

# The Holocaust and the Jewish Identity in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>

*by Peter Salner*

## **Abstract**

This study deals with the impacts of the Holocaust on the identity of the Jewish community in Slovakia. The author is interested in the question (whether and) in which form God remained among the survivors after Auschwitz.

The available ethnological material has shown that suffering during the Holocaust often resulted into abandoning the religion, and particularly in Judaism. Many survivors broke up their contacts with Jewry. They often decided to join the communist party (either due to their conviction or opportunism.) Our research has indicated that for the majority of the Slovak Jews, God after the Holocaust is rather an abstract concept or non existing. However, he is definitely not the biblical God of the Tora and micvot, to which our ancestors used to pray.

## **Zusammenfassung**

In dieser Studie wird die Wirkung des Holocausts auf die Identität der jüdischen Gemeinschaft in der Slowakei thematisiert. Der Autor ist an der Frage interessiert, ob und falls ja in welcher Form der Glaube an die Existenz Gottes nach Auschwitz unter den Überlebenden fortbestand.

Die verfügbaren ethnologischen Materialien haben gezeigt, dass das Leiden während des Holocausts oft das Ablegen der Religion, insbesondere der jüdischen, zur Folge hatte. Viele Überlebende brachen den Kontakt zum Judentum ab. Sie entschlossen sich oftmals, – entweder aus Überzeugung oder aus Opportunismus – der Kommunistischen Partei beizutreten. Die hier vorgestellte Forschungsarbeit weist darauf hin, dass für die Mehrheit der slowakischen Juden Gott nach dem Holocaust entweder ein abstraktes Konzept ist oder Gott nicht existiert. So ist er definitiv nicht der biblische Gott der Torah und der Mizvot, zu dem unsere Vorfahren gebetet haben.

The current identity of Slovak Jews is based on four pillars. The first three Judaism, Holocaust, and the State of Israel originated from the Jewish history and traditions, whereas the fourth one is represented by their relations to the environment surrounding them. Interactions with their surroundings and the

1 The study was drafted within the VEGA project No. 2/0122/08 (Urban environment as a space for diversity) and the Center of Excellency of the Slovak Academy of Science entitled „Processes“.

random expressions of anti-Semitism result in fear, resistance, solidarity, etc. These help to shape the attitudes of the Jews from Slovakia to both their community and to Judaism.

Three of the above pillars concern the present time or the recent past. It may be assumed that the Jewish identity, which was based on the traditional Judaism until recently, underwent a principal change. The Holocaust played a significant role in the transformation process. It affected the value system of individuals and of the community as a whole as well. A number of survivors rejected the Jewish faith with its undisputable principles. In order to fill in this newly created Vacuum, they are forced to seek response to the question: (whether and) what God has been left after Auschwitz?

This analysis, relies on two kinds of resources:

1/ Information collected in the project entitled *Fates of Those, who Survived the Holocaust*. It was conducted by the Milan Šimečka Foundation (MŠF) in 1995-1997<sup>2</sup> and concluded with 149 compiled testimonies. In this study, italic is used to mark quotations from these testimonies. Data in footnotes indicate sex and birth date of the cited witness, eventually supplied by registration number of the testimony in MŠF archives.

2/ Published memoirs and interviews of the Jewish survivors from Slovakia and the Czech republic. Both Slovak and Czech documents already publicly released are also used for this analysis. Similar historical experience is followed, minimally at the time when the Czechoslovak republic (ČSR) was established in 1918, but also the fact that after the Holocaust a large number of Jews living in Czech republic comes from Slovakia.

## Starting points

In the course of almost two millenniums, the Jewish identity in the diaspora was based on the Torah and Talmud principles. They were connected with monotheism and the observation of respective mitzvot. It was not a coincidence that the orthodox Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz paid greater attention to the phenomenon of mitzvot. He believes that they constitute the spiritual substance of Judaism.<sup>3</sup> He considers their observation in everyday life

2 For more details, see SALNER, Peter: *Prežili holokaust*. (They Survived the Holocaust) Veda, Bratislava 1997, pp. 7-8.

3 LEIBOWITZ, Ješajahu: *Micvot*. In: *Židovská ročenka 5765*. (Jewish Almanach, the Prague Jewish Community) Židovská obec v Praze, Prague 2004/2005, p. 19.

more important than prayers or other forms of religious practices.<sup>4</sup> Slovakia, with its territory, was part of the Habsburg monarchy until 1918. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there started Reform movements in the Jewish community began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These undermined the dominant position of orthodoxy. A recollection from a suburban municipality in central Slovakia illustrates religious loosening:

*My father was the Chevra kadisha chairman, and he was a religious neolog, I would say, because he attended the synagogue on Saturday morning, but he kept his store open too. Then, my mother (laugh) was in the store. He prayed every morning, the poor guy, from a small book, though without twilems and he had the book with him at all times and even when he died; and there was a single photo in it, which was mine. We observed Jewish holidays. On Rosh hashanah and Jom Kipur, our store was closed, we were in the temple all of us; however, we did not keep other holidays and our kitchen was not kosher, we ate everything.<sup>5</sup>*

