Memories of Youth: Slovak Jewish Holocaust Survivors and the Nováky Labor Camp

Master’s Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies
Antony Polonsky & Joanna B. Michlic, Advisors

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for

Master’s Degree

by
Karen Spira

May 2011
ABSTRACT

Memories of Youth: Slovak Jewish Holocaust Survivors and the Nováky Labor Camp

A thesis presented to the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Karen Spira

The fate of Jewish children and families is one of the understudied social aspects of the Holocaust. This thesis aims to fill in the lacuna by examining the intersection of Jewish youth and families, labor camps, and the Holocaust in Slovakia primarily using oral testimonies. Slovak Jewish youth survivors gave the testimonies to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, Israel. Utilizing methodology for examining children during the Holocaust and the use of testimonies in historical writing, this thesis reveals the reaction of Slovak Jewish youth to anti-Jewish legislation and the Holocaust. This project contributes primary source based research to the historical record on the Holocaust in Slovakia, the Nováky labor camp, and the fate of Jewish youth. The testimonies reveal Jewish daily life in pre-war Czechoslovakia, how the youth understood the rise in antisemitism, and how their families ultimately survived the Holocaust. Through an examination of the Nováky labor camp, we learn how Jewish families and communities were able to remain together throughout the war, maintain Jewish life, and how they understood the policies and actions enacted upon them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Literature Review and Methodology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies on Children</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Testimony in Historical Writing</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notable Recent Works</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia as a Subject</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Pre-War Memories of Jewish Youth</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families and Communities</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Background</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish, Zionist, and Secular Education</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Identity</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic and National Affiliation</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with Non-Jews</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 War, Independence, and Life in the Nováky Labor Camp</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laws Against Jews</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deportations</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival to Nováky</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Life</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Uprising, Escape, and Survival</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunkers in the Forests</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The fate of Jewish children and families is one of the understudied social aspects of the Holocaust. This project aims to fill in the lacuna by examining the intersection of Jewish youth and families, labor camps, and the Holocaust in Slovakia using oral testimonies. What we do know about Jewish children during the Holocaust largely comes from studies of ghettos all over Nazi-occupied Europe, orphanages and hiding in Poland and France, and concentration and death camps in Poland and Germany. Starvation, forced labor, and mass murder led to the destruction of Jewish children and families.

However, the wartime circumstances of independent Slovakia created specific conditions for Jewish families. Following the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia by Nazi Germany on September 29, 1938 and just preceding the Nazi occupation of the remaining Czecho-Slovak Republic on March 15, 1939, Slovakia declared its independence on March 14, 1939 as an ally of Nazi Germany. The subsequent wave of government mandated antisemitism shocked the Jewish community of Slovakia. Thanks to the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Slovak Jews were multilingual in Slovak, German, and Hungarian, and familiar with those cultures. Since 1918, they had been divided into two predominant religious communities: Neolog and Orthodox.¹ The majority of the Jews lived in western Slovakia, where both the secular and Orthodox

In 1921, Jewish communities were small and spread out, with the largest Slovak Jewish concentration of 10,973 in Bratislava representing 11% of the city’s population. Kosice, a city located in eastern Slovakia, had the second largest Jewish population of 8,792. Slovakia’s estimated Jewish population numbered roughly 90,000 in 1940. The testimonies reveal that pre-war relations with non-Jews in daily life extended beyond pleasantries to friendships, business partnerships, and reliance on Jewish professionals such as medical doctors. Given that most of Slovakia’s Jewish population tended to live in small concentrations, the survivors’ own perceptions of the numerical makeup of their communities tend to align closely with published population estimates. The survivors’ testimonies contribute to our understanding of the histories of smaller Jewish communities that have not been thoroughly studied.

After the initial and devastating transports of March and April 1942, some 25,000 Jews remained alive in Slovakia. In an effort to prevent the collapse of the economy, the local, fascist Slovak government issued ‘economic exemption’ papers for Jewish professional males. The papers declared selected Jewish business owners and farmers as vital contributors to the economy and labor force. Most of the men were heads of households, so their exemption from the 1942 deportations included their spouse and children. Consequently, Slovak authorities took many of those families to work in labor camps. The Nováky camp was located outside of the small village from which the labor

---

3 “Czechoslovakia,” YIVO Encyclopedia.
4 Ibid.
6 “Czechoslovakia,” YIVO Encyclopedia.
The town of Nováky is situated in western Slovakia, approximately 78 km east of the Czech border and 175 km northeast of Bratislava. Slovak Jewish men holding exemption papers built the Nováky labor camp about 4 km away from the village at the base of the surrounding Tatra Mountains. The development of the Nováky camp is unclear. Survivor testimonies recall Jewish men beginning to build the camp as early as October 1941. By April 1942, the Jewish forced laborers became inmates with their families. Rough estimates reveal between 1,600 and 2,000 Slovak Jews were imprisoned in the Nováky labor camp until the Slovak National Uprising on August 29, 1944. During the uprising, Slovaks, Jews, and Communists fought against the German and Slovak Nazis for two months before the Nazi forces defeated them. The outbreak of fighting forced Jewish families out of the Nováky labor camp and into hiding until the end of the war.

Lacking basic resources and fearing the local Slovak population, Jewish families depended upon luck and ingenuity for survival. As the testimonies reveal, many Slovak Jews remember positive relations with non-Jews until the beginning of World War II. After the local, fascist Slovak government passed anti-Jewish legislation on September 9, 1941, many Slovaks officially confiscated Jewish property and took over businesses in a process of Aryanization. Local Slovak populations assisted government officials in assembling transport lists of Jews from their communities. Some Slovaks did not actively participate in either of these actions against the Jews and remained indifferent to their plight. After Soviet forces liberated Slovakia in April 1945, many Jewish families

---

7 Aryanization is the transfer of Jewish-owned businesses to German ownership throughout Germany and German-occupied countries. In this case, the non-Jewish Slovaks did this to Slovak Jews. See Martin Dean, *Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
returned to their homes and communities to be met with hostility, pogroms, and little hope for continuing life in Slovakia. The majority of the surviving Slovak Jewish population immigrated between 1945 and 1949 to Israel, the U.S., and other Western countries.

Study of the fate of Slovak Jewish youth presents several important questions. How did Slovak Jewish youth understand changes in their relations with non-Jews during the war? How did Jewish families and communities reorganize and remain together in the face of the Holocaust? What were the characteristics of Jewish daily life in Slovakia during the Holocaust? What can we learn from late post-war young survivors’ testimonies about their childhood experience during the war? How does the Israeli context affect how the survivors relate their wartime experiences?

**My Research Perimeters**

In order to address these issues, I choose to discuss the Nováky labor camp for several reasons. The Nováky camp was built by Jewish men and populated largely by their families. It had numerous social and communal institutions that provided the youth with Jewish, secular, and Zionist education, plays, exercise, and life seemingly normal and similar to the outside world. Because of that, an examination of Jewish youth and families in the Nováky camp could shed light on Jewish childhood during the Holocaust. Since the majority of Slovak Jews immigrated to Israel, the bulk of adult and young survivors’ testimonies are deposited in the Yad Vashem archives.

Therefore, the sample

---

8 I intend to include testimonies from the Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education at the University of Southern California and the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony based at Yale University in a future project. See http://dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/ and http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/.
group has to be placed in a distinct Israeli context, through which they remember and speak about their Holocaust experiences. Israeli scholars working in the Yad Vashem archives conduct the interviews in Hebrew. I am responsible for the translations into English, which provide the basis for this study. Transcripts accompany some of the video testimonies in the archives. Two testimonies in this study from Vera P. and Regina G. had transcripts, and I consulted them when needed. Otherwise, I screened the videos and translated solely from the spoken narrative.

In the Yad Vashem archives in January 2011, I located 35 video testimonies of adult and young survivors who went through the Nováky labor camp at some point during their Holocaust experience. In addition, there are six written testimonies of survivors who were adults in the camp, which are not used. This project uses testimony from Jewish youth, and my focus is on video testimony. “Children” and “youth” in the Holocaust were defined by different standards. According to Slovak government policy, unmarried men and women age 16-35 were the first targets of deportation on March 25, 1942. Slovak Jewish youth attending secondary school until age 16 were subjected to anti-Jewish measures as early as 1938. Historians define children and youth by different standards in their studies. Deborah Dwork uses Nazi policy definitions of children up to the age of 6, 10, or 12 depending on the location. Sharon Kangisser Cohen determines a child survivor as one who was no older than 16 at the end of the war. Joanna B. Michlic analyzes written testimonies from children age 6-18 in the immediate postwar years.

---

For the purposes of this study, I consider Jewish “youth” age 16 or younger at the outbreak of World War II in 1939. In terms of gender representation, 25 males and 10 females comprise the group of Novák survivors who were documented in the Yad Vashem archives as of January 2011. In order to maintain a representative sample of male and female experience, I choose the number of testimonies for each gender before finalizing the sample based on other criteria. Accordingly, this study is based on the testimonies of five young males and two young females.

Yad Vashem began videotaping testimony in 1989. The testimonies in this study were given between 1996 and 2009. Due to the time consuming process of digitization, testimonies from 2008 and 2009 until the present were generally not available to examine in January 2011. This eliminated at least eight testimonies that could have been screened to determine whether they could be included in the study. At a later date, I plan to access these testimonies to use for further research. In addition, I received Dan S.’s testimony given in 2009 directly from him.

I also viewed the remaining 27 testimonies to gain a broader perspective. Three testimonies out of this group were eliminated from the possible sample pool due to poor video quality that did not allow a basic understanding and translation of the testimony. The testimonies of the four youngest survivors, aged 1-7, 2-8, and 4-10 between 1939 and 1945, were not used because of a general lack of sufficient historical data in them. The remaining testimonies are of youth aged 5-15 in 1939 and 11-21 in 1945. From this pool of 20 testimonies, seven were chosen to represent a variety of pre-war social background, experiences in the camp, and survival stories after leaving the camp.
My goal in choosing these testimonies was to show a mosaic of possible fates of Slovak youth who went through the Nováky camp. There was no preference made for “better” or “worse” stories. Rather, the intent is to show a range of possibilities and individual circumstances that led to survival among Slovak Jewish youth. Some survivors spent as little as a week and others as long as two years in the Nováky camp. After the Slovak National Uprising on August 29, 1944, these youth hid with Slovak Christians or in bunkers in the forests, collaborated with partisans, and ultimately immigrated to Israel between 1948 and 1949. Each story is unique, but at the same time contributes to an overall understanding of Slovak Jews’ wartime experiences, the Nováky labor camp, and the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish youth and families.

A Case Study

Much has been written about the affects of the Holocaust on Jewish communities in Prague, Bohemia and Moravia, and Hungary. Like the Nováky labor camp, Theresienstadt was first established as a transit camp for Czech Jews on November 24, 1941. Following the Wannsee conference on the ‘Final Solution’ on January 20, 1942, Theresienstadt functioned as an “instrument of propaganda for a false alibi” of the treatment of Jews under the Nazi regime.\textsuperscript{13} The “camp-ghetto” population of German, Austrian, and Czech Jews swelled to 60,000 by September 1942.\textsuperscript{14} Until the end of the war on May 9, 1945, the children of Theresienstadt produced an abundance of well-documented works of art, music, diaries, poetry, plays, and prose, which have come to symbolize spiritual and cultural resistance to the German Nazi regime in a concentration

\textsuperscript{13} Livia Rothkirchen, \textit{The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: Facing the Holocaust} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 265.

\textsuperscript{14} Rothkirchen, \textit{The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia}, 234.
camp. Nearly 90,000 Jews went through Theresienstadt to certain death elsewhere and roughly 33,000 died in the camp itself by the end of the war.\textsuperscript{15} Given the circumstances of the youth inmates, I argue that a closer examination of daily life in other labor camps, such as Nováky, enrich our understanding of children, not only in Theresienstadt, but also other areas of Czechoslovakia.\textsuperscript{16}

I draw on the methodology developed by prominent historians specializing in the history of children in the Holocaust and the use of testimony in Holocaust research. A brief examination of the current scholarship on the Holocaust in Slovakia demonstrates the need for more objective and comprehensive research in this area. I also examine the secondary literature on the pre-war Jewish community and the Holocaust in Slovakia.

This project focuses on seven video testimonies to provide a qualitative analysis of a small sample group of young Holocaust survivors. From youngest to oldest, we will follow the memories of Harry D., Shlomo G., Dan S., Vera P., Yan H., Regina G., and Yizkhak I. from their pre-war childhoods to the end of the war in April 1945.\textsuperscript{17} Slovak Jewish youth and families and the Nováky labor camp are under researched aspects of Holocaust history, so the driving force behind this project is to understand these aspects on a deeper level through the voices of the survivors. The late post-war testimonies of young survivors reveal a retrospective perception on their childhood. These youths poignantly depict not only how the Slovak Jewish community reacted to anti-Jewish policies, in particular to the conditions of forced labor in the Nováky camp. A more

\textsuperscript{17} Their first name and last initial is used in compliance with Yad Vashem copyright restrictions.
comprehensive study would include all of the testimonies in the Yad Vashem archives and other depositories, diaries and memoirs, and secondary literature in foreign languages. The limitations of the study are clear. These testimonies cannot tell us everything. However, they do provide a window into the past that has yet to be examined.
Chapter 1

Literature Review and Methodology

As background for the project, I draw on the methodology developed by prominent historians specializing in the history of children in the Holocaust and the use of testimony in Holocaust research. Although I am not able to include an exhaustive survey of all of the important works of these fields, I draw on the research of several historians that has influenced this study.

