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Jewish Experiences and New Encounters in Slovakia

A visible and stable Jewish life in Slovakia was first established in the second half of the nineteenth century by Jews emigrating from Bohemia, Moravia, Austria, and Poland. Jewish pluralism developed in many European countries during that time period, and Slovakia was no exception. Apart from traditional Orthodox communities, Neolog communities were founded – a form of modernized religious Jewry in central eastern Europe – influenced by the Neolog movement in Hungary. Traditional Jewry had been flourishing decades earlier, partly due to the charismatic Rabbi Moses Schreiber (1762–1839), better known as Moshe Sofer (Chatam Sofer). Sofer created his own Orthodox school (Yeshiva) in Pressburg (after 1918 Bratislava) and became a mentor for thousands of young Talmud and Tora students. Some historians argue that Moshe Sofer's Yeshiva was the most influential Jewish space in central Europe until World War II.[1]

Following Jewish emancipation in 1896, many Jews adopted the Hungarian language and customs to advance in society. Many Jews moved to cities and learned professions; others remained in the countryside, mostly working as artisans, merchants, and shopkeepers.[2] Jews gradually created the middle class that the Slovaks did not have, while antisemitism continued to grow. Jew-hatred continued to grow, especially on the Christian side, and lined with typical stereotypes ("Jews murdered Christ"), on an economic level ("Jews exploit Slovaks"), and on the national level ("Jews are not Slovaks, they speak Yiddish, Hungarian, German"). After the First World War and unifying Czechoslovakia as an independent state, anti-Jewish riots broke out in the Slovak part of the new State. However, these riots quickly ended. The democratic and parliamentary Czechoslovak Republic gave the Jews all civil and political rights. The Jews accepted Czechoslovakia as their state. They could also apply for Jewish nationality.

1 https://www.aish.com/jl/h/48956361.html (accessed December 15, 2021).

2 Barbara Hutzelmann (2018), "Einführung: Slowakei" [Introduction: Slovakia], in *Slowakei, Rumänien und Bulgarien* [Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria]. *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland* [The persecution and murder of European Jews by National Socialist Germany], ed. Barbara Hutzelmann, Mariana Hausleitner, and Souzana Hazan (München, 2018), S. 18 f.; furthermore: Thomas Lorman, *The Making of the Slovak People's Party: Religion, Nationalism and the Culture War in Early 20th-Century Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 47/48.

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However, during the 1930s, antisemitism increased again, now fostered by economic Judeophobia during the Great Depression and steered by the politics of the Nationalist Hlinka's Slovak People's Party. During the Czechoslovak Republic, this party never won more than one third of the votes in Slovakia in democratic elections. The party then merged with several other nationalist ones in November 1938 and finally became like the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party – Party of Slovak National Unity, the dominant political body of the Slovak State. Spiritual mentors and party chairmen Andrej Hlinka (chairman from 1913–38) and later Jozef Tiso (chairman from 1939–45) became Slovak *priests*. Under Tiso,[3] Slovakia remained unoccupied in the early 1940s, while the State became a close ally of Nazi Germany,[4] a dictatorship, and collaborated with Germany until the end of the war in 1945. From then on, antisemitism became state politics, not only resulting in the exclusion of Jews from social life. Under Tiso, Slovak authorities went as far as offering "financial compensation" to Nazi Germany for the deportation of Slovak Jews.[5] These deportations continued into the fall of 1944 after German troops occupied Slovak territory to quash the Slovak National uprising. During World War II, German and Slovak authorities deported more than 70,000 Jews from Slovakia, many of them ending up in the Nazi death camps in occupied Polish territory. Precise figures are still unclear, but it is estimated that from the Jewish-Slovakian population, which counted 136,000 people before the war, between 68,000 and 100,000 were killed.[6]

After World War II, the number of Jews in Slovakia was estimated at 25,000. At that time, many of the remaining Slovak Jews decided to emigrate, even more so after the communist takeover in February 1948 and – just a few months later – the declaration of the State of Israel. Israel became the safe haven, but a considerable number of Slovak Jews also managed to emigrate to the USA. During the communist period, lasting from early 1948 until 1989, organized Jewish life steadily de-

3 See: Eduard Nižňanský, "Die Vorstellungen Jozef Tisos über Religion, Volk und Staat und ihre Folgen für seine Politik während des Zweiten Weltkrieges." in *Religion und Nation: Tschechen, Deutschen und Slowaken im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Kristina Kaiserová, Eduard Nižňanský, Martin Schulze-Wesel (Essen: Klartext, 2015), s. 39–82; James Mace Ward, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

4 See "Treaty of Defence between Germany and Slovakia," in *Eduard Nižňanský, Slowakisch-deutsche Beziehungen 1938–1941 in Dokumenten I* (Prešov: Universum, 2009), S. 304–306.

