

Transit camps during the first wave of deportation from Slovakia in 1942

THE ANTI-JEWISH POLICIES OF THE SLOVAK STATE DURING 1938-1941

At the end of September 1938, the Munich Agreement was signed, which had a negative impact on democratic Czechoslovakia. Overnight, the first Czechoslovak Republic became a thing of the past, and its Slovak portion went on to create an undemocratic regime. The strongest political party in Slovakia was the Hlinka Slovak People's Party (HSĽS), which had long been promoting its autonomy programme, and was known for its negative attitudes toward Jews. Several days after Munich it finally succeeded in achieving autonomy, and immediately took a clear stand against Jews. The HSĽS espoused autonomy in the "Manifest of the Slovak Nation", in which it declared:

*"In the spirit of the right to self-determination, we ask for executive and government power in Slovakia to be seized immediately by Slovaks. For the Slovak nation, victory of the right to self-determination means a victorious end to our long years of struggle... We shall persevere by the side of nations fighting against the Marxist-Jewish ideology of disruption and violence."*¹

46 The period of autonomy, which lasted several months, featured similar declarations and specific acts, for example, the deportation of approximately 7500 Jews to southern Slovakia, which had been awarded to Hungary following the Vienna Arbitration. The Slovak autonomous government, led by Jozef Tiso, passed this measure as a reaction to the arbitration, and primarily affected Jews without property or citizenship.²

After the creation of the Slovak State (14 March 1939) preparations began for the "solution to the Jewish question". A few weeks later, on 18 April 1939, a government decree was issued introducing the term Jew based on religion, and prohibited the presence of Jews in certain occupations such as lawyers, notaries public, and journalists.³ Additional measures were gradually implemented, which increasingly discriminated against Jews in Slovakia, affecting public services⁴ (lay judges, civil servants, appraisers, experts), Jewish doctors⁵ and pharmacists⁶, or prohibiting young Jews from serving in the army and introducing mandatory labour.⁷ Aside from these measures and many others, the Slovak State also conducted anti-Jewish propaganda to paint an image of Jews as enemies of the Slovak nation. It was used in the press, various propaganda posters, or publications.

1 *Slovák* 7 October 1938 (20.) 228. 1.

2 Fatranová 2007, 19–21; Nižňanský 2016, 34.

3 Government Decree No 63.

4 Government Decree No 74.

5 Government Decree No 184.

6 Government Decree No 145.

7 Government Decree No 150.

Following negotiations between representatives of the Slovak State and Nazi Germany in Salzburg, the evolution of anti-Jewish policies escalated to a more radical phase. This manifested itself in the arrival of Dieter Wisliceny in Slovakia (as an adviser for the solution to the Jewish question) and increasingly stringent measures. The process of Aryanization of Jewish property also accelerated, and Jews were gradually forced from the streets of Slovak towns and then from towns as such. The anti-Jewish measures culminated with the adoption of Government Decree No 198/1941 on the legal status of Jews, which contained 270 sections. It was known as the Jewish Codex, and the period press called it the strictest racial legislation in Europe⁸, or spoke of the racial purification of Slovakia.⁹ The Jewish Codex took its inspiration from Germany, as was written in 11 September 1941:

*"Overall, it is a summary of all statutory measures, containing 270 sections based on Germany's Nuremberg Laws."*¹⁰

The racial nature of this decree was defined right in the first section, which said:

"Pursuant to this decree, regardless of sex, a Jew is considered to be:

a) someone who has at least three racially Jewish grandparents;

b) a mixed-race Jew who has two racially Jewish grandparents."¹¹

Similarly, as in the case of the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour, the term "mixed-race Jew" was also introduced in Slovakia.

