

## **The Mediating Activity of János Esterházy between the Governments of Slovakia and Hungary in 1939–1942 with Specific Regard to the Jewish Question**

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The objective of this study is to outline the mediating role of János Esterházy in the bilateral relationship of the two countries. The limited length only allows a summary with a few examples. In the second half of the paper, the activity of Esterházy in the Jewish question will be tackled.

In 1939, Slovakia had three neighbours: Germany, Hungary and, until September, Poland. The territory of Slovakia was 38,000 square kilometres with a population of 2.6 million. Slovaks formed 85% while the rest was made up of Hungarian, German, Rusin (Ruthenian) and other minorities.<sup>1</sup> The country was to serve the role of a model state, an example for Central and Southern Europe, in the plans of Nazi Germany. Model state status meant submission to German demands and the possibility of political sovereignty in return. The head of state was Jozef Tiso. At first, Slovak propaganda tried to create the illusion for their citizens that their country was a neutral state, like Switzerland, between Germany, Hungary and Poland. In reality Slovakia lost her independence almost immediately after her separation from Czechoslovakia. On 23 March 1939, she signed a defence treaty (“Schutzvertrag”) with Germany, in which the German Reich guaranteed her independence for 25 years

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<sup>1</sup> The composition of the society was as follows: 2,260,894 Slovaks (85.11%), 128,347 Germans (4.84%), 77,488 Czechs (2.92%), 69,106 Ruthenians (2.6%), 57,897 Hungarians (2.18%), 28,763 Jews (1.08%), 26,265 Roma (0.99%), 3,848 Poles (0.14%) and 0.14% others.

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and Slovakia undertook close cooperation with the German government, and the organisation of her military force in cooperation with the German defence forces. Slovakia also gave her consent to the creation of the “Schutzzone”,<sup>2</sup> which comprised 5% of her territory. The treaty gave the possibility for Germany to gradually gain control over the national economy of the country, and to get involved in Slovak domestic policy. This was the situation when János Esterházy began his political career and became an important figure in the Slovak-Hungarian relations.

In 1939, and later during WWII, minority affairs were handled as strictly domestic issues both in Slovakia and Hungary, and any initiatives or criticism in their interest from outside were regarded as violation of the sovereignty of the state while both states endeavoured to support their own ethnic minorities abroad as efficiently as they could. Slovak-Hungarian relations were based on mutual distrust and they were full of tensions due to the minorities. The tensions were fuelled by the fact that the situation of Slovaks in the territories ceded to Hungary deteriorated and the same applied to Hungarians living in Slovakia. The Slovaks mainly criticised the “Hungarization” in education and the weakening of the Slovak national movement.<sup>3</sup> Hungarians in Slovakia complained about the reduction of their minority rights. The minority question facilitated the worsening of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1939–1942. The Hungarian government was even considering breaking diplomatic connections with Slovakia, but it was prevented by Germany.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the relationship between Slovakia and Hungary was far from the usual friendly attitude that could be expected from allies. Both parties tried to raise distrust in the Germans towards the other.

While Slovakia regarded the regain of the territories lost by the First Vienna Award as her primary objective in foreign policy, Hungary wanted to retain them at

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<sup>2</sup> The territory of the Schutzzone formed a 30–40-km wide region along the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia from the Polish to the former Austrian border. Only German barracks could be present here.

<sup>3</sup> D. ČIERNÁ-LANTAYOVÁ, *Podoby česko-slovensko-maďarského vzťahu, 1938–1949*, Bratislava 1992, pp. 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> On this question see I. JANEK, *Diplomáciai csatározások a magyar-szlovák kapcsolatokban 1940–41 között*, in: *Kutatási Füzetek* 12, Pécs 2005, pp. 165–179.

any rate. Minority affairs were of secondary importance. Oddly, even though Slovakia and Hungary were members of the same alliance, their interests clashed both in political and economic fields. Neither Slovakia nor Hungary could disregard German wishes that each country in the Axis bloc must avoid conflicts among each other; however, they did not keep it in their bilateral connections. Slovakia's becoming a sovereign, almost homogeneous nation state meant that an old dream came true, and it was the celebration of Slovak national consciousness. The Vienna Award shocked Slovak intellectuals with similar intensity as the Trianon treaty had done the Hungarians. Hundreds of thousands of Slovaks got now to Hungarian territory, and the fear of their assimilation immediately raised revisionist ideas in Bratislava. The Vienna Award caused disappointment and disillusion in Slovak society. The Slovak government began to work on the realization of reciprocity.<sup>5</sup> They monitored Hungarian diplomatic manoeuvres and tried to gather evidence against Hungary to gain the favour of Germany. Esterházy had to play a mediating role between the two governments in this uneasy atmosphere.

János Esterházy considered the forging together of the Hungarian minority his main task. He imagined their life as a great family. As the president of Magyar Párt (Hungarian Party) he regularly visited Hungarian towns and villages and tried to remedy the complaints of the people. He also played an instrumental role in the development of bilateral connections and diplomatic talks in 1939–1944. His opinion was asked in every important question both by Slovak and Hungarian politicians, and he also mediated between the two countries. He maintained good relationship with leading circles in both states, and he regularly met with foreign diplomats accredited to Bratislava. He visited the Hungarian and German embassies weekly, reported about the situation of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and asked for their assistance. He also travelled to Budapest on a regular basis, where he spoke up for both the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and the Slovakian minority in Hungary. Although Esterházy's role in the Slovak-Hungarian relations was essential those days

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<sup>5</sup> M. VIETOR, *Dejiny okupácie južného Slovenska 1938–1945*, Bratislava 1968, pp. 53–55; M. HETÉNYI, *Zjednotená Maďarská strana na Slovensku 1939–1945*, Nitra 2011, p. 231.

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he was a merely tolerated member of the Slovak legislation.<sup>6</sup> He spoke, on behalf of the Hungarian Party in parliament, several times on issues that could not appear in the press and were not mentioned by the Slovakian government. He listed the grievances of the Hungarian minority, as he pointed out in one of his speeches, because they lack any other forum, and because the censorship deleted his words in the press. It was not infrequent in those years that Hungarian-language papers in Slovakia were printed with a half-empty front page because the censorship crossed out the rest in the last moment.

The leader of the Hungarian Party and an MP, Esterházy was a prominent figure in Slovakian public life. He never hesitated to openly express his views. He was said to be the voice of remorse of Slovakia because he remarked everything that the government wanted to cover.

Esterházy spoke in defence of the Hungarian minority several times. In his speech in parliament on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1939, he outlined the shortcomings of the constitution. He pointed out the lack of constitutional guarantees for legal equality: “*the Slovak nation [...] must not regard us Hungarians inferior in any respect, and must not violate our equal status. [...] Who establishes a state must hold it important that the state will not be an artificial construction but will last for centuries.*”<sup>7</sup> Esterházy revealed abuses of the Slovak authorities in his speeches. He emphasised the interdependence of the two nations and tried to decrease the tensions between them. His mediating intention is noticeable in the following case. From 10<sup>th</sup> April 1939, an anti-Hungarian propaganda campaign began in Slovakia, which manifested itself in politicians’ speeches and media programmes. An important element was the demand to regain the territories

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<sup>6</sup> The Slovak administration thought that if a Hungarian representative is given a seat in the Slovak parliament, then a Slovak representative will be present in the Hungarian parliament one day. The Hungarian administration never gave a seat to the Slovak minority all through the war. Therefore, Esterházy worked with gradually decreasing legal possibilities and decreasing influence in Slovakia in 1939–1944. He became merely a tolerated person in the Slovakian legislation, and they tried to waive his immunity referring to various violations of law several times. See: I. MOLNÁR, “*Sem gyűlölettel, sem erőszakkal...*” *Esterházy János élete és mártírhalála*, Komárom 2008, pp. 197–198.