Studies on Children

Debórah Dwork examines the fate of Jewish children during the Holocaust in her pioneering study, *Children With A Star*. She investigates the wartime experiences of Jewish youth in hiding, transit camps, ghettos, death, concentration, and slave labor camps. Dwork uses her interviews with child survivors in addition to children’s letters, drawings, diaries, and journals. Dwork’s comprehensive account includes Jewish youth from all over Europe. Through her empirical research, Dwork develops important theoretical frameworks for analyzing testimony. She addresses methodological issues such as the reliability of late postwar testimony and the lack of archival documentation of children. Dwork questions the ability of survivors to present the wartime experiences of
the victims. But ultimately, she argues in favor of the use of testimony in historical reconstructions and the value of incorporating it into historical studies.

Nicholas Stargardt’s, *Witnesses of War*, is the first social history of Nazi Germany through the perspective of children during the war.\(^{19}\) His study analyzes World War II and the Holocaust through published accounts of young survivors. His method focuses on childhood in the war ‘as it was’ and how the children constructed ‘normalcy.’ Like Dwork, Stargardt’s study incorporates children’s voices from all over Nazi-occupied Europe and uses national contexts as a tool to understand each country’s relation to Nazi Germany. He explores how war affects children in their daily lives. In one case, German youth mimicking the German soldiers they see on the streets. He looks at accounts of Jewish children in concentration camps playing games reflecting their own conditions without food. Stargardt provides a comprehensive portrayal of childhood during war through the young people’s eyes.

Judith Hemmendinger examines child survivors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald in the immediate postwar years as they struggle to recover from the Holocaust. Hemmendinger uses her experience working in the French relief organization (OSE) to describe the condition of orphaned children housed in ‘group homes’ for three years after the end of the war. Her work combines her firsthand observations of the children’s’ “return to normal life” from 1945-1948 and their own reflections of this period as adults.\(^{20}\) Conducting the interviews herself nearly 40 years later, Hemmendinger succeeded in portraying the conditions of children in the immediate postwar years as well


as their retrospective perspective on those times. Her empirical research exposes how
memories and perspectives of these events continue to evolve over time.21

In Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss’s collection of early postwar
interviews, children describe their wartime experiences. This foundational text of
children’s immediate postwar testimony relates the fate of Polish Jewish youth who
survived ghettos, camps, hiding, prison, and the resistance.22 The last chapter of the
collection switches to adult testimonies of their interactions with children during the
Holocaust. All give us a glimpse into wartime experiences through early eyewitness
testimony of both children and adults.

Joanna B. Michlic focuses on the social history of Jewish children in postwar
Poland. Her work examines early postwar testimonies to reveal the “‘raw’ or ‘fresh’
memory of children’s wartime experiences and the impact of these experiences on their
identity.”23 In addition to testimonies, Michlic uses records from orphanages, Jewish
relief organizations, and Christian rescuers to illustrate how children’s struggles began
after the war in attempting to rebuild their lives. Examining hundreds of children’s
testimonies taken by historians and educators of the Jewish Historical Commission in
Poland, Michlic reconstructs children’s wartime experiences in hiding. The empirical
evidence demonstrates the clarity of children’s perceptions’ of their rescuers’ attitudes
towards them. The voices of children are a crucial component in understanding childhood

21 See Hemmendinger and Robert Keller, The Children of Buchenwald: Child Survivors of the Holocaust
22 See Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds., The Children Accuse, trans. Bill Johnston (London:
(2007).
during the Holocaust. Her comprehensive study of Jewish children and their Polish Christian rescuers uses children’s written and video testimonies, archival material, and letters from Christian rescuers to shed light on Polish-Jewish relations from the perspective of Jewish children.

Nahum Bogner explores the rescue of Jewish children hidden by Polish Christian families and in convents. Bogner’s examines the balance between the desires of Jewish organizations to ‘save’ Jewish children and restore the Jewish community with the unavoidable difficulty of the young children to part from their rescuers and relearn their new identities. He highlights the spectrum of Christian rescuers’ motivations to keep the children from monetary reward to a genuine desire to adopt the children they had grown close to over the war years. Bogner documents the hardships faced by the orphaned Jewish youth, their rescuers, and the Jewish organizations all working in the ‘best interests’ of the torn and traumatized youth.

Using Testimony in Historical Writing

Since 1979, Lawrence Langer has developed a widely accepted methodology of analyzing survivor testimony. His distinguished works on Holocaust testimonies provide a critical look into the nature of memory and the construction of testimony. Based on

26 See Nahum Bogner, At the Mercy of Strangers: The Rescue of Jewish Children with Assumed Identities in Poland, trans. Ralph Mandel (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); See also Niva Aschkenazi’s Children Homes in the American Zone of Occupation 1945-1949 (unpublished in English) in Hebrew: ותקאת ילדים Viewer מחנה ל¬בעת העונים: צי¬這裡 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); Emuna Nachmany-Gafny’s Dividing Hearts: The Removal of Jewish Children from Gentile Families in Poland in the Immediate Post-Holocaust Years (unpublished in English) in Hebrew: תצאת ילדית ומיהודים מחנה ל¬בעת העונים (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005).
years of interviews, he formulates five distinct phases of ‘traumatic memory’: deep, anguished, humiliated, tainted, and unheroic. These categories of memory facilitate understanding of the nuances of survivors’ testimony. Langer argues that patterns of language shape a testimony and produce one or more types of memory. Langer seeks to solidify the reality of “former victims’” ‘true’ experiences, which cannot be resolved and marketed into a two-hour feature film. As such, he asserts the presence of “moral formulas about learning from experience and growing through suffering rapidly disintegrate into meaningless fragments of rhetorical consolation” in interviews with members of the second generation and late postwar survivor testimonies. Langer contends Holocaust literature, films, and the public response to them, may influence and taint the survivor’s ability to reveal their memories accurately without feeling the need to include a message of hope or embellish details. He challenges the reader to accept the limitations and disconnectedness of survivor testimony. He avoids imposing banal notions of greater purpose or meaning. Langer’s detailed account of the varieties of memory, their specific characteristics, and patterns in narrative structure – or lack thereof – provide a critical methodology.

Geoffrey Hartmann emphasizes the “importance of the victim’s story” in Holocaust historical narratives as opposed to the perpetrator-led perspective. He argues one must be familiar with the survivors’ cultural and linguistic perspective when analyzing testimony. Hartmann discusses the challenges of the arguably free flowing

---

nature of video testimony in comparison to structured literary accounts. Hartmann acknowledges the inherent challenge of applying traditional methods of analysis to this type of ‘text.’ However, he asserts the value of video testimony in exposing details and memories that would otherwise remain hidden.\(^\text{31}\)

Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky explore the “wide gulf between interviewing theory and actual practice” in order to formulate criteria for a good interview.\(^\text{32}\) They argue the tension between theory and practice reveals itself in deviations from interview scripts. Greenspan and Bolkosky define a ‘good’ interview when the survivor experiences a “mutual engagement,” “shared commitment,” and “collaboration” during the interview process.\(^\text{33}\) In addition, survivors are keenly aware that a “professional interviewer is able to respond to particular memories while keeping track of the wider experience.”\(^\text{34}\) Greenspan and Bolkosky argue that a true interview “may be a relatively rare thing.”\(^\text{35}\)

In another study, Greenspan explores the relationship between earlier survivor testimonies in the immediate postwar years with later testimonies given decades later. He argues that the early testimonies hold immense value in not only understanding the events of the Holocaust, but also the nature and purpose of testimony itself. Greenspan describes the abundance of immediate postwar testimonies written in displaced persons camps. He cites the Central Historical Commission of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Germany having collected over 2,500 written testimonies and 10,000 questionnaires.


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 432.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 441.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 439.
Similar organizations in Poland and Hungary collected 7,200 and 3,500 testimonies respectively, totaling over 20,000 written testimonies between 1945 and 1948. Greenspan emphasizes the significance of this quantity as “comparable to the results of the most active subsequent testimony projects.”

Greenspan compares survivors’ later reflections on earlier testimony. He describes how the early testimonies “may not be discussed, or even initially remembered, by the survivors themselves.” In an early testimony, a survivor may see their story as an instrument of hope to both bear witness to those murdered and inspire moral improvements. Whereas a testimony given later in life may reflect a deeper sadness, lack of resolution, and less optimistic perception of its impact. Greenspan argues the importance of earlier testimonies’ untainted narrative, which inherently lacks the “familiar rhetoric and abstraction” resulting from years of constructing morality tales from survivor accounts.

Tony Kushner studies the misuse of Holocaust testimony and the problems of representation in the postwar years. He argues the key to successfully utilizing Holocaust testimonies lies in “understanding the nature of ordinary people’s constructions of their life histories, with their internal silences and mythologies.” Kushner seeks to reveal problematic patterns of abuse of testimony. The first public act of marginalization of the survivor testimonies occurred during the war crimes trials where prosecutors preferred

---

38 Ibid., 13.
“documentary evidence” to the surviving victim’s testimony. Kusher argues that it was not until Martin Gilbert’s 1986 monograph *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* that “the centrality of victim testimony” appeared in historical accounts. He asserts the frequent misuse of testimony as “an illustrative device” for Nazi-centered histories, rather than driving the narrative. In addition, Kushner investigates how oral and social historians recover testimonies of marginalized voices in traditional historical narrative. He focuses on the rejection of survivor narratives deemed ‘unreliable,’ particularly child survivors. Kushner argues “the mythologies created within individual life stories, rather than being seen as an inherent weakness, have (only recently) been celebrated as one of their strengths.” Kushner determines that Holocaust testimony must be “taken seriously on its own terms.”

**Notable Recent Works**

The writings of Christopher Browning, a distinguished historian of the Holocaust, represent an interesting shift from perpetrator-driven histories to testimony-based historical narratives in recent years. Browning describes his approach for using testimonies as markedly different from his previous studies. He does not analyze the relationship between history and memory in terms of the “collective singular” or “collective memory” of the survivors. Rather, he looks to the “individual plural” and

---

40 Kushner, 277.  
41 Ibid., 278.  
42 Ibid., 279.  
43 Ibid., 282.  
44 Ibid., 289.  
“collective memories” in order to construct a history based on “a variety of different, often conflicting and contradictory, in some cases clearly mistaken, memories and testimonies of individual survivors.” Browning emphasizes the importance of approaching survivor testimony with the same critical lens as any other historical document. Browning illustrates this point using Jan Gross’ controversial study, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*. Gross indicts Polish perpetrators for the brutal pogrom of July 1941 in the town of Jedwabne. Browning argues that Gross’ approach to the testimonies as uncritically ‘true’ betrays a more nuanced understanding of Nazi occupied Poland. Accordingly, Browning asserts the survivors “tend to remember – with greater vividness, specificity, and outrage – the shattering and gratuitous acts of betrayal by their neighbors more than the systematic acts of anonymous Germans.” Browning illustrates the importance of a critical approach to both testimony and official records.

Omer Bartov, a leading scholar of genocide and the Holocaust, recently utilized testimonies in his writing of local history in Eastern Europe. He reiterates the marginalization of Jewish testimonies and the favoring of ‘objective’ German documentation in historical accounts. Bartov rejects the perception of the “overtly objective nature of such documentation,” since “the officials who write memoranda and hand down orders are hardly free of bias, prejudice, or an intentional desire to veil the actual meaning of the documents.” Bartov emphasizes the ability of testimonies to

---

49 Browning, *Collected Memories*, 43.
expose individual and communal responses to the genocide and policies enacted upon them. This gaping hole in the historical record also requires the inclusion of non-Jewish testimony. Bartov analyzes both Jewish survivor testimony and local ethnic groups to reveal the inter-ethnic relations that often determined the fate of local Jewish communities.

**Slovakia as a Subject**

In English, only two collections of essays, one monograph, and a number of articles focus on the Holocaust in Slovakia. Since linguistic limitations prevent me from reviewing Slovak language publications, I examine these texts and incorporate them into the historical narrative when possible. However, Ivan Kamenec, a prominent Slovak historian of the Holocaust, describes Slovak scholarship on the Holocaust as “contradictory” and marginalized. Moreover, the subject “is rarely discussed in an open, unprejudiced and qualified way.” These issues are evident in the tendency of Slovak scholars to attribute Slovak anti-Jewish legislation and action to German Nazi pressure.

Katarína Hradská, a respected Slovak historian of the Holocaust, argues that “Germany’s influence” determined the Slovak approach to the “Jewish Question.” She claims that a meeting between Slovak officials and Hitler in Salzburg on July 28, 1940 “signaled the start of the introduction in Slovakia of the ideology of German National Socialism.” However, Slovak fascist, anti-Jewish ideology was developing in the

---

52 Kamenec, 19.
53 Ibid.
55 Hradská, 37.
Slovak government by 1938. By framing the Slovak Nazi policies of Aryanization, concentration, deportation, and extermination of its Jews in terms of an “instigation of the German foreign office,” a discerning reader cannot help but question the attempt to relinquish the Slovak government of its culpability.

The empirical and theoretical studies highlighted here inform my analysis of survivor testimony. I aim to contextualize the testimonies using secondary literature of the Holocaust in Slovakia, while allowing the Jewish youths’ voices to drive the narrative. The scope of the study limits me from fully engaging in discrepancies between the historical records and testimonies. I seek to utilize both types of sources to provide a fuller picture of Jewish daily life and the fate of Slovak Jewish youth during the Holocaust in Slovakia.

56 Kamenec, 56.
57 Hradská, 37.
Chapter 2

Pre-War Memories of Jewish Youth

“They were our Shabbat goys…” – Yitzkhak I.