In the fall of 1941, negotiations were already taking place between representatives of Nazi Germany and the Slovak State concerning the deportation of the Jewish population. A key meeting took place during October 23–24 in Hitler's main tent, attended by leading representatives of the Slovak State: Jozef Tiso, Vojtech Tuka, Alexander Mach, and Ferdinand Čatloš. According to historian Ivan Kamenec, an important discussion that took place on 24 October 1941 included only Vojtech Tuka, Alexander Mach, and Heinrich Himmler and his entourage. During this time Himmler was working on plans for the extermination of European Jews, and told representatives of the Slovak State of plans to deport them to occupied Poland. They didn't have to press the Slovak delegation in any way, as both Tuka and Mach were in favour of this idea, and presented the deportation as departure of Jews for purposes of work. A final decision on deportation of Jews from Slovakia was reached during negotiations between Vojtech Tuka and Germany's ambassador to Slovakia, Hans Ludin. Tuka also agreed with the deportation of persons of Jewish origin with Slovak citizenship from Germany, occupied Austria, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.¹² Prior to this meeting, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted the Slovak government, other ministries, and other institutions with a request regarding

8 *Ludové noviny* 21 September 1941 (2.) 25. 1.

9 *Gardista* 11 September 1941 (3.) 207. 3.

10 *Gardista* 11 September 1941 (3.) 207. 3.

11 Decree No 198/1941.

12 Kamenec 1991, 155–156.

the deportation of these Slovak nationals. Specifically, it was interested in the government's position on whether it wished to have them deported to Slovakia or to the East.¹³ The agreement included a deportation fee, as noted by Ivan Kamenec:

*"During negotiations V. Tuka also concluded an agreement on a so-called colonization fee. It stated that the Slovak government had to pay Germany 500 reichsmarks for every deported individual to pay for 'resettlement costs'. The agreement, which also applied to Jews that would eventually be deported from the Slovak State, was one of the most embarrassing acts of the HSL'S government during its entire existence. All of the aforementioned meetings were strictly confidential. Here, a small circle of people, headed by V. Tuka, was playing its own 'political game'."*¹⁴

At a conference in a Berlin suburb by Wannsee Lake on 20 January 1942, attended by representatives of Nazi Germany's ministries, institutions, and security forces, the logistical and organizational implementation of the "final solution to the Jewish question in Europe" was planned. The minutes of the meeting that survived the war mentioned Slovakia, and stated that Slovakia would not pose any great difficulties during the preparation of the "final solution".¹⁵

PREPARATIONS FOR TRANSPORTS OF THE JEWISH POPULATION

Organizational preparations for the transports had already commenced during the first months of 1942. On 12 February 1942 the Presidium of the Ministry of the Interior ordered all district authorities and other subsidiary institutions to draw up a list of Jews. Jews were to be entered on special "A", "B", and "C" lists. The "A" list contained all Jews "regardless of capacity to work, sex, nationality, or current employment (economic classification) under any legal title, if they are not or will not be placed on the 'B' and 'C' list."¹⁶ The "B" list applied to able-bodied men from 16 to 60 years of age, and the "C" list contained Jewish men over the age of 60 and Jewish women aged 16 and up.¹⁷

At the end of February 1942, a decree of the Ministry of the Interior came into force prohibiting Jews from moving from their current place of residence.¹⁸ Less than a week later, a compulsory marking for Jews was instituted, according to which

*"Jews [§ 1(1) of Decree No 198/1941] must wear a yellow star 10 cm in diameter, sewn on the left side of the breast of their top garment. When worn, the star must be entirely visible and the garment to which it sewn must not be of the same colour."*¹⁹

Aside from the marking of Jews themselves, their homes also had to be marked in the same way,²⁰ as another decree of 12 March 1942 prohibited Jews from leaving their homes between 6 p.m. and 8 a.m., or from changing their place of residence without prior written permission.²¹

Based on these measures, the Slovak State was able to organize deportations in a better and more efficient manner, as it had at its disposal the necessary information on Jews: which

households were Jewish, where they were located, and when Jewish families were present in them. The Ministry of the Interior asked the Ministry of Labour and Public Work to take care of the logistics of the upcoming transports; specifically, they contacted the Department of Railways, which was to arrange the transport of Jews. A letter dated March 5 discussed transport in freight wagons, with each wagon being holding 40 persons, for a total of 1000 persons per transport, which comprised 25 wagons numbered 1–25. The doors of each wagon also had to be secured to make sure they could only be opened to a width of 10 cm. The start of transports was stipulated as 25 March 1942.²²

