

REVIEWS

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THE FATE OF SLOVAK JEWS IN THE LOCAL
PERSPECTIVE: REVIEW OF A HISTORY OF
JEWISH COMMUNITY IN DOLNÝ KUBÍN

JAKOBYOVÁ, Barbora – NIŽŇANSKÝ, Eduard.
Dejiny židovskej komunity v Dolnom Kubíne
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Kubín]. Bratislava: Izraelská obchodná
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The publication *Dejiny židovskej komunity v Dolnom Kubíne* [A History of The Jewish Community in Dolný Kubín], was released in 2018 as the result of the cooperation of Slovak historians Eduard Nižňanský (Comenius University in Bratislava) and Barbora Jakobyová (Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences). Eduard Nižňanský is one of the leading specialists in Holocaust research in Slovakia. He is the author of many publications and papers related to the topic of the Jewish Community in Slovakia. His research interests also include antisemitism in Slovakia and propaganda. An integral aspect of his interest is research into the Jewish Community from a regional perspective, and this can also be seen in *Dejiny židovskej komunity*.

The book is oriented primarily around the regional and local perspectives and conditions and contexts. As authors mention in the introduction, the book is part of a project documenting the life of the Jewish community in several Slovak towns (including Bratislava and Komárno, among others). The work is divided into two parts. One is written for English-speaking readers, and serves a very useful function of sharing important information about the Holocaust with non-Slovak readers.

The book is richly structured. It has ten chapters, not including the introduction. In the first two chapters, the authors briefly summarize the most important knowledge about the life of Jewish community in the town before the year 1918 and in the interwar period, focussing on a number of aspects. They present the most important legal norms affecting the lives of the Dolný Kubín Jews and explore several other factors through which it is possible to reconstruct the community's activities in the city, such as the organization of Jewish religious life

and the activities and expansion of Jewish associations in the town. The section related to the economic influence of the Jews in the city is of particular importance. It is well known that great part of contemporary anti-Semitism in the region was attributed to the nature of Jewish dominance in the economic life of Hungarian or, from 1918, Czechoslovak cities. The authors show how and why this stereotype became established in the opinions of the majority of the population. The second chapter is enriched by statistics and several tables which help to create a more plastic image of the influence of Jews (mainly regarding the actual influence of Jews in the economic life of the city).

The following chapters paint a picture of Jewish life at the beginning of the non-democratic authoritarian regime, a period framed by the rise of Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana (HLS) in October 1938. This new period was characteristic by the escalation of repressive measures against selected groups of inhabitants, but mainly against the Jews. The third chapter devoted to the period up to 14 March 1938 focuses mainly on depicting the political atmosphere between the events in Munich and the creation of the Slovak State, as well as on the depiction of basic undemocratic measures by the new autonomous government. The authors follow the details of hard measures adopted by government against the Jewish Community in November 1938 closely connected to the failure of foreign policy negotiations of the government. The unsuccessful negotiations resulted to the loss of great part of the Slovak territory.¹ In this respect, the authors make a good point when they highlight the connection between the First Vienna Award and the expulsion of Jews into the territory of no one,² which was to compensate for a certain feeling of frustration among the highest state officials about the loss of the territory. The authors pay attention not only to the basic regulations governing this relocation, but also note how they were applied in the case of Dolný Kubín. Both parts of the chapter are

1 First Vienna Award took a place on 2 November 1938 and caused the loss of the south territory of Slovakia (area of 10 423 km²).

2 "The territory of no one" is the territory ceded to Hungary in November 1938.

functionally connected and allow the reader to understand local events within the context of national ones. However, the reconstruction of these events is largely constrained by the surviving archival materials, which are limited in number and quality. As a result, the focus of much of this chapter is primarily on the situation at the national level.

Despite these limitations, the authors highlight the relevant factor of deportation activity “from below”. Although the HSEŠ could not yet rely on the local authorities during this period, the example of Dolný Kubín demonstrates that the employees of the still extant “democratic” Czechoslovak state administration were willing to accept and implement regulations that were outside the bounds of the constitution.