For the Jewish youth in this study, experiences of pre-war life are as similar and different in almost equal measure. Commonalities among survivors include sufficient middle-class economic background to secure ‘economic exemption’ papers, physical attributes that facilitate easy blending in, fluency in Slovak and German, and most of all, sheer luck and fortuitous circumstances.

All the Yad Vashem interviews have a chronological structure of questioning. Beginning with earliest childhood memories and family life, the survivors were asked to speak about their family home, religious, economic, and social backgrounds, schooling, what languages they learned and how they identified nationally. The same structure of questioning applied to their wartime and post-war experiences. Based on this model, I organize their memories of pre-war daily life into following categories: families and communities, socioeconomic status, linguistic and national affiliation, Jewish, Zionist and secular education, religious identity, and relations with non-Jews. On the micro-level of the family unit, the study of these aspects contributes to our understanding of how Jewish youths experienced a systematic destruction of identity and understanding of their world.
Families and Communities

The Slovak Jewish children of this study were born in different towns from where their families came. Though no definitive explanation can be found in secondary literature, the distribution of Jewish communities in small villages without hospitals or permanent doctors is a likely factor. Harry D. was born in 1934 in Trenčín, a town in western Slovakia located near the current border between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. His family lived in Nové Mesto nad Váhom, which was located 28 km southwest of Trenčín. According to Harry D.’s recollections, the Jewish community in Nové Mesto numbered about 1,000 people, and therefore large enough to have a synagogue in the town itself. Indeed, the Orthodox synagogue was built in 1921 to support the growing community. They also had a small yeshiva, a talmud torah, and a hevra kaddisha.58 A 1930 census establishes a Jewish population of 1,581 and 1,209 in 1940.59 Encyclopaedia Judaica reports that 1,300 of the Nové Mesto’s Jews were taken in the first transports from Slovakia in March 1942 to Sobibor and Treblinka.60 Since some secular Jews did not declare their religious affiliation as Jewish, these numbers can be understood as a rough estimate. Harry D. describes Nové Mesto as a “mixed city,” like most Slovak areas, comprised of Jews and Christian Slovaks, Hungarians, and Germans.61 However, his family’s interactions with Christians extended beyond simple cohabitation in a shared town. A Christian family lived in an apartment located in the

58 A talmud torah is community-run Jewish religious elementary school for poor and orphaned children unable to pay tuition to attend a heder or private religious school. A hevra kaddisha is a religious morgue service that prepares and transports bodies for burial. See http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Heder.
60 Jelinek, “Nove Mesto Nad Vahom” Encyclopaedia Judaica.
family-owned building. Harry D., his parents, and his paternal grandparents shared the rest of the space as “five souls in one house.” It is difficult to determine whether this was unusual for Slovak Jewry because of the limited research on Jewish daily life in Slovakia.

Shlomo G. was born in 1932 in Nitra, a city in western Slovakia with a prominent Jewish community. His younger sister was born four years later. The monarch of 18\textsuperscript{th} century Hungary restricted Jewish settlement “between the Moravian border and the river Nitra.\textsuperscript{63} The Jews of Nitra had an Orthodox and Neolog synagogue with their respective cemeteries, a yeshiva, a talmud torah, a mikveh, an orphanage, a home for the elderly, a public kosher kitchen, and a German-language Jewish primary school.\textsuperscript{64} The community consisted mostly of affluent Slovak Jews, but also a significant number of impoverished Jews, as evidenced by the need for communal help centers. The 1930 census recorded 3,809 Jews in Nitra, and 4,358 in 1940 on the eve of the deportations. Again, these numbers likely represent a rough estimate of the population, since historians evaluate that “some 4,400 of Nitra’s Jews were sent to extermination camps.”\textsuperscript{65}

Shlomo G.’s mother grew up in Duna Kunstrta, a small village in Czechoslovakia. His father was also born and raised in Nitra. As the youngest son without a profession, Shlomo G.’s father took over the family farm, located just outside of the city, which would ultimately prove to be a significant contribution to the family’s survival. The farm provided food, resources, and economic exemption papers for its operation.

\textsuperscript{62} YVA #4115591.
\textsuperscript{64} A mikveh is a bath facility for Jewish ritual cleansing. See http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Personal_Hygiene_and_Grooming.
\textsuperscript{65} Jelinek, "Nitra," Encyclopaedia Judaica.
Like Harry D. and Shlomo G., Dan S. grew up in a small family. He lived with his older sister, parents, and maternal grandparents. Dan S. was born in 1932 in Nitra, in his grandparents’ home, but lived in the village of Nováky. Because of its small size, Dan S. recalls being the only Jewish family in town and one or two other Jewish families in the surrounding villages.

As an only child, Vera P. was born in 1926 and grew up in Brezno, a small town in the center of Slovakia. There were less than 100 Jewish families in Brezno, and she describes the non-Jewish population as “very antisemitic.”\textsuperscript{66} In spite of this, her father cultivated positive relations with the Christian inhabitants and was a successful businessman. As a self-proclaimed “capitalist,” his political philosophy did not mirror those common of Slovak Jews, who were largely Social Democrats and left wing in their political affiliation. Moreover, Vera P.’s interest in Communist youth groups and Zionist organizations were a source of tension in the family.

Yan H. was born in 1926 in Muchevo, Subcarpathain Rus, Czechoslovakia, a village that is now part of Ukraine. He was raised in Bratislava until 1940 after his family left Banska Bystrica. His father grew up in Topoľčany, where the family would escape to in 1940. Yan H. only refers to his mother’s birthplace as “a small town in the center of Slovakia.”\textsuperscript{67}

Regina G. was born in 1924 and raised in Petrovenec, Slovakia, now called Sabinov, located in northeastern Slovakia. The small village was home to only one other Jewish family, but Regina G. recalls walking to the nearest synagogue with a few other


Jewish families from the surrounding villages. After the death of his first wife and child in labor, her father remarried and had nine children. All five boys and four girls had Yiddish names.

Like Regina G., Yitzkhak I. had many siblings. He was one of eight children living in a large house that the family had built in Topoľčany. He was born in 1924. Topoľčany’s Jewish population numbered 2,991 in 1930, 2,700 in 1939, and 3,000 in 1942. The surge in the official numbers can be attributed to an influx of Jews from “surrounding villages who moved there, concerned for their safety.” The Jewish community had a primary school, a talmud torah, an old-age home, and women’s associations for communal life outside of the synagogue. About 2,500 of Topoľčany’s Jews were deported from Slovakia in 1942. Another 1,000 were taken from the city after German Nazi soldiers quelled the Slovak National Uprising in 1944. After the war in 1945, a devastating pogrom swept the city injuring at least 39 people. As a result, only 320 survivors remained in 1947, most of whom emigrated by 1949.

**Socioeconomic Background**

The economic status of Slovak Jews was “quite high” compared to non-Jewish Slovaks and Jews in Eastern Europe before WWII. In the workforce in 1930, Jews comprised 53% of business and finance, 20.2% of handcrafts and industry, 7.7% of public service, and 7% of agriculture. Slovak Jews were clearly an integral part of the Slovak economy. The Jewish youth in this study were raised in relatively successful and financially stable families that either owned small businesses or farms.

---

69 Buechler, 34.
70 Ibid., 33.
Harry D.’s father and grandfather worked in a factory building strollers, suitcases, and furniture. They had a private moving business on the side with two employees. Since it was rare to own a car in rural Slovakia, they had horses for the business. After inheriting the large family farm, Shlomo G. characterizes his position in the family as being “taken care of.”

Although he seems embarrassed to discuss his family’s financial position, it is clear from his wartime experiences that his family was able to protect significant assets. They made monthly payments to the Slovak Christian farmer who hid them after leaving the Nováky camp.

Though they resided in a small village, Dan S.’s family was the first in the region to own a car and one of the few with domestic luxuries such as indoor plumbing and heat. In addition, Dan S. grew up with German nannies who provided daycare and private tutoring. As the government-appointed, regional doctor, his father was well known and respected by the members of Jewish and non-Jewish communities alike.

Like Dan S., Vera P. also grew up in a comfortable house with German nannies. Her father and a Christian business partner co-owned a lumber factory. She recalls the family “lived in a big, beautiful house. It was the most beautiful house in the city and it is historical site now. Each floor was (theirs).” They were able to buy an additional house outside of Brezno in order to help a financially struggling widow. The Jewish man sought to move after the death of his wife, but could not find a buyer for his house. When Slovaks took over their house in the city, they were able to escape to the house in the suburbs and remain there during the deportations.

---

71 YVA #4115591.
72 YVA #3564284.
Already a teenager at the beginning of the war, Yan H. recalls his family coming from a long line of shoemakers. His father fled the family home to join the Czechoslovak army during the interwar period. He wanted to escape from the life of a shoemaker. He worked as a translator after being hit in the head by the horse in their artillery brigade. With a sustainable pension from the army and his mother’s seamstress work, Yan H.’s parents were able to provide an average upbringing for their son.

Regina G. did not describe her parents’ background as much as her husband’s family’s success in a lumber business. Both Regina G. and her older sister married into the Gruenwald family that consisted of four brothers. It was through the Gruenwald boys’ lumber business that they were able to secure a place in the Nováky camp.

Finally, Yitzkhak I.’s family owned a shoe store and workshop in the center of Topolčany. Their business and personal relationships with non-Jews provided them the contacts to trade their services with their German neighbors in exchange for running the shop on Shabbat and High Holidays. Yitzkhak I. recalls his mother giving away winter boots to poor Jews, as they were taken from the town in the first transports. This act of charity demonstrates the family’s financial security.

**Jewish, Zionist, and Secular Education**

The majority of Jewish youth attended public schools. Jewish schools were usually available in cities with large Jewish populations. Zionist youth groups and adult organizations were popular in Slovakia, and young singles tended to immigrate to Palestine before the war broke out. Many of the youth had at least one extended family member who left Slovakia in the years leading up to the outbreak of WWII in 1939.
As the youngest in this study, Harry D. attended the Jewish school in Nové Mesto for two years. In 1942, anti-Jewish measures prevented him from continuing. His exposure to Zionism came through his aunt, who tried to immigrate to Palestine with Hashomer Hatzair before the war began. Though too young to participate in the youth movement himself, he learned about Zionism from his family during Jewish holiday celebrations.

Shlomo G. attended public school in Nitra for two years until his parents decided to send him to a Jewish school in 1940. The school was located in Rohovetz, where he boarded with a Jewish family during the week. Shlomo G. also recalls Zionism being a part of the family discussion. At a wedding, Shlomo G.’s parents discussed immigrating to Palestine before the war, but his grandmother admonished them for considering leaving Slovakia. Like many traditional elders, she did not grow up with Zionist ideals and wanted the family to stay together in Slovakia.

Dan S. attended public school in Nováky until 1940 and then a Jewish school in Nitra. He recalls studying Tanakh in a German-Hebrew translation, which was a challenging experience given that most of his classmates did not know either language yet. It was not until his confinement in the Nováky camp that Dan S. began to learn about Zionism, Hashomer Hatzair, Modern Hebrew language, and the Jewish State.

As the older youth, Vera P., Yan H., Regina G., and Yitzkhak I. spent more years in school before they were no longer allowed to attend in 1940. Vera P. was educated in

---

73 Zionism is a national-political, liberation movement for the establishment of an independent state in Palestine for the Jewish people. Hashomer Hatzair literally “the young guard” is a Zionist socialist pioneering youth movement that began in 1913 Galicia. See Arthur Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1997).

74 Tanakh is the Hebrew bible comprised of Torah (first five books), Nevi ’im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). See "Tanakh," Encyclopaedia Judaica.
public school until age 14. She was active in Hashomer Hatzair. She also received an informal Jewish education through communal plays for Jewish holidays.

Yan H. attended public school until age 14 and participated in Hashomer Hatzair activities as a way of socialization. He resisted attending Jewish school by literally running away from it when his parents’ attempted to send him. He sustained his connection to Zionism through personal and communal relationships. According to Yan H., Zionism was a part of every Jewish household:

In every non-religious house, there was small donation box for the Jewish National Fund, maybe two. Every birthday we put money in the box. Once every three months, someone would come and collect them. That’s how we grew up. Only the kids were Zionists, not the parents.75

At age 18, his older sister immigrated to Palestine in 1938, “half legally” after three years of training as a carpenter with Hashomer Hatzair.76

Regina G. received a public education through her fourth year of high school at age 16 in 1940. Although her mother was religiously observant Orthodox, she did not attend a Jewish school. She forbade Regina G. from participating in Hashomer Hatzair activities because girls were allowed to sit with boys. Her aunt had already immigrated to Palestine in 1938, while the rest of her family did not consider following.

Likewise, Yitzkhak I. completed half of public high school before he was no longer allowed to attend at age 16. However, he traveled 3 km by foot as a young child to attend a Jewish school outside of Topoľčany. Through the fifth grade, Yitzkhak I. learned the Hebrew language for religious prayers and texts, Torah, and Talmud.77 He

75 YVA #6223505.
76 YVA #6223505.
77 Talmud is a rabbinic text of conversations pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, philosophy and history. Orthodox streams consider it to be binding Jewish law, like the Torah. See Eliezer Berkovits and Stephen G. Wald, "Talmud," Encyclopaedia Judaica.
distinguishes himself from religious Jews, since the children at his school did not wear *kippot* or *peot.*\(^{78}\) According to him, the fashion for non-Orthodox youth was simply a nice hat. Though *Hashomer Hatzair* existed in other villages, he did not have time to attend their meetings. He does not believe there were Zionists in Topoľčany or at least not enough for an official group in his town. He emphasizes that as a teenage boy, there was simply no time between public school, traveling, and studying *Torah* for Zionist activities.