Starting in March 1942, five transit camps were created: Bratislava-Patrónka (commander Imrich Vašina), Nováky (commander Jozef Polhora), Sereď (commander Jozef Vozár), Žilina (commander Rudolf Marček), and Poprad (commander Jozef Petřík), which were to serve as locations through which the transports were to take place. Each camp was assigned a German non-commissioned officer to help with implementing the transports.²³ The transit camps had differing capacities, with the largest being at the camp in Nováky (for 4000 Jews), then the camp in Sereď (for 3000 Jews), Žilina (for 2500 Jews), Poprad (for 1500 Jews), and Bratislava-Patrónka (for 1000 Jews).²⁴ The Ministry of Transport and Public Work answered the letter of the Ministry of the Interior of 5 March 1942, agreeing to provide wagons for the transport of Jews. They also agreed to the dates the Ministry of the Interior had requested for the transports, and drew up the first tentative timetables, in which they already included the transit camps that were to be gradually established. Specifically, they wrote:

"In order to grant your wish that the transports cross Slovak territory at night, we have proposed the following timetable to German Railways:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1. Lamač departure (Note: Bratislava-Patrónka) 6:55 p.m. | Čadca arrival 4:28 a.m. |
| 2. Sereď departure 9:11 p.m. | Čadca arrival 4:28 a.m. |
| 3. Nováky departure 7:13 p.m. | Čadca arrival 4:28 a.m. |
| 4. Poprad departure 8:10 p.m. | Čadca arrival 4:28 a.m. |
| 5. Žilina departure 3:20 a.m. | Čadca arrival 4:28 a.m. |

The timetable has been created so that handover in Čadca to German territory always takes place at the same time. We are doing so to make things easier for German railways and border officials."²⁵

The correspondence shows how they planned the deportations, as well as that the transit camps that were under construction played a key role in this process, as they intended to organize most of the transports through them.

On 12 March 1942 the General Command of the Hlinka Guard issued orders for its members, assigning them the task of implementing the transports. The concentration of Jews was to gradually take place, based on § 22 of Decree No 198/1942, in Nováky, Sereď, Bratislava, Žilina, and Poprad. They were concentrated based on lists submitted by the Ministry of the Interior to individual District Authorities, according to which Jews were to be concentrated at the afore-

13 Document No 42. Nižňanský – Kamenec (ed.) 2003, 136–137.

14 Kamenec 1991, 155–156.

15 Wannsee Protocol [online].

16 Document No 8. Decree of the Presidium of the Ministry of the Interior of 12 February 1942 to all district offices and other subordinate institutions on the census of Jews. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 104.

17 Document No 8. Decree of the Presidium of the Ministry of the Interior of 12 February 1942 to all district offices and other subordinate institutions on the census of Jews. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 105–106.

18 Decree No 92.

19 Decree No 103.

20 Decree No 118.

21 Decree No 125.

22 Document No 16. Letter from the Ministry of the Interior of 5 March 1942 to the Ministry of Transport and Public Works, the Railways Department, concerning the transport of deported Jews. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 115.

23 Deportations in 1942. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 42–43.

24 Document No 37. Instructions of the Ministry of the Interior of 12 March 1942 to the commanders of transit camps in Bratislava-Patrónka, Sereď, Nováky, Poprad and Žilina for the preparation and implementation of the deportation of Jews. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 139.