The atmosphere of the months from autumn 1938 to March 1939 is depicted through several archival sources. The anti-Semitic mood in the town started to rise during the first months of 1939. The authors identified that in these months, the first public anti-Semitic demonstrations occurred.

The following parts of book aim to present the life of Jewish community in the town in the first years of Slovak Republic 1939–1945 existence. The chapter *The Jewish Community in Dolný Kubín between 1939 and 1941* includes a brief description of events which led to the formation of the new state. The introduction of a contemporary typology of antisemitism is also an integral part of this chapter. It is necessary to point out that antisemitism had been present in central Europe (in Slovakia too) for centuries. The chapter also includes an overview of the legislative framework adopted in first years of war, although this aspect of the research is not well connected with the regional specifics. The emphasis is on legal measures from the national perspective; specific measures in Dolný Kubín are omitted. Probably due to the lack of archival material, the impacts of the adopted legal framework on the life of Jewish Community in the town are discussed only in descriptive way. The subsequent sections are focused on the functional connections between regional archival sources and the knowledge gleaned research concerning anti-Jewish policy at a national level. The authors present several examples of efforts

by the Jewish community to adapt to the new situation in Dolný Kubín.³

Although several examples can be found regarding interventions and decisions at the local level, the book does not primarily focus on the role of local political actors in the repressive policy towards its Jewish population. Only a few indications can be found in the section dedicated to local interventions in policy relating to the housing of Jews in the city. The authors found no sources dealing with the relocation of the Jewish minority to the periphery (as was the case in larger cities) so they can assume inaction on this issue among the local political leaders.

The chapter on *Aryanisation of Jewish Businesses* is dedicated to the analysis of this mechanism in Dolný Kubín. Aryanisation included despoiling the entrepreneurial, immovable and movable property of Jews. This part of the book is extremely valuable in terms of uncovering the mechanisms of Aryanisation at a local level. Last but not least, the value of this chapter lies in the author’s analysis of archival sources, which allowed them to reconstruct several cases of Aryanisation, behind which are hidden real human stories. Based on the example of Dolný Kubín, the authors confirm the fact that the “political” reliability of the candidate in the Aryanisation of companies played an important role. The practical consequence of the Aryanisation and liquidation of Jewish property was the impoverishment of the Jews, leading to existential problems.

This played an important role in the deportations that began in the spring of 1942 and ended in the autumn of the same year, as is stated at the start of the chapter about the deportations of Jews. The authors propose a causal link between the pauperization of the Jewish population and these deportations, and suggest that it also explains the close cooperation between the moderate and radical wings of the Party in the organization of transportation out of the territory. The next part of the chapter describes the technical preparation and implementation of the deportations generally, followed by a case

3 The good example of that is the creation of the school for Jewish children excluded from the state schools. The Jewish school was provided in the former law office of Dr Július Meisl.

study on the preparations made in the case of Dolný Kubín. The authors show how the local authorities took an active part in the preparations and transportation, and their activities cannot be considered as mere blind obedience to orders. Several sources confirm that, in addition to active participation, local political actors were also responsible for the fate of the deported members of the Jewish community, as the lists of those transported were decided by the district commission, which in several cases acted beyond scope permitted by the national regulations.

The chapter *The "Peaceful Years": 1943-1944* describes the life of the Jewish community in Dolný Kubín in the years 1943–1944. The authors recall that the remaining Jews still lived in fear of the resumption of transportation. The description of the atmosphere is completed by several ridiculous examples of their position in the city, for example, regarding evidence of the debts deported Jews owed to the city. The sale of Jewish real estate was still going on. A part of the chapter follows the Jews' participation in the Slovak National Uprising in August 1944.

