

Activities of Bishop Paul Peter Gojdic in favour of Jews in Slovakia during the Holocaust

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National-socialist policies of racial superiority brought into the Slovak society a new dimension of anti-Semitism, which was evident in Slovakia since the 19th century, but only gained monstrous proportions in the first period of the Slovak Republic during the period 1939 - 1945. The "final" solution of the Jewish question in Slovakia became a real trauma in modern Slovak history and the moral consequences of this shameful act are still noticeable in today's society. The dramatic fate of approximately 89,000 men, women and children of Jewish nationality is an admonition in face of the Slovak nationalism, which resulted during World War II in a form of an unspeakable brutality and still manifests itself in thought and action of a certain group of the Slovak population.

An anti-Jewish campaign was launched after the declaration of the Slovak autonomy in 1938 and the presentation of a solution to the Jewish question became one of the main attributes of the governmental policy of the nascent authoritarian-totalitarian regime. On the night of 4-5 November 1938, the autonomous government with the help of the Hlinka's guards prepared the forced deportation of uncomfortable Jews to the south of Slovakia which was given to Hungary after the Vienna Award.¹

The Slovak State established on 14 March 1939 under the Constitution of July 1939 was called the Slovak Republic and opened the road for the implementation of Slovak nationalism. The authoritarian-totalitarian regime in the so-called solution of the Jewish question showed its anti-democratic, anti-human and ultimately anti-Christian side.²

¹ KAMENEC, I.: *Slovenský štát (1939–1945)*. Praha : Anomal, 1992, p. 107.

² KAMENEC, I.: *Slovenský štát v obrazoch*. Praha : Ottovo nakladatelstvi, 2008, p. 141 – 142.

Official propaganda together with the government's anti-Semitic policy provoked hatred against Jewish citizens. After the Slovak-German negotiations in Salzburg during the Summer of 1940, the fate of thousands of Jews began to be addressed according to the German model and racial principle. After those negotiations, a special German adviser for the solution of the Jewish question, Dieter Wisliceny, arrived in Slovakia. In September 1940 the Slovak parliament conferred full powers to the government of the first Slovak Republic to solve the Jewish question within one year. The German adviser suggested a simple plan of seizure the income and assets of Jewish co-citizens, which should lead to solve the question of the removal of Jews from Slovakia. The act of conferring full powers for one year to the new government brought literally hundreds of anti-Jewish decrees and regulations of national or regional scope. The government policy systematically excluded Jewish population from the economic and public life and premeditatedly deprived them of social, civil and finally human rights. Up to September 1941 the Jewish community was intentionally impoverished and this mass of people deprived of their rights became an uncomfortable social burden for the state.³

The most critical moment was the publication of Decree-Law No. 198/1941, Official Journal, of the Jewish Code of 9 September 1941. The government regulation contained up to 270 paragraphs and was the most comprehensive regulation issued during the existence of the first Slovak Republic. This regulation was an almost exact or true copy of the German laws against the Jews and defined a solution of the Jewish question in Slovakia on strictly racial basis. Compared with other countries as Italy, France, Hungary, Romania, the Netherlands, Austria and others, the Jewish code also contained two lighter points, paragraphs 255 and 256, which were its exclusivity. The first paragraph reserved the right for the President of the first Slovak Republic to, directly and with administrative proceedings, exempt someone from the scope of this law while the second one confirmed the validity of all the exceptions, which were granted earlier according to the mentioned Slovak legislation.⁴

The exceptions contained in the code could not mitigate the immorality and shamefulness of a code in which some people were deemed to be inferior and deprived of rights. The consequences of these treatments directed against Jewish citizens had tragic consequences in early 1942, when

³ BORZA, P.: *Dejiny Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi na Slovensku v období II. svetovej vojny (1939–1945)*. Prešov : Petra, 2006, p. 161.

