

TOPOLCANY

THE STORY OF A PERISHED ANCIENT COMMUNITY.

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Topolcany is situated on the right bank of the Nitra river, West Slovakia, Czechoslovakia. The town was first documented in 1173, as a property of the Hungarian king. At the beginning of the 14th century Topolcany was a king's domain with customary rights. In 1599, the Turks invaded the town, plundering and destroying it. After its rehabilitation Topolcany became known as a center for markets and fairs. As it was situated in one of the most fruitful areas, it marketed agricultural products abroad as well. As a district town some one hundred neighbouring settlements were affiliated to it. In the mid 19th century an industry was established in the town, based on the

processing of agricultural products: a sugar factory, a lumber mill and a cable factory, one of the largest in the country. The towns population was mostly Slovak-Catholic.

At the beginning the town was in the Hungarian Kingdom, later in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and from 1918 in the Republic of Czechoslovakia. During the second world war Topolcany became a part of the indepedent Slovak state, but since the end of the war it was again inside the Czechoslovakian Republic.

The Jewish community of Topolcany was one of the oldest in the county of Nitra. They lived in the town since 1649, arriving from Moravia and leasing rights from the local nobleman. At the beginning of the 18-th century Jews of Topolcany are mentioned as suppliers to the Austrian Imperial army in its war against Hungarian insurgents.

Bu order of the Emperor Karl VI the Jews were driven out of the town in 1727 under the pretext that the place was near the mines. But this injuction was not in the force for long and in 1744 the Jews once settled in Topolcany. The life of the

community was renewed, the "old" cemetery was opened, and the "Shomrei Torah" synagogue was built. These two institutions existed until the Second World War.

In 1764 there lived in Topolcany some 20 Jewish families, and the community employed a slaughterer who served also as a teacher.

The Jewish population of the city increased with a new influx of Jews from Moravia. At the beginning of the 19-th century the community numbered some 500 persons, mostly descendants of Moravian emigrants.

Statistical data.

Year	Number of Jews	Total population	%
1830	561	?	
1880	1120	3689	30%
1900	1676	4944	33.3%
1930	2192	8731	26%
1940	2459	10242	24%
1942	3057	12000	25%

In 1810 a Yeshiva was founded in Topolcany which

existed for more than 130 years. Its founders were the town Rabbis, Abraham Ullmann and Asher Anshel Roth. Due to the Yeshiva and the "small" Yeshiva "Machsike Torah", Topolcany became one of the centres of holy learnings in the "Oberland" (Northern provinces of Hungary, where the Jews tended to German culture).

The Jewish school was founded in the 1850's and its language of tuition was German. The school functioned until September 1944, when the last Jews of Topolcany were deported from the town.

In due time the community founded religious and social institutions, as well as educational and welfare ones: Beth Midrash, a Kindergarten, an old age home, a kitchen for the needy, a Mikveh with public baths, a Matzot factory a slaughter house and butcher shops. Within the framework of the K'hilla and in conjunction with the "Chewra Kadisha" the following institutions functioned: A women's organization, "Bikur Cholim", and the girls organization "Emmunah".

At the beginning of the 20-th century The "New" cemetery was consecrated and the "Grosse Shul" was

built, one of the biggest and magnificent in the state. After the First World War the Rosenthal family built a third synagogue in town. In addition there were also 5-6 "Stieblech" in town.

The community belonged to the orthodox trend (the "Oberland" version) and was under the influence of the Pressburgs Rabbis and the dynasty of Rabbi Moshe Sofer, the "Chatam Sofer".

The Chief Rabbis officiating in Topolcany from the beginning of the 19-th century were: Rabbi Asher Anshel Roth (served until 1810), Rabbi Abraham Ullmann (until 1825), Rabbi Benyamin Wolf Lew, author of "Shaarei Thora" (until 1827), Rabbi Zeev Wolf Tartzes (until 1860), Rabbi Feivel Kaleb Schlesinger (until 1908), Rabbi Nahum Schlesinger (until 1917), Rabbi Abraham Elieser Weiss (until 1942) and Rabbi Simon Zwi Haberfeld (until 1944). Among the Dayanim were Rabbi Shalom Sofer, Rabbi Pinhas Link, Rabbi Yitzhak Schweiger.

These were the heads of the community from the start of the 20-th century: Yeshayahu Friedmann, Yacob Eckstein, Moshe Bernfeld, Yosef Bernfeld, Shlomo Gelei, David Low-Beer, Hermann Linkenberg

and Max Bernfeld.

Community life was carried out according to regulations adapted periodically to changing times (the last time in 1922).

The economy of the Jews of Topolcany was based on mutuality between the city and its surrounding villages. The Jews bought from the peasants and landholders agricultural products and sold them tools and commodities. The town's commerce was mostly in Jewish hands. The same was true as regards the greater of industry and trade. On the cattle market of Topolcany, one of the largest in Czechoslovakia, the Jews reigned, as well as in the corn wood commerce. There were also among the Jews of Topolcany many "Marktfahrer", an ancient livelihood of Slovakian Jews. The economic situation of the Topolcany Jews was sound and the community owned a lot of property. The Jews added essentially to the development and wellbeing of the town and the relation between them and the other residents were cordial until the end of 1930's. Despite ingrained Antisemitism among part of the

Gentile inhabitants, the interdependence the two parts of the population curbed instances of harm against the Jews.