There was not only a more relaxed attitude towards the Jewish faith, but also a questioning concerning its fundamentals. Already prior to the Holocaust, individuals were abandoning Judaism:

*I came home for my vacations and told my mother quite strictly, while she was kneading dough, that I would not go back to the yeshiva. I liked to draw, I was always very good in drawing at school and I often wished to become an artist or a photographer and thus, I refused to return to Gelnica. And she says: "Why?" And I say: "You know, I am really questioning God's existence."<sup>6</sup>*

*My father was a very honest man and he used to say that if we live by the Ten Commandments, he will be very happy, even if we chose a different faith, but we will be o.k. to live by the God's principles.<sup>7</sup>*

Viktor Fischl, a famous writer, described his feelings after his sister's death and the murder of one million children as follows: "I have no explanation for this. If there is a God, how could he allow it. Human mind is incapable to comprehend the 6 million victims, it is impossible to understand. But one sister, who was so close to me, that's a total failure."<sup>8</sup> We can say in a simplified way that prior to the Holocaust, religion was abandoned mainly by individual believers attributing it to pragmatic

4 SHASHAR, Michael: *Hovory o Bohu a světě s Ješajahu Leibowitzem.* (Talks about the God and the World with Yeshayahu Leibowitz) Sefer, Praha 1996, p. 78.

5 W 1913/65.

6 M 1916/2.

7 W 1912/43.

8 EMINGEROVÁ, Dana: *Dva životy.* Hovory s Viktorem Fischlem. (Two Lives. Talks with Viktor Fischl) G+G, Prague 2002, p. 32.

reasons. Rejection of God after the Shoa was justified in a different (emotional) way.

### **Prior to the Holocaust**

From 1781, when the Tolerance Act was adopted under Emperor Joseph II, until 1895 (the parliament codified equal rights), the Jews became full-fledged citizens of the Habsburg monarchy.

In the course of that process, townspeople represented a referential group for Jews, who used them as their guide in entering the non-Jewish society.<sup>9</sup> On one hand, it was progressive for Jews to adopt the urban population values, but on the other hand, this accelerated the assimilation process: "...the result was evident in cases where there was a discrepancy between urban values and Judaism. Instances of abandoning the formal expressions of a faith were always appreciated as a sign of modern and progressive trends."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the affiliation with the Jewish community was not defined only by Halacha, but also by one's membership in non-Orthodox Jewish communities, and the interest shown in non-religious areas (zionism, ethnicity, culture, etc.). According to Leibowitz, creativity of Jews in the modern society is "not the result of their affiliation with Judaism, but rather their affiliation with the western world culture. Their jewishness did not contribute to their personality or to their accomplishments."<sup>11</sup>

The split of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy and the rise of single nations' states after the WWI scared Jews in regard to their future. Many of them compared the fall of the monarchy to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.<sup>12</sup> These concerns were strengthened further on by the violence against Jews and

9 D. Sorkin, cit. according to TRANČÍK, Martin: *Medzi starým a novým (História kníhkupeckej rodiny Steinerovcov v Bratislave)*. (Between the Old and New (History of the Steiner's Bookseller's family) PT, Bratislava 1997, p. 29.

10 SALNER, Peter: *Židia v meštianskej spoločnosti Slovenska. (The Jews in Commons Society)* In: *Meštianstvo a občianska spoločnosť na Slovensku 1900-1989* (ed. E. Mannová). AEP, Bratislava 1998, pp. 137-146, p. 145.

11 SHASHAR (1996), p. 22.

12 ROZENBLITT, Marsha L.: *From Habsburg Jews to Austrian Jews: The Jews of Vienna, 1918-1938*. In: Lappin, E. (Eds.): *Jüdische Gemeinden. Kontinuitäten und Brüche*. PHILO, Wien 2002, pp. 105-130, p. 105.

their property in several places of the western and central Slovakia that occurred at the turn of 1918 and 1919.<sup>13</sup>

## The Faith and Shoa

The relation between Judaism and the Holocaust has attracted the attention of philosophers and theologians for some time. It is not my goal to discuss and evaluate their views<sup>14</sup> in this study, but for illustration, I will mention a few instances.