5 See Ivan Kamenec, *On the Trial of Tragedy. The Holocaust in Slovakia* (Bratislava: H&H, 2007); Eduard Nižňanský and Katarína Psicová, *Antisemitismus und Holocaust in der Slowakei in Dokumenten deutscher Provenienz von 1938 bis 1945* (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum SNP, 2021).

6 David M. Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 447.

clined, additionally hindered by aging, assimilation, and the hostile politics of the regime against any religious life and activities.

Only with the peaceful revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 (and Slovak independence in 1993) were some religious and cultural Jewish structures re-constructed and renewed, though – as we witnessed in our series of expert interviews – by protagonists with a long breath and prodigious self-confidence. In terms of identity, some Slovakian Jews today identify as religiously Jewish while others as ethnically Jewish, with the former outweighing the latter. Most recently, religious observance seems to be on the rise – children and youth of mixed marriages are also returning to the community and studying Judaism. Today, Bratislava and Košice have active, Orthodox synagogues: the Heydukova Street Synagogue in Bratislava and the Pushkinova Street Synagogue in Košice. Kosher food is available in Bratislava and Košice, but almost impossible to find elsewhere in the country.[7]

Agreeing that a Jewish future in Eastern Europe can only be built on a very solid educational foundation, starting with early age groups, the Ronald Lauder Foundation has opened a Kindergarten (Lauder Gan Menachem) in the Slovakian capital. The globally active Chassidic movement Chabad Lubavitch has also been running an enlarged educational center in the heart of Bratislava's historic Old Town since 2000, including a Hebrew school named "Tora Or" (Light of the Tora).[8] However, the rebuilt and newly established structures of Jewish life in Slovakia, formerly home of vibrant, dynamic, and self-confident Jewish communities in several cities of the country, still appear as kind of "a drop in the bucket."

Due to limited capacity, our interview sample in Slovakia exclusively concentrated on a half dozen interviewees, most of them Jewish functionaries and intellectuals, but with perceptibly varying world views and at least gradual deviations regarding their perspectives on a Jewish future in the country. The Jewish interviewees revealed a clear awareness of demographic weakness and limited future prospects for the very small Jewish communities in the country, which is not surprising when considering that today's Slovak-Jewish population is no more than 2,600 in number,[9] most of them living in Bratislava and in smaller Jewish communities in Košice, Prešov, Banská Bystrica, Zvolen, Žilina, and Nové Zámky.

To commemorate the murdered Jewish population, a number of monuments and commemorative plaques, including plaques with the names of the murdered

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7 World Jewish Congress, Slovakia, accessed on December 15, 2021, https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/SK.

8 https://www.chabadslovakia.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/584089/jewish/Hebrew-School-Tora-Or.htm (accessed May 22, 2023).

9 Institute for Jewish Policy Research/JPR, Slovakia, accessed December 15, 2021, www.jpr.org.uk/country?id=294.

Jews, were erected. At the Jewish cemetery in Zvolen there is a list of Holocaust victims and in front of the cemetery there is a monument to Slovaks who helped Jews during the Holocaust and were awarded the "Righteous Among the Nations" award. Every year, the names of not only the Jewish victims but also the Slovaks who saved them are read there. September 9 (the adoption of the racial so-called Jewish Code from 1941) is a memorial day of the Slovak Republic.

The Jewish interview partners were encouraged to describe how they currently experience and see organized Jewish life in the country, what makes their individual Jewish identities distinct, and how they consider Jewish/non-Jewish relations in Slovakia today. We also asked about their experiences with antisemitism, and to what extent old-new antisemitism might affect their individual lives, and the day-to-day lives of the local Jewish communities. Sharing biographical experiences was welcomed, so some interviewees gave insight into specific life experiences.

Surprisingly, almost all of the interview partners were carefully optimistic about Jewish issues. They are certainly aware of the community's tiny size (compared to before World War II), and nowadays they face problems similar to most other diaspora communities in Europe: aging, secularization in the younger generations, trends of assimilation, declining interest in Jewish issues, and a lack of sufficient infrastructure, at least in smaller cities.

On the other hand, our interview partners, especially those with special functions in the Bratislava community, expressed a resolute and active pragmatism ("to make the best of it"), proudly raised the flag, and committed to *not* departing from Jewish traditions, personhood, and community activities.

Slovak Jews feel foremost like *Slovak citizens* and secondly as ethnic or religious Jews, and they obviously feel well integrated into the non-Jewish majority society. Actual trends and incidents of antisemitism are carefully noticed, but not considered an existential threat. Critical attention is paid rather to growing nationalism and historical revisionism. Our non-Jewish interview partners shared similar concerns regarding growing nationalism, but also referred to a vibrant Jewish community, with open doors for interested non-Jews and a readiness for more dialogue. However, due to the small number and size of the Jewish communities, the frequency and scope of joint Jewish-Christian activities and projects seem to be limited, and rather concentrated on Jewish *history*. A great deal of respect is shown for Slovak Christian schools, which frequently organize site visits with their classes to Auschwitz.