The last chapter is focused on a brief summary of life of the survivors of the Holocaust in Czechoslovakia after the end of the war. Despite the fact that a new wave of anti-Semitism arose in the country, it seems there is no evidence of this in Dolný Kubín. The new era should have been a new start for members of Jews community. However, despite the efforts of several members of the Jewish community in city, their previous existence was not restored spiritually, culturally or economically. As evidence for this, authors cite the fate of the synagogue; the gradual decay of the building led to it being rebuilt as a cinema in the 1960s.

The main text is followed by a list of the literature and sources consulted, including rich archival material. The publication is supplemented by several appendices which summarize, in particular, the number of Aryanised and liquidated Jewish companies. What the publication may be missing is a conclusion or evaluation of the entire work and the archival research. Ultimately, the publication could be improved if the authors summarized their findings and went further to contextualise them in terms of the national situation. It would certainly not

harm the publication and would improve on its current significant descriptive character. Nevertheless, in general, it can be said, that the book represents a valuable probe into the life of Jewish communities in Slovakia, based on the example of a small town such as Dolný Kubín. Despite some of the shortcomings mentioned, it can be considered a good and fair treatment of this topic from a regional perspective.

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A BOOK REVIEW OF *POTRIANONSKÉ KOŠICE*

FICERI, Ondrej. *Potrianonské Košice. Premeny etnických identít obyvateľov Košíc v medzivojnovom Československu [Košice Post-Trianon. Ethnic Identity Changes of Inhabitants of Košice in Interwar Czechoslovakia]*. Bratislava: VEDA, Vydavateľstvo SAV, 2019, 336 pp. ISBN 978-80-224-1737-2

Ethnic identities of the inhabitants of central European border cities were marked by a complex set of factors during the first half of the 20th century, which is why they consistently present an attractive topic for social scientists. The East Slovak city of Košice that currently borders three states is certainly no exception. Censuses from the beginning of the 20th century show that Hungarians and Slovaks were the two largest ethnic groups in Košice, but Germans, Jews, Roma and others were represented as well. The city could thus be characterized as a melting pot of languages, cultures and religions, as well as social classes. This phenomenon was further exacerbated by the gradual changes occurring in state formations, as well as the four ethnic-national changes that Košice underwent in the first half of the 20th century, the most important out of these being the creation of the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 and the subsequent signing of the Treaty of Trianon. As a result, the ethnic identity of Košice's inhabitants became one of the most discussed topics in Košice's urban history within both Slovak and Hungarian national historiographies. Central to the academic debate are the attempts by authors from both

countries to “nationalize” or lay claim to the city, associating it with whichever side the author identifies with.

The latest contribution to the Košice controversy is the monograph *Potrianonské Košice* [*Košice Post-Trianon*] written by the historian Ondrej Ficeri. Ficeri has previously authored or co-authored several publications about Košice, most notably, the monograph *Košice v slovenskej historiografii* (2016) [*Košice in Slovak Historiography*]. In *Potrianonské Košice*, Ficeri presents an innovative attempt to settle the ongoing debate, with the ambition to resolve question of the ethnic identity of Košice's population in a way that could be acceptable for both Slovaks and Hungarians. The book comprises four chapters, and reader can find helpful information on the historical context of the topic in the introduction. The first chapter, *Termíny, Koncepty, Teórie* [*Terms, Concepts, Theories*] is dedicated defining the key terms of the work and presenting the fundamental concepts and theories applied in the book. Ficeri subjects polyvalent and ambiguous terms, such as *nation*, *nationality*, *ethnicity* and *ethnic identity*, to a brief examination of their genesis and the manner of their usage in the past (pp. 43–48). He also specifically distinguishes the term *identification* as an analytical tool. He then goes on to set out the conceptual framework of his book, which is based on the selected parts of the constructivist theories of ethnic politics by the American political scientist Kanchan Chandra (pp. 52–59). Chandra divides the concept of ethnicity into two groups: ethnic structure and ethnic practice. As Ficeri states, the focus of his research is the relationship between these two concepts and it is this decision that makes his research so original.