**Religious Identity**

Since Slovakia was an integral part of Hungary until 1918, the religious communities followed similar paths in Slovakia. Slovak Jewry divided into the *Neolog* and Orthodox communities, in addition to those of the “Status Quo,” who did not ascribe to either movement.\(^{79}\) *Hasidism* continued to thrive in the eastern parts of Slovakia and exert influence over the other Orthodox communities.\(^{80}\)

Given the high level of acculturation amongst Slovak Jewry, it is no surprise that the youth did not identify as *dati.*\(^{81}\) Nearly all described their religious upbringing as observant, but not *dati.* This departure from their grandparents’ religious observance was significant. The grandparents’ presence in their daily lives often dictated the maintenance of a Jewish home in terms of *kashrut* even if their parents still observed other traditions.

---


\(^{79}\) "Czechooslovakia," *YIVO Encyclopedia.*

\(^{80}\) *Hasidism* or Hasidic Judaism is an Orthodox branch of Judaism focusing on mysticism. See Assaf, David, “Hasidism: Historical Overview,” *YIVO Encyclopedia.*

\(^{81}\) Hebrew term meaning “religious.” In Israeli colloquial speech, the term references the strict ultra-Orthodox community that adheres to all of the religious laws.
like Shabbat.\textsuperscript{82} On one end of the religious observance spectrum, Vera P. describes her family as “hiloni plus” or very secular. She recalls that she had once received some informal Jewish education outside her home, but could not recognize Yiddish as distinct from German when she arrived in Israel in 1949.

Harry D. notes that his grandparents were “Masorti,” or traditional and therefore kept a kosher home. However, his parents departed from this and ate non-kosher food outside the home. Harry D.’s “most powerful memory of the holidays [was] Pesach because there were Zionist books.\textsuperscript{83} The family attended synagogue in Nové Mesto.

Dan S. also recalls both Shabbat and kashrut being observed in his home, due to the influence of his grandparents in Nitra. His exposure to the religious communities of Nitra was a result of his grandfather’s insistence on continuing a traditional way of life:

My grandfather and grandmother went with the Orthodox community because the families before us were part of the community. My grandfather would take me at 6pm on Friday night to the synagogue and on Saturday morning to the Neologi synagogue because they had a more interesting and understandable sermon. That is how it was between the two worlds.\textsuperscript{84}

His connection to Judaism was with the religious community of Nitra, rather than Nováky.

Yan H. also describes the level of his family’s religiosity as “Masorti,” observing Shabbat and holidays. He celebrated his bar mitzvah ceremony in the Neolog synagogue

\textsuperscript{82} Here, the concept of a Jewish home applies to the observance of kashrut or “keeping kosher” according to Jewish dietary laws. In order to observe Shabbat or the Sabbath, one lights candles, says prayers, and abstains from a number of activities. See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Food and Drink,” and Elliott Horowitz, “Sabbath,” YIVO Encyclopedia.

\textsuperscript{83} YVA #4115591.

that his family frequently attended. In Bratislava, there was both a Neolog and Orthodox synagogue to accommodate the diverse Slovak Jewish community. With the influx of “several thousand refugees from Bukovina and Galicia” after World War I, tension between the two Jewish communities became unavoidable. Slovak Jews stood in stark contrast to their religious counterparts from Poland:

The conspicuous presence of Yiddish-speaking Ostjuden with beards and sidelocks, wearing shabby garments and black hats, caused embarrassment, especially in Prague and other Czech-assimilated environments. At the same time, their poverty, lack of education, and poor physical condition placed a burden upon the community...

Indeed, Yan H. recalls “them” dressing differently and speaking a different language. The synagogue in Bratislava had to conduct services in Slovak and Yiddish, which Yan H. recalls as an “annoyance to the community.” Clearly, the interwar Slovak Jewish community feared the potential for antisemitic attitudes reaching them through their connection to the new Polish Jewish immigrants.

Other Jewish families struggled more openly with a tension between observance and belief. Regina G.’s father did not see himself as a religious man, since he was “university man.” His identity as an educated and enlightened man dictated the family’s level of observance. While they observed Shabbat, synagogue attendance was limited to the High Holidays. In spite of this, Regina G.’s describes the synagogue with nostalgia:

---

85 Bar Mitzvah is a religious, coming-of-age ceremony when a Jewish boy becomes an adult at age 13 in the eyes of the community after rigorous religious studying. See Harvey E. Goldberg, “Life Cycle,” YIVO Encyclopedia.
87 Ibid., 29-30.
88 YVA #6223505.
“It was modern, pretty, new, and very famous, with a balcony for the women. I went up there with my mother and sat next to her. We prayed. I loved my mother. This was the picture in my heart throughout the end of the war.”\(^{90}\)

Likewise, Yitzkhak I.’s family was torn between tradition and modernity. He recalls his mother being very religious, while his father was only observant. The family observed Shabbat, attended synagogue, and had Torah and Talmud books in the home. However, Yitzkhak I.’s father struggled to supply him with answers regarding prayer: “I remember asking my father if he understands what he was praying. My father responded that he doesn’t understand anything, and if he needs to understand something there is a siddur.”\(^{91}\)

**Linguistic and National Affiliation**

Following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy on October 28, 1918, the new Czechoslovak state was comprised of Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Jews, Poles, and Gypsies.\(^{92}\) The multinational legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire resulted in the Slovak Jewish community speaking Slovak, German, and often Hungarian. The “Language Law” established Czech and Slovak as the official state languages on February 29, 1920.\(^{93}\) There was an exception for the use of minority languages in local self-government where a “census of the members of such a language group numbered at least one-fifth of the population.”\(^{94}\) The concentration of ethnic Germans in northern Slovakia along the Austrian border disseminated German as a

---

\(^{90}\) YVA #5770357.


\(^{93}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{94}\) Ibid.
dominant second or third language during the interwar period. Yiddish was commonly spoken in eastern Slovakia in the Orthodox communities.

Though Harry D. does not express what his mother tongue was, it is likely that he learned Slovak first. Shlomo G. was fluent in all three languages, but his family identified as Czechoslovakian/Slovak. In Dan S.’s case, the presence of a German nanny and his father’s education in a German-language university in Prague determined his first language to be German. He recalls speaking Slovak in school and on the streets, but German at home and in Tanakh studies.

Though her father was Hungarian, Vera P. also learned German first because of her German nannies. They also spoke Slovak at home, in spite of her parents’ belief in “Universalist” ideals. They were members of a local organization “Citizens of the World” who studied the universal language, Esperanto. Developed in the 1870s by Dr. Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof of Bialystok, the dissemination of the new language aimed to facilitate “Jewish assimilation by metaphorically forcing all residents of Eastern Europe to face the same struggle of learning a new language.” More fervent followers of the movement relinquished their citizenship in favor of being a “citizen of the world.” Vera P.’s father gave up the family’s Czechoslovak citizenship during the interwar period. This decision left them vulnerable to early anti-Jewish deportation of foreign or stateless Jews. Without citizenship, families also had no way of acquiring exemption papers, even if they were business owners like Vera P.’s father.

The older youth naturally had more extensive linguistic skills. Yan H. spoke Slovak in the family home and learned Hungarian and German on the streets. His father,

---

95 Rebecca Korbin, Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 52.
96 YVA #3564284.
97 Kamenec, 42.
a former translator for the Czechoslovak army, reinforced the importance of
multilingualism with distinct national and ethnic alliances. Yan H. identified as Slovak,
or Czechoslovakian first, and Jewish second. He explains that most Jews ascribed to the
same type of identity order.

Regina G. spoke German and Slovak in the home, but also Hungarian less
prominently. Her parents were both born in Hungary, but her father had less refined
Hungarian linguistic skills. Regina G. also spoke Yiddish, which was unusual for secular
Jews in this region. It is unclear whether she learned Yiddish as a result of her marriage
to a religious Jewish man who only spoke Yiddish.

Finally, Yitzkhak I. asserts his family considered themselves Slovak by
nationality and spoke Slovak in the home. He compares his German language acquisition
to that of English in Israeli schools – a second language taught from a young age. His
father’s native tongue was Hungarian, so he was familiar with Hungarian as well.

**Relations with Non-Jews**

The most emotional pre-war memories of the Jewish youth involve their
interactions with non-Jews leading up to their internment in the Nováky labor camp. The
volatile period of 1939-1942 is characterized by increasing tensions in schools, on the
street, and between neighbors. All of the characteristics of their childhood, from the type
of education they received to their parents’ occupations, seem to have influenced the
extent to which they experienced persecution. In a rather distinct pattern, most of the
children reflect positively on their relations with non-Jews until the anti-Jewish
legislation of 1940. After 1940, nearly all describe a turning point when an incident (being kicked out of school, personal attacks, etc.) shifted their relations with non-Jews.

Because Harry D. did not attend a public school, he does not remember any tension in school, but rather on the streets. While he does not personally recall being on the receiving end of violent attacks, he describes how Jewish boys were often teased and hit on the streets.

Similarly, Dan S. does not recall feeling discrimination, but saw it happen to other Jewish boys. He says that he would “avoid their path,” where he knew the non-Jewish boys often played. In the public school classroom, he recalls how the Jews were made to stand inside during recess while the other children went out to play. Soon after, they were banned from the school entirely.

As a teenage girl, Vera P.’s turning point was more traumatic than the experiences of the younger children. Her father’s Christian business partner and respected status in the community meant she did not feel any antisemitism on the streets or in school. It was not until 1941 that a rival classmate informed on her. According to Vera P., the town mayor’s daughter, who was “always jealous” of her, insisted that she be put in the transport list. She was not yet 16 when the Slovak authorities came looking for her at her parents’ home in 1941.

Likely because of Regina G. and Yizkhak I.’s ages, both recollect Jewish-Christian relations in a broader sense. In her public high school leading up to the war, teachers would not call on the Jewish students in class. Likewise, she recalls not being able to go outside during breaks in the late 1930s. In 1940, Slovak gendarmes began systematically looted Jewish homes and businesses. Regina G. laments how her non-
Jewish neighbors were “silent.” In Petrovenec, “the Jews did not meet them, talk with them, and there were no connections between Jews and non-Jews. Each had their own lives. Only a polite hello and goodbye. People were primitive.”

Due to Yizkhak I.’s family’s shoemaking business, they played a major role in the community. They enjoyed pleasant relations with the ethnic German population of Topoľčany. According to Yizkhak I., there was an initial attempt at solidarity amongst the non-Jews of Topoľčany to boycott the prohibitions against buying goods from Jewish businesses. Though this specific incident is not part of the historical record:

Propaganda also attacked the non-Jewish inhabitants, challenging them to boycott Jewish shops and their Jewish fellow-citizens in general. The HG (Hlinka Guard) threatened ‘to put an end to those who protect and help them (the Jews).’

On the eve of World War II, it is evident the increasingly hostile environment of Czechoslovakia did not bode well for the Jews. Pre-state anti-Jewish measures shifted to state-sponsored violence once Slovakia declared its independence on March 14, 1939.

---

98 YVA #5770357.
99 Kameneč, 58.
Chapter 3

War, Independence, and Life in the Nováky Labor Camp

“I was eight and already sitting in jail...” – Harry D.

Following the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia by Nazi Germany on September 29, 1938, Father Dr. Jozef Tiso declared Slovak autonomy within the remaining Czechoslovak territory on October 6, 1938. After Nazi Germany granted Slovakia official independence on March 14, 1939, Tiso became president of the first Nazi-satellite territory. Newly appointed Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka was a right-wing fascist and “leading spirit” of the Hlinka People’s Party, the radical National Socialist political movement in power. Anti-Jewish measures had already been underway since 1938. Members of the People’s Party disseminated antisemitic propaganda on radio broadcasts, which incited violence and boycott of Jewish businesses.

By March 1939, official governmental directives legalized the Aryanization of Jewish businesses. By April 1939, anti-Jewish decrees excluded Jewish professionals from public life and required mandatory labor service to the government. The systematic stripping of Jewish rights culminated in the legislation of the “Jewish Codex” on

100 Gila Fatran, “The Struggle for Survival During the Holocaust,” in Mensfelt The Tragedy of Slovak Jews, 141.
101 Kamenec, 56.
102 Ibid., 68.
September 9, 1941. The laws’ “severity surpassed the notorious Nuremberg Laws.”

After removing Jews from public life and stripping them of their assets, the next step in ‘solving the Jewish question’ relied on Slovakia’s relations with Nazi Germany.

Slovakia asked Nazi Germany to take its Jews and “paid the German Reich 500 marks for each Jew deported.”

As the political and daily conditions in Slovakia began to deteriorate after the implementation of anti-Jewish laws, some Jews fled to Hungary and its territory, the Subcarpathian Rus. In response to the unwelcome influx of Jews, Hungarian leaders gathered some “4,000 refugees from Slovakia and Poland,” in addition to 8,000 Subcarpathian Jews, for deportation in January 1942. Though the SS could not be bothered with such small numbers at this stage, the attempt to expel their Jews suggests “local rulers could prevent the deportation of the Jews within their borders if they wanted to.”