Some uncertainties have emerged since right wing populist/right extremist parties and parts of the the clergy developed new forms of mutual sympathy and interest in cooperation – which inevitably raises memories of the disastrous bonds and collaborations under the Tiso-regime in World War II. However, as our

interviewees told us, uncertainty is rarely caused by open antisemitism or hostile attacks but rather by far right-wing rallies and celebrations under the guise of "new patriotism." The trend obviously meets the majority society's wishes to place its own sufferings in World War II in the foreground, despite Slovakia being a long-time ally of Nazi Germany until 1944. Thus, the commemoration of the tragic fate of distinct minorities under Tiso and Nazi Germany, including the deportation and annihilation of the overwhelming majority of Slovak Jews, is not directly contested but is in danger of becoming downplayed or gradually ignored.

Our non-Jewish interviewees, however, embodied the opposite of such current trends. They have found an approach to Jewish topics, Jewish networks, and people by simply acknowledging and considering the fate of the Slovak Jewish population during World War II.

The Jewish interview partners very much appreciated contacts with interested non-Jews. Most of them also argued that Slovakia could be one of the most secure places for Jews in the world. The trust in politics and authorities seems unshaken for the time being, a position also shared with interview partners in other countries in our project's focus.

Both our Jewish as well as our non-Jewish interview partners had high professional qualifications and were of varying ages and gender. All were well-integrated in their professional fields and had optimal networks in their private networks, which may contribute to them feeling at home in their city of residence, as well as in their native country. A.A., a young successful female author (non-Jewish), who publishes books on Jewish history and present day Slovakia admits:

> So, I feel at home in my house, but in general I feel at home in Bratislava, in Slovakia. I would say that I am a local patriot and that I'm interested in exploring the whereabouts of my city and maybe country, but I can't say about myself that I would like to travel outside of the country.[10]

A Jewish scientist and pensioner, Egon Gál, made a quite optimistic remark when saying: "I feel at home here, in Bratislava. I have been living in this city for quite a long time (…) I feel normal. I have no problems. I'm happy to live here and I feel good."[11] K.S., a Jewish, middle-aged businesswoman, also situated in Bratislava, said when asked where she would feel most at home:

10 Interview with author and historian A.A., in Bratislava, March 29, 2020.

11 Interview with Egon Gál., in Bratislava, April 4, 2020.

> So, I feel at home, I don't know, so I'm travelling, that is where I feel at home, you know, that's when I'm with Hashem or whatever in order to be fine. But I live in Bratislava, and my main social circles, that's what I, and before that I (indiscernible) to live in Bratislava, I've lived here all my life.[12]

Jewish and non-Jewish interview partners were pleasantly surprised when asked about the *presence of Jews* in their closest circles of friends. Also, the Jewish respondents didn't consider it a meaningful criterion to choose friends primarily by cultural, ethnic, or religious belonging.

In this regard, K.S., the businesswoman from Bratislava, said: "My main social circles are businesspeople, intellectuals, mainly non-Jews because there are not too many Jews here, so it would be very difficult just to be with Jews."

Egon Gál, who was also former president of the Jewish Community in Bratislava, admitted that, due to his individual and professional biography, Jews were not the most important persons in his life:

> It's hard to tell, most of my best friends are non-Jewish because I lived most of my life outside of the Jewish Community. In my academic professional specialities, there haven't been Jews in Bratislava. Admittedly, I have also good Jewish friends, and I am a long-time member of the Jewish community here, and so my relation to Jewish people, community members, is also good. For some time I was President of Jewish community (in Bratislava, O.G.), so I had a lot of friends there as well."[13]

Professor Martin Muránsky, a non-Jewish professor of philosophy at the University of Bratislava, and very well acquainted with the Jewish scene in Slovakia's Capital, said:

> Choosing my friends because they are Jewish? This is not my case. I never choose my friends because of being Jewish or non-Jewish. I didn't. Today I do not accept this thing [sic] this differentiation of people on two sorts, you know. I didn't have that kind of socialization. I am lucky that I am not a victim of this differentiation in my life. So, but after all I was aware of who is or who is not Jewish in my circle of friends.[14]

Obviously, Jewish and non-Jewish interviewees in Bratislava did not feel any constraint or strong motive to find friends in specific ethno-cultural, religious, or political groups. Or, conversely, to join any networks or communities due to needing a sense of collective belonging. On the contrary, they saw it as a matter of course to choose friends in their professional fields or through cultural or intellectual inter-

12 Interview with K.S., a businesswoman, in Bratislava, March 28, 2020.
13 Interview with Egon Gál in Bratislava, April 4, 2020.
14 Interview with Professor Martin Muránsky in Bratislava, April 5, 2020.

ests. Thus, drawing from our interviews in Bratislava, the boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish networks appeared to be quite permeable and flexible. Strategies of mutual alienation seemed – 80 years after the Shoah – irrelevant. Being aware of the disastrous fate of their ancestors nearly 80 years ago, the Jewish interview partners felt well-affiliated with their current places of residence.