According to Emil L. Fackenheim, Jews after Auschwitz had often felt difficulties in preserving their faith in God.<sup>15</sup> This may be the reason why Leibowitz disapproves the dominating status of the Holocaust with the current rules and regulations systems. In reaction to the Claude Lanzmann's document Shoa, he said: „It is a big mistake that today Shoa is a central theme for everyone dealing with issues concerning the Jewish people. For many Jewish intellectuals, their Judaism is expressed through the Shoa: “We are the people, to whom they did it.” For these Jews, Shoa is their Jewishness.”<sup>16</sup>

Some ultra Orthodox movements have considered the Holocaust to be a punishment for Jewish sins.<sup>17</sup> The Czech writer Ivan Klíma commented these views as being unjust both to the people and to God...<sup>18</sup> The Prague rabbi Karol E. Sidon says that Shoa was God's victory: “Shoa, which cost us 6 million victims, is in a way, God's triumph. Suddenly, those, who were anti-Semites, were shocked. It is a cruel price to pay, but it is not about us, but about the mankind and whether it recognizes God.”<sup>19</sup> The Bratislava rabbi Baruch Myers, when asked whether he can understand how the God could allow

13 See MEDVECKÝ, Karol. A.: Slovenský prevrat. (Slovak Coup D'état) Vol. III Komenský, Bratislava 1930.

14 See for details e.g. DETHLOFF, Klaus: Problémy židovskej filozofie a teológie po holokauste. (Problems of the Jewish philosophy and Theology after the Holocaust) Maybaum, Rubinstein, Fackenheim, Berkovits. Štúdie Inštitútu judaistiky, Zošit 5, (Studies of the Judaism Institute, Vol. 5) Bratislava 2004.

15 DETHLOFF (2004), p. 22.

16 SHASHAR (1996), p. 1954.

17 DETHLOFF (2004), p. 10.

18 KLÍMA, Ivan: Moje šílené stoloť. (My Crazy Century) Edition Paměť, Academia : Prague 2009, p. 142.

19 ĐURKOVÁ, Katarína, WIENK, Zuzana: Pražský rabín Karol Efrajim Sidon: Šoa je triumf Boha. (The Prague Rabbi Karol Efrajim Sidon: Shoa is the God's Triumph) In: Domino fórum, 2002, č. 7, pp. 4-5, p. 5.

the Holocaust, said: "No. There are things that I cannot understand. And any rational argument would offend all the victims. We cannot and even do not need to excuse the God. He does not need it. I do not understand it, but I am not the one, who has to understand."<sup>20</sup>

Rabbi Richard Feder was solving a similar problem. He spent three years in Theresienstadt, where he had lost his wife and three children with their families. In spite of his personal experience, he could not justify death of the observant Jews, who had to die as the worst scoundrels: "Dear Marticka, I have been asking the same questions for years, similarly as you did. everyday, endlessly. I have been asking on behalf of your pious uncle, all the children, their parents, their grandparents. And I have no answer for it."<sup>21</sup> He says elsewhere: "I lost my whole family, but I am not upset with the God. We cannot know why this tragedy happened, but I don't blame Him."<sup>22</sup>

## The Holocaust and its impacts

The Holocaust has irrevocably affected the survivor's attitudes to Judaism and through them it has not only shaped the views of several generations of Jews, but also subsequently the current state of the whole community. However, faith, observation of the commands and prohibitions of the Torah continued to be a priority for many Jews. They did not lose their trust in God even in the worst moments of their lives: *My faith and observation of religious habits helped me the most in my life, in everything I experience.(...) The faith helped me to survive the catastrophe every day; I survived Mauthausen and other camps. Thus, faith and trust in God helped me to endure and survive.*<sup>23</sup>

Another witness said that he survived because of his firm faith and divine miracles. He considers a sudden illness affecting himself and his parents as the biggest miracle because they had to stay in Auschwitz hospital and consequently escaped the death march: *In some other time, it would be considered a punishment, now god's punishment was not an absolute evil. In contrary, as if a parent would*

20 HRÍB, Štefan – ŽITŇANSKÝ, Robert: Boha netreba ospravedlňovať. (God Does not Need to be Excused) *Domino – forum*, 2000, č. 44, pp. 4-5, p. 5.

21 PETEROVÁ, Zuzana: Rabin Feder. (Rabi Feder) G+G, Praha 2004, p. 102.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 120.

23 M 1919:45.

*smack his child's bottom a bit, so it was painful for the child at that moment and it considers the father very unjust. So, that's how it was.*<sup>24</sup>

While being in the concentration camps, some individuals were seeking help and consolation in their communication with the God: *I say, there were moments that I asked the God: My dear God, I was told that you'll help us when we need it. So help! I asked God, I meditated alone with him, with my God. It was terrible. I wanted to die, I even wished to die.* When asked whether her suffering and death of her close family members did not affect her faith, she responded unambiguously: *Well, I am not very observant, but I would never give up my faith.*<sup>25</sup>

Then, a 15 year old girl had together with her aunt and her three daughters attempted to observe mitzvot even in the horrible conditions of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Her aunt tried to exchange her bread portion for candles that she lighted on Friday evening:

*It was very risky in Auschwitz to get a candle from somewhere, but she managed somehow and cut it into pieces. My aunt had a prayer book and she protected it so much that the poor soul brought it with her home. We were in Krakow. (...) During the day, we went to Poles to clean. Though, it was very dangerous to cross through the wired fence. I don't want to imagine what would happen if caught... but somehow, we always managed to make it with my girl-friend. I asked for a candle for my aunt, the first thing. My dear aunt continued to light it the whole time that we spent in the camp and later even in Ravensbruck; only when we got to Bergen-Belsen at the end, where we were liberated, she had no chance to do it. And she kept crying every Friday that she was unable to light a candle.*<sup>26</sup>