⁴ HOFFMANN, G. – HOFFMANN, L.: *Katolícka cirkev a tragédia slovenských židov v dokumentoch*. Partizánske : G-print, s.r.o., 1994, p. 130 – 131. Also MURIN, K.: *Spomienky a svedectvo*. Hamilton : Zahraničná Matica slovenská 1987, p. 418 – 419; *Slovenský zákonník*, 1941, Law n. 198/1941 Official Journal.

the eviction of Jews from Slovakia started being prepared. On 25 March the first transport of thousand young people left to Auschwitz, situated in occupied Poland. The government led by radical Vojtech Tuka carried out deportations based on § 22 of the code about Jewish job duties when Jewish citizens were officially deported to work in occupied Poland. Until May 1942, when the parliament adopted the law of deportation of Jews from Slovakia, the government had deported 35,000 Jewish citizens. The Act of eviction of the Jewish people began with these words: *Jews can be deported from the territory of the Slovak Republic*. The deportees lost all movable property (they did not have any real estate property) and citizenship. The cost of eviction was 500 Reichsmarks per person and should be funded from confiscated Jewish property. The parliament of the Slovak Republic which approved the emigration law on 15 May 1942, managed to insert exceptions meant to save thousands of Jewish citizens. However, until transports were stopped in October 1942, around 58,000 people were transported from Slovakia, and therefore we cannot minimize the shameful behaviour of government officials who assumed responsibility for crimes against humanity.⁵

Deportation was accompanied by various acts of violence by the security forces. Inhuman treatment of the Jewish population provoked justified outrage among the public and church leaders. A large amount of Jews were saved from deportation because of the dedication of the Slovak population, church and government officials who disagreed with the procedure of other government officials and pressed for a stop of the transports, which they achieved in October 1942.⁶

After that, despite the German pressure, no Jews were deported from Slovakia until 1944. After the arrival of the German army in August 1944, deportation restarted. Nazis together with the Hlinka's guards deported from Slovakia about 13,500 Jews. Almost all of the deported perished in Nazi camps under appalling conditions.⁷

The honour of the nation that first impoverished and then sent tens of thousands of Jews to certain death in the concentration camps, was saved by the heroic attitude of some Slovaks and many of them also hold the title of "Righteous Among the Nations." Nearly 540 people in Slovakia were awarded this title for rescuing Jews.⁸

⁵ Časová os. [cit. 2012-06-14]. Dostupné na internete: <http://www.uzzno.sk/dsh/casova-os>.

⁶ Biskupi Slovenska veriacim. Vyhlásenie biskupov o rasovej legislatúre. In: KAMENEC, I. – PREČAN, V. – SKORVÁNEK, S.: *Vatikán a Slovenská republika (1939–1945), Dokumenty*. Bratislava : Slovac Academic Press, 1992, p. 105 – 108.

⁷ Časová os. [cit. 2012-06-14]. Dostupné na internete: <http://www.uzzno.sk/dsh/casova-os>.

⁸ *Spravodlivý medzi národmi 2012*. [cit. 2012-06-14]. Dostupné na internete: <http://www.delet.sk/zivot-a-judaizmus/holocaust/spravodlivy-medzi-narodmi-2012>.

One of them was blessed bishop Paul Peter Gojdič. Bishop Gojdič's personality is closely linked to the Eparchy of Presov. In 1926 the Holy See named a young Basilian monk to the office of administrator of the Eparchy of Presov. Bishop Gojdič replaced the bishop of the Eparchy of Krizevac, Dr. Dionysus Nyárady, who had administered the Eparchy of Presov since 1922, because, he faced many adversities from the state administration, which tried to remove him from office since he was not a Czechoslovak citizen. Finally, he suggested as his successor the young monastic priest Paul Peter Gojdič. Rome received this proposal and on 14 September 1926 he was appointed new apostolic administrator.⁹