Like all Jewish communities and organizations in the former Eastern Bloc, Slovakian Jews also had to fight a permanent struggle of survival against assimilation and communist repression on the one side and against fatalism and institutional regression on the other. However, it seems that the pressure by the communist system was much more problematic than the relations with non-Jewish neighbours or any occurrences of antisemitism. So, unsurprisingly, the end of the Cold War and the political and social transformation from 1989/90 was very much welcomed by the interview partners.[15] From that time onward, it was possible to develop new structures and programs, also supported by Israel and Jewish organizations in the western world. Some of the interview partners also admitted that after the end of the communist regime, it was the first time they felt free to live as Jews in public, not fearing any restrictions or negative repercussions from the state.

The entire political and societal shift created great incentives for the very few but still persistent local Jewish communities in Slovakia. Dr. Tomáš Stern, today's Head of the Jewish Community in Bratislava, tried to draw a realistic balance "30 years later":

> Admittedly, from the demographic point of view, we have a very small Jewish collective in Slovakia today. We have about 2,000 men and women who are registered as belonging to the Jewish religion, half of them live in Bratislava. Across the country, there are 12 local Jewish communities, but the JC in Bratislava is covering half of the people. Four rabbis are active in the country, among them one liberal, but in general the communities are following the orthodox rite. In Bratislava, also non-Halachic Jews can become members of the community, albeit with some constraints, for example they cannot join the Minjan. Of course, we are happy to have them with us, and the Bratislava community considers itself a 'United Community', covering people from all thinkable congregations. Though, in fact, small communities like ours need a very strong coherence, and this is rather safeguarded by keeping the Jewish tradition in its original essence. As for Bratislava, we have a Jewish kindergarten and a Sunday school, more educational structure would be desirable. But this is what we can build on, we are grateful for this.[16]

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15 Interestingly, this is at least partly in contrast to some statements which our colleague Lilach Lev-Ari got during her interview series among Jews in contemporary Budapest. Here, for example, unsolved problems in the post-Communist period in Hungary were blamed for an increase in antisemitic incidents. See in this volume: Lilach Lev-Ari, "Feeling 'At Home" or Just Privileged Minorities? Perceptions of Jewish and non-Jewish Respondents in Contemporary Budapest."

16 Interview with Dr. Tomáš Stern in Bratislava, January 20, 2022.

Regarding the perspectives of the Jewish communities in Slovakia, Tomáš Stern says:

> The number of our members is not that big, but we feel – unlike 30 years ago – that we can do something, that we have opportunities to work on our future. It will remain very important to commemorate to the Holocaust. But I think we are also committed to think on our future, to the positive parts of our history and there is a lot of creative potential among our believers. There is a Jewish Museum in Bratislava, we have a very modern JC journal called 'Kehila', we have our own TV, where we produce TV-stand ups, documentaries, discussions, etc., and we have an open door for interested people who want to contact us. This is also the case in contacts with Christians.[17]

While Bratislava and Košice have active Orthodox synagogues, Jewish religious and cultural pluralism in Slovakia seems more distinct than expected at first glance. Egon Gál offered a broader insight when explaining:

> Now there are all generations in the community. We have a kindergarten, we have a Sunday school, we have various holidays which are visited by all generation, families. (…) We have two Rabbis. One is Liberal, one is Orthodox. But, the community is one, and it is structured more by generation, less by political view or religious. (…) Most of the internal offers are used by old people, because young people have their families, their employment. There are a lot of discussions and cultural programs in the community. (…) There are also various clubs in the community. But it is very similar like in other religious communities. There are clubs of seniors, club of young families, and each of these clubs has its own program, and there is B'nei Brith.[18]

While some of the interview partners viewed the certain plurality inside the Jewish community of Slovakia as a strength and an advantage, at least one JC member, considering himself to be traditionally Jewish, harshly opposed:

> We are trying to live as a unified body, but it's a fantasy. After the revival of Judaism here in Slovakia in 1990, there was a very strong trend of the survivors to open up the community, also to mixed couples and to *all* people with any Jewish grandfathers or grandmothers, which was very complicated. (…) They wanted to found, as they call it, a Reform kehilah, but the state didn't allow them because what they understand (of) reform was, it doesn't mean religious. (…) We just stopped the process, we started fighting, we came back to kehilah and that's all. So we are here and they are there and let's see what will happen in the future.[19]

17 Interview with Dr. Tomáš Stern in Bratislava, January 20, 2022.
18 Interview with Egon Gál in Bratislava, April 4, 2020.
19 Interview with L.A., an economist, in Bratislava, March 28, 2020.