When asked how she survived, another witness said: *Well, I think thanks to God. We were both I and my husband, observant Jews. I am thankful to God that my children are healthy, because there were many women, who were sterilized and could never have any children.*<sup>27</sup> Another woman stated again: *Difficult to say, it did not depend on me, for sure. It was either a coincidence or the influence of some higher will, I don't know, I cannot argue (...), but when I recall how many times I was on the verge of life and death and that somehow I managed to escape it, and even after the war there were a number of strange situations, so it leads me to believe that there is something... I don't know.*<sup>28</sup>

Most of observant Jews were killed and therefore, there is very little information in this respect. Most survivors used often good luck and their own ef-

24 M 1923/72.

25 W 1928/33.

26 W 1927/80.

27 W 1927/19.

28 W 1926/27.

forts, rather than God, as the main reason of their survival: *I was always a happy person. And already as a child, I tried to look at things with kind of humor even if they were sad. And this helped me a lot during the war, too.*<sup>29</sup> *It may have been due to a self-preservation instinct that one wanted to live, that we were young and we so much wanted to live. That we did not give up. That was the biggest mistake, when someone had resigned, because it was the end. One had to want.*<sup>30</sup> *If we resigned, we would not be alive today.*<sup>31</sup> *We were always looking for some solution and kept stressing to each other that we must survive.*<sup>32</sup>

Although there were contrary views sometimes, most survivors commented shoa as the reason for loss of their faith. In this case, it was enhanced by the fate of observant women from the eastern Slovakia, who refused to eat non-kosher food in Ravensbrück:

*All of them starved to death. And from that moment, I lost my faith entirely. Because if such observant women, who refused in the most tragic moment and the worst poverty to touch any food, because it was not kosher and because it came from the Germans, then I felt that my faith disappeared. Since then, I am unable to believe in anything.*<sup>33</sup> More often we come across cases that people in concentration camps or in hiding violated kashrut: *And interestingly enough, when I came to those Germans, it was the fast, great fast. I could not fast then. And it was the first day that I ate non-kosher food. But everything can be overcome.*<sup>34</sup>

When the young man learned then that his pious grandmother, who brought him up as an orphan after his parents had been murdered, he made a final conclusion: *If there were a God, he could not allow that this old person, who brought up three orphans, ended like she had. And I simply stopped to believe, I became an atheist.*<sup>35</sup>

There is a minority of those who began to believe in God after the Holocaust. They reflected their “miraculous” survival: *My mother started to believe in God after the war. She claimed it was a miracle that her whole family survived. And someone had to arrange this miracle.*<sup>36</sup> Karol E. Sidon described how he realized God’s existence in the moments of his personal crisis and desperation, “...that there is only one God and no one else, who could help me in fact and that I am only expected to ask for help nicely, then to kneel and pour mud on my head until I

29 W 1910/5.

30 W 1923/42.

31 W 1924/25.

32 W 1924/26.

33 W 1921/91.

34 W 1924/40.

35 M 1919/12.

36 W 1921/144.

get back the keys. And when I voiced my request, I found them at that moment. So I knelt, poured mud on my head and rejoiced. Not because of my keys, but because I realized I am not alone. That whatever happens in this world, there is someone on whom I can always rely."<sup>37</sup>

## After the Shoa

Immediately after the Shoa, many Jews preferred to emigrate than to stay in the environment which reminded them of the past horrors. Between 1945 and 1949, approximately one third of the survivors left for Palestine/Israel.<sup>38</sup> Zionist ideas helped to forget the past and, at the same time, they offered some future perspectives to them. The establishment of a new Jewish state gave a new sense of life to the young generation, in particular: *We were entirely assimilated initially. We left our orthodox upbringing behind us and we were different people. Most of us came from orthodox homes, but we turned into atheists and ethnic Jews.*<sup>39</sup> *I began to attend the high school (gymnasium) in Nitra and Hashomer Hacair was already working there. I think that those trainers, who were one or two years older than we, may have saved us; they filled our leisure time with activities, which helped us to forget our past experience. After school lessons, we ran to the youth movement center.*<sup>40</sup> *That time between September 1945 and my aliya to Israel, it was the most beautiful part of my childhood, because I joined Hashomer Hacair movement then. From that time, all nice moments of my life have been connected with the movement. (...) For a number of us, life in the movement was our second home and for those, who lost their parents, it was a real home.*<sup>41</sup>

It seems that one part of the survivors accepted communism just because it had something in common with Hashomer ideas. One of the Hashomer veterans told us that in 1946, "Hashomer Hacair joined the election campaign of the communist party as its ideas were close to its members."<sup>42</sup> The Jews, who stayed in Slovakia, opted for a voluntary assimilation. A number of them

37 SIDON, Karol E.: Když umřít, tak v Jeruzalémě. Rozhovor s Karlem Hvižďalou a Viktorem Vondrou. (If to Die, then in Jerusalem. Talks with Karel Hvižďala and Viktor Vondra) Mladá fronta, Praha 1997, pp. 11-12.