<sup>7</sup> I. MOLNÁR (ed.), *Esterházy János: A kisebbségi kérdés. Válogatott írások, beszédek, interjúk*, Budapest 2000, pp. 146–147.

lost in the First Vienna Award.<sup>8</sup> The idea of St Stephen's state was challenged with the notion of Great Slovakia and Great Moravia.<sup>9</sup> At first the radio and the press attacked the Hungarian minority, later political leaders joined with their speeches. *"The press called the Hungarians murderers, the Hungarian gendarme blood-thirsty beasts,"*<sup>10</sup> which shocked Slovakian public shortly after the military clashes (Little War).<sup>11</sup> The Slovak government reproached the Hungarian authorities for insulting several Slovak minority activists and explaining it with the notion of reciprocity. These were responses to the arrest of leading Hungarian intellectuals in Slovakia. Reciprocity had become the basis of bilateral connections by that time. Esterházy emphasised Christian and humanistic values, and he condemned both reciprocity and the abuses of the authorities. *"If here in Slovakia, an ultra-chauvinist Slovak considers to serve the interest of his country the best by tearing the party badger off a Hungarian in Nitra, Bratislava, Prešov or Baňska Bystrica, or by offending his nationality, then this ultra-chauvinist Slovak harms his country in the same way as the ultra-chauvinist Hungarian who verbally or physically endeavours to obstruct the national development of Slovaks in Hungary."*<sup>12</sup> On 12<sup>th</sup> May 1939, Esterházy called his fellow party members in his speech in a party assembly in Bratislava to abstain from provocation, and he also criticised the Hungarian government's

<sup>8</sup> The Slovak Republic rejected the First Vienna Award and the borders drawn according to it from the beginning. I. MOLNÁR, *Esterházy János*, Dunajská Streda 1997, p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> In their view Great Slovakia would include the territory lost with the First Vienna Award as well as the territory with Slovak population in Moravia. They wanted to deport Jews, Hungarians, Czechs and the Roma from these places and bring home the Slovaks from the USA, and thereby create a strong homogeneous ethnic majority which could withstand the Czech and Hungarian ambitions. The response to the Hungarian propaganda, which emphasised the thousand-year history and cultural superiority, was also born: the Slovak version claimed that advanced culture flourished in Pribina's realm when the Hungarians softened meat under their saddles on the steps of Asia. *"Why are they always bragging with Saint Stephen; Cyril and Methodius were much greater"*, the Slovak propaganda said. Some Slovak politicians demanded Vác, Eszergom and Miskolc.

<sup>10</sup> Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (hereinafter MNL), Külügyminisztérium (hereinafter KÜM), K-63, 456. csomó. 51/pol. 1939. sz.

<sup>11</sup> In connection with the "Little War" see: I. JANEK, *Az elfelejtett háború*, in: *Történelmi Szemle*, 43, 3–4, 2001, pp. 299–313.

<sup>12</sup> *Esti Újság*, May 14, 1939, pp. 1–2.

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limitation of cultural and association activity of Slovaks in Hungary.<sup>13</sup> He pointed out the interdependence of the two nations several times. At one such occasion he said: *“In my view, the little nations in the Danube basin must work in partnership, especially in the present warlike atmosphere, in order to keep their sovereignty and ensure peace in the Danube basin, or, if you like the Carpathian Basin. [...] I have never concealed my opinion in the nationality question: every nation or nationality has the right to fulfil a complete national life even if it has no separate sovereign state. As a conclusion, I have the principle that Slovaks in Hungary must get everything they are entitled to as a nationality.”*<sup>14</sup> He went on to explain that he could not give up the Hungarian minority rights which they had obtained in the Czechoslovak Republic through tough struggle, and which they retained in the separate Slovak state.

Esterházy's main objective was to get ties between Slovakia and Hungary closer, and this was a focal point in his negotiations in Budapest and Bratislava. The following case is an example for this. Esterházy visited President Jozef Tiso in early July 1939, and he explained the objection of the Hungarian government to the fact that the Slovak government had done nothing to extend the rights of the Hungarian minority. Esterházy was willing to continue talks in order to improve the bilateral connections. He thought that the Hungarian government would be open to dialogue if Tiso had informed them about his intentions and plans through him. Esterházy also made it clear that Hungary had no territorial demands towards Slovakia.<sup>15</sup> Tiso welcomed this declaration and said that he personally always wanted to see the development of friendly relationship between the two countries. Had he known what border modifications were to happen, he would have come to an agreement about the territories with the Hungarian government in Komárom.<sup>16</sup> He thought it likely that in that case they could have signed economic, cultural and political contracts with Hungary in early 1939. *“That was the mistake I made,”* Tiso said,<sup>17</sup> but he

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<sup>13</sup> Slovenský Národný Archív (hereinafter SNA), Ministerstvo vnútra, Box 15, 5499/1939.

<sup>14</sup> SNA, Snem Slovenskej republiky, Príloha k tesnopiseckej zpráve o 21. zasadnutí Snemu Slovenskej republiky v Bratislave 21. decembra 1939, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> MNL, K-64. KŮM, 89. csomó. 1940–65 tétel. Document without number, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1939.

<sup>16</sup> On the Komárom talks see: G. SALLAI, *Az első bécsi döntés*, Budapest 2002, pp. 82–103.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

reproached the Hungarian government for not handling the Slovaks in the way as it was promised in the Kosice speech of Regent Nicholas Horthy.<sup>18</sup> The Slovak public opinion became anti-Hungarian due to the atrocities between November 1938 and July 1939, and that is why he, Tiso, did not initiate the improvement of relations, as he would have prepared the way to his resignation. He suggested to Esterházy that the two governments should start economic negotiations, which could give the opportunity for secret talks and for cultural and political agreements in the back of the Germans. He would guarantee that Slovakia would have no exaggerated demands and that they would ask in the interest of the Slovak minority as much as it would be acceptable for Hungary. In the end, Esterházy promised Tiso that he would report everything to the Hungarian foreign minister.<sup>19</sup> Although no political agreement was made between Slovakia and Hungary in 1939 regarding the minorities, smaller export-import decisions were realised, that is, Esterházy's mediation was not totally futile, but he could not achieve a breakthrough.

The following case reveals the fact that Esterházy was criticised from the Slovak side for his talks. Slovakian MP Konstantin Čulen criticised Esterházy by saying that he travelled to Budapest too frequently, and also the policy of Hungary towards Slovakia. As a response Esterházy gave a speech in the Slovak parliament on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1940. He admitted that he visited Budapest on a regular basis and he met the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister as well. He commented on it with these words: *“I go when I feel that a problem needs solving. I also add, because I am not boastful, that we did not talk with the mentioned gentlemen on questions of great politics, and we did not talk about how the map of Europe will change after the war, but I do work in the interest of the non-registered Slovak railwaymen and postmen and the like, and if there should be somebody who would question the credibility of my word, I will show written evidence about how many Slovak government official had regained his existence through my intervention.”*<sup>20</sup> Esterházy explained that he was

<sup>18</sup> Miklós Horthy and his escort marched in Kosice on 11 November. He gave a speech in Slovakian with Croatian accent, in which he welcomed the Slovaks in their new home. The Hungarian radio broadcast his speech. He promised legal equality for Slovaks and Hungarians.

<sup>19</sup> MNL, K-64. KÜM, 89. csomó. 1940–65 tétel. Document without number, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1939.

<sup>20</sup> MNL, K-63. KÜM, 459. cs. (Esterházy's speech in the Slovak parliament), (7<sup>th</sup> May 1940).

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dedicated to the idea of friendship with the Slovaks and he also declared it from the beginning of his career.<sup>21</sup> “[...] *I would like to believe that these are only temporary symptoms, and the policy of understanding will prevail here as well, which lies on the principle of ‘live and let live’.*”<sup>22</sup>

On 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1941, Esterházy spoke up for the Hungarian minority in the Slovakian parliament in the debate on the establishment of the propaganda office. He mentioned that it had been a long time since he last spoke and continued: *“I am of the opinion that in such troublesome times, the minority ought not to turn to the public with all its grievances. We have informed the appropriate government offices about their wishes and complaints, and I am convinced that they will be remedied with good will. Therefore, I do not want to deal with the memoranda submitted to the government too early.”* He went on to express his astonishment in connection with the propaganda issues which were held so important by the government: *“[...] why does the official have to seal the radio sets of Hungarian people and adjust them in a way that they are unable to take Budapest?”* Esterházy, while his speech was accompanied with remarks shouted in, called such arrangements narrow-minded, and he raised doubts about the equal rights of the minorities in Slovakia. *“[...] we Hungarians complete our duties as citizens and we expect the appreciation of this in return; because we will not let every petty official handle us as he pleases.”* In the rest of his speech, he criticised the voices of the Slovak propaganda against the Hungarian minority and against Hungary, which intensified tensions rather than decrease them: *“because we must live next to each other on this continent no matter what we do.”*<sup>23</sup> He received the response of the presidency of the Slovak government to his letter to Jozef Tiso and to his speech in parliament on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1941. Some of his complaints were admitted and the rest was rejected with reference to Act 95 of the constitution, the law of reciprocity. Both the memorandum and the response to it were

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<sup>21</sup> *Új Hírek*, May 9, 1940, pp. 1–2.