Bishop P. P. Gojdič was the sixth bishop of the Eparchy of Presov since its creation in 1818 and the last one before the violent liquidation in 1950. In his function he focused on the objective of increasing the authority of the Church through its renewal and the deepening of religious life as well as preventing further spread of Orthodoxy that began to expand after the revolution in Russia through emigrants in the territory of the Eparchy of Presov. Much attention was given to spiritual renewal. In this sense he used press, schools, regulations, visitations, personal visits, etc. He strived to make religious persons meet in conferences. Along with deans, he established that spiritual conferences were to be held at least four times a year. He ordered that every priest should attend a five-day retreat at least once every three years and demanded from priests an increased discipline. He paid special attention to the purity of the Eastern Rite. He also supported the publication of religious literature, especially anthologies and prayer aids which with due explanations ensured the unity of liturgical singing. He also restored and embellished the Cathedral in Presov. On the territory of the Eparchy eighteen new churches were built and twenty-one parishes and temples were restored until 1947. At the same time, for the need of believers, he helped to create new parishes in Prague, Brno and Bratislava and after World War II also in Eastern Slovakia. He invited to the Eparchy new religious communities, namely the Sisters of the Congregation of Servants of Mary Immaculate, whom he entrusted an eparchial orphanage in Presov, as well as the reformed Basilian Fathers. He supported the spiritual renewal in the diocese of Prešov by printing a magazine for the Ruthenian intelligentsia 'Russkoye slovo', but particularly by creating a business institution called Petra. Petra was devoted to publishing and editorial activities. It published books, prayer books and the Catechism. Bishop Gojdič looked after the elevation of ecclesiastic and religious life of the Greek Catholics. He was Bishop of Presov from 1927 until his death in the Leopoldov prison. In 1950, when the communist regime

⁹ ŠTURÁK, P.: *Otec biskup Pavol Gojdič, OSBM*. Prešov : VMV, 1997, p. 48 – 53.

in Czechoslovakia banned the Greek Catholic Church, he was imprisoned and in 1960 he died in the Leopoldov prison faithful to God, to the Church and to his conscience.¹⁰

On 4 November 2001 he was beatified in Rome by Blessed Pope John Paul II. He became the first modern-day saint, who was born in Slovakia, where he lived, worked, suffered and died. His relics are exhibited for public esteem in the Greek Catholic Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, in Presov.

Bishop Gojdic reacted to the idea of spreading Nazi ideology in the Slovak society with a pastoral letter of January 1939, in which he called the Nazi ideology an epidemic. The Nazi epidemic was spreading through Europe and also found its victims in Slovakia. When the pastoral letter was issued, the so-called solution of the Jewish question was debated in Slovakia. He regarded it as misguided and even dangerous to Slovakia, if "someone does wrong to another person, he is damaging himself."¹¹ The fact of clearly naming the problem in January 1939 says much about Gojdič's excellence and sensitivity to respect essential human rights. He was strongly affected by the atrocities against defenceless Jews during the organized transports. He was not satisfied with the common practice of Catholic Bishops in the form of memoranda and statements. After the beginning of the transports, he wrote a letter to the chargé d'affaires Giuseppe Burzio in May 1942 describing the horrors of transports and proposing the resignation of President J. Tiso. */Barbarism against those poor people exceed inhumanity.../* He defended in a letter the interests of the Catholic Church whose reputation was severely compromised. Later on, his fears expressed in this letter were confirmed that the responsibility for the implementation of the so-called Jewish Code may fall on the Catholic clergy and the whole Catholic Church.¹²

Bishop of Presov Gojdič did not only express protest, but he engaged personally within his possibilities in saving Jews. He inspired several priests by his personal example and instructions to act in favour of the persecuted.¹³ He paid great attention to the weakest members of Jewish families, the children. Along with the clergy, he showed courage helping Jewish families by issuing authentic and false birth certificates, by hiding valuables, by guaranteeing the respect of presidential exceptions and even

¹⁰ POTÁŠ, M.: *Dar lásky. Spomienky na biskupa Pavla Gojdiča, OSBM*. Prešov : VMV, 2001..

¹¹ BIRČÁK, J.: *Slovo episkopa Gojdiča. Výber z publikovaného dedičstva blahoslaveného biskupa Pavla Gojdiča*. Prešov 2004, p. 155 – 157.

¹² BORZA, P.: *Dejiny Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi na Slovensku v období II. svetovej vojny (1939 – 1945)*. Prešov : Petra, 2006, p. 165.

