguing that they were diametrically opposed to Slovakia's economic interests, the Slovak constitution and international law. However, his statements produced no practical results. The Slovak minister of the interior, Alexander Mach, who was also present at this session, persuaded those present that Slovakia must not allow itself to pass up this "historic opportunity to rid itself once and for all of its Jews." Some of the council's members managed to ease their "tortured" consciences with the proposal that the Slovak president generously issue exemption permits (that is, exemption from deportation); these permits were granted primarily to Jews who had converted to Christianity.

As the State Council members debated the issue, the first transport of 1,000 young Slovak Jewish women had already reached Auschwitz. The brutal treatment that members of the Hlinka Guard meted out to these women while they were still in Slovakia was only a prelude to the dehumanization these Slovak Jewish women would undergo in Auschwitz. A few months after their arrival there, they became the first female inmates of the death camp of Birkenau.

On April 11, even before the deportation of the 20,000 young Slovak Jewish men and women and after 8,500 of them had already been sent to Auschwitz and Maidanek, the Slovaks began the deportation of entire Jewish families. The transports of young Jews included those who had passed medical examinations and had been proclaimed fit for work. In contrast, the families who were deported for "work" assignments included the sick and the elderly, as well as children.

The Slovak authorities justified the deportation of entire Jewish families on "humanitarian" grounds: The families would be "resettled" and would be reunited with their younger members who had been deported earlier. In practice, however, the exact opposite occurred: Once the families arrived in Poland, most of them were divided into separate groups of men and women.

The Deportation Bill, approved by the Slovak parliament on May 15, 1942, authorized the deportation of Jews from Slovakia, with the exception of "vitaly needed persons" who had been issued exemption permits and Jews who had converted to Christianity prior to March 14, 1939.

News of the deported Jews' difficult situation began to reach Slovakia in the summer of 1942 (nothing was yet known of the mass, systematic exterminations) and increased resistance to the deportations – among both Slovak Jews and the more moderate members of the Slovak regime. In an attempt to escape the deportations, thousands of Jews fled to Hungary, sought the shelter of hiding-places, or obtained baptismal certificates dated prior to March 14, 1939. In churches throughout Slovakia, priests displayed profound understanding for the plight of the persecuted Jews.

The moderates in the Slovak leadership began demanding that the continuation of the deportations be made conditional upon a visit by a Slovak delegation to the "resettlement colonies" of the deported Jews. In August, this demand and the difficulties involved in hunting down "unprotected" Jews led to a slowdown in the pace of the deportations.

In a mass religious rally held that same month in the city of Holič to celebrate the upcoming Harvest Festival, President Tiso justified the deportations of the Jews on the grounds that it was the very essence of Christianity to rid the Slovak nation of its enemy. Thus, in the latter half of September, the Slovaks dispatched two additional transports. The deportation of mentally ill persons who had been forcibly removed from psychiatric hospitals on October 20 was the final act in the process of

deportations for 1942. That year, 58,000 Jews were deported. Of these, only a few hundred survived the war.

Well-informed senior civil servants told Jewish leaders that the suspension of deportations would continue until the spring of 1943. The declaration by the interior minister to a group of HG officers in February 1943 that the deportations would soon be resumed stunned local Jewish leaders. The country's Catholic bishops reacted to this new initiative with a pastoral letter that, with cautious and indirect phrasing, came out in defense of Slovakia's Jewish citizens. On March 21, the letter was read out in all Catholic churches throughout the country. Even the Vatican's opposition was more energetic than it had been in the past. Moderate Slovak leaders opposed the invalidation of the exemption permits because they saw this move as a death sentence. All of this activity thwarted the plans of extremists to resume the deportations in the summer of 1943. In the waning months of that year, the Germans, for the first time, applied pressure on the leaders of the Slovak regime to complete the solution to the Jewish question. The leaders of Slovakia were no longer eager to respond to this demand.

The reports of Nazi atrocities among the persecuted groups in German-occupied countries and the improved position of the Allies on the various fronts began to have an impact on the Slovak public, which had, up until now, tended to support the Ludak regime. Underground organizations determined to topple the regime now started springing up. The atmosphere in Slovakia in the summer of 1944 was charged with the anticipation that a national uprising would soon break out against the government. Jews also participated in the preparations for the uprising.