<sup>22</sup> SNA, Snem Slovenskej republiky, Tesnopisecká zpráva o 34. zasadnutí Slovenského snemu, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1940, pp. 22–26.

<sup>23</sup> SNA, Snem Slovenskej republiky Tesnopisecká zpráva o 67. zasadnutí Slovenského snemu, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1941, pp. 19–20.

then forwarded to the embassy of Germany.<sup>24</sup> Esterházy also presented his complaints to the Hungarian government, which forwarded them to the German embassy, too. The German foreign ministry admitted that Esterházy was right and promised their mediation. On 7<sup>th</sup> August 1941, Matuš Černák, the Ambassador of Slovakia in Berlin, informed the foreign ministry in Bratislava that the German government wished to stop the anti-Hungarian tone in the Slovak press, because the debate could imply that the anti-Bolshevist front, led by Germany, was not united. This had a temporary effect. The Slovaks started collecting articles from the Hungarian press and showed them as evidence in Berlin that the Hungarians began the affair. This case can illustrate what difficulties Esterházy had to face in his mediating activity, and also that the last word in Slovak-Hungarian problems was said in Germany.

Esterházy never gave up the idea of reconciliation between the two nations, which is indicated in the following case. The president of Slovak National Unity Party in Hungary, Emanuel Böhm met with Slovakian Minister of the Interior Alexander Mach in Bratislava in April 1942. The president informed the minister about the improvement in the situation of the Slovak minority in Hungary, and asked him to show understanding towards the Hungarians in Slovakia because it will positively affect the situation of Slovaks in Hungary.<sup>25</sup> Esterházy had talked with Böhm several times before. Mach listened to Böhm and received Esterházy in April 1942, when they discussed all topical questions regarding the Hungarians. As a result, the pressure on the Hungarians in Slovakia decreased for a while, and the same applies to the Slovak minority in Hungary. The Slovakian press adopted a milder tone and they wrote about the improvement of the Slovak minority in Hungary. Mach and Esterházy met several times. An important stage of this development was that Hungarian Prime Minister Miklós Kállay allowed *Slovenská Jednota* to become a daily from 24<sup>th</sup> May 1942, in which Esterházy played an instrumental role.<sup>26</sup> It was clear for Esterházy that the days of nationalist minority policy were over. He spoke in the interest of the Slovaks in

<sup>24</sup> SNA, Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí, Box 130, Number 555/41.

<sup>25</sup> MNL, KŮM, K-63, Box 462, Number 68/1942 (24<sup>th</sup> April 1942).

<sup>26</sup> Our source for the circumstances of the publication and the content of *Slovenská jednota* is: J. SPIŠIAK, *Spomienky z Budapešti 1939–1944*, Bratislava 2010, pp. 269–272.

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Hungary, which had a positive effect on the situation of Hungarians in Slovakia. He and his party worked as a link between Slovakia and Hungary, and it facilitated the improvement of the conditions of the minorities.

On 24<sup>th</sup> July, János Esterházy visited Minister of the Interior Alexander Mach and asked him to modify some protocols that were against the interest of the Hungarian minority. Mach responded that he could not fulfil the request as Premier Vojtech Tuka had asked him not to make any change in connection with the Hungarians without consulting him before. He also mentioned to Esterházy that the Hungarian authorities had prevented the political organisation of the Slovaks around Košice and they did not even allow cultural performances. Tuka himself ordered the Slovakian ambassador in Budapest, Ján Spišiak, to watch such cases and to protest at the Hungarian authorities immediately, and also report the case and the Hungarian response to Bratislava, if he hears about any disfavourable arrangements. Tuka insisted on the principle of reciprocity in the cases of the Slovak minority in Hungary.<sup>27</sup>

Esterházy, after studying the cases reproached by the Slovaks, confirmed the abruptness of the Hungarian authorities to the Slovak minority around Kosice. He disagreed with this behaviour, which is harmful mostly to the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and therefore he urged the quick solution of the problems.<sup>28</sup> He wrote to the Hungarian foreign minister the following day, in which he asked him to send an investigating committee to Košice. He knew that there were some people in the Hungarian authorities who were unfamiliar with the local mentality and disliked the Slovaks. He thought that although the Slovak complaints might exaggerate, there was some truth in them, so a committee should be sent there. He asked that state secretary Tibor Pataky should be the leader of the committee.<sup>29</sup> In his report to the Foreign Ministry of 26<sup>th</sup> August 1942 that Ambassador Spišiak explained the reduction of articles that criticised the policy of Slovakia with the activity of Esterházy. He was also pleased to see that the Hungarian revisionist propaganda became less intense.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> MNL, K-28, Miniszterelnökség (hereinafter M. E.), Box 6, 128/pol. 1942 (24<sup>th</sup> July 1942).

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> MNL, K-28, M. E. 200. cs. 379. tétel, Number E-23638 (25<sup>th</sup> July 1942).

<sup>30</sup> SNA, MZV, Box 124, Number 9671/1942.

Meanwhile Esterházy met with Slovak ministerial advisor Štefan Semián, who informed him confidentially that the strict attitude of the Slovak authorities to the Hungarian minority was the consequence of the advice of the Slovak ambassador in Budapest, Ján Spišiak. With this behaviour, the ambassador wanted to get the Hungarian authorities to show friendlier attitude to the Slovak minority.

Esterházy was working on the improvement of the situation of minorities during nearly the whole war period. Although his personal talks brought visible improvement occasionally, he could not achieve significant development in the relations of the two countries. He was of the opinion that the Slovaks in Hungary must receive their minority rights, and it was not his fault that the Hungarian government did not modify its policy regarding the minorities. The interdependence of the two nations makes it a historical necessity to forgive each other's former crimes, but the principle of reciprocity prevented the development of closer friendship between the two nations.

### **The Problem of János Esterházy and the Jewish Question**

It is very difficult to present this problem clearly as it has been thoroughly infiltrated with political ideologies. There is some pressure on both Slovak and Hungarian historians to take a stand on this issue. Hungarian authors write about him with appreciation as the critic of totalitarian regimes, an oppositionist, who has become a symbol, a hero and a martyr. As all symbols, he is not easy to define and can be subject to different interpretations. From the Hungarian point of view, he has become the victim of the Beneš decrees, which is a painful issue for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia up to the present day. Note that Esterházy could have escaped in 1945, but he remained as he did not feel himself guilty. The myth of a hero is also represented in Esterházy's courage to declare his opinion in the question of the deportation of Jews and being the single one to vote against it in the Slovakian parliament. Still, the Hungarians have failed, so far, to get the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem to give him a title for the rescue of the Jews. In Slovakia, he has not been rehabilitated, nor has the Hungarian minority been compensated for bearing the collective guilt. Esterházy was sentenced to death as a war criminal after WWII. This was, as it

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were, the condemnation of him and the whole Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The Czechoslovak nation state needed an individual in whom the crime could be manifested and who could be punished as the main figure of the guilty nation. For all this, Esterházy has become an example in the eyes of the Hungarians in Slovakia.

For the Slovaks, on the other hand, Esterházy has become the embodiment of Hungarian irredentism. He was regarded as a war criminal, a collaborator, a fascist politician who cannot be rehabilitated. If he was quitted, the Slovakian public opinion and Slovak historians would have to admit that what happened to the Hungarian minority after WWII was illegal and unfair. The role of Esterházy is interpreted differently in Slovakia and Hungary.

The problem of Esterházy and the Jewish question has not yet been studied at depth. In Hungary, Imre Molnár and others have dealt with this issue, while on the Slovak side Ladislav Deák, Ivan Kamenec and Eduard Nižňanský have studied the Jewish question; Deák and Kamenec also researched Esterházy's activity. A monograph on the life of Esterházy and his role in the Jewish question should be written by Slovak historians. Russian, Czech, Israeli and German archives can also provide new unknown material.