Once the deportations ended in Slovakia in 1942 and began in Hungary’s territories, the Jewish population transfer shifted the other direction as political instability and ethnic warring intensified. The Jews of Subcarpathian Rus’ sought refuge in Slovakia where they usually had close family ties. In the midst of navigating between two countries who were actively seeking to remove them, both Hungarian and German leaders worked “to enlist the cooperation of the Slovak guards in the effort” to secure the borders and eliminate the Jewish population altogether. Ultimately, the combination of political disputes and ethnic clashing against the backdrop of centuries of religious

106 Jelinek, The Subcarpathian Diaspora, 271.
107 Ibid., 276.
antisemitism produced an impossible situation for Slovak Jewry. More than 70,000 Jews were deported from Slovakia, over 100,000 were murdered in total, and only about 15,000 survived. The German Nazis and their collaborators killed approximately 263,000 Jews who had resided on the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1938.

**Laws Against Jews**

Because the head of the new Slovak government was a Catholic priest, Jewish-Catholic relations in Slovakia form the backbone of anti-Jewish legislation. The uncommon involvement of these three levels of Catholic authority played a significant role in determining the fate of Slovak Jewry and their relations with non-Jews. Not only were Slovak authorities “aware of the exceptional (German) Nazi attention to the Jewish minority,” but also they “placed persecution of the Jews high on their agenda.” Both Tiso and Tuka were desperate for control over the fledgling nation and gaining approval of the German leaders. However, Tiso’s rise to leadership situated the Catholic presence in the forefront of Slovak policy-making, especially towards the Jews.

Internal clashing of Catholic attitudes towards the Jews complicated Jews’ position in Slovakia from the very beginning. Unlike Tiso, the “Holy See was troubled by the deep involvement of the clergy in politics, by the close cooperation with the Nazis, and particularly by measures taken which were hardly consistent with the principles of Catholic morality.” Historian Yeshayahu Jelinek argues that “the average Slovak

---

109 Ibid.
111 Jelinek, “The Vatican,” 222.
Catholic priest did not express much sympathy for the persecuted.”112 The long religious animosity towards the Jews compounded with the socioeconomic and nationalist tensions reared little hope for restraint. However, a Jewish campaign for Catholic help began in 1942, as soon as Slovak Jewry realized the direness of their situation and the power of Catholic influence in the country. In this effort, individual bishops and clergymen demonstrated their disagreement with Tiso and assisted in the campaign as well as helped Jews on an individual basis. “The combined efforts of the Jewish leadership, of the Church [Catholic and Protestant] and of lay personalities stopped mass expulsion of Jews in 1942.”113 While other elements inevitably contributed to the delay in deportations, Catholic assistance should not be overlooked. The Church “repeatedly intervened with the authorities and willingly responded to Jewish appeals” to prevent deportations until they were no longer able.114 It is important to note that here “authorities” refers to the Catholic Slovak authorities led by Tiso as well as German Nazi officials. Following the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 and subsequent German invasion, “the Curia and the Episcopate lost much of their ability to act.”115

In spite of the Vatican and the position of individual Slovak priests, who “constantly criticized Tiso,” he ran Slovakia according to his vision of a state with Catholic social doctrines in practice.116 For Tiso, the preservation of both Slovakia’s independence and the Catholic Church were top priority. While pressure from the Vatican pushed him to halt the deportations, it is clear that this was not out of sympathy for the Jews. Tiso exercised pardoning rights at his discretion endowed by the laws of the

112 Ibid., 223.
113 Ibid., 237.
114 Ibid., 224.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., 228.
Jewish Codex. “He made use of it on behalf of the Jewish converts to Christianity, of those individuals important to the Slovak economy, and of the rich and influential.”\textsuperscript{117} This should not be undervalued, but also weighted against the fact that “the majority of Slovak Jewry was thus sacrificed, not only to preserve the existence of the Slovak State, but also to save a privileged minority of exempted, which included a large portion of Jewish Christians.”\textsuperscript{118}

These examples of Vatican and Episcopate-level objection and intervention at times contradicted laymen and clerical opposition to aid the Jews. Each of the three groups acted differently towards the Jews at various points during the war, but Jelinek asserts “neither party could claim that it had done everything in its power to assist the Jews.”\textsuperscript{119} The inconsistency on part of the Vatican, the Church, and the clergy highlights the severity and totality of national, ethnic, and religious conflict in Slovakia.

For Jewish youth in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the rise in antisemitism and anti-Jewish legislation resulted in friends becoming enemies and their entire understanding of the world around them beginning to crumble. As children and adolescents, they did not understand the sudden hostility from formerly friendly neighbors. They experienced confusion and disorientation when their accustomed daily lives were shook to the basic core of knowing who is a friend and who is going to turn you in to the authorities. This situation was not unique to Slovakia, of course.

As was the case all over Europe, the youth in this study were puzzled when authorities, Slovak gendarmes, began to take away their personal possessions and family wealth. Parents had the difficult task of protecting them from the harsh reality of what

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 230.  
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 225.
was occurring, often lying to the children about what it meant. Vera P. cried when they took her tennis racquet and skis. Then her piano went next. She recalls her parents telling her, “Ok, that’s not that bad. One year you don’t go skiing. Not that bad, nothing.”

Harry D. remembers his father’s precious Leica camera, in addition to his mother’s dresses, being taken by the Slovaks. Dan S. describes how the Slovaks took his mother’s fur coat, and all of the Jews had to give up their gold. The petty pillaging also extended beyond the “coats, pretty dresses, and useful clothing,” to Regina G.’s family’s farm. The Slovak militias took animals from the farm as well, something that was not as easy to hide away as jewelry or family heirlooms.

In 1940, anti-Jewish decrees required all Jews in Bratislava to return to ‘from where they came.’ Since Yan H.’s father was born in Topoľčany, Slovak authorities ordered them to relocate there. Yan H.’s father refused. He saw himself as an “army man with many medals and honors.” Yan H.’s father remained in Bratislava, while his mother took the children to live in the center of Topoľčany in a small, rented room. The family did not hear from his father and lived only on what his mother earned sewing in Topoľčany. Yan H.’s older brother found work building the Nováky labor camp, which brought in some money. In November 1941, he moved to Nováky. Yan H. and his mother followed in 1942. Yan H. found out after the war that his father went missing. One of his father’s friends told him that he was shot alongside the river, while a deportation list to Auschwitz reflects his father’s name. Yan H. still does not know what happened to his father or when he disappeared.

120 YVA #3564284.
121 YVA #5770357.
122 YVA #6223505.
By 1942, the majority of Slovakia’s Jews knew, to a certain extent, the fate that lay before them. Some Zionist youth groups warned the young Jews and tried to prepare them for the harsh conditions of surviving on their own:

The youth group, *Hapoel*, tried hard to explain to us that we needed to make a change and go train how to live in the mountains for a little bit because they knew one day we would have to go. We learned to live outside of the city and that’s how we survived. Many kids from our class didn’t and said they needed to go with their parents (to the transports).\(^{123}\)

These preparations informed more critical decisions when the deportations began and young Jews were rounded up in 1942.

**Deportations**

In addition to the campaign to appeal for Catholic assistance, Jewish leaders exercised their own efforts for resistance, intervention, and aid. They “successfully persuaded the administration that the country had more to gain from putting Jews to work within its borders than from deporting them.”\(^{124}\) This measure, combined with significant bribing of officials on all levels, helped to preserve the remnants of Slovak Jewry in labor camps.

The first group of Jews targeted for deportation were young women aged 16-35.\(^{125}\) To understand Slovak policy towards the deportation of Jewish women and later families, general Catholic Slovak attitudes towards women must be examined. According to Catholic principles, “the woman’s place was in the home.”\(^{126}\) While this is unremarkable for Catholic society or religious societies in general, it reveals the basis for

\(^{123}\) YVA #6223505.
\(^{125}\) Kamenec, 216.
the exclusion of women from universities and the job market. According to Catholic ideology, a “healthy family was regarded as the best insurance for the nation’s well-being.” As a consequence, Slovak women were encouraged to stay home and be mothers. Women who birthed a dozen or more children were honored in propagandist celebrations. Women were subject to education and professional restrictions to balance the need for mothers and the continuation of the nation. In comparison to the restrictions against Slovak women, Jewish women were treated far worse. The regard for motherhood and women’s ‘role’ in society did not extend to Jewish women.

To illustrate, while considering the deportation of 20,000 Jews, the Slovak government “asked the Germans to accept the wives and children as well” in order to “avoid being burdened with the families of productive workers.” The Germans rejected this offer. “Spouses of childless families were separated and deported,” demonstrating that Slovak Catholic family values did not apply to Jews. Young Jewish women were left markedly vulnerable and targeted by Slovak guards who “beat, robbed, and even raped them, and then shipped them off to the extermination camps in Poland.” Young Jewish men, many who had just lost their wives, were deported to Auschwitz next. By April 11, 1942, the first family transport was sent from Slovakia for “humanitarian reasons.”

The beginning of the deportations was traumatic for the youth and their families in general. Harry D. remembers how the situation for the Jews took a turn for the worse:

127 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
The most traumatic thing for me was April 5, 1942. I was a boy of age 8 or something. We took our suitcases. My parents received an early warning. Backpack, dresses, and we left home and went to a neighbors’ very close to us on the same street. They were friends. On the same day, many Jewish families were deported.\textsuperscript{132}

He also emphasizes how there were no Germans in Slovakia at that time, and the Slovak government initiated and oversaw the deportations. He describes the transports of single women, single men, and families. An April 25, 1942 transport resonates strongly in his memory, where the fate of his fellow Jews informs his survival today: “I did not remember anyone coming back from that transport. No one came back. No one survived. If I was on that transport, I would not be sitting here now.”\textsuperscript{133}

When deciding whether to flee or hide in the face of the deportations, the close-knit nature of the Jewish family tended to dictate the decision to stay together in Slovakia. In many cases, “family solidarity also discouraged young people from going into hiding, even after friends – both Jewish and gentile – suggested it to them. They stayed because of concern about ill parents and a desire to help them care for other family members.”\textsuperscript{134}

Shlomo G.’s family struggled with the same choice:

They thought that it would be a good idea to send kids to Hungary, and my mother wanted to send me alongside another boy to Hungary in hopes of survival. But I didn’t end up going. Instead, the other kid was sent, and he was caught and sent to Auschwitz. So I can say I was lucky to stay and I wasn’t sent.\textsuperscript{135}

However, there are also instances where parents actively discouraged their children from staying with the family. Jelinek’s research renders descriptions of “a

\textsuperscript{132} YVA #4115591.
\textsuperscript{133} YVA #4115591.
\textsuperscript{134} Jelinek, \textit{The Subcarpathian Diaspora}, 311.
mother who directed her daughters to flee at the first opportunity, or of an ill father who rejected his children’s plea to flee with them, not wanting to burden their flight.”136 These cases likely reflect a change in the atmosphere in Slovakia. On the other hand, some “children seized an opportunity to flee despite their parents’ pleas not to abandon them.”137 What is telling about these anecdotes is the different ways in which families related to each other and to the fluctuating severity of the situation in Slovakia.

According to official records, the state of Slovak Jewry at the end of the deportations was grim:

From 25 March until 20 October 1942, exactly 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 exemptions (and their families) and Jews in labor camps in Sered, Vyhne, and Nováky.138 The exemptions distributed by the Slovak government protected important Jews deemed useful to the state. If a well known Jewish man could prove his business or occupation was critical to the success of the Slovak economy and the war effort, then he could secure a temporary reprieve for his family. However, many of those exempted families ended up in the Nováky labor camp by 1942.

**Arrival to Nováky**

Arrival to the Nováky labor camp often involved arrest and police escort of individual families. There was no complete round up of Slovak Jews. Those who were saved from deportations for a variety of reasons: hiding, economic exemption papers, rabbinic intervention, or luck. Like most of Slovak’s Jews, Harry D.’s family was

---

137 Ibid.
138 “Czechoslovakia,” YIVO Encyclopedia.
informed about their impending arrest and deportation a day or two ahead of time.

Nevertheless, his family was taken for deportation out of Slovakia, with the exception of Harry D.’s father. He was already working in the Nováky labor camp, so he was unable to help them. It was the rabbi of Nové Mesto who saved Harry D.’s family from the deportation:

My aunt was married to a Christian. They heard about a transport. She went to the Rabbi of the city, I forget his name….She ran to him. She saved our lives. The rabbi of Nové Mesto. He was well known; he had influence. They tried to take us, but the rabbi intervened and said you can’t take the family when the father is in Nováky. So we sat in jail for two days. I was eight and already sitting in jail.139

For Dan S., his father’s status as the regional doctor provided a privileged status for the family after the war broke out. Unlike other adult men, his father may not have been forcibly taken to Nováky for labor, but rather assigned to the camp by the Slovak government to work as a physician. Though Dan S. does not know for sure, documents uncovered in Yad Vashem suggest this may have been the case. After several months of working in the camp, his father returned home for Passover in April 1942. A friend “suggested that they flee to Hungary” before being taken to the camp.140 However, they decided to remain together and were taken only days later.

Shlomo G. was the last of the survivors to arrive at the camp in the beginning of August 1943. His father was arrested in the middle of the night and taken to the camp a few days before the family. The Slovak government had already seized the farm and continued to pay his father a salary in order to run it. Previously in April 1941, he had avoided arrest by luck when the Slovak gendarmes came looking for him at the house where he was boarding for school out of town. He happened to be away from the

---

139 YVA #4115591.
140 YVA #8092026.
Pollacks’ house, the Jewish family who boarded him, when they were taken on a transport to Auschwitz. After hearing the news, he remained on his parents’ farm outside of Nitra until 1943. During this period, Shlomo G. recalls a traumatic encounter with a Slovak tutor that his parents hired:

My parents did not want me to be illiterate, so they hired a private tutor for me. He was an antisemite Slovak. During one of our sessions, he asked me a question to which I did not know the answer. So, he took a chalk and drew a swastika on my forehead – I was ten years old – and tells me ‘If a Jewish boy is dumb then he is really dumb.’ As a 10-year-old, I did not know how to react to this. I was afraid. He did not let me wipe it off the whole time. Only when the class was over and I walked home, I could wipe it off.141

It is unclear where Shlomo G. received these private lessons.