25 Document No 157, 5 March 1942 – 14 January 1943, Bratislava. Correspondence between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Transport and Public Works in connection with the transport of Jews from Slovakia to concentration camps. In Hubernák 1994, 36–37.

mentioned camps. District authorities continued with the preparation of summoning notices for Jews that were delivered by subsidiary authorities (notary and district).²⁶ The instructions emphasized:

“A Jew that has received such a summons must without exception report on the specified date and time to the location given him in the summons. These will be district transit locations that will be designated by the district commander (there may be several if needed). Jews will then be escorted from these district transit locations under the supervision of gendarmes and Guardists to the main transit camps for Jews. Obviously, Jews will try to avoid this obligation in all sorts of ways, and will either try to escape, commit suicide, or do something similar, just so they don't have to go to work. We therefore order you to notify local Hlinka Guard commanders of this measure, who can set up inconspicuous patrols in their municipalities to monitor the movement of Jews, their behaviour, travel, interaction with Aryans, and everything that would hinder the problem-free concentration of Jews.”²⁷

The intensive preparations for the planned transports and inhuman conditions are documented by a report from Jozef Petrik, the commander of the transit camp in Poprad. In it, he wrote:

“I am informing you that today I was in the local barracks under Gerlach, and accompanied by Lt. Col. Noščak, the commander of the garrison and barracks, I inspected the accommodations for Jews in Poprad (women), regarding which I note the following: Jews (women) at the transit camp in Poprad will be housed in the barracks under Gerlach in one building, in which these at most 1500 persons can be located, and will sleep on a floor covered in straw (not on beds).”²⁸

Several days later, only two days prior to the departure of the first transport, the Ministry of Transport had already specified the plan for transport from Slovakia. They stipulated that according to mutual agreement with the German Reich Railway the transports would cross the border at Skalité – Zwardon. Transports were handed over at Zwardon station, with Slovak Railways accompanying the train comprising 25 freight wagons²⁹, four additional wagons for baggage, and one special wagon for guards.³⁰ At the same time, in the document they noted:

“that the destination station (Auschwitz or Lublin) must be adhered to precisely according to the given timetable for reasons of smooth transport on German railways. We can change the order of boarding station in Slovakia as needed if you notify us of the change in time – prior to the return of the train to Čadca.”³¹

The Ministry of Transport drew up a plan for the first twenty transports, with departure from Slovakia planned starting March 25, and wanted to organize them all via five transit camps. They also noted that all transports would be dispatched in the late afternoon and that transports in Žilina would be loaded at night.³²

26 Document No 32. Instructions of the Hlinka Guard Main Command of 12 March 1942 on arranging deportation by the Hlinka Guard. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 132.

27 Document No 32. Instructions of the Hlinka Guard Main Command of 12 March 1942 on arranging deportation by the Hlinka Guard. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 132–133.

28 Document No 46. Report by J. Petrik of 16 March 1942 to the Ministry of the Interior, Dept. 14, on the preparedness of the Jewish transit camp in Poprad for deportation. In Nižňanský (ed.) 2005, 149.

29 For the transport of Jews, they used freight wagons used to transport cattle. They gave the transported Jews only two pails, one for water and the other for bodily functions.

30 The escort consisted of two members of the Hlinka Guard, gendarmes, or members of the *Freiwilligeschutzstaffel* (voluntary defensive units).

31 Document No 157, 5 March 1942 – 14 January 1943, Bratislava. Correspondence between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Transport and Public Works in connection with the transport of Jews from Slovakia to concentration camps. In Hubernák 1994, 37.

32 Document No 157, 5 March 1942 – 14 January 1943, Bratislava. Correspondence between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Transport and Public Works in connection with the transport of Jews from Slovakia to concentration camps. In Hubernák 1994, 38.

The deportations officially began on 25 March 1942 with the departure of the first transport, containing young women and teenage girls, from the transit camp in Poprad. At the same time Jews were being assembled, for example in Sered', where the first Jews arrived at the transit camp on 26 March 1942. The first transport left Sered' on 29 March 1942 at 9:11 p.m., precisely according to plan. This specific transport was headed for the Lublin District in the east of Poland, and contained 1000 young Jewish men.³³ By the end of March 1942 the first five transports had departed from all five transit camps. As Gardista informed on the day the first transport left Sered':

“To this we can also add that since March 25 a thousand Jews are leaving for labour camps every day. To this day, 4000 Jews have thus departed. These transports are departing with the greatest order and without difficulties.”³⁴