In the forced labor camp of Novaky, an underground group arose as early as the fall of 1942 in reaction to the "completion" of the transport of September 21 (Yom Kippur on the Jewish calendar) by the inclusion of residents of the camp who had been promised that they would be "protected" from deportations. The members of the underground group vowed that they would resist any further attempt to deport those who shared their fate and, at the same time, they made preparations for an uprising intended to topple Slovakia's Fascist regime. The disbanding of the Sixth Battalion in the summer of 1943 and the transfer of its conscript soldiers to various concentration points brought some 100 sturdy young men to Novaky. They would be an important nucleus in the fighting unit that would take part in the uprising.

In the spring of 1944, as the Red Army drew closer to Slovakia's eastern border, partisan operations increased. Succumbing to pressure from high-ranking officers in the Wehrmacht, the authorities in Bratislava ordered the Jews in eastern Slovakia to evacuate and to move toward the western part of the country by May 15. The decree, for a limited period of time, did not apply to, on the one hand, physicians and pharmacists – because of the shortage of these service-deliverers – and, on the other, mixed marriages. Even among the Jews who were ordered to evacuate, there were those who decided not to obey the evacuation order, because they realized that the further they would be from eastern Slovakia, the further they would be from the much-longed-for day of liberation. They utilized their good relations with their gentile neighbors to hide in their neighbors' homes or in nearby forests. Their assumption was proven correct: Eastern Slovakia was liberated a few months earlier than western Slovakia.

The deportations of 1944 and 1945

The Wehrmacht's entry into Slovakia on August 29, 1944, sparked the declaration of the Slovak national uprising on that very same day. The gates of the forced labor camps were opened and many of the inmates, confused and bewildered, tried to reach communities that were under the control of partisans. They especially wanted to reach the capital of the uprising, Banská Bystrica. Paratrooper Haviva Reik, who had been sent there from Palestine together with her colleagues, played a key role in helping them to organize in their new surroundings. The Jewish unit from Novaky reported to the nearest Slovak military base. In the early hours of the uprising, the members of the unit were assigned the task of blocking the advance of the German troops. Their courageous fighting won them a commendation from the commander of the front. On an individual basis, Jews joined various fighting units, on some occasions under a borrowed Aryan identity.

Officially, the uprising was suppressed two months after it broke out. Fighting units that had survived and which included Jewish members retreated from the territories that had been reoccupied and took to the mountains. These units continued fighting the German enemy until Slovakia's liberation.

Approximately 1,600 Jews played an active role in the uprising and some 170 of them fell in the fighting. The Germans' entry into Slovakia boded evil for the Jews who had survived the deportations of 1942. Those Jews who had managed to reach the areas under the partisans' control knew that, with the suspension of the movement of the eastern front, the rebels would not be able to hold out for very long. Thousands of persons sought shelter in the rebel stronghold, the city of Banská Bystrica. They were confused and had no resources for subsistence at their disposal.

A few days after the fugitives' arrival in Banská Bystrica, the German invaders – in cooperation with units of armed storm troopers of both the Hlinka Guard and the German minority's *Heimatschutz* – began to hunt down Jews and to concentrate them in the Sered forced labor camp, which had recently been converted into a concentration camp. The Germans took the solution of the Jewish question out of the Slovaks' hands and all the "protection permits" issued by the Slovak authorities and all the baptismal certificates were declared null and void. The principal event in the Germans' hunting down of the Jews was the intensive manhunt that was conducted to capture Jews in the Slovak capital, Bratislava. In the campaign, which began on the night of September 28, 1944, the day after the Yom Kippur fast, the Germans, employing a decoy stratagem and a large number of troops, arrested some 1,800 Jews before dawn.

The capture of the majority of Slovakia's Jewish leaders, together with 1,800 Jews of Bratislava, brought to an end all the efforts to rescue Slovak Jews from the fate of deportation. The money that had been accumulated for rescue operations was passed on to the members of an underground group, which had been formed in Bratislava. The Jewish leadership had now ceased to exist. The top items on the agenda of the "new people at the stern" were to uncover Jews who were in hiding and to help them with cash and false papers "authenticated" with all the necessary (false, of course) official stamps.