Yizkhak I.’s brother and father began to build the Nováky camp in 1942. He remembers this as advantageous since the rest of the family could follow instead of being sent on the transports.

After being caught hiding in the barn of a Christian family’s farm, Vera P.’s family was taken to the camp to await transport to the East. However, her father’s Christian business partner got them out through bribing the camp guards. As such, Vera P. did not stay in the camp for more than a week, in spite of her desire to work: “As Socialists, we were excited that Jews would not only make a lot of money, but they will work and change the image of the Jew.”142

Regina G. was 16 years old and aware of the deportations of young women to Auschwitz in March 1942. To avoid certain deportation, she went into hiding for several months before being caught in July 1942. Slovak gendarmes concentrated her and several hundred other Jews in a local school to await imminent deportation to Auschwitz. It was

141 YVA #6815731.
142 YVA #3564284.
at that time that she decided to marry one of the Gruenwald boys, who had asked her to marry him while she was hiding with her sister:

There was a rabbi in the school, who was sent to Auschwitz in the end, who married us religiously in the school. He wanted to marry me. We had to found a hupa, and I didn’t object because I had nothing. I was alone. Was I supposed to say no? He was able to get 1000 girls, but he liked me. So I was ready. Something else was the ring. It was forbidden for Jews to have gold. The hupa was tallit. I wore a summer blue dress. It was July. There was a ketubah.143

As the Slovak authorities began rounding everyone up to be loaded onto the train, someone began checking for people with exemption papers. Regina G. and her new husband returned home with his family. Regina G. became pregnant the following month, and was finally taken to the Nováky camp in May 1943, two weeks before giving birth.

Camp Life

Little has been published on the internal workings of the Nováky camp specifically, so we must rely on a published diary account, brief references in general Holocaust studies, and the testimonies of these survivors. The diary of Rabbi Abraham Abba Frieder, an active member of the Slovak Jewish community throughout the war, describes his visits to the Nováky labor camp. As such, he provides detailed, albeit limited, account of the camp that is not found elsewhere. Allowed to remain outside of the labor camps, the Jewish Council of Slovakia appointed him the spiritual leader of the Slovak labor camps. He also worked with the “Working Group” and provided an intimate account of Slovak Jewry during this period.

Rabbi Frieder wrote that Nováky camp held 1,200 people in November 1942. The main factory of the camp “employed about 350 tailors, seamstresses, and needleworkers”

143 YVA #5770357.
to produce uniforms for the Slovak police, suits and coats, and workers’ clothing.¹⁴⁴
Unlike other forced labor camps, the Jews of the Nováky camp were producing goods that sold to the Slovak public and elsewhere. These goods included: boilers, shirts, underclothes, nightwear, aprons, hats, scarves, gloves, iron products, sinks, pumps, cardboard boxes, suitcases, mirrors, albums, office supplies, bound books, handbags, wallets, watchbands, brooms, vests, ear muffs, angora wool products from camp-raised rabbits. The camp also raised cows, goats, sheep, and hens. The majority of the labor was indoor, useful (in comparison to other forms of forced labor that did not produce goods and amounted to nothing short of torture until death), and run by the Jewish inmates with oversight from the Jewish Council (outside of the camp) and Slovak authorities. The inmates received “housing, food, and clothing” in exchange for their (forced) labor.¹⁴⁵

Rabbi Frieder was allowed to enter the camps relatively freely, sending and delivering goods such as matzah for Passover in April 1943 and numerous toys, books, and supplies for the children.¹⁴⁶ Two months before the Slovak National Uprising, Rabbi Frieder visited the Nováky camp to learn that police sergeant Gabcan replaced the commissar Svitler, whom he had previously tried to remove from his post due to his poor treatment of the Jews. He reports that the new leadership promoted a more “relaxed atmosphere” in the camp and even allowed for the construction of a mikveh and swimming pool.¹⁴⁷

The camp’s social services included a medical clinic staffed by Jewish doctors, a kitchen, bakery, showers, laundry, barber, and shops for clothing and shoe repair. There

¹⁴⁴ Emanuel Frieder, To Deliver Their Souls (New York: Holocaust Publications, 1990), 106.
¹⁴⁵ Frieder, 104.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 109.
¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 183.
was a nursery school, kindergarten, and elementary school that the Slovak Ministry of Education and Culture oversaw.\textsuperscript{148} Finally, vocational re-training, a library, and theatrical and musical performances were some of the social services established in the camp. All of the Nováky’s camp institutions and services reflect a communal effort to maintain Jewish family life.

Arrival in the camp began with a personal search of all the Jews for money, jewelry, or anything of value in their coats, clothing, and hidden on their bodies. In the beginning, there were no kitchens and food for the workers and families had to be brought in from the outside. However, the transition from a transit camp to a full fledged labor camp in May 1942 meant that public services needed to be established. Between the Jews inside the camp and the Jewish council outside, kitchens were built in three days and women from the camp recruited to work in them.\textsuperscript{149} To supplement the standard camp diet of bread and jam, “pea soup and potatoes” were distributed to the inmates.\textsuperscript{150} In addition to these resources, Shlomo G.’s family received food packages from family outside of the camp as well as non-Jewish friends.

Harry D.’s family was sent to the Nováky camp at the beginning of April 1942 just a few days after the first night of Passover (April 2). With his mother and paternal grandparents, he joined his father, who was already working in the camp. Likewise, Dan S., his mother, and sister were sent to the camp at the same time.

The architectural layout of the Nováky camp was similar to other labor camps. A system of barracks for living quarters, the school, kitchens, and other facilities were located in the main camp. Dan S. recalls the camp’s buildings:

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{149} YVA #8092026.
\textsuperscript{150} YVA #7160969.
There were three different camps, about 1 km from each other - because of the safety issues. Only the first Object was out of the territories. That one was used to send people out of. We were in the second Object, which had families of workers, and people that were brought in.\(^{151}\)

Though the transit camp (“Object 1”) was located outside of the labor camp (“Object 2”), the laborers, including Dan S., were aware of what was happening there. As we know, the first transports from Slovakia were young, single women and men. By this time, however, Slovak authorities were gathering entire families from the surrounding mountains and villages and bringing them to the camp to await transport to Poland.

The housing arrangements of the workers’ camp were crowded and primitive. They also reflected the grouping of Slovak Jewry during the transports:

> We were eight people in a small wood shed. And there were plenty of bedbugs. Most people lived in the big blocks. Families lived in one barracks and there was one for single men and one for single women. At some point the families started to divide the rooms with 1-2 meter walls for each family for privacy. It was always four bunk beds and that’s how babies were made.\(^{152}\)

Shlomo G. also describes his living quarters as a “huge shed…separated into small cubicles” and “filled with either lice or fleas.”\(^{153}\) His parents slept on a small bed, while he and his sister slept on bunk beds.

Alongside their parents, children also worked in the camp before the camp schools were established. Dan S. made paper bags for the first few weeks or months before the school was opened:

> They (the Jewish leaders of the camp) convinced the camp commander that the people would work better if the children would be under supervision, so then the education system started. There was kindergarten through 7th grade. To each of these classes, they appointed a teacher and a principal was in charge of everyone. We had to show up at 8am to school.\(^{154}\)

---

\(^{151}\) YVA #8092026.

\(^{152}\) YVA #8092026.

\(^{153}\) YVA #6815731.

\(^{154}\) YVA #8092026.
This shift in the camp structure reflects the Jews’ ability to negotiate the circumstances of camp life in order to provide the necessary education for their children. These priorities stood at the forefront of camp life.

As the youngest of the survivors, Harry D. does not remember much about the camp. He recalls woodsheds and family-sized rooms for everyone to sleep together. His strongest memories involve playing soccer with his friends and the camp guards. From age 8-10 inside the camp, he experienced a relatively “normal” and “good life,” playing with friends, attending school, and swimming in the pool.155

As a third and fourth grader, Dan S. reflects on the schooling inside the camp as a “true educational experience.”156 There was a “very intellectual spirit” with Communist and Zionist ideals driving the youth activities.157 When school was not in session on Saturdays, they would read literature, sing songs, and listen to music with the teachers. They had a gramophone and about five records they played over and over. A choir would sing songs in Slovak and “Bein Harim” in Hebrew.158 Shlomo G. also recalls learning Hebrew songs and exercising constantly as part of the Zionist activities.

Already a young adult, Yitzkhak I. found the cultural activities of the camp as his first exposure to live classical music. Since the concerts, plays, and other cultural events were conducted in Slovak, he remembers how “the guards would come to watch” and “everyone was clean and dressed.”159

---

155 YVA #4115591.
156 YVA #8092026.
157 YVA #8092026.
159 YVA #7160969.
Undoubtedly it was the work of the Jewish council, rabbis, and the adults in the camp that bribed, organized, and maintained the traces of “normal” childhood for the children of the camp. Children until age 14 were required to attend school and presumably work thereafter. Every adult, including grandparents, worked in the camp in a variety of positions. Harry D.’s mother “made net grocery bags from strings.”160 Because of Shlomo G.’s family’s background in agriculture, his father worked in farming and then later building frames. His mother worked in the kitchen and afterwards sewing fabrics for the Slovak and German military uniforms.

While the Nováky camp served as a transit camp for some of the deportations from Slovakia, few included those interned in the camp. Since the families of the group of youth under analysis held exemption papers to work, it would have been unusual for their names to appear on transports lists. However, Harry D’s family was on the list for one of the most devastating transports remembered by all of the youth in this study. About 1,000 people were transported from the camp to Poland on September 21, 1942, Yom Kippur.161 Having avoided deportation six months prior with the help of his aunt and the Rabbi of Nove Mesto, Harry D.’s family was destined for the next transport. He recalls riding the bus to the train station and the family getting off the bus at the last minute. The family returned to the camp, where they remained until the Uprising.

Given the tumultuous wartime atmosphere in Slovakia, many of the survivors describe life in the camp as “the safest place to be.”162 Though working and health conditions were not ideal, the inmates of the Nováky labor camp lived with shelter, food,

---

160 YVA #4115591.
161 *Yom Kippur* or “The Day of Atonement” is one of the most important Jewish holidays characterized by fasting, prayer, and religious rituals in the synagogue. This is the day in which Jews atone for the sins of the previous year before the New Year begins.
162 YVA #4115591.
and access to the social services of the camp. However, these conditions did not mean the threat of transport or other dangers vanished.

Two weeks after Regina G. arrived to the Nováky labor camp in May 1943, she gave birth to her son. Nearly 17 years old and married for survival, Regina G. became a mother in the forced labor camp. Since she could not work in the few weeks after giving birth, she was assigned to watch over several other small children. Both her and her newborn son were very sick, but had access to limited medical care in the camp. Since there was no hospital, Regina G. relied on vaccinations and bed rest.

Though the camp had no formal prison block, punishments were doled out for acting against the guards. Dan S. recalls one such instance when his father was reprimanded for trying to protect a local rabbi from having his whole beard shaved:

My father was fired from being the doctor and was sent to work in the quarry. Manual labor. But he of course didn’t work there. The Nováky guardist im that were in charge of the quarry told him “Dr., you will sit in the storage room and don’t touch anything. This is not for you. We will look out for you.” He was there for two weeks until the camp commander said: “We can’t operate without a head doctor.” So they brought him back.\(^\text{163}\)

For other minor offenses, workers would receive slaps or beatings according to the guards’ whims. When an actual crime was committed, such a stealing, the reportedly cruel commander would orchestrate public punishment and humiliation:

I remember one serious time when a woman stole something. I don’t know what or from whom. The camp commander decided that she had to carry a big plank that says: ‘I stole.’ And, I remember that as children we didn’t want to get close to her, so they won’t think we were looking at her. As a child I don’t remember much more.\(^\text{164}\)

Leading up to the Slovak National Uprising on August 29, 1944, the camp was active in storing weapons, training young men, and preparing for the impending fight. Even the

\(^{163}\) YVA #8092026.  
\(^{164}\) YVA #8092026.
young teachers participated in covert operations under the guise of school field trips outside the camp:

A friend of hers that would disappear half way through the trip would always join my teacher. That I know, he didn’t return with us. He left with us as another adult supervisor and disappear half way. This was in 1944. We noticed it. Everyone paid attention to the teacher’s ‘friend’ and all of a sudden he is gone. Looking back, there is no doubt that the communication with the partisans in those woods was also in this way.\textsuperscript{165}

Since Yan H. arrived to the camp on his 16\textsuperscript{th} birthday, he went straight to work. He milked the camps’ cows in the morning and worked all day on the farm. This position allowed him to leave the confines of the labor camp. He communicated with partisans and helped organize the resistance. Inside the camp, he convinced the guards to permit fire drill training, while actually training for the uprising:

The fire-training hoax in the camp worked well. We were more organized. We had trainings and a small amount of arms hidden under the floorboards. We knew if we needed, there was a weapons barracks not far away. Certain people in the camp had connections and they would smuggle arms into the camp. I never did. I just knew when it happened. We were also taught weapon usage. But only dry training.\textsuperscript{166}

While young men in the camp worked and organized the camp’s resistance, Regina G. faced another grave situation. Nearly 15 months after her arrival in the camp, she was pregnant with her second child as the uprising broke out on August 29, 1944.