After a meeting with the representatives of the 14th Department of the Ministry of the Interior and Wisliceny, the consultant for the solution to the Jewish question, it was decided to suspend transports between 6 and 11 April 1942. They also agreed that after this date transports will contain not only able-bodied Jews, but also their family members.³⁵

CONDITIONS IN THE CAMPS

The propaganda of the Slovak State attempted to describe conditions in these camps in a positive light. When the first transports left Slovakia in March 1942, the Gardista daily wrote:

“To this we can also add that since March 25 a thousand Jews are leaving for labour camps every day. To this day, 4000 Jews have thus departed. These transports are departing with the greatest order and without difficulties. The transports and the camps are being watched by Guardists, who are taking care of them in exemplary fashion. Very good care is being taken care of health, supply, and other such matters, so it is impossible to speak of Jews being treated in some harsh or God forbid inhuman manner.”³⁶

Up to that date the first four transports departed from the transit camps in Poprad, Bratislava-Patrónka, Žilina, and Sered'. The first to arrive at one of the transit camps were young women and teenage girls from eastern Slovakia, who were being moved to Poprad. Among them was Laura Špániková, who described completely different conditions:

“The order said all girls, all single ones, were to report, and that was that. We went like baby chicks, they loaded us on a bus, our parents wrung their hands and cried, but nothing helped. And we young people thought we were going to work, well so what, we'll work. We left on 25 March 1942 on a bus to Kysak, in Kysak we transferred to a train to Poprad. In Poprad they unloaded us into a building where there was straw, and we lay down on that straw. And I'll never forget when a Guardist came and too everything we had on us: earrings, bracelets, watches, and rings. And he told us: 'You won't be needing that anymore!' We still thought that it was all fun and games.”³⁷

Helena Weinwurmová (neé Weisová), who was deported from the Bratislava-Patrónka transit camp, had similar memories. She recalled the following:

33 Hlavinka – Nižňanský 2009, 35–36.

34 *Gardista* 29 March 1942 (4.) 73. 3.

35 Document No 157, 5 March 1942 - 14 January 1943, Bratislava. Correspondence between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Transport and Public Works in connection with the transport of Jews from Slovakia to concentration camps. In Hubernák 1994, 40.

36 *Gardista* 29 March 1942 (4.) 73. 3.

37 Špániková [DVD].

“Guardists came and told us that they were taking me and my older sister to go to work. We spent two days and two nights at Patrónka. We just lay there in the straw and had just enough food to subsist on. That was on 24 March, and on 26 March 1942 they loaded us into cattle wagons and locked them. One pail of water as a toilet and one pail of drinking water. And we then travelled two days and two nights, not knowing at all where.”³⁸

Their memories of the start of the transports are proof of the different reality of the transports that propaganda claimed were occurring in complete order and that Jews were being well taken care of in the transit camps. More such articles were published during the transports. Right at the start of the deportations, they claimed the following:

“The transports and the camps are being watched by Guardists, who are taking care of them in exemplary fashion. Very good care is being taken care of health, supply, and other such matters, so it is impossible to speak of Jews being treated in some harsh or God forbid inhuman manner.”³⁹

At the end of May 1942, the Gardista paper published an article informing the public about Jews being “moved” out of Slovakia. It described the transports, which included young, old, rich, and poor Jews, who were leaving Slovakia in freight wagons. Later they described life in one unnamed transit camp.⁴⁰

“Journalistic curiosity led us to one of these transit camps. It lies outside a certain district Slovak town, far from the urban hustle and bustle, inconspicuously hidden. Only the two-armed Guardists who patrol the camp day and night give away that something unusual is going on here. Many people pass this way every day, and many of them don’t even notice it. The camp is surrounded by an ordinary wooden fence, which in some places is not even topped by barbed wire, and the appearance of the buildings and accommodations reveals that it wasn’t built for this purpose.”⁴¹

But the reality of conditions in these camps was different. At the start of the transports, President Tiso received an anonymous letter about the conditions in the Žilina transit camp. The anonymous author wrote the following about the camp:

“Allegedly 1600–1800 Jews are concentrated in Žilina, housed in army barracks. These barracks, which date back to the former world war, have no windows, the roof is defective in places, and floor is rotten. Quick alterations are being performed only now, and these people are exposed to all the whims of nature. For example, one night these people stood outside under the open sky, whether as punishment or because the rooms weren’t ready, that’s irrelevant. It changes nothing on the fact that people had no place to lay their head! Is this not worse than in the Middle Ages? Where is humanity and moral responsibility?”⁴²

The anonymous author continues and says that the concentrated Jews are being stripped of all valuables, money, and clothing by the Guardists. They also speak of the violent, ruthless, and brutal nature of the Guardists, who treat the Jews in a very callous manner. Jews in the transit camp have no papers, which were confiscated, and were assigned numbers. He also noted that conditions in Žilina are identical with those at the Bratislava-Patrónka transit camp.⁴³ Another complaint regarding the way in which Jews were being concentrated and deported was also addressed to the office of the President of the Republic. In the letter to President Tiso from May 1942, its author asks for corrective action with regard to the poor conditions at the Žilina transit camp. He gives examples of people who were already deported, among them a

pregnant widow with nine children, a 95-year-old postman, an 84-year-old butcher, or a woman who had just given birth. He asks what benefit the departure of these people could have, who are not capable of working. Similarly, as in the anonymous letter from the end of March, he describes how the Guardists confiscated all the Jews’ possessions and physically assaulted them. The letter arrived at the presidential office sometime in June 1942, and was eventually archived; pursuant to the applicable provisions of Constitutional Act No 68/1942⁴⁴, the request did not need to be processed.⁴⁵

TRANSPORT LOCATIONS

During the entire process (before, during, and after the deportations), propaganda played a very important role. It was used intensively to communicate the implementation of the transports, which were presented to the public as departure for work or moving away. From March 1942 most communication regarding the transports was handled by Minister of the Interior Alexander Mach. Six days before the departure of the first transport, he spoke of the fact that he had issued guidelines for the last phase of the solution to the Jewish question. At the same time, he asked Guardists to not let themselves be misled and fooled by some information being spread by Jews. He emphasized that Jews were going abroad only to work.⁴⁶ Following the departure of the first transport, he declared the following in Issue 70 of Gardista dated March 26:

“Apparently Jews are faced with the most horrible fate. Apparently, they are to be taken somewhere to mysterious marshes, where they are to be murdered, shot. Nothing like that lies in store for them, only one thing lies in store for Jews: they will have to work. That is all!”⁴⁷

Two days later, the Slovák daily published an article entitled “Move Jews Out of Slovakia”, in which Minister Mach spoke of the Jewish question in Slovakia. In it, he reacted to the current situation, and discussed the moving out of Jews, which in his words was not yet complete, because his goal was to move out all Jews. He called the deportations “emigration activity”, and once again presented the departure of Jews as departure for work, which according to him they were to perform in production centres.⁴⁸ Two months prior to the end of the transports, the president of the Slovak State, Jozef Tiso, declared:

“Do not forget that in recent years, the following slogan sounded: Jews to Birobidzhan! No, we’re not sending them to Birobidzhan, as that would be a little too far. Prior to the world war, what all did the English promise Jews just to get their money. They promised them an independent state, and then didn’t give it to them. And see, Hitler didn’t ask the Jews for anything and didn’t get anything from them, and now he’s giving, he’s giving them a state!”⁴⁹

After the transports ended, an article was even published entitled “How Jews Are Living in

38 Weinwurmová [DVD].

39 Gardista 29 March 1942 (4.) 73. 3.

40 Gardista 31 May 1942 (4.) 122. 5.

41 Gardista 31 May 1942 (4.) 122. 5.

42 27 March 1942, Bratislava. An anonymous letter to Dr. Jozef Tiso on conditions in the transit camp for Jews in Žilina. In Hubernák 1994, 72.