A central member of this Jewish group, Arnold-Bumi Lazar, used the apartment of Antonia-Tonka Vlková*, who would later be recognized as one of the Righteous Among the Nations, to hold meetings with Jews who were in hiding and who were in desperate need of funds and to hide documents, false official stamps, and cash. The welcome activities of the members of the Jewish underground are referred to in a number of the rescue tales recounted in this book.

The transport that left the Sered concentration camp on September 30 for Auschwitz marked the end of the two-year suspension of deportations. The intervention of various outsiders who pleaded with President Tiso to prevent the deportation of the last remnants of Slovak Jewry again proved to be of no avail. Tiso, who, to his very last day, remained loyal to his German allies, turned a deaf ear to these cries for help.

Despite their awareness of the fact that the deportations meant terrible suffering and death, some Jews decided to remain in their homes – whether because there was a shortage of hiding-places or whether because there were other obstacles standing in their way. The presence of the Germans in their country frightened many Slovaks and led them to refuse to open their door when a persecuted Jew, seeking assistance, happened to knock on it. Some of the Jews chose to hide in bunkers in the mountains or forests, in the hope that the war was drawing to an end. With the arrival of winter, their suffering became almost unbearable. A shortage of funds and the difficulty in finding food forced some of these Jews to risk their lives by emerging from their bunkers and, in a number of cases, to give themselves up to the authorities.

On October 27, 1944, the partisans' last bastion, Banska Bystrica, fell to the German invaders. The warriors who had managed to survive and many Jews who had resided in this city escaped to the mountains seeking the shelter of fortified hiding-places. The Germans and their local collaborators began to "cleanse" the area of both opponents of the regime and Jews. Some of those whom the Germans and their collaborators had managed to capture were executed in Kremnička. After the war, some 747 bodies were found there. Of these murdered victims, 211 were women and 58 were children. More than half the victims were Jews. This mass grave, one of many in Slovakia, has become a symbol of the massacres that were carried out with the suppression of the Slovak national uprising.

The manhunt for Jews who had gone into hiding continued until the very last days of the war. Many of those who had sought the shelter of the mountains and who were discovered were murdered on sight or were executed after having been sent to prison. Between September 30, 1944 and March 31, 1945, some 11,000 Jews were deported from Slovakia and only half of them survived the war. Hundreds of Jews were murdered on Slovak soil.

Despite the vicious terror that was unleashed in Slovakia during the last months of the war, some 11,000 Jews succeeded in saving themselves on Slovak soil. This is, of course, only a rough estimate because we will never know the precise number of Jews who fell victim or who were rescued. None of those Jews who were saved could have escaped death without the help, in one way or the other, of a non-Jew. Some of the Jews who were rescued owe their lives to the 375 Slovak Righteous Among the Nations whose names are presented in this book. (That figure is correct as of December 31, 2000.)

Help for the persecuted Jews

A portion of the religiously devout Slovak population, including priests from the country's various churches, found it impossible to accept the position of President Tiso, namely, that the persecution and deportation of the Jews were congruent with the principles of Christianity.

The brainwashing to which the Slovak public was exposed for many years and according to which the Jews had accumulated their wealth by exploiting the Slovak

nation had a major impact on the thinking of Slovaks, most of whom tended to accept the regime's thesis that the confiscation of Jewish assets was simply the restoration of stolen property to its rightful owners. The official explanation that the deported Jews were merely being sent to labor assignments managed to assuage the consciences of the few Slovaks who were very concerned about the deportations. However, reports on the fate of the deported Jews began to filter through in various ways to Slovakia. The leaders of the Slovak Jewish community made sure that these reports reached both moderate officials in the Slovak regime and representatives of the Catholic Church. This information also found its way to members of the Slovak general public and stunned those citizens who were seriously disturbed over the persecution of the Jews. The identification of evil with Nazi Germany and the improved fortunes of the Allies on the front led a number of Slovaks to do some serious soul-searching. One of the indications of this changed mood was the increase in the number of Slovaks prepared to help the Jews when the deportations were renewed.