## **The Solution of the Jewish Question in Slovakia**

The first Jewish laws were passed in Slovakia as early as the second half of 1939. Jews were obliged to wear the yellow star, then they were deported to labour camps.<sup>31</sup> Nearly 10,000 Jewish shops and companies were eliminated or sold to Slovaks.<sup>32</sup> In 1939, besides those of Israelite religion, people who converted to Catholicism after 1918 and those who had at least one Jewish grandparent or a Jewish spouse were counted as Jews. The allowed number of Jews was maximized in several professions. As a result, approximately 6,000 Jews lost their jobs. In the Germans' opinion, Slovakia began the elimination of Jews quickly and efficiently. After a while, however, the German leaders thought that the initial impetus weakened as the deportations

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<sup>31</sup> D. KOVÁČ, *Bratislava 1939–1945*, Bratislava 2006, p. 172.

<sup>32</sup> On the Aryanization in Slovakia see: I. GRAZIANO – I. EÖRDÖGH, *Jozef Tiso és a szlovákiai holokauszt*, Budapest 2006, pp. 51–93.

did not start immediately and many Jews remained in their homes.<sup>33</sup> The German ambassador in Bratislava, Hans Bernard shared this view. In his memorandum of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1940 he remarked that the “solution” of the Jewish question had not been completed and that Jews were still considered valuable and essential citizens in Slovakia. He asked Berlin to send advisors to investigate this problem.<sup>34</sup> Slovak leaders negotiated with the Germans on the Slovakian Jews several times but they did not as yet come to any decision. Interestingly, the Slovaks gave their consent to the deportation of Jewish Slovak citizens in Germany as early as 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1941 but they wanted their property.<sup>35</sup> From this point the next step for the Germans was to demand the deportation of Jews in Slovakia. The most active mouthpieces of anti-Jewish measures were Vojtech Tuka and Alexander Mach. On 9th September 1941, Act 198/1941, the so-called “Jewish Codex” came into effect, which was based on the Nuremberg laws and aimed at the “final solution” of the Jewish question.<sup>36</sup> The Jews were deprived of their citizen rights, they were required to declare their properties above the value of 5,000 Crowns, upon which a property tax of 20% was imposed. Jewish landholding was confiscated, their typewriters were taken away and the Jews had to provide winter clothes for Slovak soldiers on the front. 1888 firms were also confiscated and given to Slovaks and collaborators. The private property of 54,667 people in the value of 4,322,238 Crowns was confiscated or purchased by Slovak owners at a low price.<sup>37</sup>

In October 1941, the relocation of the Jews in Bratislava began. 6,000 out of 15,000 were sent to labour camps in the country.<sup>38</sup> The rest received immunity for a while as it turned out that many had professions whose lack would strike Slovak economy heavily. The Slovaks wanted to be eminent in the eyes of the Germans and they did their best to eliminate

<sup>33</sup> E. LIPTÁK, *Príprava a priebeh Salzburškých rokovani roku 1940 medzi predstaviteľmi Nemecka a Slovenského štátu*, in: *Historický časopis*, 13, 3, 1965, p. 359.

<sup>34</sup> J. KAISER, *Die Politik des Dritten Reiches gegenüber der Slowakei. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der nationalsozialistischen Satellitenpolitik*, Bochum 1969, p. 600.

<sup>35</sup> SNA, fond MZV, kt. 594, without number. Also: E. NIŽNASKÝ, *Holokaust na Slovensku*, Vol. 4, Bratislava 2003, doc. 27, pp. 111–112.

<sup>36</sup> MOLNÁR, *Sem gyűlölettel*, p. 177.

<sup>37</sup> E. LIPTÁK, *Slovenko v 20. Storočí*, Bratislava 1998, p. 208.

<sup>38</sup> SNA, fond Policajné riaditeľstvo, Box 2228, 21457–4.

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the Jewish population. The fact that a part of the Slovakian Jewry had pro-Hungarian sentiment may have strengthened this process. Most of the Jews adhered to Hungarian language and culture after Trianon, and many did so after 1942.<sup>39</sup> The Slovaks might also fear that at a possible referendum the Jews might vote for unification with Hungary.

The German government always encouraged the deportation of every Slovakian Jew from the second half of 1941. Talks about this took place in Hitler's office on 23<sup>rd</sup>–24<sup>th</sup> October 1941 with the participation of Tiso, Tuka and Mach. Hitler thought that the Slovakian government was "*incapable of solving this problem on its own*".<sup>40</sup> Mach said later that Hitler had explained that Germany needed the Jewish labour force. The leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler thought that the Slovakian Jews should be sent to labour camps in Poland. According to another memoir Hitler threatened the Slovak government at another meeting in early 1942<sup>41</sup>: "*If Slovakia rejects [the deportation of the Jews], they can expect the worst from me.*"<sup>42</sup> The intimidated Slovakian parliament handed in a proposal for the deportation of the Jews on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1942. Then the Ministry of the Interior declared the Jews to be enemies of the Slovak nation. This would provide some legal basis for the deportations. The bill of the "constitutional law on the deportation of the Jews" had four articles. The first said that Jews had to leave the territory of the republic; the second deprived the Jews of their citizenship; the third was on the property of the relocated Jews; the fourth said that the act would come into effect on the day of its declaration. Mach said that with the approval of this act Slovakia has got rid of all the Jews. He also pointed out that it was only an outline law and asked for permission to execute the first two points by decree as difficulties might appear during its implementation. When asked about the costs of the deportations he said that all expenses would be covered from the Jews' wealth.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> R. L. BRAHAM, *A magyarországi holokauszt bonctani vizsgálata: az okok egy lehetséges magyarázatra*, in: R. L. BRAHAM (ed.), *Tanulmányok a holokausztról*, Vol. VI, Budapest 2014, p. 364.

<sup>40</sup> SNA, Národný Súd, Box 53, Number 41/782.

<sup>41</sup> The source is based on memories; the Germans could really put pressure on the Slovaks, but it is hard to prove when exactly this happened and whether he visited Hitler. E. NIŽŇANSKÝ, *Nacizmus, holokaust, slovenský štát*, Bratislava 2010, p. 111.

<sup>42</sup> L. ESTERHÁZY, *Szívek az ár ellen. Népek ütközése, közép-európai tapasztalatok*, Budapest 1991, p. 121.

<sup>43</sup> SNA, fond Snem Slovenskej republiky, Box 180, 370/1943.

The Slovak Ministry of the Interior designated several “transfer camps” for the Jews in Bratislava, Szered, Poprad and Žilina. The commanders of the camps were instructed to organise the transport of the Jews and give them over to the Germans over the border. In Slovakia, the collection of the Jews was done by the Hlinka Guard on the order of the government. The first group of Jews left Poprad on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1942 and crossed the Slovak-German border in the morning of 26.<sup>44</sup> Slovakia was the second country to implement the deportation of Jews after Germany. The anti-Jewish laws affected about 89,000 people, 4% of the Slovakian population.<sup>45</sup> The Jews lost all their incomes and properties before they were sent to extermination camps in Poland in spring 1942.<sup>46</sup> The initial steps were taken under the command of SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny, who represented Adolf Eichmann.<sup>47</sup> It is noteworthy that Slovakian Jews had been taken to camps in the German Reich even earlier but those actions lacked any legal basis. A clear act was needed, which regulated the deportations. This was Article 68 in 1942, which elicited the protection of the Vatican.<sup>48</sup> The Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tardini wrote in one of his letters: “*It is unfortunate that the president of Slovakia is a priest. Everyone understands that the Holy See cannot stop Hitler. But who understands that it cannot restrain a priest?*”<sup>49</sup>

Eventually most Slovakian Jews were arrested, put in ghettos then deported in cattle-trucks to concentration camps in the German Reich.<sup>50</sup> The greatest beneficiary of the “Aryanisation” was the Slovak state.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>44</sup> NIŽŇANSKÝ, *Nacizmus*, p. 119.

<sup>45</sup> The deportation of the Slovakian Jews started already in March 1942 and it lasted until the end of the year.

<sup>46</sup> I. KAMENEC, *Slovenský štát (1939–45)*, Praha 1992, pp. 107–108.