\textsuperscript{165} YVA #8092026.  
\textsuperscript{166} YVA #6223505.
Chapter 4

Uprising, Escape, and Survival

“They don’t pay the rabbits to be hunted...” – Dan S.

Jewish resistance found a small, but significant home within the Communist underground in Slovakia. In contrast, the Slovak underground had a general policy of exclusion towards the Jews on the grounds that “they were more vulnerable to governmental agencies.”\(^\text{167}\) In spite of some Jewish support for the Communist underground, their attitudes towards the Jews did not vary greatly enough from that of the rest of the Slovak population. Jelinek asserts that Communists “abstained from assisting those left-wing Zionists who contemplated armed resistance.”\(^\text{168}\) Support occurred on an individual basis with no general policy. Given their tenuous situation in Slovakia, Communist indifference towards the suffering of Slovak Jewry did not discourage Jewish participation in the resistance. Jews “fought in the Uprising and in the partisan units,” only to be pushed out of Slovakia after the war ended and Communist rule began.\(^\text{169}\)

There are main examples of Jewish resistance, rescue, and aid in Slovakia occurred largely within Zionist movements and their collaboration with international Jewish organizations. Since “Zionist youth movements began to flourish in the 1930s,”

\(^{168}\) Jelinek, *The Lust For Power*, 108.
\(^{169}\) Ibid., 109.
there was a notable Zionist base from which to organize charity, aid, and resistance efforts. Connected and influential Jews were able to work from Bratislava to coordinate with London, the U.S., Jerusalem, etc. As both Jelinek and Rothkirchen demonstrate, the “Working Group” underground Jewish organization played a significant role in these efforts and “enjoyed relative freedom of movement.” They were in contact with the He-Halutz center in Geneva, the Joint Distribution Committee, the World Jewish Congress, amongst others, in order to secure aid and intervention on behalf of Slovak’s and Europe’s Jews.

Gisi Fleischmann was a prominent Zionist leader in Bratislava. In addition to aid trips to Hungary, she delivered food and aid to groups of Jews waiting to emigrate from Slovakia throughout the war. The group disseminated information about Jewish suffering in the concentration and death camps of Germany and Poland to Jews in Slovakia and internationally. Unsurprisingly, “the suggestion to bomb Auschwitz and the railroad lines from Hungary to the death camp in order to stop the mass deportations originated in Bratislava.” In their respective studies of Jewish resistance in Slovakia, Jelinek and Rothkirchen describe numerous actions and negotiations carried out by this group.

The Nováky labor camp played an active and important role in the Slovak National Uprising on August 29, 1944. The underground stored a cache of weapons for the nearby partisans, while the surplus of young men and women strengthened the resistance fighters’ numbers. The young adults of the camp were working out and

---

170 Bauer, “Gisi Fleischmann,” 255.
173 See Jelinek, The Lust for Power and Rothkirchen, “The Role of the Czech.”
training for the fight leading up to the outbreak of the Uprising. When the partisans declared war, Shlomo G. remembers “the commander of the Gendarmerie himself gave weapons to the young men in the camp that joined the Slovak resistance against the Germans.”\footnote{YVA #6815731.} Dan S. also recalls seeing “nine guns, 60 handguns, and several Russian automatic weapons,” stored somewhere in the camp.\footnote{YVA #8092026.} By 1943, Yan H. and a group of young men in the camp “started assembling the underground group. We disguised it as if we were training in case a fire broke out. With time we would be allowed out of the camp more to train.”\footnote{YVA #6223505.}

In spite of the networks of Jewish and Communist undergrounds, the Slovak National Uprising did not succeed against Nazi German forces. German forces quelled the Uprising and occupied most of the Slovak territory by October 1944. With Nazi Germany exercising greater control over the country, “another 13,500 Slovak Jews were deported to Auschwitz, Terezín, and other camps.”\footnote{“Czechoslovakia,” YIVO Encyclopedia.} From August 29, 1944 until April 1945 when Soviet forces liberated much of Slovakia, the former inmates of the Nováky labor camp were forced to hid in bunkers, with Slovak Christians, fight with the partisans, and survive mostly by their wits and on luck. The sudden ‘freedom’ was a burden upon the Jewish youth and families:

The camp was disbanded, liberated. There was nothing to do. There was no one to worry about them (look after them). The majority of families, like my parents, went to the forests.\footnote{YVA #7160969.}
In the forests, the concept of ‘liberation’ represented a new kind of fear and fight for survival. Immediately following the Uprising, Slovak Nazis started a new wave of anti-Jewish propaganda:

Their authors accused the Jews of causing fratricidal war, robbery, rape, sadistic torture and killing of Slovak Christians: ‘The Jews released from the labour camps are beginning to rule, they are establishing national committees, robbing and murdering’; ‘Judaeo-Bolshevik Satanism is reaching for the lives of all Slovak intellectuals, it wants to wipe out the priests and eliminate religion.’

The remaining Slovak Jews certainly did not expect sudden aid and rescue from the general Slovak population. Their experiences told them otherwise. However, it is reasonable to believe that the fascist Slovak government’s renewed anti-Jewish campaign likely interfered with potential assistance.

For the most part, Jews were left to their own devices. Families sometimes numbering 15-20 in one underground bunker faced hunger, robbery and intimidation by other partisans or local Slovak peasants. Adults and children embarked upon anxiety-ridden voyages into Slovak villages for goods. The gamble waged by many mothers and fathers to seek out food, shoes, and clothing for their children in hiding was subject to one degree of unlucky timing for everything to go wrong.

**Bunkers in the Forests**

Dan S. fled the camp with his mother and sister. Since his father was the camp doctor, he stayed behind until everyone was out. He set up an infirmary for the partisan fighters until it was too dangerous to remain there. Dan S.’s family traveled to Banska Bystrica and attempted to reach one of his father’s acquaintances in search for shelter. However, the looming threat of German soldiers forced them to constantly move. During

---

179 Kameneck, 330.
the day, Dan S. would meet children from Nováky to exchange news of the adults from
the camp who were fighting. Dan S. occupied his time exploring the forests and
mountains, seemingly ‘normal’ childhood activities:

We spent a whole day to go look at a German plane that fell down nearby. We
mainly try to arm ourselves. Someone found a Hitler youth storage room. So I got
a Hitler youth ski uniform, which was my only clothing when I lived for 7 months
in the snowy mountains.\textsuperscript{180}

In October 1944, the fall of the rebellion and beginning of winter marked the first of
several mortal conflicts. Since the demand for shelter in the forests exceeded the supply,
former inmates of Nováky, including Dan S.’s family, concentrated with “POWs,
partisans, and communists” in the Tatra mountains.\textsuperscript{181} After following the partisan
leaders for two days in the rain, the German soldiers finally caught up to them:

We are told that we have to go through a passageway between the two mountains
to get to the bunkers. \textit{Today, it’s pretty clear that, it was all betrayal because that
whole passageway was full of German machine guns.} When the crowd goes
through the ‘saddle,’ a lot of people are killed. We are not enough ahead and not
too behind that we manage to escape and get lost from each other. I keep thinking
I can see my sister. I was the youngest and the fastest in the family. I run around
until I find everyone. I am the one who tells my father where my mother is. We
hide in the bushes and continue to run. We are pretty much the only ones who
escaped.\textsuperscript{182}

The status of Dan S.’s father as a prominent physician continued to aid them in hiding.
Constant walking through forests and mountains in the rain and snow deteriorated what
little material goods they had. Dan S.’s shoes fell apart shortly after their escape from the
German soldiers. He tied them up with wire, but it did not protect his feet from freezing.
His “feet swelled up so much” that his shoes had to be cut off his feet.\textsuperscript{183} Dan S.’s father
sought out a group of partisans and “convince(d) them” to take Dan S. in for a few

\textsuperscript{180} YVA #8092026.
\textsuperscript{181} YVA #8092026.
\textsuperscript{182} YVA #8092026.
\textsuperscript{183} YVA #8092026.
nights.\textsuperscript{184} It is likely that his father paid them for this kindness. Dan S.’s mother risked an encounter with German or Slovak Nazis and ventured into the nearby village for shoes. She returned with a pair of women’s shoes with a small heel. These were his shoes for the “entire winter with two meter high frozen snow” to traverse daily.\textsuperscript{185} After exhausting their financial resources in exchange for shelter, food, and clothing, Dan S.’s family received an empty bunker in the forest where they remained until April 1945. His father exchanged medical services with partisans and local villagers for food and goods to sustain the family.

Other youth hiding in the forest faced different challenges. Regina G. fled the camp with her husband’s family, baby, and another on the way. With no safe house to return to, the group of 30 went on foot to Banska Bystrica. The large village in the center of Slovakia is located 70 km east of Nováky. The partisans in Slovakia were located in Banska Bystrica because of its proximity to the dense forests of the Tatra Mountains. Many Jews imprisoned in Nováky were unable to find shelter with their non-Jewish neighbors after the Slovak National Uprising forced them from the camp. The majority of surviving Slovak Jews gathered there until April 1945. Partisans helped the Gruenwalds build two underground bunkers to house 15 people each. The space allowed enough room for each person to sit, which lasted upwards of 18 hours per day. With little food, water, and sunlight, Regina G. gave birth to her second child:

She was born in the bunker. The baby was quiet. It was a miracle from God that she was quiet during birth. She was born without pain. I asked, ‘She’s already born?’ It was luck that she was a girl. We were so happy because we did not need to do a \textit{brit milah}. She was very, very small because I didn’t eat. So, she didn’t

\textsuperscript{184} YVA #8092026.
\textsuperscript{185} YVA #8092026.
grow. She was born regularly in the 9th month but without labor pains. But it was my second child, so it was less hard.\textsuperscript{186}

It is difficult to imagine the conditions of her daughter’s birth, yet those challenges were only the beginning of Regina G.’s struggles. She had two children under the age of two to look after. The existence of an infant or small child in the bunkers endangered everyone, since their cries could attract German soldiers:

It was the hardest time, since I couldn’t give her milk. So, I got an idea to melt snow in my hand and give it to her. After that, she was quiet. But only water. She only had water. Her eyes were always closed, never opened. I always asked my family, since I had never seen someone dead in my life, is the baby still alive or already dead?\textsuperscript{187}

Regina G. gave her daughter a non-Jewish name, Ancha, but she changed it to Hannah after the war. Both of her children survived the rest of the war in the bunkers, in addition to the extended Gruenwald family.

**Christian rescuers**

Amongst a hostile non-Jewish population, there are cases of Slovak Christians hiding Jews. In this study, there are two types of Christian rescuers: those who sought payment and were borderline hostile to the Jews, and those who hid Jews out of goodwill, even if some payment was received. Many studies of Polish Christian rescuers of children shed light on this complicated and sensitive issue.\textsuperscript{188}

Harry D.’s family encountered two different examples of Christian rescue, which determined his family’s survival. Following the Uprising and escape from Nováky, Harry D.’s father deemed it unsafe to return to the family farm. Like many others, the family set

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{186} YVA #5770357.
\textsuperscript{187} YVA #5770357.
\textsuperscript{188} From Chapter 1, see Michlic and Bogner.
\end{footnotesize}
out for Banská Bystrica, a city in central Slovakia about 66 km east of Nováky. Thick forests that enabled Jews and fighting partisans to build and hide in underground bunkers surrounded the city. However, Harry D.’s family looked for a man named “Dr. Deutsch,” from whom they received packages in the camp. In the small town of Malinetz, they did not locate the mysterious doctor, but instead rented a room with an elderly woman. As Germans approached the village, they were instructed to hide, but chose to leave. Harry D.’s father found a Slovak Christian to take them in, but their stay was short-lived due to the man’s fear of German soldiers’ well-known punishment for hiding Jews.

At the time, Harry D. only knew that they went to another Christian Slovak’s house. They remained there for six months until the end of the war. After the war, he learned that the Christian rescuers, Andre and Maria, were friends of the first rescuer. The couple happened to be in his home when he asked Harry D.’s family to leave. Andre and Maria volunteered to take them. Harry D.’s family joined them with their young daughter in a one-room house in the mountains. Maria was pregnant at the time and gave birth to her second child in the room shared by six people.

The conditions of their stay were difficult, but sustaining. Harry D. describes how the Christian family had “nothing to eat” because they were poor peasants, yet no one went hungry.¹⁸⁹ They lived on potatoes, bread, and almost no meat. Because of their rural location, they had plenty of wood for a fire and would remake candles with used wax and new string. If Harry D.’s father compensated the rescuers during their stay, he does not know. It is unlikely, since they had been stripped of their resources by this point. What little they may have had went towards basics needs for food for the entire household. The

¹⁸⁹ YVA #4115591.
location of the peasants’ house must have been quite isolated, since they only experienced one interaction with soldiers:

One day, three soldiers came, not German, but Croatian or something similar in German uniforms. They were looking for food, not Jews, but still noticed we looked out of place. They asked the family who we were. They told them we were relatives from the city who came to stay there during the war.

Harry D. is overcome with emotion as he explains their motivations to rescue his family. It is difficult to determine why the family hid them with such a high risk and no monetary reward. They had a young daughter and another child on the way when they risked their personal safety. Harry D. can only imagine that “it must have been (their) fate because in Christianity, you have to help people.”

Harry D.’s family paid the peasants as much as they could after the war, though he is quick to emphasize that they did not demand anything from them. After arriving in Israel, Harry D. kept in touch with them by exchanging letters for many years. To this day, he continues to send them money. Harry D. and his family keep contact with Andre and Maria’s children and grandchildren. For him, the act of continuing to pay them for their seemingly selfless aid is one of “לְכָמֹל, נֶדֶרֶךְ.”