In the following two core chapters, *II. Etnická prax a štatistika* [*Ethnic Practice and Statistics*] and *III. Etnická prax a politika* [*Ethnic Practice and Politics*], Ficeri proves that ethnic identities are not fixed, as traditionally assumed in the relevant historiographies, but change over time, and are often the product of political and economical phenomena. At the beginning of the second chapter, the author analyses the ethnic genesis of Košice and declares the city, before the Treaty of Trianon, to be one of the centres of Hungarianization in the non-Hungarian-speaking regions

of Hungary (p. 75). The chapter is then divided into two chronological parts, the first dealing with Hungarian population statistics (up to 1918) and the second with Czechoslovakian statistics (after 1918). In the first part (pp. 75–124) Ficeri explains why Hungarianization was so successful in Košice, basing his argument on a complex set of geographical, historical, social and political factors. In the second part, he analyses the sudden shifts in proclaimed nationalities as captured by Czechoslovak officials. Based on Chandra's conceptualization, he identifies five major areas of transformation of ethnic identity, depending on the mechanism of said transformations (pp. 124–229). The final chapter is dedicated to presenting selected demographic indicators associated with ethnicity and the migratory movements of the inhabitants of Košice, according to the 1930 people's survey. Ficeri managed to create a database using an analytical method based on data from permanently settled and temporarily absent inhabitants of Košice in the city's nine residential areas. This chapter is highly technical: the author uses various equations which can be difficult to understand even for historians with a background in historical demography. In fact, the low comprehensibility of the text is one of the biggest shortcomings of *Potrianonské Košice*. Although it is a work of scientific character aimed at a relatively targeted audience, readers might have better experience with the book were it not for the overcomplicated sentence structure and the use of scientific terms that sometimes sound forced. However, Ficeri balances this out not only with several tables, graphs and schemes but also with a summary conclusion. The book is also suitably complemented by a functional and attractive graphic appendix.

Despite these shortcomings, the contribution of this award-winning book (*Potrianonské Košice* has recently been awarded a Prize for Scientific Literature from the Slovak Literary Fund) is significant thanks to its alternative and very original approach to the issue of changes of national identity within populations that live in ethnically diverse areas. A Hungarian translation of the book is expected.

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**KNOWING THE CAPITAL IN THE NEW
PERSPECTIVE: REVIEW OF WAR AND
BRATISLAVA**

SZALAY, Peter – BOGÁR, Michal –
HABERLANDOVÁ, Katarína – BARTOŠOVÁ,
Nina – KRIŠTEKOVÁ, Laura. *Vojnová Bratislava
1939–1945 [War and Bratislava 1939–1945]*.
Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2020, 336 pp.
ISBN 978-80-569-0131-0

Urban history, as a specific field, is the subject of research not only by historians, but also by urban planners and architects. It is not surprising that the latest publication to focus on the history of Bratislava in the years 1939–1945 comes from a team of architects and urbanists. As the authors state in the introduction, *Vojnová Bratislava 1939–1945 [War and Bratislava 1939–1945]* is a free continuation of the book *Moderná Bratislava [Modern Bratislava]*, published in 2014. The book follows the history of the city's architecture in the interwar period. The main theme of the publication is architecture, but it cannot be reduced to a simple description of this art. The authors provide a decent overview of the most important social and political events that influenced the development of Bratislava.

Vojnová Bratislava is the result of cooperation between several authors. Most of them work at Department of Architecture of Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. By way of introduction, it should be mentioned that the book has the character of popular science literature. Its aim is to summarize known knowledge rather than present new empirical research. This does not, however, detract from the quality of the work, which offers a new perspective on the development of the capital city and also offers new information, mainly on the topics of housing and infrastructure. The modern design of the book will certainly please.

The work is divided into ten chapters, providing a comprehensive view of the city in the WWII period. The main focus is on the material aspects of Bratislava, with a focus on new construction and expansion of the city. The authors do not omit a brief overview of the political situation in the country, which largely determined the development of the city. The plastic picture

of the prevailing atmosphere in the city can also be assessed positively. The authors work with contemporary articles, recordings and photographs, complementing each chapter. The central point of interest lies not only in the architecture itself, but in the happenings in the public space as well.