<sup>47</sup> K. HRADSKÁ, *Případ Dieter Wisliceny. Nacistickí poradcovia a židovská otázka na Slovensku*, Bratislava, 1999, p. 30.; T. TÖNSMEYER, *Das Dritte Reich und die Slowakei 1939–1945. Politischer Alltag zwischen Kooperation und Eigensinn*, München, Wien, Schöningh, Paderborn 2006, pp. 137–138.

<sup>48</sup> The Vatican protested at Slovakian ambassador Karol Sidor against the limitation of possibilities and the deportation of Jews and converted Catholic Jews on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1942. I. KAMENEC – V. PREČAN – S. ŠKORVÁNEK (ed.), *Vatikán a Slovenská republika (1939–1945). Dokumenty*, Bratislava 1992, pp. 72, 92.

<sup>49</sup> KOVÁČ, pp. 218–219.

<sup>50</sup> KAMENEC – PREČAN – ŠKORVÁNEK, pp. 97–98.

<sup>51</sup> I. GAUCSÍK, *Lemorzsolódó kisebbség*, Bratislava 2013, p. 59.

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On 5<sup>th</sup> October, the German embassy in Slovakia asked the German Foreign Ministry for the number of deported Jews from Slovakia. The answer was 57,628 people.<sup>52</sup> According to the Hungarian ambassador in Bratislava, Lajos Kuhl 60,000 people were deported from Slovakia.<sup>53</sup> Those who remained at home survived for the time being, in which also Jozef Tiso played a role.<sup>54</sup> In September 1942, Tuka and German ambassador Hans Elard Ludin with the sub-committees under their supervision started talks on the Jews, which lasted for ten days. The two sides agreed that Slovakia would pay 500 Reichsmarks to Germany as reimbursement after each deported person.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, only Croatia paid for the deportations in Europe but only 30 Reichsmarks per head.<sup>56</sup> The justification of these quotas was that the state would have to care for the Jews if they had not been deported, and also that the Slovaks obtained great Jewish wealth due to the Aryanisation. This wealth was distributed among those who participated in the deportations or those who were considered worthy of it, especially people close to the Hlinka Guard. Ludin calmed Tuka, when the latter was worried about the solution of the Jewish question, that he was also dedicated to the complete solution of the problem in Slovakia.<sup>57</sup>

The pace of the deportations slowed down by early September 1942, then it came to a halt since nearly all without exemption were taken away.<sup>58</sup> Those who

<sup>52</sup> SNA, Ministerstvo vnútra, Number 152, Box 262, 2361/42.

<sup>53</sup> MNL, KÜM, K-63, 1943/65. tétel, 147/pol. 4<sup>th</sup> August 1943.

<sup>54</sup> Tiso gave immunity to 5,000–9,000 Jewish people (their exact number is unknown). The documents were issued by the Presidential Office, which demanded high sums for the protection depending on the economic status of the applicant.

<sup>55</sup> There is a memorandum without date among the documents of the Slovak Foreign Ministry, probably written at the end of 1943, which says that the 500 Reichsmark can be reduced to 300 as the Slovak National Bank transferred 200 million Slovak Crowns (converted to Reichsmark) to Germany in December 1943. SNA, Ministerstva vnútra, Box 262, 12683/42, see also: SNA, MZV, Box 142, No. 1.

<sup>56</sup> NIŽNANSKÝ, *Nacizmus*, p. 231.

<sup>57</sup> SNA, documents of people's court (the documents of ambassador Ludin) No. 49/45, Box 22.

<sup>58</sup> The stop of the deportations in Slovakia can be explained with several reasons. According to one version the Slovak leaders wanted to seek the new “Jewish settlements in the East”, which could have provided evidence for what was happening there. The other reason was the pressure from the Vatican and also the fact that the Slovakian Jewish leaders managed to bribe a few high-rank Hlinka Guard persons and also Dieter Wisliceny, who was in charge with the

remained at home were, about 20,000 people, were put into previously built “Jewish labour camps” or they were allowed to continue their work with their exemption document. The labour camps functioned until the Slovak National Uprising on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1944. Most of the Jews participated in the uprising. The German army leadership reported that the Jews played an essential role in the revolt, and therefore they must be deported. This was evidence for Heinrich Himmler for the fact that where Jews were allowed to remain at home, there would be an uprising. Therefore he himself travelled to Bratislava to get the Slovak leaders to deport the Jews immediately.<sup>59</sup> After the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising, the German SS units gathered the Jews and put them into concentration camps. Their estimated number is 13,000. All in all, the human loss of the Slovakian Jewish population was around 70,000 in 1942–1944.<sup>60</sup>

It must be noted that the anti-Jewish laws and the deportations were the work of the Slovak government and authorities. They did not even attempt to delay the process. As it can be seen above, the Tiso government loyally followed the policy of Nazi Germany, which led to the most tragic chapter in the modern history of Slovakia.<sup>61</sup>

### **Esterházy’s Voting Against the Jewish Law**

János Esterházy was the only member of the Slovak parliament to vote against the Jewish law on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1942.<sup>62</sup> He said to the Speaker of the House Martin Sokol that he would vote against the deportations and he hoped that he could convince his

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deportations. The latter turned out to have taken the money; still, it was not his intervention that stopped the deportations. BRAHAM, p. 371.

<sup>59</sup> HRADSKÁ, pp. 70–71.

<sup>60</sup> 39,000 Jews were deported from the territories ceded to Hungary due to the Vienna Award between May and June 1944. From the 136,000 Jews who lived in the territory of today’s Slovakia about 108,000 were deported. J. ŠPITZER, *Kétség és remény. Esszék és tanulmányok*, Bratislava 1994, p. 11.

<sup>61</sup> KOVÁČ, pp. 219–220.

<sup>62</sup> The evaluation of the role of Esterházy usually shows a sharp contrast in Slovak and Hungarian historical literature. The Slovaks label him a collaborator, while the Hungarians portray him as the critic of totalitarian arrangements and they write about him with recognition. His speeches clearly put Esterházy to the political opposition.

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fellow MPs to follow his example and perhaps the question would even be dropped from the agenda or at least postponed. Esterházy gave this reason to Sokol, and others, for his vote: “[...] *I have had anti-Semitic bias since I was very young, and I will retain them, but it does not mean that I will give my vote to a law that treads on all divine and human rights. With the deportations the Slovaks do not deport the Jews as people of Israelite religion but the Jews as a race, which confirms my decision to vote against it. Hungarians form a national minority in Slovakia, and therefore it is entirely impossible for them to accept and identify with any bills which enable the majority to relocate a minority. We Hungarians have evidently lived and acted in the spirit of St Stephen for more a thousand years; the best evidence for it is the fact that no individual nor any group has been expelled from the territory of Hungary.*”<sup>63</sup> Esterházy’s critics pointed this out to show that he had anti-Semitic sentiments. We have to feel the atmosphere of the age and see that Esterházy could not write that “I have always been the friend of the Jews” when everyone who tried to help them or expressed sympathy was punished. Such a declaration would have led to his immediate condemnation and it would not have convinced anyone that the bill was harmful. Those at power expected him to make statements that they could approve. Esterházy misled his opponents with his statements because he had to avoid any accusation of sympathising with the Jews. Therefore, his statement is irrelevant when we want to evaluate his behaviour. His intention was to make the Slovak government realise that even anti-Semitism cannot provide grounds for passing the law. He emphasised that the government had taken a dangerous path as it had, in fact, recognised that the minorities could simply be thrown out of the country.<sup>64</sup> Esterházy deeply condemned the passing of the anti-Jewish law: “*It is a shameful thing that a government whose head calls himself a good Catholic deports its Jewish population to Germany, to Hitler’s concentration camps. And it is also shameful that the same government sets up concentration camps in Slovakia, where Jews and Czech are kept without any legal procedure.*”<sup>65</sup> He was driven by his Catholic faith, his social sensitivity and his

<sup>63</sup> I. MOLNÁR, *Esterházy János és a kisebbségi kérdés*, Budapest 2000, pp. 215–216.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>65</sup> ESTERHÁZY, p. 125.

Hungarian minority consciousness when he rejected the bill. He was a man of solid morals who would not give up his values. He regarded his life and act as a mission to defend the interests of the Hungarians who remained in Slovakia, and to help the prosecuted people including the Jews.