Among the Jews as well, attitudes began to change when the deportations were resumed in September 1944. However, even during the first wave of deportations, the authorities were forced to carry out manhunts in order to capture their victims. The Jews' resistance increased during the last few months of 1944. The ever-growing number of Allied military successes, the assumption that the war would soon be over and the encouragement that was generated by the changed attitudes among a segment of the Slovak population provided many Jews with the incentive to carry out actions to save themselves. Finding themselves in extreme distress, Jews did not hesitate to knock on the doors of non-Jewish acquaintances or strangers in order to seek help. Those Slovaks who opened their doors to the persecuted Jews at times faced a serious dilemma to which they were forced to provide an immediate reply. It should be recalled that, at the time that persecuted Jews sought help, posters throughout Slovak communities issued the stern warning that persons offering shelter to Jews would be executed.

Who were these individuals who agreed to save the Jew who had knocked on their door? They were neither saints nor warriors who felt no fear. They were ordinary citizens from all walks of life: farmers and artisans; physicians and the former patients of Jewish physicians; religious and secular people; priests and Communists; close and distant neighbors; friends and total strangers; grocers who agreed to provide food on credit to Jews who had gone into hiding and who had run out of money; and servants, maids and caretakers who were once employed by Jews. This, of course, is only a partial list.

There were also cases in which romantic relations existed between rescuer and rescued who chose to ignore racist decrees. In some instances, these relations led to the birth of children who were the products of a forbidden love (by the Nazis' standards).

Some of those who provided an immediate, positive reply to persecuted Jews desperately in need of help were people who had few years of schooling but who, in a considerable number of cases, had magnanimous souls. In view of their immense quantity of humanity, they have become symbols of moral courage in the midst of incredible evil. Not all those who opened their door to a persecuted Jew were aware what they were taking upon themselves when they brought this unfortunate individual into their home. Some of them later regretted their act because they were unable to bear the immense pressure that inevitably accompanied such acts of rescue. On the other hand, some rescuers agreed to provide this person with shelter for one night only. That was a great deal during this period when any moment could be a fateful

one for a persecuted Jew. However, once they heard the hardships of Jews who were being so severely persecuted, Slovaks who were willing to provide only one night's shelter took these Jews under their wing until Slovakia's liberation.

This category of rescuer includes the members of the Černák* family of the village of Majeričky. Their home became a warm shelter for the members of the Altmann family and for a married couple, the Kleins. After seemingly endless wanderings and after their desperation had reached rock-bottom, the Altmanns and the Kleins knocked on the door of the Černák home. Although they were promised shelter for only one night, they ended up staying with the Černáks for several months until the liberation.

Unique testimony regarding the degree to which rescuers were willing to sacrifice themselves can be found in those cases where the initiative for rescue came from the rescuer, who, in some instances, did not even know the Jew who so urgently needed rescuing. The appearance of a rescuer who, in a moment of immense despair, stretched out a hand to save a persecuted Jew was, in the eyes of those Jews who were in great distress, akin to the appearance of an angel sent from heaven. This was how a former patient of long standing, Julia Gašparová*, appeared in the eyes of Dr. Jozef Martonovič and his wife, when the two sat in their Bratislava apartment and debated where they could hide in the face of the massive, frightening manhunt of the Jews. Aware of the dangers facing the Jews with the German invasion of Slovakia, Gašparová, on her own initiative, went to the Martonovic home and transferred the astonished couple to shelter. The Jews whose lives she had saved survived the war.

When members of the HG forced Jakob Bachner, an elderly Jew with a limp, to run with the members of his large family and other Jews to the valley of death in Kremnička, he collapsed and fell. They left him behind. When partisans found him at dawn, they transferred him to a hospital in Banská Bystrica. Dr. Daniel Petelen*, who treated Bachner for a broken leg, knew that a deadly fate awaited his patient outside the hospital's doors. After having treated the broken leg, Petelen had Bachner placed in a room above whose door appeared the sign "Danger: Typhus!" Bachner remained in this shelter until his liberation.

Michal Majerčík* of Žilina displayed a special brand of resourcefulness. At the end of his workday, he saw a member of the HG standing in front of the entrance to the apartment building in which Majerčík lived. As he ascended the staircase, he heard a plaintive beg. Another member of the HG was leading a man, a woman and a little girl. The man was pleading with the HG member to release the little girl whose father was in Bratislava. The Hlinka Guard was unwilling to let the girl go. Majerčík remained in his apartment and kept the door ajar. As the arrested Jews began to descend the staircase of the apartment building with the few belongings they had been allowed to take with them, their guard was busy locking the door and sealing off their apartment. Majerčík grabbed the little girl's hand and brought her into his apartment. He placed his hand on her mouth, telling her not to let out any screams and explaining to her that he wanted to save her. The child, Janka Hetty Fisch, was not found when the apartment was meticulously searched following the discovery of her disappearance. She survived the war.