38 BÜCHLER, Robert, Y.: Znovuoživenie židovskej komunity na Slovensku po druhej svetovej vojne. (Revival of the Slovak Jewish Community after WWII) Acta Judaica Slovaca, 4, 1998, pp. 79-90, p. 166. And: JABLONKOVÁ, Chana: Izrael a Židia zo Slovenska. (Israel and the Slovak Jews) Acta Judaica Slovaca, 4, 1998, pp. 163-186, p. 166.

39 M 1929/128.

40 M 1934/132.

41 M 1935/136.

42 NIR 1998:85.

joined the communist party: Some, due to their ambitions or opportunism, others, out of their fear of the new totalitarian regime. As the journalist B. Utitz wrote, “the contemporary program – equality for all, regardless their religion and ethnicity, and the social justice – I liked it. I am not embarrassed that I joined the party then...”<sup>43</sup> For many of them, membership in the communist party reflected their thankfulness to the Soviet army for their liberation. Later disillusionment was perceived with even more painful emotions:

*Russia, communism, and socialism was like an idol for us, for our generation. We and the Jewish youth in general, especially Zionists, were left-oriented and Stalin for us... We could not believe that it is true, that they rape women and steal watches; we claimed that it was propaganda until we experienced all that personally...*<sup>44</sup>

*You know, it was already long ago, but I thought that when we would be liberated that everything will be covered by red fabric. And it happened, after all. It was red for forty years, but not the fabric, but the ideology. Today I am much smarter, I learned my lesson.*<sup>45</sup> One may agree with a view that initially “the Czechoslovak communists did not request that the Jews, who continued to live in post-war Czechoslovakia, give up their ethnic identity. It was not necessary. After their horrifying experiences from the Holocaust, the Jews hurried to get rid of their Jewish identity, to become part of the society, to be identical with others.”<sup>46</sup> This feeling was strengthened by the fact that there were no more any Orthodox Jews who would remind them of the past. Mrs. N.S. recollection (from a private correspondence) shows that even Jewish children perceived the traditional Jews as being exotic: “I recall 1956 very well; it was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chatam Sofer. I sat next to my mother in the Primatial Palace and asked her who those individuals with wide fur hats on their heads and with white stockings are and my mom told me that these are Jews and they used to live here before the war.”

The Czechoslovak Communist party (KSČ) soon changed its forthcoming attitude and it labeled “Zionists” as enemies (the term was used to denote Jews in general). Not only active Zionists, but also the Jews, who had nothing in common with this ideology, became the victims of the communist persecu-

43 HVÍŽĎALA, Karel: Chtěl jsem tu žít. S Bedřichem Utitzem o jeho emigracích, selháních a návratech. (I Wanted to Live Here. With Bedřich Utitz on his Emigration, Failures, and Returns) In Roš Chodeš, 71, 2010, č. 1, pp. 6-7, p. 6.

44 W 1923/42.

45 W 1924/26.

46 ŽIAK, Miloš: Mrzáci studenej vojny. (Criples of the Cold War) Kalligram, Bratislava 2003, p. 313.

tions. It can be illustrated by a monster-trial “with the leadership of the anti-state conspiracy center headed by Rudolf Slansky.” Fourteen persons, out of which eleven were Jewish, were taken to the court; out of eleven executed, ten were Jewish. According to the historian Karl Kaplan, “struggle against Zionism and the Jewish bourgeois nationalism, in fact anti-Semitism” was the dominating feature of this trial.<sup>47</sup> The historian Tony Judt characterized it as a “great anti-semitic monster-trial”, in which both prosecutors and witnesses repeatedly underlined the Jewish origin of most accused persons and their affiliation with Judaism served as a presumption of their guilt.<sup>48</sup> It seemed that in that moment (at the latest), Jews must have got rid of all their illusions concerning the communist regime. The historian Toman Brod, who survived Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, documented that reality was more complex: “Some Jewish contemporaries stated that just in that time they sobered up from their sweet communist dreams – if the communist regime is so anti-semitic, as it was evident during the Slansky trial in Czechoslovakia, then the Jewish community should not support it! I am embarrassed to admit –again! - that this trial did not yet change my opinion.”<sup>49</sup> Still, some people considered the trial to be a struggle inside the communist party rather than an expression of anti-Semitism.<sup>50</sup>

“Battle against Zionism” did not stop even after J.V. Stalin’s death, nor after Klement Gottwald, the General Secretary of KSČ, died. In August 1953, the Supreme Court took 11 persons to court for their activities in Zionist organizations. Ten of them were charged by treason. Moreover, four were also charged of spying. The eleventh, (the only non-Jew) allegedly “violated the duties of a public official”, because he allowed to be corrupted by his Jewish co-offenders. He was sentenced to 6 years in prison – the lowest sentence; the rest of them were sentenced to 7 years and up to life prison terms. According to the charge, they were not only supporting emigration to Israel, but also the corruption and alleged espionage. The charged persons were alleged to pass

47 KAPLAN, Karel: *Nekrvavá revoluce. (Revolution with no Blood)* Mladá fronta, Prague 1993, pp. 359-360.

48 JUDT, Tony: *Povojnová Európa. História po roku 1945. (Post-war Europe. The History after 1945)* Slovart, Bratislava 2007, pp. 177-178.