Others appeared quite pragmatic, or even rather open-minded when asked about the opportunities of cooperation and interconnectedness with non-Jewish population groups, especially regarding culture and arts. Egon Gál said:

> We have to cooperate with them because we are such a small group. We wouldn't survive without cooperating with the non-Jews. So I don't think there is any problems you know. What is this politics on the other side, the average life needs a cooperation. We cooperate. They cooperate with us, we have friends from non-Jewish groups and they have Jewish friends. (...) Culturally, we are who we are, they are who they are. (But) the music it's an international language. So you know ...the Danube river is a very special river in Europe, longest river in Europe. And all the nations around the Danube they have very similar music, so now there are other singers from Serbia, the lady who comes to sing Yiddish because we were looking for a lady speaking Yiddish. She's not Jewish, but did speak Yiddish language, so it's a ... culturally it's a gain. Culturally, it's not any confrontation.[20]

A veteran board member in Bratislava also spoke positively about the situation between Jews and non-Jews:

> I see no problem in the relationship between Jewish society and non-Jewish society. There are some problems on the individual level. But such problems are also among Jews, among some Slovaks and some Hungarians, some Slovak and some Czech people.[21]

As in many other European countries with a remarkable Jewish population, joint initiatives between Jews and Christians in Eastern Europe mainly began in the 1990s. The aims are manifold, spanning from mutual learning of spiritual and theological views to organizing interfaith events and holding critical dialogues about the failure of Christian-Jewish relations in the past. The third aim, however, is a source of contention, stemming from the role of the Catholic church in Slovakia and the Tiso regime. Josef Tiso, who served as the President of the Slovak Republic during World War II, was not only a politician but also a Roman Catholic priest. As Eduard Nižňanský and Katarína Bohová describe in another chapter of this volume, collaboration between societal forces and the Nazis brought Slovakia – up until the national uprising in 1944 – extremely close to the National Socialists. Most Catholic priests, being in political positions during the Tiso regime, did not intervene when the Slovak Jews were deported from their homes. Slovak Jews were the first to be murdered in the Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps. Since a considerable number of Catholic priests had been mired in Tiso's regime, and the church still has not developed a self-critical attitude about its

20 Interview with Egon Gál in Bratislava, April 4, 2020.

21 Interview with a board member of the JC Bratislava, April 3, 2020.

own involvement in this dark historical chapter, leading representatives of the current Jewish population believe that interfaith dialogue is not yet fathomable. Thus, Tomáš Stern states:

> Christian and Jewish representatives share a lot of contacts in Slovakia, and there is, for example, a longstanding project between the Catholic University of *Trnava* and the Jewish community. And there is, aside [from] the theological, also a vibrant cultural exchange and finally a lot of joint commemoration ceremonies, as for example on last September 9th (2021), the day of adoption of the anti-Jewish race laws by the Tiso regime. Most members of the Slovakian government came there to the ceremony at the Holocaust memorial of Bratislava, including the prime minister and president of the parliament. I am acquainted with some of the leading politicians, deeply rooted in Christian faith, and they consider the anti-Jewish crimes during the years from 1941 to 1944 as horrific, as well. However, until today the Catholic Church of Slovakia did not succeed in doing a public condemnation of the crimes against Jews under the rule of Josef Tiso. When the Pope was visiting Slovakia last year, we had a certain hope, but he did also not mention the name of Tiso. It seems that we have to wait for such words a bit more. Though, again there are regular, helpful contacts with church dignitaries, including the archbishop, who, by the way, strongly supports memorial service on January 27th, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz.[22]

For Tomáš Stern and the other leading figures of Jewish communities in Slovakia, it is beyond question that dialogue activities with Christian institutions will maintain, and the general prospects are seen carefully optimistic. At local places, Christian-Jewish activities might be rather limited, due to the currently very small numbers of Jews in Slovakia. Frequent Jewish-Christian activities seem to be feasible only in Bratislava and Kosice. Though, as several of our interview partners confirmed, there are, in fact, interested protagonists on both sides, primarily motivated by the joint search for theological commonalities as well as the deep interest and dismay among non-Jews regarding anti-Jewish politics and criminal collaboration with Nazi-Germany during the Holocaust.