¹³ Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance Bratislava, fond KS ZNB S-ŠTB Košice, inv. č. V-745/2, Teodor Rojkovič.

by hiding the persecuted. Bishop Gojdič issued a mandate for some Greek Catholic priests to baptize and issue original and false birth certificates.¹⁴ These activities were not left unnoticed by the state security service, and so for some religious persons an investigation began, which led to arrest and internment in Ilava.¹⁵ One of the suspected priests was Peter Dudinský, vicar of Ihlany, who according to the records of the investigation gave the baptism of 210 Jews. He was detained in Ilava for some time. They also investigated Michael Szabatov, vicar of Laškovce.¹⁶ Szabatov and Dudinský were accused of making a fortune of this. At least, in the case of Peter Dudinský, it was a fake accusation, as he was awarded posthumously the honour of Righteous among the Nations in 1994 for his selfless rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. The title of Righteous Among the Nations was also posthumously awarded to Father Michael Mašlej from Oľšavica in 1997. He rescued with personal??? enthusiasm and the help of parishioners dozens of persecuted Jewish co-citizens.¹⁷

Besides eparchial priests, some of the religious integrated in parallel help. Redemptorists in Michalovce¹⁸ and nuns of the Order of St. Basil the Great in charge of a girls' dormitory and nuns of Congregation of Servants of Mary Immaculate managing eparchial orphanage in Presov, who hid Jewish children in the dorm and orphanage.¹⁹

Bishop Gojdič with his clear stance and a proactive approach had showed the right way also to the clergy and the believers how to behave in the face of suffering Jews. He helped to find the way in a difficult time. He told Father Michael Mašlej, who was concerned that providing shelter to the racially persecuted endangered the safety of his parishioners: *"The support to the persecuted results of charity and it is your duty according to your capacity to help and to provide shelter to the threatened by deportation."*²⁰

He is known to have saved some thirty racially persecuted people with deep humanity and heroic sacrifice. However, this refers only those

¹⁴ Testimony of Michal Lukac - Spitzer dated 06.12.2006, author's archive.

¹⁵ Slovak National Archives Bratislava, fond 209, kr. 934. *Gréckokatolícky farár Peter Dudinský v Hodermarku – pokrstenie 210 Židov na gr. kat. Zápisnica zo dňa 30. júna 1944.*

¹⁶ Falšované krstné listy. Namiesto mŕtvych vpisoval do matriky Židov. In: *Slovenská Sloboda*. 1943, č. ?, zo dňa 30. januára 1943, p. 2.

¹⁷ BORZA, P.: *Dejiny gréckokatolíckej cirkvi na Slovensku v období II. svetovej vojny (1939-1945)*, Prešov: Petra, 2006, p. 166.

¹⁸ MANDZÁK, A. D.: Čriepky našich dejín. Židovská otázka v Michalovciach a redemptoristi. In: *Misionár*. 2008, č. 6, p. 48 – 54.

¹⁹ Testimony of Judit Knellerová dated 05.12.2006 and Marianna Zachová dated 02.01.2007, author's archive.

²⁰ Testimony of Andrej Filo dated 20.12.2006, author's archive.

rescued around Presov and Spis, but in fact there were certainly more. We still do not know the names of those rescued from Michalovce and Humenné, although he had met them earlier in Michalovce in front of the Redemptorist Fathers' monastery in August 1942 and urged them not to be afraid. ÚŠB informed, that Bishop Gojdič kissed Jews and believers were very resentful. One of the rescued, Marianna Zachová - Spitzerová was 12 years old in 1942, when the transports began. Paul Peter Gojdic took her and her sister Zuzana to the boarding school in the convent of the Sisters of Basil the Great and even enabled them to attend grammar school in Presov. *"We lived a normal life without fear and danger"* she wrote in her testimony. Her father Pavel Lukac - Spitzer was caught in a dramatic situation, when they were with the bishop in town and Hlinka's Guards started catching Jews. Bishop Gojdič hugged him tight and protected him from the guards.²¹ He rescued the Fleischer family from transportation to a concentration camp. Erika Klein - Fleischer was only five years old then. For this heroic act it was enough to deliver a baptism certificate that he delivered personally. Erika kept this document until 2006, when she attached it to her testimony. It meant life for all her family.²²

Jews saved by Bishop Gojdič live now in Canada, Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. His attitude and actions of rescuing Jews during the first Slovak Republic were praised by the State of Israel through posthumous granting the title of Righteous Among the Nations, which was handed to his relatives and then to the Archbishop of Presov on 27 January 2008 in Bratislava.

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