The Slovak parliament voted with hand-raising those days. Counter-verification was held only when a proposal did not get visible majority. Now, everybody could see that Esterházy did not raise his hand. As there was no counter-verification, he left the hall in protest. The Slovak parliament did not want him to express his opinion in speech at the “no” voting. It is also noteworthy that a few Slovak MP had left the hall before the voting; allegedly, they did not want to vote. They went to the lavatory or the café; most of them belonged to the group around Pavol Čarnogurský.<sup>66</sup> This is difficult to prove, now, as there is no written record of it. Kálmán Kéri was present in the assembly hall as a representative of Hungary. He mentioned that there was shouting and disorder when Esterházy left the hall and Sokol could make order with great difficulty.<sup>67</sup>

Rezső Peéry, a Hungarian writer in Slovakia, wrote about Esterházy’s step: “*with courage still unparalleled in the parliamentary practice of totalitarian systems, as opposed to the humble yes from every other member of the house*”, only the hand of János Esterházy did not rise.<sup>68</sup> Rezső Szalatnay, Slovakian Hungarian literary historian, remembered with these words: “*I saw, I heard when he did not vote for the Jewish law in the great hall of the former county building, now the building of the assembly, bravely protesting against opening the gate widely for inhumanity, which did happen later in the country. I saw when he said no to ministers and Hitler’s Slovakian procurator Franz Karmasin,*<sup>69</sup> *who was the leader of the Slovakian*

<sup>66</sup> O. PODOLEC, *Slovensko-maďarské konflikty a ich odraz na pôde slovenského snemu*, in: M. ŠTEFANSKÝ – I. PURDEK (ed.), *Slovensko vo vojnách a v konfliktoch v 20 storočí. Zborník referátov z vedeckej konferencie v Bratislave 15.–16. októbra 2002*, Bratislava 2003, p. 190. Also see KAMENEC – PREČAN – ŠKORVÁNEK, p. 112.

<sup>67</sup> MOLNÁR, *Sem gyűlölettel*, p. 179.

<sup>68</sup> R. PEÉRY, *Malomkövek között. Találkozások kortársakkal, Feljegyzések, beszámolók, karcolatok*, Stuttgart 1977, p. 54.

<sup>69</sup> There was a tension between Franz Karmasin and Esterházy primarily due to the Germans in the Zips region, who supported the Magyar Párt (Hungarian Party) rather than the Nazi

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*Germans, and who hated him and would destroy him together with his party.*”<sup>70</sup> The *Gardista*, the mouthpiece of the Hlinka Guard remarked: “... *all members voted with one exception.*”<sup>71</sup> The *Gardista* also wrote that rumour had already circulated among Slovak MPs that Esterházy would not vote for the deportation of the Jews. Guard members from Nitra went to the editorial office, as they had won a bet, having said that Esterházy would not give his vote to the deportation bill.<sup>72</sup> Esterházy’s act was, under the given circumstances, the demonstration of opposition to the then victorious Nazi ideology and the policy of Adolf Hitler. It is his merit that he set an example to his contemporaries as well as to posterity.

Esterházy described the event to his family on the following day: “*It was disgusting.*”<sup>73</sup> *The national assembly has sentenced the Jews here to deportation. And the most horrible thing was that the hall was full of priests.*”<sup>74</sup> *They were also afraid of Hitler’s revenge, and therefore voted for this terrible bill. This is how deep Hitler’s regime could bring the leaders of small nations, and even the priests; all this from the fear that Slovakia might share the fate of Poland.*”<sup>75</sup> According to the memories of Lujza Esterházy there were Wehrmacht officers in Bratislava who admired Esterházy’s behaviour. They said that he was “*the bravest man in Central Europe*”.<sup>76</sup> However, German propaganda, just like the Slovakian press, condemned his act. The *Grenzbote* in Bratislava reported the event with this mocking title: “*Only the lord Count did not vote for it!*”<sup>77</sup> The *Gardista* went even further. It did not label Esterházy’s behaviour a “protest”, domestic or international; rather, it called it such Jewish-friendly attitude in which he had personal interest as his estates were administered by Jews.<sup>78</sup>

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oriented Deutsche Partei.

<sup>70</sup> E. STELCZER, *Esterházy János élete és munkássága*, in: *Kapu*, 5, 8, 1992, p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> *Gardista*, May 17, 1942, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>73</sup> ESTERHÁZY, p. 122.

<sup>74</sup> There were a lot of priests among the members of the Slovakian People’s Party.

<sup>75</sup> ESTERHÁZY, p. 122.

<sup>76</sup> I. EDELSHEIM Gyulai, *Becsület és kötelesség. 1. kötet 1918–1944*, Vol. 1, Budapest 2000, pp. 108–109.

<sup>77</sup> *Grenzbote* (Pozsony), May 19, 1942, pp. 1–2.

<sup>78</sup> A. ESTERHÁZY-MALFATTI – B. TÖRÖK (ed.), *Esterházy János emlékkönyv*, Budapest 2001, p. 30.

The Gestapo and the Slovakian police suggested the arrest of Esterházy because of his vote, but the German Ambassador rejected the idea. His arrest would have elicited a huge diplomatic and political scandal between Slovakia and Hungary, which neither country wanted to risk. The Germans knew how popular Esterházy was in Hungary and they were afraid that his arrest would kindle anti-German sentiments. Esterházy's Jewish-friendly activity became inconvenient for the Hungarian government as well, and therefore, on German pressure, Premier László Bárdossy had to forbid the count to act or mediate in the interest of the Jews.<sup>79</sup> This did not prevent Esterházy from continuing his activity in secret. His daughter, Alice remembered his father bringing a suitcase full of passports from Hungary one day and distributing them among Jews and other refugees.<sup>80</sup>

### **The Interpretation of Esterházy's Vote in Slovak Historiography**

No one followed Esterházy's example in the Slovak parliament. Unfortunately, his role and his act receive negative judgement from a part of Slovak historians. The main work of this trend was written by Ladislav Deák, who has recently passed away, which established an approach that still dominates the viewpoint of most Slovak historians.<sup>81</sup> According to Deák, Esterházy voted against the bill because Jews were defined by birth rather than religion, and so he felt the Slovakian Hungarians threatened. Deák's other argument was that Esterházy had known, as early as 1942, that Hungary would lose the war on the side of Germany, and he wanted to collect credits for the post-war period.<sup>82</sup> Most Slovak historians think that Esterházy was seeking some alibi at the voting.<sup>83</sup> Ivan Kamenec, among others, reproach Esterházy with accepting the previous anti-Jewish laws in parliament and with actively participating in Slovakian legislation, which made him responsible. He says that Esterházy acted in self-defence as he was afraid that the Slovakian Hungarians would follow the Jews in deportation.

<sup>79</sup> MOLNÁR, *Esterházy János (1901–1957)*, p. 190.

<sup>80</sup> MOLNÁR, *Sem gyűlölettel*, p. 217.

<sup>81</sup> L. DEÁK, *Politický profil Jánosa Esterházyho*, Bratislava 1996.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 17–19.

<sup>83</sup> According to Ivan Kamenec Esterházy was forced by circumstances and motivated by alibism when he gave his vote. I. KAMENEC, *Po stopách tragédie*, Bratislava 1991, p. 189.

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Kamenec also points out the alibi issue.<sup>84</sup> In the Slovakian view, Esterházy wanted to provide an excuse for himself against later accusations.

There are various approaches to Esterházy within Slovakian historiography. Ondrej Podolec concludes that he was the only one to have the courage to go against the Slovak parliament.<sup>85</sup> He also points out, however, that Esterházy did not avoid anti-Jewish phrases in his report that he handed over to Sokol.<sup>86</sup>

Ján Mitáč, a young Slovak historian considers Esterházy's vote mere alibism, since the count had previously voted for anti-Jewish laws; moreover, he lost the chance to be called the defender of democracy and human rights without regards to racial differences because he, then Czechoslovak MP, had ceded Kosice and participated in the destruction of the country in 1938.<sup>87</sup> Ján Mitáč acknowledges Esterházy's act in parliament, but he notes that *“it was a very strong moral gesture without weight at the time, for Esterházy had supported all Jewish laws before.”* Mitáč states that Esterházy's behaviour can only be interpreted as treason, even considering the fact that *“his aristocratic morals did not allow him to raise his hand in support of a dirty law that deprived the Jews of all political rights”*.<sup>88</sup>

Martin Lacko is another young historian of the generation who says that, regardless to activity and motive, Esterházy's step betrays “great personal courage”. He also reproaches the contemporary Slovak politicians with having no other figure in a Christian state who would openly condemn the deportations.<sup>89</sup> Martin Lacko gives the names of other three MPs who were not present in the assembly hall at the voting.<sup>90</sup> He, also, does not absolve Esterházy.