43 27 March 1942, Bratislava. An anonymous letter to Dr. Jozef Tiso on conditions in the transit camp for Jews in Žilina. In Hubernák 1994, 72–73.

44 Constitutional Act No 68/1942 was passed by the legislative assembly of the Slovak State, thereby sealing the fate of Jews that had been deported or were still waiting for deportation out of Slovakia. Based on this act, these Jews were stripped of their citizenship and their property was forfeited to the state. This measure applied both to Jews that had already been deported and those that they were planning to deport.

45 Ministry of the Interior of the SR, Slovak National Archive, Ministry of Interior Collection, Box No 243, 9268/42

46 Gardista 19 March 1942 (4.) 64. 4.

47 Gardista 26 March 1942 (4.) 70. 3.

48 Slovák 28 March 1942 (24.) 72. 3.

49 Slovák 11 August 1942 (24.) 186. 4.

the East⁵⁰, the purpose of which was to eliminate doubts regarding the true fate of the Jewish transports. According to the *Gardista* daily, it was a reportage that

*“will also perfectly subvert all those horrible rumours, spread by unfriendly, mainly whispered propaganda about the alleged atrocious treatment of deported Jews. The reportage will convince everyone that deported Jews are living an orderly life in their new homeland, to the extent that they want to work, that’s true, because manual labour is not part of Jewish nature.”*⁵¹

In reality, the transports from the transit camps were headed to the Auschwitz camp or to the Lublin District. Those deported in the first wave included Alfréd Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba (originally named Walter Rosenberg), who in the spring of 1944 managed to escape from the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex. Alfréd Wetzler was deported on 12 April 1942 from the Transit and Labour Camp for Jews in Sered'. After the war, he described the departure in his book as follows:

*“...you’re leaving for work, – continues the deputy commander of the Sered’ camp, an ungainly man with purple veins under watery eyes, – everything has been readied there for you. There’s no need to panic. After all, we’re treating you as people deserve, and there it will be the same. Don’t worry! Each of you will do what they do: the cobbler will cobble, the doctor will treat, so everyone will be able to work at their trade. In exchange for work you will be given a place to live, food, and pay so you can buy what you need. And you’ll all be nicely together there. Do your work and after a half-year, a year at most, you will return.”*⁵²

Filip Müller, who was born on 3 January 1922 in Sered, departed on the same transport. As soon as he arrived at Auschwitz, he was placed with the Sonderkommando, who operated the gas chambers. First, he worked in the main Auschwitz I camp, where they built the first gas chamber. Later he was moved to Auschwitz II – Birkenau, where the Nazis built high-capacity gas chambers and crematoria. In his book *Sonderbehandlung*, he described what the gas chambers looked like. He described them as a rectangular space measuring about 250 metres, with a low ceiling. They contained columns supporting the ceiling, as well as hollow columns into which Zyklon B crystals were thrown. Fake showers were used to deceive the people entering the chamber. According to him, about 1000 people fit into these chambers. There were also various signs that on one hand served to direct people to the chamber and on the other to give the impression that it involved only a shower and disinfection.⁵³ Müller’s description contained many important details:

“Slogans such as ‘Freedom through cleanliness’ or ‘Lice – your death’ served to deceive, as did clothes hooks installed at a height of 1.5 metres on both walls, with numbers. There were wooden benches by the walls. They gave the impression that they were there to let people undress in comfort. Other signs on the walls asked those arriving in several languages to tie their shoes together and hang them with their clothes on the hooks and to remember their number so that they could find them more easily after their shower. The way from the dressing room to the gas chamber was also described as the way to the ‘bath and disinfection room’. The entire furnishings of the underground space, based on sophisticated camouflage and bold deceit, could give the impression of some sort of international information centre. With horror I realized that everything I’d experienced up to now was child’s play compared to what lay in store for me. Every detail served

50 Fritz Fiala’s reportage with this headline was published on 7 November 1942, less than a month after the departure of the last transport. In his reportage, he wanted to eliminate any traces of doubt in connection with the deportation of Jews from Slovakia, and above all about the places to which Jews were being deported. In the article, he for example spoke of the fact that Jews had in the East the Jews had self-governance, that they lived in freedom, and that they were happy. All this information was part of the propaganda apparatus used by the Slovak State to support the deportations. See: *Gardista* 7 November 1942 (4.) 256. 5.