Admittedly, there are not many tales in which the rescue was initiated by the rescuer, perhaps because there were few situations in which such an initiative was even possible. Nonetheless, the "value" of a rescue is not diminished by the fact that it was initiated by the rescued individual. The degree of danger faced by the rescuer was the same, regardless of where the initiative came from.

Among some of the rescuers, their having saved another person from death became the crowning achievement of their lives. This is what happened in the case of Maria Minárová*, who rescued two children of the Mauskopf family, who had resided in Nitra. The children were brought to Minárová by their father. Her husband was opposed to the idea of the children being concealed in their home and his objections increased after the children's parents, siblings and other relatives were arrested and deported. However, Maria's home was her castle. She resisted her husband's pressure and saved the children. Decades later, when the two children, as adults, visited their rescuer, they were astonished to learn that the story of their rescue had become a legacy that Maria passed on to her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who were familiar with every detail. The story had become a family saga that was transmitted from one generation to the next.

The rescue of a child sometimes created a special relationship between rescuer and rescued, particularly when the rescuer was a woman. As a young girl, Alica Szuran-Geist of Malacky lost both parents and all her close relatives in the waning months of the war. When she visited her rescuer Maria Pekarovicova in the 1980s, she was visibly shaken by the sentence that she heard from the old woman who had rescued her and who was very excited to see her: "I have waited 40 years for this moment."

Lidia Breder was three years old when her grandfather held her in his arms during the execution of a large group of arrested Jews near the village of Kšinná. The grandfather was resourceful enough to throw himself and his granddaughter to the ground before a bullet hit them. This resourcefulness saved their lives. After the shooting and cries had stopped, the grandfather asked a Slovak couple, Mr. and Mrs. Šenkeri*, in the nearby village of Uhrovec to see to Lidia's welfare. When Breder visited her rescuer in 1990, she was very surprised to discover that the couple had named their daughter, who was born after the war, Lidia, in order to fill the vacuum that was created when Breder left their home.

Not all the Slovaks who deserve praise for their noble actions during the Holocaust have been included in the family of the Righteous among the Nations. The Langer family, who resided in the village of Ardanovce and who, like their non-Jewish neighbors, made a living from farming, did not go into hiding in the fall of 1944 when the second wave of deportations began. During one of the searches conducted in the village, all the villagers were ordered to emerge from their homes so that the searchers could determine whether Jews had found shelter there. None of the villagers revealed to the troops the Jewish identity of the Langers. Thanks to these simple farmers, the Langers spent the hardest period in their own home and did not have to go into hiding. No one ever informed on them.

A similar pattern of behavior was demonstrated by the residents of the village of Jarok in the Nitra district. Nearly all the villagers in Jarok knew that Jews were hiding in the wine pits on the village's outskirts. Many of the farmers contributed food to the Jews who were in hiding and who were totally without means of support. The Tokoly* family residing in the village adopted and befriended the Jews and provided them with additional vital services. The local priest, Dr. Štefan Galló*, encouraged the villagers to behave in a humane manner. In his sermons, he urged his congregants to assist the persecuted Jews. He himself was also one of those who gave them food. In addition, he rescued several Jews by hiding them in his home. All the villagers concealed the secret of the Jews who were hiding in their midst.

When a Jewish partisan, Karol Neufeld – who later changed his name to Akiva Nir – was arrested in the village of Nolcovo during a search conducted there by the

Germans, he was told to stand with his back to the wall before the villagers until the elderly head of the village could identify him. When the officer in charge of the search asked the village leader, "Who is this man?" Nir himself was astonished by the answer: "He's my grandson!" The rifle barrel that had been aimed at Nir's chest was lowered and none of the other villagers uttered a word.

One of the nameless non-Jewish women who sheltered the Berner family of Presov was ordered to join the transport when the Berners were arrested. The train set off for Ravensbrueck in November 1944. Along with the deported Jews were Aryans with a "low security classification." Mrs. Berner and her daughter shared the same plank as their benefactress in one of the camp's barracks. They never heard her complain even once that they were to blame for her being sent to such a place where hardship was always present. As a widow and as a mother who had lost her only daughter, she was not afraid of death. She herself perished, and the people she had sheltered survived the war.

