
Salner, Peter: Premeny židovskej Bratislavy /Changes in Jewish Bratislava/

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The new book by the Bratislava ethnologist and chairman of Bratislava's Jewish Religious Community Peter Salner, the author of several very successful books about the capital of Slovakia, was published in a Bratislava-Pressburg edition in a beautiful graphic layout of the well-known Bratislava publishing house. Not only the title, but also the cover, on which there is a photograph of the former neological synagogue which was razed in 1969 for the construction of a new bridge across the Danube, speaks of the author's purpose of connecting his two large research topics: postwar Bratislava and the world of the Jewish minority, both on the official level (community, associations), and on the individual level (family and individuals) into one whole. Salner decided to cover the relatively long period of 1945 to 1968 and, in the conclusion of the book, even extended into the years of normalization, the analysis of which he wants to continue in his next volume.

Research of the situation of the Jews in the Czech lands in the years 1945 to 1968, unfortunately not reflected in the book (with the exception of an article by the distinguished Czech journalist Peter Brod [1999] summarizing the results of existing research), already showed that such a time segment in itself contains several periods. In the years of the renewal of the community (1945-1947) there was again formed, in the environment of the Czech lands, a minority institutional platform, renewed religious life, institutionalized memory of the Shoah, emphasized Jewish resistance (the myth of the Jews as sheep going to the slaughter was strictly denied). The Jews - and with respect to postwar anti-Semitism, the difficulties with restitutions, the problems of acquiring documents about so-called national reliability - considered their strategies of the future, including emigration to Israel or to Western Europe or America. New waves of emigration were provoked by the February Revolution in 1948 and the tragic year of 1968. Those who did not leave chose a strategy of inconspicuousness, assimilation, or remained members of the Jewish religious community, whose tactic became the reconciling of Jewish tradition and radically socialist ideology. The year 1950 brought a breakthrough when there was a marked deterioration of the relation of Czechoslovakia, a Soviet satellite, to Israel. However after February 1948 the Zionist movement had already come to an end. In the Stalinist period of the communist regime (1948-1955) the position of the Jewish minority basically deteriorated. The introduction to Salner's book, written by Jaro Franěk, also mainly revolves around that problem, especially then around the Slánský trial, generally communist anti-Semitism and the stereotype of the Jew-communist, alive up to the present, and also the inability of today's Slovak society to come to terms with postwar anti-Semitism. Sovietization of the Czechoslovak society afflicted the world of Czech Jews through the reduction of their communities, an insufficiency of spiritual leaders and control over reduced religious and social life by the communist party. The community wrestled with the problem of obtaining kosher groceries. On the other hand a certain renaissance of Jewish culture continued. On the official level maneuvering between Judaism and communist ideology, including transformation of Jewish war victims into an image of socialist heroes, continued. Conservative de-Stalinization in the years 1956 to 1960, accompanied by the destruction of many Jewish monuments, was accompanied by the activation of Jews from the Czech lands who were abroad. And actually that, or a relaxation of the social atmosphere on the international level, quite possibly foreshadowed the 60s, mainly the period 1963 to 1966/7, when the Jewish phenomenon returned to the consciousness of Czech society.

Promising rudiments of a certain democracy, contacts between Czech and Viennese Jewish representatives, and activation of Jewish youth ended with the suspension of diplomatic relations with Israel (1967), which in Jewish thought filled the function of refuge of brothers and sisters and the cradle of Judaism, and with the defeat of the so-called Prague Spring (1968). Celebration of a millennium of Czech Jews (1966) was postponed twice and deprived of its international context. Thanks to Salner, it is possible today to compare Czech development with Slovak development; however, the author - probably with reference to the character of his material - in some cases did not consistently explain the causes of historic changes of Jewish Bratislava.

Salner, who emphasized the fact that he dealt with his "personal" topic (by way of the book he held a dialogue with his deceased parents) in his readable text used the oral-historic interview with witnesses, e-mail (!) correspondence with postwar Jewish emigrants, fragments of archival material of the Jewish religious community in Bratislava, professional (mainly Slovak, but also German, and also with great reserve Czech, but not Polish, American, etc.) literature, published memoirs, and his own memory, but not sources of a major nature. He methodically enriched our current knowledge of the division of Jews into invisible (they did not express themselves in public, but only within the framework of the community) and visible (they appeared in public, strove for assimilation and for complete equality with non-Jews). Important, although not original, it also turned out that he attempted his analysis of the changes of the Jewish community (3,500 Bratislava Jews survived the Shoah) to combine with the results of the Holocaust and the character of the totalitarian regime.

The structure of the book is interesting. In the first chapter Salner deals with the character of Bratislava and subjectively experienced problems of the Jews after 1945 (the change in relationship to their own ideological orientation, hatred of the majority of German and Hungarian Jews, ethnic cleansing of Bratislava, problems of ethnically mixed marriages, chronically known difficulties with hunting for apartments [but not with restitution], coping with the fate of their relatives) and partly also reaction to expressions of postwar anti-Semitism (applications for name changes, emigration, strengthening of visions of assimilation). In Slovakia there was also a revival of the community thanks to the activation of Jewish youth at the end of the 1950s and 1960s. The second chapter, sort of the core of the book, then describes the activities of the rapid activation of the neological and orthodox Bratislava Jewish religious community, that is, centers of invisible Jews. Despite material lacks, in the years 1948-1952, it was possible to see a development tendency similar to the one in the Czech lands (loyalty to the regime in exchange for the possibility of activities of Jewish institutions, maneuvering between Judaism and communist ideology, a stubborn attempt to maintain one's own religious and social life). A Bratislava feature, however, became discord between orthodox and neological Jews (an independent sub-chapter is dedicated to the conflicts in the community). On the contrary, the fate of religious buildings was similar; Salner also points out in the process the threat to the orthodox cemetery in the 1960s. The third chapter analyzes - again mainly with personal memories - the profile of members of emigration waves to Israel, where mostly secularized Jews went. Also in Slovakia, just as in the Czech lands, the experience of Zionist camps and associations mainly for Jewish youth compensated for real life. Similar also were motives for emigration (anti-Semitism, orphanhood), or non-emigration (worry about relatives, professional career) to Israel. Part of this chapter, however, is the development of official relations to the Jewish state and the anti-Zionist character of the political trials in the 50s. The Zionist movement disintegrated and the emigration of almost 4,000 people after 1968 (whose experiences of August 1968 are brought closer by means of a few impressive documents of personal character) was no longer directed exclusively to Israel.

Peter Salner's new charming and readable book brings another extraordinarily important view of the Bratislava Jewish community after the Second World War. He enriches our current knowledge not only with new original material, but also methodically. He presents a view built mainly on the basis of minority sources of personal and institutional character. In it is the power of work, but also its certain weakness. It is - despite the indisputable obsolescence of the current Salner picture of postwar Jewish Bratislava - an augmented by and not always quite consistent connection of Bratislava events to the state and international socio-political situation.

As for the unique period photographs, sensitively accompanying the text, I would welcome reference to the source of the document or a more complete description although the book is, of course, destined for the wider public.

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