Martin Muránsky, who had many Jewish friends in the Slovak capital, formulated an inevitable, in his view, requirement for understanding the situation of Slovakia's Jews under Tiso:

> You have to have the immediacy, if you wish to further understand something. You have to educate yourself as much as possible, but you also have to have a proximate experience, you know? You have to listen to the stories from the people who really survived something that you never survived – the kinds of memories and tragedies that you haven't had in your family. So, this combination is for me very important because it can be lost in your tragedies and losing … and being lost means that you are not able to create bridges to others. Or you can be lost in your abstract educational conventions. You know, I'm asking myself what

22 Interview with Dr. Tomáš Stern in Bratislava, January 20, 2022.

> happened here and how could this happen here. And I try to work most with things within this important question, not to be lost and not to be ignorant.[23]

This set of problems is, at least in certain circles and milieus of Slovakian society, currently hotly debated, and contemporary writers are playing an important role in this regard. One of the most discussed books in this context is Denisa Fulmeková's novel *Lily of the Valley: Rudolf Dilong's Forbidden Love*, based on the true love story of a Catholic priest and the author's Jewish grandmother. Catholic priest Rudolf Dilong cooperated with the Tiso government in World War II, and thus – by using his individual channels and contacts – he was able to save his Jewish beloved. The story grows even more unique when the young Jewish woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to their baby.

With her acclaimed novel, Fulmeková has sparked many different reactions and resonance, as she described:

> After publishing this book, I was very curious what the public would say about this book. And this book has awakened or incited very controversial reactions and opinions. (…) I was invited to the northern part of the country, Orava, to be a judge in a literature competition. However, I was not officially introduced to competitors. I was anonymously sitting as a judge in this competition because they were afraid that the local priests would get angry if they said that I was the granddaughter of a priest.
>
> During one discussion about my book I was verbally attacked by men who said that I don't value the legacy of the Slovak State. Other reactions were quite positive because people often wrote to me about some relics and some old documents or they reminisced about that era. But I think that the most open-minded discussion that I have witnessed was at the senior club of Jewish society in Bratislava. I read them a poem by Rudolf Dilong, which was written for my grandmother on her fiftieth birthday. And the ladies that were attending the discussion told me that they forgive Rudolf Dilong because he wrote such a beautiful poem for a woman.[24]

In circles like those described by Fulmeková – and also among our non-Jewish interview partners – the tragic fate of the overwhelming majority of Slovak Jews and the close collaboration of Tiso's regime with Nazi Germany is an important topic. However, other milieus are intensively working on a white-washing of the past, supported by nationalist or even right-wing extremist organizations. Thus, the aforementioned Bratislava historian and author A.A. notes:

> I think the most important fact that influences the relations between the Jewish community in Bratislava and the rest of the society is the fact that the population of the Jewish commu-

23 Interview with Martin Muránsky in Bratislava, April 5, 2020.

24 Interview with Denisa Fulmeková in Bratislava, April 5, 2020.

> nity compared to its pre-Holocaust state both in Slovakia and in Bratislava is tiny. So they might not be that visible in society, but I still feel that antisemitism is on the rise. It is related to the tensions in the society and to the rise of the popularity of the extreme right, especially with young people. This is one of the problems in Slovakia now. And I think it also complicates the relations with the Jewish community.[25]

As we already learned from other authors in this volume, parts of the Jewish population in central and eastern Europe are unnerved by the new trends of growing nationalism and right-wing populism, not necessarily openly antisemitic but clearly creating myths of national innocence during the occupation in World War II, praising fighters for national liberation and independence and downplaying acts of collaboration and complicity. On the other hand, Jewish community members also show their appreciation with new initiatives at schools to confront Slovakian teenagers with the crimes that were committed 80 years ago. Bratislava businesswoman and member of the Jewish community K.S. explained:

> It's a very difficult question, you know. During the last 30 years (…) the Jews were commemorating the tragedy of the Jews, but now maybe it's much better because it is in the schools. The historians are teaching the kids about the history including this topic, which means the Holocaust and so on and so on. Slowly, slowly it will come. There is a new generation and I think this new generation partially, they, you know … because they are taking them to Auschwitz. (…) So I don't know what is at the end of the process, but the elite, they are trying to do the best, they are pushing the kids to understand what happened. To explain the history to them, and to really give them a reason for cooperation, but it's just the beginning of the process, it's very difficult for me to define.[26]

Our interview partners seemed to be aware that antisemitism in Slovakian society still exists, though seldom shown openly, but very much present in several society milieus. At the same time, the Jewish interview partners emphasized that they – personally – feel secure in their homes in Slovakia. Physical attacks on Jews currently seem to be rare in Slovakia. Antisemitic statements are being carefully monitored, especially concerning the new upward trend of right-wing populism and historical revisionism. However, the situation is not considered unbearable, as reported by the media, for example, from several places in Western Europe.