49 BROD, Toman: *Ještě že člověk neví, co ho čeká. Života běh mezi roky 1929-1989 (Better not to know what is one facing. (Life course between 1929-1989)* Academia, Prague 2007, p. 236.

50 KAPLAN (1993), p. 364. See also: KAPLAN, Karel: *Kronika komunistického Československa. Společnost pro odbornou literaturu – Barrister &Principal, (Cronicle of the Communist Czechoslovakia)* Prague 2009.

“very important reports on the Czechoslovak economy, which subsequently served to the American imperialists to undermine the Czechoslovak economy.” These reports included e.g. “important reports on the production and export of sugar, on the location of sugar processing factories, on their machinery” and also on the glass production, etc. The Zionist movement ceased to exist in Czechoslovakia. Media only presented it as a derogatory concept. However, struggle against Zionism continued. The Israeli historian Yeshayahu A. Jelinek stressed that even in the seventies, a “Zionist denoted a Jew. The hunting of Zionists was, in fact, the hunting of the Jews...”<sup>51</sup>

### The Jewish community reactions

The most frequent response to the Shoah and the communist regime was atheism. Another typical reaction was one's effort to “leave Judaism”, and to act as “non-Jews” in the public: “I didn't want to be a Jew. I thought anti-Semitism would disappear by means of assimilation. Only much later, I understood that preserving traditions of one's own ancestors should not be a reason for persecution and that reasons for the persecution of Jews must be sought somewhere else. I realized that to give up the history and traditions of your forefathers cannot be associated with persecution. One should not be ashamed of his background, only for his present/day deeds.”<sup>52</sup>

Although left-oriented (communist) and assimilating views prevailed, believers were also part of the overall specter in smaller towns. In 1955, about 55 religious communities were active in Slovakia.<sup>53</sup> In Bratislava, there was minyan twice a day; regular services were held in several other cities, too. An emigration wave after the August 1968 occupation brought a significant drop in the Jewish population. According to the JOINT data, 4,500 Jews left Slovakia at that time.<sup>54</sup> These were mainly the members of the young and middle-age generation. As a consequence, the majority of Jewish communities ceased to exist, others had no future prospects and so, it was only a question of time when

51 JELÍNEK, Ješajahu, A.: *Dávidova hviezda pod Tatrami. Židia na Slovensku v 20. storočí.* (David's Star under the Tatras. The Slovak Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) Jána Mlynárik's publ.house, Prague 2009, p. 425.

52 ŠPITZER, Juraj: *Nechcel som byť žid. (I Didn't Want to be a Jew)* Kalligram, Bratislava 1994, p. 102.

53 SALNER, Peter: *Židia na Slovensku medzi tradíciou a asimiláciou.* (The Jews in Slovakia between the Tradition and Assimilation) Zing Print, Bratislava 2000, pp. 165-166.

54 JELÍNEK (2009), p. 421.

they will cease to exist. In 1990, there were 15 of them and this number was further shrinking until it reached the current 11.

Today, 2,300 persons are affiliated with the Jewish religious communities. Most of them are, paradoxically, secular Jews. They are seeking particularly social, cultural, and economic assistance in the community. When attending a religious service, they do not perceive it from the religious aspect. They consider it a social act, or an expression of solidarity with more religious members or their forefathers: "In 1967, I sent my child to a religious camp to the U.S. after all, but I had instructed him that other participants would pray there and that he should not mock them. This is my attitude to the believers. I don't believe and I am sorry for that, because it would help me if I could do so."<sup>55</sup> Viktor Fischl offered a similar view: "I don't claim that there is no God, but I cannot pray to him. There must be something. I never doubted that, and I don't even today."<sup>56</sup> If some members are religious, they do not identify with the traditional Judaism. The honorable president of the Union of the Jewish Religious Communities (UZZNO), Pavel Traubner represents the current search, rejection, and acceptance of the values: "I am not a religious Jew. I attend the synagogue on high holidays to make a prayer for my parents. I am an ethnic Jew. I am a Slovak, who was born to Jewish parents."<sup>57</sup>

The family background and prevailing atheism of the contemporary educational system made the children of survivors, i.e. the generation of the "Holocaust children" to accept secular values. However, lack of religiousness has not affected their affiliation to the Jewish community.