Special mention should be made of the priests of various Christian denominations who spoke out on behalf of the persecuted Jews and who even helped in rescue efforts. In sharp contrast with Tiso's declarations that the persecution of the Jews complied with the spirit of Christianity, they regarded this persecution as the very abandonment of the principles of their faith. In line with their belief that the saving of human lives was an important Christian principle, they acceded to requests for baptismal certificates, opened up the orphanages they ran to Jewish children and urged their congregants to help the persecuted Jews.

One such priest was Father Vladimir Kuna*. In the orphanage he operated in Liptovský Svätý Mikuláš, 26 Jewish children found refuge at various periods during the war. Many of them were removed from the orphanage by their parents on the eve of the uprising and their removal proved fateful for them. Father Kuna, who lived to a ripe old age, was very moved by the esteem and love expressed by some of those Jewish children whom he rescued and who used to visit him.

Aware that the baptism was being forced upon those who requested it, some priests suggested that those Jews who were being baptised under such circumstances regard the baptism as a means of saving their lives and that, after the war and as free individuals, they could decide what religious faith to adopt. A statement in this spirit was made by Father Jan Bakoss during a group baptism in which Eli Mende and his family took part. Father Bakoss refused to make peace with the Fascist regime. His assistance to the participants in the uprising led to his being executed in January 1945.

Those priests who had a strong conscience believed that assistance to the persecuted Jews was in compliance with Christianity's principles and was even one of its fundamental precepts.

One young rescuer (aged 17) who married shortly before giving shelter to a number of persecuted Jews, conscientiously saw to the welfare of these persons whom her husband had taken in. Nonetheless, influenced by what was being said in the media, she felt pangs of conscience and was worried that she was undermining the foundations of her Christian country. She confessed her "sin" to her priest, who told her that she was doing the right thing and that her behavior was congruent with her Christian faith.

Nature's laws could not be denied even during this era when decrees contrary to both nature and the universe created by God were being issued. Jews died while in hiding and their rescuers were forced to bury them. The rescuers arranged a temporary

burial in their backyards and awaited the day when these Jews could be given a decent burial.

After the war, many Holocaust survivors took up residence in the New World. The difficulty of integrating in their new country and a desire to suppress memories of the Holocaust prevented, in many cases, the establishment of orderly contact between rescuer and rescued. The Iron Curtain that fell on the bloc of Communist countries in Europe deterred some rescuers from correspondence with the persons whom they had saved and who were living in the West. However, as time passed, both sides became increasingly interested in a meeting. Among the survivors, there was also the feeling that they should personally express their gratitude to their rescuers. The collapse of Communism led many survivors to visit their former hiding-places and to establish a close relationship with their rescuers.

One of those survivors was Eva Fono (née Galandová; born in 1936). When she arrived at the village of Abraham, she was saddened to learn that the persons who had rescued her and her parents were dead. With the help of the head of the village (where the story of their rescue took place), Fono initiated an educational project to commemorate her benefactors. Under her direction, local youths annually write compositions on the Holocaust and antisemitism. The purpose of the compositions is to increase the awareness of the young people in the village regarding this chapter in history and to enable them to express admiration for those members of their nation who rescued persecuted Jews during the Holocaust.

When rescuers were asked by the persons they rescued or by the children of the rescued what were the motives for their action, most of them replied that this was the way any human being should act and that they did so because of their deep Christian commitment.

The persecution of Slovakia's Jews and their deportation to a horrible death are a blot on the history of the Slovak nation and a moral blemish that will remain forever. Those Slovak citizens who wanted to make some amends for their nation's ghastly sin were the initiators of the decision that September 9 would be Holocaust Day in Slovakia. This was the date in 1941 when the Slovak authorities published the Jewish Code, which formally completed the process of the degradation of Slovakia's Jews and which provided the rationale for the deportations.

The deeds of the rescuers were the few lights that shone in this era of moral darkness. It is our hope that they will also serve as an example to be used by the educators of future generations, so that light will triumph over darkness in the coming years.

(from the Lexicon of the Righteous Among the Nations, Yad Vashem, 2007)