<sup>84</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>85</sup> O. PODOLEC, *Slovensko–maďarské konflikty a ich odraz na pôde slovenského snemu*, in: M. ŠTEFANSKÝ – I. PURDEK (ed.), *Slovensko vo vojnách a v konfliktoch v 20 storočí. Zborník referátov z vedeckej konferencie v Bratislave 15.–16. októbra 2002*, Bratislava 2003, p. 190.

<sup>86</sup> Ibidem, p. 191.

<sup>87</sup> J. MITÁČ, *Kauza Jánosa Esterházyho pohľad slovenského a maďarského historika. János Esterházy a jeho miesto v sloveských dejinách*, in: *Historická revue*, 2, 2012, pp. 41–42.

<sup>88</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>89</sup> M. LACKO, *Slovenská Republika 1939–1945*, Bratislava 2008, pp. 73, 78.

<sup>90</sup> The name of the MPs is: P. Čarnogurský, J. Ferenčík, J. Filkorn, E. Boleslav Lukáč. LACKO, p. 73.

The great gap between the official Slovak and Hungarian viewpoints is well demonstrated by the declaration of the Historical Institute of the Slovak Scientific Academy in 2011, which speaks about Esterházy in a negative context.<sup>91</sup> They recognise the count's voting against the deportations but reproach him with having accepted all the other anti-Jewish laws earlier and with participating in the construction of a totalitarian regime as an MP. His moral gesture of standing by the Jews must be evaluated, and his tragic fate later must be regarded with sympathy but this cannot provide fundamental criteria for the evaluation of his political activity as a whole.<sup>92</sup>

Let us note the dismal fact that the Slovakian MPs lacked the courage to openly follow the example of the count. If only there had been more "alibist" representative in the Slovak parliament who would have dared to act. Esterházy's vote meant opposition to collective judgement. Speculations on the motivation of his "no" vote, statements about necessity or "alibism" are merely interpretations of historians in retrospect, which do not dim the fact that he acted.

### **Esterházy's Activity to Save Jews**

Esterházy also took concrete steps to help the prosecuted Jews. He managed to get the Hungarian Minister of the Interior, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer to allow the Jews who escaped to Hungary from Slovakia to remain there without harassment, and that those without passport or visa could receive asylum in Hungary.<sup>93</sup> He did everything so that the Jews in Slovakia could escape to Hungary. We know this from the wife of István Horthy, Ilona Edelsheim.<sup>94</sup> The statistics of the Hungarian Ministry of the

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<sup>91</sup> Based on former Slovak analyses it considered the Hungarian interpretation that Esterházy "was the persevering warrior not only of the Hungarian minority here but also a determined democrat and humanist, the unselfish protector of persecuted citizens and the unappreciated supporter of the Slovak-Hungarian friendship and cooperation" false and mistaken. In their view, all this was in contrast with historical facts. They think that Esterházy had endeavoured to shatter the democratic system of the Czechoslovak Republic. This was the target of his undermining activity and intelligence work in cooperation not only with Budapest but also with the Nazis. See the whole text at: <http://www.history.sav.sk/esterhazy.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>93</sup> EDELSHEIM, p. 108.

<sup>94</sup> Ibidem.

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Interior show more than 20,000 Jews who left Slovakia for Hungary.<sup>95</sup> This may be an exaggerated number, but to tell the exact number of the fugitive Jews would require the complete examination of documents. A contemporary Slovakian source estimates their number 10,000, which is possibly closer to reality.<sup>96</sup> The Slovak administration did not approve of the steps of Keresztes-Fischer and Esterházy.<sup>97</sup> The Ministry of the Interior in Bratislava sent a complaining note to the Slovak Foreign Ministry on 26 June 1942, and they asked for the immediate intervention of the minister at the Hungarian embassy demanding the prevention of illegal Jewish migration to Hungary.<sup>98</sup> The Hungarian government did not pay much attention to the Slovak protest at first, but later they made the border-guard control stricter when the German embassy in Budapest also demanded it emphatically. However, the life of Jews was not threatened in Hungary until the German occupation.

There were politicians in Slovakia who wanted to find a common solution to the Hungarian and the Jewish question. Franz Karmasin, the leader of Slovakian Germans was such a figure, who not only hindered the settlement of Slovak-Hungarian relations, but also wanted to expel all Jews, Roma, Hungarians and other unwanted people, claiming them inferior races, in order to settle 100,000 German families to their place.<sup>99</sup>

Esterházy must have been familiar with what happened to the Jews in Poland as he had relatives there and he also visited the country. The memories of Lujza Esterházy tell us about this. The countess visited Minister of the

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<sup>95</sup> M. KÁLLAY, *Magyarország miniszterelnök voltam 1942–1944. Egy nemzet küzdelme a második világháborúban*, Vol. II, Budapest 1991, pp. 79–80. Ivan Kamenec and his fellow researchers estimate the number of Jews who fled to Hungary in 1942 at 5–6,000. KAMENEC – PREČAN – ŠKORVÁNEK, p. 98.

<sup>96</sup> SNA, documents of the people's court, Number 45, Box 97, Film archive I. A-1010, 198/97.

<sup>97</sup> At the end of May 1942, Mach asked Ján Spišiak to ask the Hungarian government to send back Jews with Slovak citizenship until July 1942 otherwise they would lose their Slovakian citizenship. Spišiak also had to ask what was to be done with the Jews with Hungarian citizenship who were still in Slovak territory. Would they be also deported or sent to Hungary? See: E. NIŽŇANSKÝ, *Holokaust na Slovensku. 6. Deportácie v roku 1942*, Zvolen 2005, p. 213.

<sup>98</sup> SNA, MZV. Box 142, No. 1300/42.

<sup>99</sup> Z. BALASSA, *Pilóta a viharban. Gróf Esterházy János és kora*, Budapest 1994, pp. 75–76.

Interior Mach and asked him for assistance for a deported Jewish man who had “presidential immunity”. After long telephone talks, Mach found out that he could not do anything as the man had been transported to Germany. *“But Mr Minister, this deportation happened without your permission,”* she said. *“Save this man from the death camp for God’s sake!”* Mach denied the existence of death camps and asked where Lujza Esterházy had such information from. The countess told him that she knew that Jews were executed in the camps. Mach replied resentfully: *“[...] We are surely no butchers, are we? We would never have allowed the deportation of the Jews knowing that they go to death! No doubt, we wanted to get rid of them but only on condition that they leave for Palestine. They have to remain in the camp of the Reich only until the end of the war. We would never agree to their execution.”* *“I believe that you do not know about their extermination in Nazi camps,”* she responded. *“The Gestapo probably did not confess it to you. But all who have been to German-occupied Poland, like myself, know for sure that the Jews are getting to death camps.”* *“You are probably a victim of the anti-Hitlerist propaganda of the London radio,”* Mach declared,<sup>100</sup> when the countess replied that Mach was the victim of Nazi propaganda. At the end, Mach promised to get her protégé back from Auschwitz in a few days. He never fulfilled his promise.

Esterházy’s Jew-saving activity did not only mean his “no”-vote; there is evidence that he also saved concrete families and persons. Felix Schlesinger and his wife Katalin Weithamer, who had leased the Esterházy estate before, testified this at the end of the war. Esterházy helped them to escape to Budapest where he got them a flat as well. They said in their testimony: *“... we know that he helped several Jewish people in the Central Office in Budapest, who were then not deported by the Germans. He saved several Jews from their camps.”*<sup>101</sup>

Ágnes Wertheinger was hiding in Újtlak before she and her parents could get to Hungary with Esterházy’s help. Ágnes confirms that there were others who

<sup>100</sup> ESTERHÁZY, pp. 126–127.

<sup>101</sup> SNA, Národný súd 19/47, mikrofilm II. A 951. Zapisnica 1948, 31<sup>st</sup> May.

