



THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

NEW SERIES OF ACTA HISTORICA  
ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

*Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary:  
New Histories*

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Institute of History,  
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# The Hungarian Historical Review

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## *Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary: New Histories*

Alexandra Szabó and András Szécsényi  
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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Slovutný pán prezident. Listy Jozefovi Tisovi [Your Honor, Mr. President: Letters to Jozef Tiso]. By Madeline Vadkerty. Žilina: Absynt, 2020. 228 pp.

Since the struggles and debates over the memory of World War II and the Holocaust have not come to an end in most of the countries concerned, including Slovakia, the German position concerning its allegedly exclusive responsibility for the Holocaust has become an obstacle not only to independent scholars, but also to the society which needs to confront its own troubled history and its own responsibility. While the Holocaust was exclusively a German plan, as Jan Grabowski correctly claims, the Germans found many willing allies and enablers. Thus, the Slovaks too should take responsibility for the acts of the Slovak authorities, the Hlinka Guards, and collaborators who helped facilitate the deportation of tens of thousands of Slovak Jews to their deaths. The Holocaust in Slovakia happened smoothly in large part because the local representatives and populations participated. And among those who represented the whole regime responsible for the destruction of the Slovak Jewry was Jozef Tiso.

There are not many Slovak personalities who are more controversial than Jozef Tiso, the Catholic priest and president of the wartime Slovak Republic. While every serious academic research has proven his role and participation in the Holocaust in Slovakia, nationalistic sentiment tends either to rehabilitate him and point out his role in saving Slovaks (including some Jews) or bluntly admire him for his alliance with Nazi Germany and his participation in the persecution and massacre of Jews, Roma, and political opponents. American author Madeline Vadkerty decided not to write a major biography of Tiso or an academic analysis of existing debates on the role of Tiso in the Holocaust. In her book *Your Honor, Mr. President: Letters to Jozef Tiso*, she used archival sources to demask the Catholic compassion of this man, who was a politician and a clergyman, and shed light on the helplessness of the persecuted Slovak Jewry. In her book, Tiso stands in the background, yet his persona is omnipresent. The central figures of her book are people whose lives had been brutally affected by the anti-Semitic policies of the Slovak Republic, i.e. the Jews of Slovakia. The ongoing adoption of anti-Jewish measures gradually had a devastating effect on the lives of about 89,000 people. And when the economic destruction of Slovak Jewry was completed, the Slovak authorities led by President Tiso decided to “solve” the “Jewish question” by stripping the Slovak Jews of their citizenship and deporting them in collaboration with Nazi Germany to the “East.”

Vadkerty examines the prelude to the deportation, and she sheds light on the time of permanent persecution, which included the loss of jobs and thus livelihoods, the loss of property, and relationships broken up due to the racial laws regulating sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews. Vadkerty's book brings the reader to the moment when thousands of people decided to write to the president of the republic of which they were citizens with the hope that they could trust in the compassion and moral commitment of the head of the state, who was also a Catholic priest. Thousands wrote to Tiso hoping that their letters would prompt him to recognize their fundamental human rights, for instance by helping them keep their jobs, shops, or property or by granting them the "famous" presidential exception, awarded to the "economically important" Jews. These exceptions protected approximately 1,000 people (the exceptions also included family members, and thus they involved an estimated 5,000 people) from deportation in 1942.

Through these letters, which can be read as testimonies to the destruction of the Slovak Jewry, readers can learn about the Holocaust through the fates of individuals. These 13 real stories, which Vadkerty had chosen, are presented in the form of short novels, based on actual historical events. Vadkerty recreates (fictionalizes) possible monologues, dialogues, and backstories while she writes about little-known chapters of the Holocaust in Slovakia. Using the format of a short novel, she introduces readers to real Jewish and non-Jewish women and men of all ages from numerous Slovak villages and towns as they reacted to the regime's anti-Jewish measures. Each of 13 stories is based on deportation records, archival documents, and interviews with family members, and they are all accompanied by pictures of the original letters. Vadkerty switches back and forth from fictional dialogues and recreated stories inspired by historical sources and historical narrative based on references to historical sources, so she keeps reminding the reader of historical facts and documents which are the base of these stories. The book shows how the anti-Jewish policy of the wartime Slovak republic destroyed the lives of ordinary people simply because these people were regarded as Jews. Vadkerty describes how these people not only asked for mercy, but also proclaimed their own integrity, diligence, love of country, and other civic virtues in their letters. However, the President's Office did not respond to many of the letters. In some cases, the President's Office simply declined the requests or called on other local authorities to investigate the situation. Often, replies arrived after the people who had written the letters had been deported.

Thanks to archival research and her focus on story-telling, in collaboration with Ján Púček, Vadkerty manages to shed light on the unhealed wounds of recent Slovak history. While the introduction of the book by Ivan Kamenec, one of the most important Holocaust scholars from Slovakia, gives an academic frame to a book which is intended for a general audience, it points out this problem in Slovak historiography. In Slovakia, the gap between best-selling memoirs of Slovak Jews who survived the Holocaust and the highly exclusive academic works on the Holocaust, which are almost inaccessible in their vocabulary and approach to a reader who is not a specialist in the field of history, calls attention to the need for more approachable historical narratives on the Holocaust in Slovakia. Yet more and more scholars in Slovakia, such as Hana Kubátová, Monika Vrzgulová, Marína Zavacká, Ján Hlavíka, Anton Hruboň, and Jakub Drábik, have begun to recognize the potential roles for scholars of this area and the need not only for extensive research but also for comprehensive and accessible publications which meet high scholarly standards while also appealing to wider audiences.

Vadkerty's book follows a trend of semi-fictional writing in the international Holocaust literature. Yet, unlike many other similar books based on real stories, such as Heather Morris's best-selling novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, Vadkerty does not blur the authenticity of the history. Vadkerty's book uses primary historical sources, including photographs and testimonies, and thus it can be recommended not only to readers looking for interesting literature about tragic stories of Jewish fates in Slovakia during the Holocaust, but also for scholars who search for new formats to share their research findings. Nevertheless, *Your Honor, Mr. President: Letters to Jozef Tiso* does not fulfil the function of a standard work of historical scholarship. Hopefully, Vadkerty will add to her book an additional publication which will allow her to combine archival research with a more academic approach. Her research would thus be an important addition to Holocaust historiography, and her style of writing could hopefully be an inspiration for professional scholars and an example of how to write more accessible academic texts, which are still rare in the historiography of the Holocaust in Slovakia.

Denisa Nešťáková

Comenius University, Bratislava / Herder Institute, Marburg

THE

# Hungarian Historical Review

## Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European History in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

## The Hungarian Historical Reviews

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