L.A., the economist from Bratislava, stated:

> Everywhere in Europe there's a problem with antisemitism. All the world is now in transformation, so the paradigm of the twentieth century ended in 2014. In my eyes, from 1914 until 2014, that was the twentieth century, beginning with the First World War and ending with the

25 Interview with author and historian A.A., in Bratislava, March 29, 2020.

26 Interview with K.S., a businesswoman, in Bratislava, March 28, 2020.

> Russian-Crimean war. The Arabic, you know, they called it Spring, and so on. (…) Now all the world is going to be transformed into something, we don't know what it will be. So of course, there are also antisemites in Europe, but I don't think we are the main problem for them now.[27]

Egon Gál considers the situation more or less similarly:

> There are some problems, but they are rather hidden. Nobody would look you in the eye and tell you: "I don't like you because you are Jewish" or something like that. My brother, who was in politics, had problems with his Jewishness. But if you are not in public life, like me, usually you don't have this problem. I never had problems with my Jewishness in my adult life. Admittedly: we have a political party that is explicitly anti-Jewish. And if you read internet discussions, anonymous discussions, so you find that there's something anti-Jewish, I don't know. But in public life, there is no problem.[28]

Interestingly, one of the non-Jewish interview partners, an author and historian, considered the problem of antisemitism in Slovakia as being quite significant:

> Yes, there is a problem with antisemitism. It doesn't surface that much, mostly occasional violent acts or acts of vandalism, but it's very present in Slovak society in the form of hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and maybe also at the level of the church. (…) Some members of Slovak clergy, but not the church in general, but some members have a problem with antisemitism, for sure.[29]

This view was rather contradicted by Martin Muránsky who stated:

> More or less all of this anti-Semitic agenda is digitalized. And this hate speech agenda is a very modern phenomenon and I would say that this is the first problem what we have to tackle when we are talking about the resources of anti-Semitism in Slovakia. But the security on the streets, the kind of security agenda that they are really afraid of like in the western part of Europe where 45% of Jews who are thinking about emigration, that's not the case here. I would say that now, the situation here is, compared to other EU member States, better.[30]

Regarding the threat of historical revisionism, Tomáš Stern says:

> Indeed, the are some trends and attempts of historical misrepresentation. And we have to note that one party is inside the parliament that openly acts as fascists. However, the majority of deputies from all other parties are clearly avowing themselves to anti-Fascism. Also the

27 Interview with L.A., an economist, in Bratislava, March 28, 2020.
28 Interview with Egon Gál in Bratislava, April 4, 2020
29 Interview with author and historian A.A. in Bratislava, March 29, 2020.
30 Interview with Martin Muránsky in Bratislava, April 5, 2020.

> acting president, Zuzana Čaputová, is making clear that fascism and anti-Semitism won't be tolerated at all. This is, of course, encouraging for our community.[31]

In summary, it appears that Jews in Slovakia witness incidents of antisemitism. When such events occur, Jews do not live with the illusion that Jew hatred has disappeared. However, they are more concerned by some current trends of right-wing populism and historical revisionism, but do not feel seriously menaced in their daily lives or for their personal safety. Those who deal with the topic simply for political interest consider the situation of the Jews in Slovakia more secure than in Western Europe, and partly also than in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc. This does not say that our respondents would be completely unworried, and of course they welcome and support, for example, special educational programs for children and teenagers for elucidation on and prevention of antisemitism, including teaching about the Holocaust and site visits to memorials and former concentration camps.

At the same time, there seems to be a certain confidence that the "modus vivendi" of living together with the non-Jewish majority in Slovakia will work quite well in the long run. Even the idea of a Christian-Jewish occident in cultural terms is not completely denied. Beyond this, the non-Jewish interviewees, like Martin Muránsky from the Comenius University, also saw significant progress in Christian-Jewish relations, though maybe more enhanced "from the top" than "from below." Our interviewee stated:

> When I see these activities of this Confederation of Slovak Bishops and the Central Union of the Jewish Religious Communities, they have really coordinated activities. They introduce even in Vatican there are many commissions, or there are not many, but there are commissions for inter-religious relationships. And there is also a commission about the relationship between Catholics and Jews. As far as I see in this field they are really aware of the importance of having good common perspectives, about living together and not denying the specific religious autonomy of Jewish people.[32]

Martin Muránsky also underlined that Jews are able to play a key role in local places and municipalities when it comes to the real challenges for the politics of commemoration but also for initiating, at the very least, the re-construction and restoration of Jewish buildings and places to their condition prior to 1941, as they have become heavily decayed during the Cold War and State Communist Regime:

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31 Interview with Dr. Tomáš Stern in Bratislava, January 20, 2022.

32 Interview with Martin Muránsky in Bratislava, April 5, 2020.

> I would say in local politics, you have this big initiated event introducing the Day of Holocaust Remembrance or this new definition of antisemitism. You have many regional initiatives. Almost not bad. But you see, in it Slovakia based policies which make it available to people, or visible for the people. Step by step you see this trust, I would say, that the future is here.[33]

In such a light, it is not surprising that, according to our interviews and talks, emigration from Slovakia is not a serious consideration, also not to Israel – the modern Jewish state, which pro-actively canvasses for "Alija," i. e., coming home to the land of the forefathers.