51 *Gardista* 6 November 1942 (4.) 255. 3.

52 Lánik 1989, 7–8.

53 Müller 2018, 48.

*to satisfy and fool mistrustful and suspicious victims as soon as they entered the gas chamber, so they entered it quickly and didn’t cause problems.”*⁵⁴

Rudolf Vrba was first deported to the Lublin District, to the Majdanek camp. He was registered in this camp at the end of June 1942.

*“Even though I was mentally prepared, my first encounter with the camp shocked me. I wasn’t afraid, at least not for myself – I was determined to live, to escape. But I was sick to my stomach from the horrible atmosphere of that place and the disgusting feeling remained with me as the stink of rotten blood in my nose. As we passed through individual sections [Majdanek was split into several sealed-off sections], emaciated skeletons whispered: ‘Some food? Something in your pockets?’ When they spoke, they didn’t look at us. They continued with their work: digging, sweeping, pushing wheelbarrows, so heavy that they almost ripped their skinny forearms from their joints. We threw them what we had, secretly and inconspicuously, with a flick of the wrist. And then I saw how life in a concentration camp can debase a human being. I discovered another side of life in the camp, something that was completely foreign to my world, something completely disgusting. First the skeletons threw themselves like jackals on the scraps of food, fighting and growling. Then the guards attacked them and beat them willy-nilly with clubs. The inmates didn’t notice the blows, continued to scabble in the mud, and then one separated from the bunch and started running, and while the guards ran after him and beat him, he was stuffing a dirty piece of cheese in his mouth.”*⁵⁵

Another deportee who passed through a transit camp in Slovakia was Dionýz Lénard. When they started deporting Jews from Slovakia, as an able-bodied Jew he was sent to the transit camp in Nováky, where he was included in a transport. At the camp he had an opportunity to see the cruel manner in which the Guardists treated arriving Jews. Like Vrba, he was sent to Lublin, to the Majdanek concentration camp. In the camp there was hunger, rampant diseases, and inmates were subjected to constant beatings and murder. Lénard was an eyewitness to several murders committed by the SS. Like Wetzler and Vrba, he escaped from the camp, with the difference, however, that he succeeded in doing so two years earlier. He managed to escape at the start of June 1942, and returned to Slovakia roughly in July. Dionýz Lénard escaped from that camp before they built a gas chamber there,⁵⁶ but his testimony was very important, because it gave proof of the conditions being completely different from those claimed by the propaganda of the Slovak State.

SUMMARY

The transit camps were built for organizational purposes during the first wave of transports from Slovakia in 1942. They operated from March to October 1942, and most Jews deported from Slovakia passed through these camps. After the transports, some of the transit camps were closed (Poprad, Bratislava-Patrónka, and Žilina) while the rest continued on as labour camps (Nováky and Sered'). The head of the 14th Department of the Ministry of the Interior, Anton Vašek, declared:

*“It is generally known that the measures of the Slovak Republic have resulted in 4/5 of Slovak Jewry having been moved out.”*⁵⁷

Only six days prior to the departure of the last transport from Slovakia, the Propaganda Office contacted the Ministry of the Interior with a request for statistics for a yearbook. Aside from oth-

54 Müller 2018, 73–72.

55 Vrba 2007, 72–73.

56 Hlavinka 2016, 76–77.

57 *Gardista* 10 November 1942 (4.) 258. 7.

er data, the Propaganda Office also requested the number of Jews deported, more precisely, the decline in Jews by individual district (note: Slovakia had six districts) since 1940. The total decline in Jews was around 73 %.⁵⁸ A total of 57,752 Jews were deported from Slovakia, only a few hundred survived, and most died in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps.

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