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received passports and went to Hungary.<sup>102</sup> Others were hiding in Esterházy's palace or nearby. Veronika Dubnická Schlesingerova and her family were such people.<sup>103</sup> On one occasion, Esterházy saved 200 Jewish people on labour service when he dissuaded their commander from sending them abroad saying that there was a lot of work to do at home. He gave the men clothes and food; staying in Slovakia, under better circumstances saved their lives.<sup>104</sup> Esterházy also helped Viktor Egri novelist, Dr Árpád Balogh-Dénes solicitor, "Uncle Lővy" one of the owners of the printing house in Nitra as well as Dr Hönigberg physician and his family, whose daughter he saved from the Budapest ghetto in 1944.<sup>105</sup>

It was also Esterházy who organised the saving of 1000 Israelites who were christened by Calvinist ministers István Puskás from Zólyom (Zvolen), László Sedivy from Nitra and Sándor Brányik from Eperjes (Prešov). With their conversion, they could avoid the most severe regulations of the Jewish laws. The former two ministers were arrested by the Slovakian police in 1942; they were taken to the prison of Illava, from where they were released by the instrumentality of Esterházy.<sup>106</sup>

It must be noted that Magyar Hírlap, the official paper of the Hungarian Party (Magyar Párt), supervised by Esterházy, dealt with the Jewish question only occasionally in 1942–1944. It published the reports and news of the Slovakian Agency on the matter without comments. There were no personal voices or offensive articles. Esterházy did not make rude or condemnable anti-Jewish remarks in his articles although he could have turned them to his advantage. The Hungarian Party helped its Jewish members until 1944; the Hungarian identity card meant protection against deportation for a while. We know that members received regular benefit. One such occasion was when Dr Marcell Szilárd, who had lost his job as a lawyer due to his origin in Bratislava in 1940, received 5,500 Crowns per month from the party.<sup>107</sup> Esterházy, when instructed to renew his staff by the Slovak authorities in 1942, did not

<sup>102</sup> The letter of Ágnes Wertheimer to Elemér Stelczer. In: ESTERHÁZY-MALFATTI, p. 215.

<sup>103</sup> On the hiding of the Jews of Nyitraújlak see: ESTERHÁZY, p. 135.

<sup>104</sup> MOLNÁR, *Sem gyűlölettel*, p. 182.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 181.

submit the data of the members of the Hungarian Party, and he continued accepting Germans and Jews in the party rather than excluding them.<sup>108</sup> “*I will not exclude as Jews those who have been good Hungarians from one day to the other,*” he said.<sup>109</sup> The leaders of the Hungarian Party had two lists of members: one for the authorities and one for themselves with the real data.<sup>110</sup> On the call of Esterházy the Hungarian Party and the Slovakian Hungarians rejected participation in Aryanization; with a few exceptional cases, they did not collectively contribute to the robbery of the Jews. Eleven Slovakian Hungarians seized significant Jewish wealth, and even they acted according to their previous agreement with the former Jewish owner.<sup>111</sup>

Now the question can be raised if Esterházy was anti-Semitic? It is not easy to answer; he probably shared the prejudices of his age. However, he disagreed with race theory and rejected it several times.<sup>112</sup> Irén Rujder, who survived the holocaust and who was saved by Esterházy, gives the answer: “*In the forties, everybody knew in Bratislava that Esterházy was a friend of the Jews, so much so that he was mocked as a Jew several times. He was also threatened with deportation; still, he helped as he could. [...] János Esterházy does not deserve the slanders written about him these days. We, who lived in Slovakia at that time, know the truth. He was handed over to the Soviets because if he had been tried in Bratislava, every Jew would have witnessed for him. Such a corruption of truth is painful. Esterházy really deserves a tree of the Righteous in Israel. [...] I cannot name another person who would have done so much for the Jews as he did. His whole family was noted for their willingness*

<sup>108</sup> M. ÁDÁM, *Esterházy János koncepciók pere, 1947-ben*, in: *História*, 8, 2008, p. 14; HETÉNYI, p. 123; Molnár, *Sem gyűlölettel*, p. 140.

<sup>109</sup> G. SZENT-IVÁNYI, *Graf János Esterházy*, Wien 1995, p. 183.

<sup>110</sup> HETÉNYI, pp. 234–235.

<sup>111</sup> R. SZALATNAI, *A csehszlovákiai magyarok 1938 és 1945 között*. Part II, in: *Regio* 1990/3, p. 178.

<sup>112</sup> One of many examples: Esterházy, as the president of the Magyar Párt (Hungarian Party) forbade in a letter to organise a Fascist department in the party. In 1944-1945, he did all he could to prevent his party from serving German or Arrow Cross interests. The best example is perhaps the description of a contemporary, Rezső Peéry: “*Who would not become Germans or join the Guard, who were hiding from the Fascist present and the world in the community whose only noticeable and outstanding characteristic was the rejection of National Socialism.*” R. PEÉRY, *Védőbeszéd a szlovákiai magyarok perében*, Bratislava 1993, p. 66.

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*to help. It was not only we whom he helped; I know that he gave Hungarian passports to many in order to save them.*"<sup>113</sup>

Esterházy, like others, was not born to save humans. One has to take a long road before, shaped by circumstances and events, one takes to save lives. The evaluation of the historical role of Esterházy is not problematic on the Hungarian side but on the Slovak side it is still debated. His role in the Jewish problem, however, is beyond dispute. By refusing to vote for the deportations he clearly stood on their side. Slovakian history writing acknowledges that Esterházy had the courage to protest against the holocaust at the highest level in one of the darkest periods of twentieth-century Slovakia. By voting against the proposal he confronted the German Reich; he turned against Nazism alone. As a contemporary witness remembered: *"I experienced the holocaust. Therefore, I know how much the smallest support means, and Count János Esterházy not only helped the Jews but he stood by them in the most difficult days when they were facing death."*<sup>114</sup> Still, his Jew-saving activity was not considered when he was put to trial and sentenced in Czechoslovakia in 1947. It should have been taken into account according to the contemporary Slovak law but the submitted documents were not approved.<sup>115</sup> Esterházy's trial took place in his absence; he was sentenced without being heard. His conviction was unjust and impropportionate; he was sentenced to death at first, then to life-long imprisonment. Finally, he died in prison.<sup>116</sup> Minister of the Interior Alexander Mach, who was the mouthpiece of the deportation of Slovakian Jews was first sentenced to death then 25 years in prison and finally he was given amnesty.

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<sup>113</sup> ESTERHÁZY-MALFATTI, p. 214.

<sup>114</sup> The letter of the historian M. ÁDÁM, in: *Ki volt Esterházy János?*, Budapest 2007, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> B. DOLEŽAL, *Esterházy János esete*, in: *Valóság*, 12, 1995, p. 83.

<sup>116</sup> Esterházy was sentenced in Czechoslovakia with reference to the decree of the Slovak National Council on people's court. Esterházy was accused of making an agreement, as the president of the United Hungarian Party (Egyesült Magyar Párt), with the Sudeten German and the Hlinka parties in February 1938 to set demands for the Czechoslovak Republic which could make it fall apart. By doing so he actively contributed to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and to the destruction of its democratic order. With being the president of the Hungarian Party and an MP in the Slovak parliament, he identified with the German orientation and he supported the "activity of the Fascist invaders and their collaborators", which deserves death penalty. SNA, Národný súd, 19/47. Mikrofilm II. A 951. János Esterházy. Dok. 19/47/10.

Perhaps if Esterházy was approached from another aspect: his behaviour in the Jewish question, it could be the initial step towards his rehabilitation, and it could be a gesture in disclosing the common past.

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is the introduction of the mediation of János Esterházy in the bilateral relations of Slovakia and Hungary mentioning only a few examples due to limitations in length. In the second part of the study, the activity of Esterházy in the Jewish question is discussed; the reasons behind his voting against the Jewish law. János Esterházy considered it his main goal to forge the Hungarian minority in Slovakia together, and he imagined the life of the community in the form of a great family. The person of Esterházy is interpreted in different ways in the Slovak and Hungarian history writing. This study wishes to present these interpretations based on facts and to get them closer to each other.

### **Keywords**

History; Diplomacy; Slovak-Hungarian Relationship; Jewish Question; János Esterházy