After the Holocaust, a number of families chose a strategy of assimilation, hiding one's ethnicity. In my research, I came across young people, who learned about the Jewish origin of one or both of their parents (thus about their own too) from other sources, often under dramatic circumstances. The memory of Mrs. N.S. is a clear illustration of the situation: "The Jews didn't want to be Jewish. They kept it secret even from their own children. I heard about a case when the son learned that he was Jewish and he committed suicide as a consequence." When analyzing the post-war generation of Jews,

55 LUSTIG, Arnošt: Interview II. Vybrané rozhovory 1979-2003. (Interviews II. Selected talks 1979-2003) Ed. Jan Suk. Devět bran, Praha 2004, pp. 120-121.

56 EMINGEROVÁ (2002), p. 35.

57 KOTIAN, Robert – FŮLLE, Ján: Pavel Traubner: Som Slovák, ktorý sa narodil židovským rodičom. (I am a Slovak Born to the Jewish Parents) In: Domino – forum, 2004, vol. 46, p. 8-9, p. 9.

Alena Heitlinger has highlighted the fact of diversity: “They differed from other Czechs and Slovaks by the trans-generational passing (or not passing) over the parent’s Holocaust experience and their ambivalence or even hiding of their Jewish roots, which lead to confusing feelings of being different from others. A number of Czech and Slovak Jews have experienced, though not too often, psychologically significant anti-Semitism; they had emotional link with Israel, which automatically contradicted with the strongly anti-semitic communist regime. Contrary to their Jewish peers in western liberal democracies, their affiliation with Judaism was connected with a negative feeling of being different, often with a painful search of one’s own Jewish background in a situation when the communist authorities and many parents avoided to be identified with their Jewish background; another factor was the lack of Jewish education.”<sup>58</sup> The author summarized a number of concrete instances of the functioning of the Jewish family under the totalitarian regime in her monograph entitled “In the Shadow of the Holocaust and Communism.”<sup>59</sup>

After 1989, the Jewish Communities (particularly in Bratislava) have undergone an intense revival. There are long-term programs and various social, cultural, and educational events held on a regular basis. Special attention is paid to the commemoration of the Holocaust and its victims. Official azkaras represent the most attended events in smaller Jewish communities. Their member turn-out is often “more than hundred percent”: Apart from local members, other community affiliates, who already moved to a different place are also coming.

Among a wide spectrum of activities, the religious events are not part of the priorities for most members. Large turn-out has been traditionally observed during the High holidays. One of the observant members critically commented the disparity between the numbers of registered members of the Bratislava Jewish community (ŽNO Bratislava) in the nineties of the past century:

*So, I am asking, where are those people? It is not a priority for them? Good, those employed, they have to go every morning to their work and cannot attend services. But even on Friday evening it is nothing too much and even on some Saturdays... On one Saturday, we*

58 HEITLINGER, Alena: Česko/slovenská židovská identita povojnovej generácie. (The Czech and Slovak Jewish Identity of the Post-war Generation) In: Židia dnes (The Jews at the Present Time) ed. E. Gál, Intitute of Judaism UK, ROAD, Bratislava 2003, pp. 51-90, pp. 83-84.

59 HEITLINGEROVÁ, Alena: Ve stínu holocaustu a komunismu. Čeští a slovenští židé po roce 1945. (In the Shadow of the Holocaust and Communism. The Czech and Slovak Jews after 1945) G+G, Prague 2007. See also: SALNER (2000).

*needed the tenth person in order to have a minyan and simply we couldn't find him. We hardly get ten or eleven men, sometimes a few more. Sometimes. Where are all those members?*<sup>60</sup> An indirect response was provided by an old lady, who always publicly declared her Jewish roots. In 1993, when a rabbi arrived in Bratislava (for almost one quarter of a century this job remained vacant), she told me in a private conversation that something she wanted to forget is coming back...

Since then, the situation has been getting worse. Due to lack of interest, Monday and Thursday services had to be cancelled in the Bratislava synagogue; moreover, the Shabbat services have been permanently struggling with the number of present men (minimum 10 are necessary for a minyan). The future prospects do not look promising either. The third generation members (currently in their thirties or forties) were growing up after the November 1989. These "Holocaust grandchildren" could already join the Jewish community activities and events either individually or through their youth organization (The Slovak Jewish Union Youth). Hundreds of young people took part in international summer Jewish camps held in the Hungarian town of Szarvas after 1989. A number of them participated in various educational programs abroad. Following her own research, Tina Gyarfášová stated that "thanks to these new possibilities, positive aspects of the Jewish identity were strengthened," which has been demonstrated in stricter observation of the Jewish traditions and in better education in Judaism".<sup>61</sup>

It follows from the ethnological materials that the present-day Jewish identity in Slovakia cannot be entirely defined through the traditional concepts like religiosity, ethnicity, culture, etc. One should also consider the factor of dissimilarity with one's surrounding and its historical roots. This "origin identity" has been characteristic especially for those, who were shaping their relation to Judaism after the Shoah.<sup>62</sup>

60 M 1920/98.

61 GYARFÁŠOVÁ, Tina: Faktory intergeneračného prenosu židovskej identity na Slovensku. (Factors of the Intergenerational Transfer of the Jewish Identity in Slovakia) In *Sociální studia*, 5, 2008, č. 3-4, pp. 179-192, pp. 184-185. See also KLEMENTOVÁ, Ela: Postholokaustová židovská identita. (Post-Holocaust Jewish Identity) In *Sociální studia*, 5, 2008, č. 3-4, pp. 213-209, pp. 196-197.