Our interviewees revealed that contemporary Israel is an important pillar of their Jewish identities, although the motivation to move to Israel appears to be weak or non-existent. Some of the elderly interview partners described that they had thought about Alija several times in their lives. However, they decided against it either for personal reasons (no complete consensus among their families) or for professional reasons (no comparable perspectives as experts in their professional fields, partly also due to advanced age).

K.S., the businesswoman in Bratislava, explained what Israel means to her:

> Israel is what I absolutely inherently need. We need it for our kids. I'm absolutely aware that we need the State of Israel because of security, and we need something that we can fight, you know for us, for our lives. That's emotional. Economically, I led some big Israeli investments and these developed in Slovakia. Socially, I have some friends in Israel, and from Israel I also have some Jewish friends from other countries. (...) And yes, I considered Aliyah after 1989 (...) and after the split of Czechoslovakia, I thought that I would go to Israel and continue my life in Israel but (...) at the time I couldn't convince my former spouse.[34]

One of the Board members of the Jewish community in Bratislava said:

> It's very important to have a strong Israel (...) They do care about what's happening to the Jewish communities all around the world. (...) In-between all these scenarios it's nice to have Israel. So it's important culturally because it helps the younger generation develop its identity, travelling, seeing the country. Economically, again, a lot of opportunities. Israel is a start-up nation, you know, making us proud and creating possibilities for some of us who have the will and the potential to further develop their economic enterprises. Israel, as a start-up place, or at least as a place of some ideas is very nice to have and to visit. For a Jew, it's very important to have this backstage.[35]

33 Interview with Martin Muránsky in Bratislava, April 5, 2020.
34 Interview with K.S., a businesswoman, in Bratislava, March 28, 2020.
35 Interview with a board member of the JC Bratislava, April 3, 2020.

For complex reasons, our Jewish interview partners had no intention to move to Israel and do not intend to do so in the future. Our non-Jewish interview partners had neither personal experiences with Israel nor had they temporarily visited the country. However, they expressed much understanding of the fact that Jews around the globe consider Israel as an important element of their identities.

Martin Muránsky, for example, was also quite responsive to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other conflicts in the region when saying:

> I'm not a member of the Jewish Community. For me the Israel question is more abstract than an existential question. I can say that for people who survived the Holocaust, the State of Israel is an existential imperative. And for 16 million Jewish people around the world it is good to know that Israel keeps statehood, and that works very well. So, this is my first sentence. If I look on the sides of the victims of the Holocaust – and the survivors –, I wish to have a sacred place for me and I wish to have a place which has justified roots. I am also aware that Israel has been, from the very beginning, in this tragic situation of the unsolved Middle East conflict. Though, what is the lesson to be learned for me? That you have to be really very careful in the human history and in present situations. As it looks now, for example, the Christian-Jewish tradition is more or less completely losing ground now in the Middle East. However, I still hope and wish that for all minority members it will remain worthy and safe enough, to keep living there.[36]

In general, the small size and the limited opportunities of Jewish communities in Slovakia today embody only a fraction of the formerly numerous and vibrant Jewish community. Nevertheless, it does not appear to be a reason "to throw in the towel" – at least not for the active protagonists. For example, Egon Gál is impressed by the various activities inside the Jewish communities – starting from religious service in two congregations – traditional-orthodox and neolog – via cultural programs to clubs and intellectual events. However, he also notes: "Most of the visitors (of the communities, O.G.) are elderly people. Furthermore many of the clubs and circles in the community are also characterized by a dominance of elderly people. But this is similar to other religious communities, as for example the churches."[37]

What our interview partners described mirrors more or less similar situations in the Jewish communities of the other countries we focused on. A certain demographic decline is to be expected during the coming years and decades, except Slovakia – and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe – might face a greater influx of Jews from other regions of the world. As we have also heard in the interviews, more young Ukrainians are expected to come to Slovakia in the long run, at least in Bratislava, and among them, for example, Jewish students. Also, in Brati-

36 Interview with Martin Muránsky in Bratislava, April 5, 2020.

37 Interview with Egon Gál in Bratislava, April 4, 2020.

slava, some young Israelis have already gained a foothold, not at least as IT experts working for Israeli companies in the country.

The Jewish community in Bratislava is obviously willing to keep its door open, at the same time fighting against an exotic or special image. In this sense, K.S., a businesswoman and an active member of the Jewish community in the capital, summarized the situation in simple terms:

> Some people said that we are a specialty, that Slovak Jewry is something special. Nothing's special. We are Jews living in Slovakia, that is how we see it. We are Jews living in Slovakia, so for us the brothers are in Israel, the brothers are in Canada, everywhere. So it was never just to call our community Slovak Jewry. It's a Jewry living in Slovakia, so now it's again – let's see how it will proceed.[38]

38 Interview with K.S., a businesswoman, in Bratislava, March 28, 2020.