In the first two chapters, authors Peter Szalay and Michal Bogár focus on the topic of the manifestations of public space. They highlight specific urban spaces, such as squares and streets, with reference to the performative character of public space. Their interpretative inspiration seems to be from performative studies, in seeing the public space as a stage. One section of chapter 2 is devoted to the issue of new offices in the city. A lack of public buildings was one of the major issues in many Slovak towns in the selected period.

In Chapter 3, *Nenápadná architektúra nemeckej menšiny [Inconspicuous Architecture of the German Minority]*, author Peter Szalay examines the construction activities of the German minority in Bratislava and follows their impact of the activity on Bratislava's urban development. One good example is the construction of "German houses": multifunctional centres with a social, political and cultural function, built in Bratislava, but also in other regions (for example region of Spiš or in the wine-growing villages near the capital).

Chapter 4, *Mesto v zázemí [The City in the Background]*, focuses on the activities of several Slovak architects in Bratislava. Also authored by Peter Szalay, it explores the cultural life of capital. The chapter consists of several subsections, varying in content, overall creating the impression of disparate whole.

Chapter 5, *Holokaust v Bratislave [Holocaust in Bratislava]*, is more compact. This topic has been extensively covered in Slovak historiography but is not possible to omit it, even in a work focusing mainly on architecture. Indeed, this perspective brings new insights, so far overlooked in previous works. The authors, Peter Szalay and Michal Bogár, draw attention to the hierarchy of public space and track the expulsion of the Jews from the central parts of the city. One section is devoted to the plans to demolish the district concentrated around the old Jews

Street. Another interesting section is given over to the story of the architect Steiner, who, even in times of the transportation of Jews, managed to create a studio with several Jewish architects and engineers.

Chapter 6, *Plánovanie mesta* [*City Planning*], is devoted to several large projects that are already known to the professional and lay public. The most important points that the author, Michal Bogár, highlights are that the urban planning is driven by pragmatic motivations, and that the ideological background of construction should not be overestimated.

Chapter 7, *Každodennosť vojnovej metropoly: Bývanie, šport a vzdelávanie* [*The Everyday Life of a War Metropolis: Housing, Sports, Education*] by Katarína Haberlandová reflects upon a topic which is not well known. I wish to highlight that these aspects of urban space are very important for the daily life of city inhabitants and I consider it useful to bring to the fore topic like this.

Nina Bartošová, author of Chapter 8, describes the capital from the point-of-view of building industry and infrastructure. From the perspective of an architect, she interprets several well-known facts concerning the economic boom in the first years of WWII, focusing on the largest industrial companies in the city. The section of the chapter reflects on the city's road network and the traffic situation, considering it beneficial. But the conclusion of this chapter, which is vague and artificial, is a bit disturbing.

The chapter entitled *Vojna v meste* [*War in the City*], compiled by Laura Krišteková and Peter Szalay, captures the impact of

the war on the construction of war-related infrastructure in the capital. They briefly describe the construction of civilian shelters or the "Festung Pressburg", a defence system intended to protect the city from the arrival of the Red Army. The authors also deal with several buildings in the city that belonged to the army.

The final entry, Chapter 10, we be described as a kind of epilogue. The authors Peter Szalay and Michal Bogár turn their attention to the events that took place in the city after it was handed over to the Red Army. The chapter focuses on events from an architectural perspective, but we can find several links referring to efforts at an interdisciplinary view of the topic. Sections devoted to construction activities and the renewal of infrastructure in the city are mixed with those reflecting on the symbolic level of changes in the public space. These changes were connected with the renewal of Czechoslovakia and associated ideological paradigms.

The work closes with a bibliography, register of objects and short biographies of its authors. Despite the fact that the book belongs to the realm of popular science literature, the lack of a conclusion could be considered a weakness. Nevertheless, I evaluate this work positively. The authors manage to create a compact whole, enabling the readers to get know the city of Bratislava from a new perspective.

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