62 BUMOVÁ, Ivica: (Dis)kontinuita hodnôt na príklade jednej židovskej rodiny (prípádová štúdia). (Discontinuity of Values Based on a Single Jewish Family Example) In *Naratívna každodennosť v kontexte historických zlomov v Česku a Slovensku po roku 1948, 1968, 1989, 1993 z pohľadu dynamiky vývoja hodnôt* (Narrative Everyday Life in the Context of hHistoric Turning Points in the Czech and Slovak Republics after 1948, 1989, 1993 Viewed from Dynamics of the Value Development, comp. Z. Profantová), Bratislava 2009, pp. 345-362.

## Conclusion

Gradual decline of faith (particularly of its traditional forms) has been going on for more than two centuries. The Holocaust became a catalyst of this long-term process, because it undermined the so far accepted values. Before, it was rather an individual rejection of faith that became a general phenomenon. A number of Jewish persons demonstratively interrupted their contacts with the community and suspended their membership in the Jewish community. Out of 35,000 survivors in Slovakia, in 1949 7,476 persons, i.e. almost 20 percent confirmed their affiliation with the Jewish community.<sup>63</sup> This could be their reaction to the past, trust in the communist regime, but also their fear of the future. Fedor Gál was born in March 1945 in Theresienstadt. Only several decades after the war, he learned that his mother, whom he perceived as a secular Jew, had him baptized after her arrival from the concentration camp: “I have no other explanation as her fear of anti-Semitism and the possibility that the war did not change anything.”<sup>64</sup>

This baptism was rather exceptional. More often than not, Jewish individuals adopted the communist ideology, often associated with atheism and joining the communist party followed by a change of their surname (making it sound more Slovak), and hiding their Jewish roots from the surrounding, sometimes including their own children:

*I have to admit that after the liberation I didn't want to have anything in common with Judaism. I changed my surname immediately, suspended my affiliation with the community and I refused to be part of the chosen people. I didn't succeed. Whether I want or do not want, it is part of me; I miss sholel, yes and also various traditions from my home that connect me with my childhood and the past.*<sup>65</sup>

This statement is rather characteristic of the present-day state of Judaism in Slovakia. In response to the Holocaust trauma, the Jewish community members lost (younger ones could not develop any) interest in Judaism as a reli-

63 MEŠTAN, Pavol: Antisemitizmus v politickom vývoji Slovenska (1989-1992). (Anti-Semitism in the Political Development of Slovakia) SNM, múzeum židovskej kultúry, Bratislava 1999, p. 13.

64 GÁL, Fedor: Krátká dlouhá cesta. (The Short Long Road) Nemo, Prague 2008, p. 18. See also, SALNER, P.: Transformácia religióznej identity. (Transformation of the Religious Identity) In: Ed. KILIÁNOVÁ, G., KOWALSKÁ, E., KREKOVIČOVÁ, E.: My a tí druhí v modernej spoločnosti. Konštrukcie a transformácie kolektívnych identít. (We and the Others in the Modern Society. Constructions and Transformations of Collective Identities) Bratislava: Veda 2009, pp. 163-174.

65 W 1924/7.

gious system. However, they did not get rid of all their spiritual and emotional links with their past. They have perceived their Judaism in a secular way, but it still exists. They did not lose their (formal) connection with religious roots. They try to demonstrate it "ritually" on some chosen occasions, e.g. lighting of Shabat or Hanukah candles, by their participation at Mazkir, Seder, by consuming Matzos instead of bread on Passover, by fasting on Yom Kipur or choosing some kind of semi-kosher diet, i.e. a symbolic observation of some kashrut principles. The above mentioned (including others) demonstrations of respect for traditions do not reflect religiosity, but rather one's respect for ancestors and their traditions:

*My father was not religious, it was very interesting. And my mother requested observance of all Jewish traditions. And me too, I had to pray every morning with tefillin until I turned twenty five. Only when my dear mother died, I stopped doing it. I am though a good Jew, I can say, but I am not observant. During the year, I go to the synagogue on the High holidays, I believe in certain things, in God, but I am far from being associated with those Orthodox Jews. Certainly not.<sup>66</sup>*

*Well, we don't observe the old customs. Very little, we observe though Rosha Shana, Yom Kipur. Just as it is required. So, I for instance eat pork. One shouldn't mention that (laugh), but I don't eat it on holidays.<sup>67</sup>*

Obviously, it is difficult to answer the question posed at the beginning of the study unambiguously. Following the gathered material, one can conclude that God is for the majority of Slovak Jews either an abstract concept or non-existent. Clearly, it is not the traditional God of the Torah and mitzvot, to which their ancestors used to pray.

66 M 1932/48.

67 M 1927/52.