Historical background: Slovakia

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Jews in the Hungarian kingdom were fully emancipated by the law of 1867 and in 1895 with the so-called 'Reception Law', placing Judaism and Christianity on an equal level. Slovakia, formerly a part of the Hungarian kingdom, became part of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. Anti-Jewish riots re-appeared on Slovak territory repeatedly throughout history, mainly during times of significant political or social changes, as was the case in 1918. The Slovak Jewish population was scattered throughout the country, residing mainly in the cities.

Jews in Slovakia were more conservative compared to those in Czech lands. Only 9% of the Slovak Jews intermarried, compared to 43.8% in Bohemia and 30% in Moravia.[1] Eastern parts of the country were the most traditional ones, with Subcarpathian Rus' under considerable Hasidic influence. In Slovakia the Jewish community was formally divided into Neolog (Reform) and Orthodox communities, as well as those who followed neither movement, belonging to the so-called Status Quo group. In 1928, the Neolog and Status Quo communities formed the Yeshurun federation together. There were several yeshivas in Slovakia, including Bratislava, the major centre of Orthodox practice in Slovakia.

The Slovak People's Party was formed in 1896, and later re-named as Andrej Hlinka's Catholic Slovenská Ľudová Strana (Slovak People's Party). With its nationalistic and antisemitic program, it had dominated Slovak politics since 1925. At the beginning of November 1938, Czechoslovakia had to cede southern Slovakia to Hungary. Slovak authorities ordered all foreign and poor Jews from the Slovak side of the new border to be moved to the ceded areas. Several hundred ended up in camps on the frontier, and only after several weeks were Slovak citizens allowed to return.

After the independent Slovak state was declared on 14 March 1939, the Slovak government, controlled by the Slovak People's Party, issued a series of anti-Jewish decrees that limited Jewish participation in the economy and the professions, forced Jews out of the civil service and the army, and established special labor units for them. On 9 September 1941, the most detailed anti-Jewish legislation, also known as the Jewish Codex, was passed; it applied the racial categories of the National Socialist Germany's Nuremberg Laws in Slovakia. However, the Jewish Code also gave the president the right to grant exemptions from the law. Approximately 1,000 such exemptions were granted, mostly to converted Jews or the wealthy. Various ministries also used their right to protect those Jews considered indispensable (among these were professionals such as physicians).

Slovakia was the only non-occupied German satellite state that willingly handed over its Jewish citizens to the Germans for deportation to the extermination camps, and even paid 500 Reichsmarks for every person deported. From 25 March until 20 October 1942, 57,628 Jews were deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz and the Lublin region, and only several hundred survived. After the wave of deportations, approximately 25,000 Jews remained in Slovakia, among them mostly holders of

[1] Statistics from between 1928 and 1933. Source: YIVO: Czechoslovakia

exemptions (and their families) and Jews in labor camps in Sereď, Vyhne, and Nováky. Following the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising and the German occupation of Slovakia on 29 August 1944, another 13,500 Slovak Jews were deported to Auschwitz, Terezín, and other camps.

The Jewish population of Czechoslovakia was greatly decimated during World War II. The survivors faced many difficulties, the majority had no surviving relatives and lacked economic means. Property restitution was hindered by many obstacles and, following the Communist takeover of February 1948, restitution was impossible. In some cases, survivors faced hostility from the local population, an extreme case being the anti-Jewish pogrom in Topoľčany, Slovakia, in September 1945.

The Communist coup on 25 February 1948 marked a new, non-democratic, period in Czechoslovak history. Thousands of Czechoslovak citizens decided to emigrate, with large numbers of the Jewish citizens immigrating to the newly founded Israel. At the beginning of 1950s a series of political trials took place, both in and beyond Czechoslovakia, which was accompanied by anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist propaganda. Under the Communist government Jewish communal life was regimented and closely observed by state, party, and police organs. A brief period of liberalization that culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968 was followed by the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968. A new wave of emigration started, with roughly one-third of Czechoslovakian Jews leaving the country.

Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which toppled the Communist regime, religious and communal life recovered slowly. In 1993, Czechoslovak leaders amicably agreed to split the country into Czech Republic and Slovakia. Both new countries saw a resurgence of Jewish life, even as the population of self-identifying Jews remained a fraction of its pre-war size.