After the revolt broke out, Shlomo G.’s family returned to their house and farm. Unlike most Jewish families leaving by foot, they traveled on a train 70 km south to Nitra. Jews were typically not afraid of using the train, since partisans ran them at that time. The local, fascist Slovak authorities appointed a non-Jewish farmer to run the farm after his father’s arrest. According to Shlomo G., the farmer thought the Uprising meant the war was over and returned the farm to his family. Shlomo G.’s aunt’s family joined

---

190 YVA #4115591.
191 YVA #4115591.
192 In Hebrew meaning ‘to pay back,’ but with divine connotations; a divine reward.
them on the farm from Nováky. Suspecting this security would be short lived, Shlomo G.’s father commissioned someone to build two cabins in the woods for all nine people. When rumor of their impending arrest arrived two months later, the families left the farm to hide in the woods. After one month in the cabins, the winter conditions became too difficult to bear. The families traveled through the forests, hid, and returned to the cabin. Shlomo G.’s father secured a hiding place with another farmer. They moved from the farmer’s barn to an underground bunker until the end of the war:

The farmer and his boys dug an escape tunnel. When there was suspicion that they were coming to look for Jews in the village, we got into the tunnel and sat there. We were nine people, and I was in charge to make sure air would come into the tunnel. I had a metal wire, and I would push it through a wall to get some air. I remember at some point when we didn’t have almost any air. My father lit a candle and it went out almost immediately. It was a very difficult time, I remember, and we would knock so the farmer will let us out. We were nine people living in this ‘room’ for five months.\(^\text{193}\)

Shlomo G. and his sister played board games provided by the farmer to pass the time. No one left the bunker for five months, which resulted in his sister’s inability to walk. They had to carry her until she regained their strength. When asked about the farmer’s motivations to hide and provide for nine Jews during this dangerous period, Shlomo G. explains a different situation from that of Harry D.’s rescuers:

Although he was OK financially, he got 500 Slovak crones for each person from our family each month. In addition to that, we drew up a contract. My father had a farm and many lands. For each one of us, he got four dunams (one dunam is \(\frac{1}{4}\) acres, so one acre per person). He got the best lands my father had.\(^\text{194}\)

**Fighting as Partisans**

Yan H. participated in Nováky’s resistance and was assigned to a unit of fighters.

According to Yan H., the local resistance efforts were well organized and continued to

\(^\text{193}\) YVA #6815731.
\(^\text{194}\) YVA #6815731.
fight in the mountains after the German soldiers quelled the Uprising in the towns. Yan H. uses military vocabulary to describe his partisan activities:

We were sent to train tracks, so we had to cover our division when they detonated the train tracks. Our base was in Bukovets. After awhile, we moved to the mountains. Until November, when it was snowing, we had to pass German guards. My commander ordered two other men and me to cover them. They will pass and let us know when it is clear to pass. Our platoon was cornered and an RPG hit right next to me, so I was injured in my hands and legs.  

German Nazi soldiers captured Yan H. as a prisoner-of-war, not as a Jew. They took him to their base where he was imprisoned with other POWs from Slovakia and Britain. A British soldier warned him that the Germans had not “checked” for Jews yet, but that he should be careful. The soldier turned out to be a Jew from Topolčany who immigrated to Palestine before WWII. He helped Yan H. transfer to another German base, where he escaped with a friend after killing a German soldier. After several weeks on the run, Yan H. reached an American-liberated zone in March 1945. They sent him to a hospital in London and then Prague at the end of 1945. He met a friend there who informed him of his own death:

I received two days of leave to go to Bratislava to see if someone was still there. I met someone who told me that my mother and brother were there, but they thought that I was hung in Gerlitz for killing a guard. That’s what the Germans announced because they could not afford to have a guard dead without consequences. That’s how I found out that I was dead.

Yitzkhak I. joined the partisans after the revolt, but he does not say much about this period. He recalls the indifference of the former guards of the camp. The Jews did not face resistance from their former captors, and the Slovaks simply “went home.” He recalls half Jews and half non-Jews amongst his partisan group. The interview

195 YVA #6223505.
196 YVA #6223505.
197 YVA #6223505.
198 YVA #7160969.
substantively ends after his discussion of the Nováky camp. Only a few remarks are made about the partisans and his family today. The reason is unclear.

Vera P.’s wartime experiences were more varied. After her father’s Christian business partner secured their release from Nováky, they could not return to Bresno. According to Vera P., the town held a celebration after the removal of the last Jews and posted signs around town that read: “Emancipated from the Jews.”199 They traveled to the central Slovak town of Tisovec, where they hid for a few months with her boyfriend. He had exemption papers due to his position managing a lumber factory. He was killed a few weeks before the Slovak authorities came for Vera P.’s family again. They were taken to a transit camp, Zilina, where they worked for one month. In order to get out of the camp, Vera P. agreed to marry a childhood friend. He had connections with the authorities that secured the release of Vera P. and her family soon after.

Like Regina G., her marriage was for survival at age 16. Her struggle as a young woman escalated when she became pregnant. The family was still moving from place to place by the summer of 1944. With her parents and husband, they decided to terminate her pregnancy:

We were all packed up and we had to terminate this pregnancy. A Jewish doctor, a friend, not a gynecologist, gave me, at age 16 and 3 months, an abortion without anesthetics. My father stood next to me and held my hand. Ok good. That was that. And then we knew it was very serious because I didn’t want the abortion of course, but I was told that I don’t even have a say. And that’s it. Pregnant women get killed. We knew that. We knew that the strong and healthy and those who know how to keep their mouth shut would survive. We needed to get through this period.200

Although this decision likely saved her life, it is no less physically or emotionally damaging. She got an infection from the procedure and had to go to the nearest hospital

199 YVA #3564284.
200 YVA #5770357.
for treatment. Upon recovery, she would be taken to jail. Her parents hid with German friends, and she escaped from the hospital to join the partisans with her husband. They entered a Russian unit that was less sympathetic to them:

   Food was running low in our bunker. I remember going to my commander and telling him that there are people dying. He responded, ‘OK, so? In war, people die.’ We ate 100 grams of horsemeat. Without salt or bread or anything.\(^\text{201}\)

Vera P. and her husband remained with the partisans until liberation. She emerged from the bunker weighing 90 lbs, due to the lack of food. She also learned that her parents were found in hiding and shot by either German or Slovak Nazis.

\(^{201}\) YVA #5770357.
Conclusion

In this study, I learned much of the youths’ pre-war and wartime experiences. Slovak Jewish youth tended to grow up in relatively small Jewish communities and interacted regularly with their friendly, non-Jewish neighbors. Most youth were fluent in at least German and Slovak. They had some exposure to Jewish education and Zionist activities and almost always attended synagogue. Slovak Jewish youth were generally aware of the wave of antisemitism before it reached Slovakia, but had no reason to believe it would affect them. Most Jewish families saw themselves as (Czecho)Slovak first and Jewish second. The stable financial and social conditions of Slovak society did not encourage widespread immigration to Palestine.

After the outbreak of World War II, the intentions of the fascist Slovak government became clear. Jewish families avoided the first wave of deportations in March and April 1942 by securing economic exemption papers. Socioeconomic status was a determining factor for families to remain together in Slovakia. The transition of Nováky from transit camp to forced labor camp granted several hundred Jewish families reprieve from deportation to death camps in Poland. Jewish men, women, youth, and the elderly worked long, hard days in order to be produce enough goods to remain valuable to the Slovak state. Communal services and schools were established in the camp to maintain Jewish daily life. The youth followed secular, government mandated curriculum
in addition to a Jewish and Zionist education. Young women coped with pregnancy, child
rearing, and abortion under the conditions of forced labor and hiding.

Jewish families fled the Nováky camp after the Slovak National Uprising on
August 29, 1944. Most of them escaped to the mountains to hide and participate in
partisan activity. From September 1944 until liberation in April 1945, Jewish families
faced the most difficult challenges of cold, hunger, and constant threat of annihilation.
Jewish mothers, fathers, and young people relied upon their remaining assets,
professional skills, and cultural knowledge to navigate near fatal encounters with Slovak
and German Nazis. In some cases, the kindness of Christian rescuers proved instrumental
in families’ survival.

In the immediate postwar years, all of the Jewish youth in this study immigrated
to Israel between 1948-1949 through Youth Aliyah movements. Their families followed
them several months later with groups of adult immigrants. The youth had grown to 15-
21 years old and faced the beginning of a new life in a foreign country. United by their
Slovak Jewish identity and Holocaust experiences, they worked to assimilate into the
developing Israeli society. Many young survivors recall the clash with native-born
Israelis, the struggle to acquire Hebrew and cultural fluency, and the feelings of isolation.
After working and studying on kibbutzim for up to two years, some young survivors
joined the army, while others went to study at universities. All of the young survivors
rebuilt their shattered lives through education, professional development, starting new
families of their own.

Some of the survivors’ postwar lives have been marked by even more tragedy.
The difficulties of Israeli life due to wars and conflict weighed heavy on their new
families. Several youth survivors lost their own children and spouses in the fighting. Others struggled with feelings of marginalization in a society that either could not or would not deal with their Holocaust experiences. Yet, all of the survivors in this study chose to give their testimony to Yad Vashem archives in the later stages of their lives. Sometimes for the first time, they volunteered to share their life stories with strangers, after not being able to tell their own families for decades. In nearly all of the video testimonies, the interviewer ended the testimony with questions of lesson-learning, wisdom to pass along to their children, and a connection to their lives in Israel. Some survivors refused to end on a “hopeful” note in this way, while others gave the interviewer the optimistic closure she sought. Whether their message in the end is one of hope or bitterness, there was a desire to record their testimony.

**Problems in Historiography**

Studies on Slovak Jewry are inconsistent, contradictory, and often blame Nazi Germany for the actions of the fascist Slovak government. Some historians seem to oversimplify the social background of Slovak Jewish communities in their writing without access to survivor testimonies. They claim the majority of Slovak Jews were “Orthodox” without any nuance as to what that meant. A number of Slovak Jews affiliated themselves with the Neolog synagogues and even more with Orthodox synagogues. But that does not mean they were “Orthodox” in the sense that they believed or followed strict Orthodox law. The youth in this study attended Orthodox synagogues but did not ascribe to Orthodox ideology. A more comprehensive look at Slovak-

---


language historiography against other language histories and survivor testimonies can produce a nuanced account of the Holocaust in Slovakia.

**Role of the Interviewer**

An important methodological problem highlighted in Chapter 1 is the role of the interviewer. Yad Vashem interviewers conducted the interviews in a question and answer format, leaving little room for the survivor to freely explore their memories. Interviewers often interrupted and cut off the survivors from telling stories. They tended to put words into the survivors’ mouths even if it was not a case of the survivors forgetting an obvious detail. The interviewers tended to summarize their testimonies to check for accuracy. They also maintained a strict chronological order.

In at least four of the seven of the interviews, the interviewer was so overtly antagonistic towards the survivor that it was insulting and upsetting for me to watch. The interviewers asked questions like: Why didn’t you run? Why didn’t you leave before the war? If you knew what was going on, why didn’t you do anything about it? Did you attend Zionist activities? Why not? Why didn’t you know Hebrew? Why didn’t you want to come to Israel? Another interviewer strategy seemed to be asking the same questions over and over throughout as if trying to elicit more satisfactory responses. In all cases, the interviewer was female.

**Future Direction of the Study**

Some of the survivors have given testimony – both written and video – to other organizations at different points in time. In order to further develop the issues discussed
in this study, it would be critical to not only review those testimonies but also to interview survivors myself. I would like to explore the Israeli context further: the interviewing methods, Yad Vashem archives, survivors’ views of Israel, and the role of Zionism. I am interested in how they recount their experiences through an Israeli lens. I think the study of a group of young survivors could shed light on how personal, group, and communal memory evolve over time and in relation to the developing collective memory in Israel. As I mentioned in the introduction, a fuller study of the Nováky camp with more video and written testimonies, archival documents, and interviews is needed.

I would like to further develop the issue of Slovak-Jewish relations and the social, political, historical, and religious influences of those relations between 1918 and 1949. I am also interested in examining the pre-war Slovak Jewish community in terms of its religious and socioeconomic characteristics. The published and testimony accounts produce a varying and conflicting picture. The concept of the rural vs. urban in Slovak Jewry could be useful structure to better understand the similarities and differences in the Jewish communities. This area demands further investigation through more testimonies and Slovak language primary and secondary sources.

I argue that the more recent shift in historical research utilizing survivor testimonies in writing Holocaust history can contribute reliable and valuable information to the historical record. It enhances established accounts of the Holocaust as well as illuminates communities and issues that have yet to be fully developed. All of the prominent scholars featured at the beginning of this study established and continue to develop effective methodologies for examining testimonies and incorporating them into
historical writing. By producing case studies utilizing testimony, the field will be able to grow and acquire a substantial collection of empirical and theoretical studies.
Bibliography

Methodology: Testimonies


---. "'And I was only a child': Children's Testimonies, Bergen-Belsen 1945." Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History 12, nos. 1–2 (2006).


**Children in the Holocaust**

Michlic, Joanna B. “Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish Jewish Relations During the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections.” Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2008.
The Holocaust in Slovakia


Spitzer, Juraj. “Jewish Opportunities for Resistance and Revolt in the Years 1939-1945 (As in Case of the Novaky Camp).” In Mensfelt, *The Tragedy of Slovak Jews*, 257-76.