Involvement of Jews in the life of the town was very much felt. Between the two world wars the Jews Joseph Felsenburg and Karol Pollak served as deputies to the head of the municipality and others were elected to its management. Jews stood among the free professions and among heads of commerce and artisanship. The district physician, most of the town's doctors and lawyers were Jews. There existed also a Jewish bank in Topolcany.

A political organization among the Jews of Topolcany started at the outset of the 20-th century. The Orthodoxy and most of the youth were organized in the "Agudath Israel". Rabbi Abraham Elieser Weiss, The Chief Rabbi of Topolcany, was among the heads of the "Agudath Israel" in Czechoslovakia.

The Zionist idea also found supporters among the town's Jews. The local branch of the Zionist organization was founden in 1901 and Rabbi Moshe

Graus, one of the founders of "Misrachi", stood for several years at its head. Rabbi Yitzhak Schweiger, the community Dayan supported Zionism and was a seldom seen phenomena among the orthodox Jews. Some of the town's Jews, such as Dr. Ignatz Friedmann, the Rabbi Dr. Eliesr Schweiger, Wilhelm Reichenthal and Hermann Abrahamson, were among founders and leaders of the Zionist movement in Hungary. The organization of the Zionist youth started in the 1920's. The first was the "Hashomer Kadima" and from its mids emerged the "Hashomer Hatzair". "Bnei Akivah" was formed in the 1930's. These two movements in Topolcany established a "Hachshara"(training farm) for Aliyah to Eretz Israel. In addition "Maccabi Hatzair" and "Beitar" were activ in town.

The society for physical culture "Maccabi" founded in 1924, developed sport activities among the youth and in its framework hundreds of young people were organized.

THE HOLOCAUST PERIOD.

Following the "Munich Pact" of September 1938, which forced Czechoslovakia to hand the Sudeten region over to the Germans, The Republic of Czechoslovakia was dissolved. Bohemia and Moravia became Protectorates of Germany, and Slovakia was declared autonomous, becoming an independent state in March 1939, as a German satellite.

With the establishment of the Slovakian state under German patronage and the increase of the national wave, the latent Antisemitism of the Topolcany populace came to the fore.

The anti-jewish laws of the new government, destined in the first place to remove the Jews from the economic life, were used to divest them from their property. Many Jews were expelled from their homes, pupils were sent from public schools and businesses were transferred into the hands of "Aryans" (Gentile Slovaks of Aryan stock).

A regional branch of the "Jewish Center" (U.Z.) was opened in Topolcany, and Ignatz Gelei was nominated as its head. For fear of persecutions Jews from

neighbouring villages flowed into Topolcany and in September 1941 some 365 Jews from Bratislava were added to the community, having been evicted from there by orders of the authorities.

At the beginning 1942 there were over 3000 Jews living in Topolcany, many without any income sources and needing welfare help.

The deportation of the Jews of Topolcany started on the "Shabath Hagadol" (near Passover) of 1942 with the despatch of more than 200 male and female youngsters to camps in Poland. Some time later, on April 18 1942 some 150 families were deported from Topolcany to the Sered camp and from there, on April 22, to the Opole Ghetto in the District of Lublin, Poland. On the Shavuot Feast (in June of the same year) many Jewish families from the town and its surroundings were deported to the Novaky camp. From there a transport including 50 families from Topolcany was sent to the Sobibor extermination camp.

During the month of June and July some 100 families of Topolcany Jews were despatched in 3 transports to their death at Auschwitz. On the Yom Kippur

(September 1942) additional tens of Topolcany Jews were deported from work camps to the extermination camp at Auschwitz.

According to the data of the "Jewish Center" some 2448 Jews (some 79% of its Jewish populace) were deported from Topolcany in 1942, among them 750 children under age of 16. Only 618 Jews remained in town, to whom were added in the spring of 1944 some tens of families evacuated from Eastern Slovakia.

On August 29, 1944, with the outbreak of the Slovakian Revolt against the fascist rule, the town fell into the hands of the insurgents. Many youth joined the partisans. On September 3, 1944, immediately after the Germans conquered Slovakia to suppress the uprising, the town was taken by S.S. units. Nearly 1000 Jews trapped inside were despatched to the Sered camp. Most of them were conveyed from there to the Death Camps. On September 10, 1944 some 56 Topolcany Jews were massacred near the village of Nemcice having been caught or extradited by the local populace. They were buried in the local common grave.

Topolcany was freed by the Red Army on April 2, 1945. Some 400 of its Jews and its vicinity returned to town from the camps and forests. The community renewed its activity. The "Rosenthal" synagogue, the only one that remained, was restored, Philip Nagel was elected as community head. It employed also a Shokhet and a Cantor. The Jewish youth reorganized mainly in the "Hashomer Hatzair".

In September 1945, after a blood libel, an incited mob attacked the homes of the Holocaust survivors, hurting Jews and plundering their property.

Most Topolcany Jews immigrated in 1949 to Israel. The K'hillah continued to exist until 1965. At the end of the 1980's only a very few Jews lived in Topolcany. The cemetery, somehow looked after, remained the only Jewish location in town.

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