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BEYOND THE DUTIES OF A BISHOP – PAVEL GOJDIČ, RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS¹

ABSTRACT: The State of Israel awarded the Greek Catholic Bishop Pavel Gojdič the title of Righteous Among the Nations in 2007. In the critical years 1939-1945, he publically stood up for the persecuted Jews and saved many from death. The study focuses on the analysis of his personality and attitudes to the Slovak Jewish community. It reveals his way of thinking and the specific examples which show us how it was manifested in relation to the persecuted. The study also contains the attitude of the Slovak elites towards the bishop and his activities in Slovakia.

KEYWORDS: Jews, Pavel Gojdič, Greek Catholic Church, Slovak state, Holocaust, Righteous Among the Nations.

The life story of Bishop Pavel Godič was characterized by faithfulness to God and the Church, which he proved by the sacrifice of his own life. He became the subject of a religious cult, and in honour of the martyred bishop, several churches were built in Slovakia, streets and schools were named, and many important works of art created. Publications by Marián Potaš, Petr Šturák, Milan Hromník and other well-known authors contributed to the positive image of Bishop Gojdič's personality.² On account of this, he is well known to the believers not only in Slovakia, but also abroad. On the other hand, it is still possible to discover little-known aspects of his life. One of them is the way of thinking and personal attitude towards the Jews in Slovakia. In the contemporary context of the first half of the 20th century, he inspired with his statements, gestures and deeds, but simultaneously

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² M. P o t a š, *Dar lásky. Spomienky na biskupa Pavla Gojdiča OSBM*, Prešov 2001; M. H r o m n í k, *Blahoslavený Pavol Peter Gojdič, OSBM*, Prešov 2007; P. Š t u r á k, *Pavol Peter Gojdič OSBM. Prešovský gréckokatolícky biskup (1926-1960)*, Prešov 2013;

provoked the negative reactions of the elites who came from the environment of the ruling regime as well as from the environment of the Church. Many times, these negative positions were motivated by the power goals, first regarding the specific Slovak nationalism and then within the ideological focus of communism.

The character traits of Bishop Gojdič were aptly captured by the Greek Catholic priest Viktor Skorodenský in the novel *Excommunicated*. The author describes bishop's personality with these words: "The bishop was the embodiment of genuine goodness and love." His eyes, his face and his every movement reflected understanding and friendliness. His whole appearance radiated enthusiasm and fanatical love for God and his neighbour. His faith must have been very living as it was able to astonish other clergymen. His voice also sounded soft, full of tenderness and understanding. He needed no long philosophical speculations. He spoke simply and in such a way that he referred directly to the soul of the listener. He allegedly led a holy life. No one could have known that, and with his modesty, no one would have ever found out. The fact is that his frail, thin figure, grey hair, delicate face, respectable appearance and pleasant voice created that impression. [...] He was convinced that every person could be broken by kindness and love."³ The positive image of the bishop's personality corresponds to the book published in 1947 on the 20 years anniversary of episcopal service in Prešov. The editors of *Blahovistnik* presented minutely his life from early childhood through his school years and priestly service, as well as his decision for monastic life, and especially his priorities in the service of a bishop. The book also included presentation of the bishop's activities during the period of the Slovak state which contained Bishop Gojdič's critical attitude to the racial issue and drew attention to the conflict with the government.⁴ The tension between the bishop and the state representatives of the Slovak state revealed the positions of both parties which in a positive or negative sense identify the fundamental position of the bishop in favour of the racially persecuted Jews.

The bishop manifested his attitude towards the anti-Jewish sentiments in society for the first time in a pastoral letter dated January 25, 1939.

³ V. S k o r o d e n s k ý, *Exkomunikovaný*, Prešov 2002, s. 96.

⁴ Team of authors, J. E. Pavel G o j d i č ČSVV. K jeho dvadcaťročnému jubileju so dňa jep. Posvjaščenija, Prešov 1947, s. 136-144.

With the declaration of Slovakia's autonomy in the autumn of 1938, the anti-Jewish rhetoric began to intensify in the Slovak society, and the specific steps of the autonomous government foreshadowed the radicality of the solution to the Jewish question. After the well-known events of the deportation of the selected Jews to the territories ceded to Hungary, a government commission was set up in January 1939 to deal with further actions against the Jewish population. As a result of these changes, Bishop Gojdič, as the only Catholic bishop, decided to take a clear position on the given problem. The bishops of the Catholic Church in Slovakia expressed their views on the way of solving the Jewish question several times only from 1940, and Bishop Gojdič agreed with the content of the pastoral letters; in fact, his signature was not missing under even one of them.⁵ A clear position towards racial politics helped many clergymen and faithful find their feet in the upcoming difficult conditions. In addition, his public statements were confirmed by the authority of his personality and concrete actions.

The text reveals Gojdič's universal view of man and compares nationalism, chauvinism and racism to a contagion and a dangerous delusion that is already choosing its victims among people. Right at the beginning of the letter, he declared very clearly the basic rights of every person. Above all, it was the right to live, native language, traditions and everything that is dear to one, while he referred to the history of the redemption of man. The dignity of a child of God was unquestionable in his words. He drew attention to the incompatibility of hatred with Christian life. He especially appealed to priests to protect themselves from pernicious ideology and remain faithfully anchored in Catholic teaching. He appealed to the heralds of the gospel not to betray their priestly mission. He tragically perceived the fate of those who sold themselves out to the nationalist trend of the time, calling them blind - living in the dark. He vigorously reminded the priests of the need for impartiality and apoliticality. In the letter, he notably mentioned the Jews and he identified with them through a quote of St. Paul: "We are obliged to stick to the example of St Paul the Apostle, who says about himself: To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under

⁵ R. L e t z, *V hodine veľkej skúšky*, Trnava 2007, s. 320-403.

the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. [...] To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some". (1 Cor 9:20-22) He called on the priests to apply true love towards their believers, love that does not discriminate, but is aimed at every person without distinction. He even offered a basic rule how to behave in the turbulent and chaotic times. According to Gojdič, the principle of decision-making should be justice and love. He prophetically remarked that treating somebody unjustly did not pay off because the injustice would come back with vengeance.⁶

The bishop's published opinion characterised his activities in favour of the Jews until the end of the Second World War. It became one of the sources of tension, which grew between him and the pro-regime elites after the foundation of the Slovak State. They were represented by the governors of Šariš-Zemplín County Štefan Hašík and Andrej Dudáš, and by the government of the Slovak State headed by Vojtech Tuka.⁷ The consequences of the dispute affected the functioning of the Church by reducing the education allowances for schools, persecution of the clergy and restricting the religious press. The main reason was Rusyn orientation of the bishop and the clergy. The bishop supported the Rusyn interests consistently since taking his office in 1927. By contrast, the ruling elites were interested in pulling strings to get the Slovaks into the Greek-Catholic Church, and that is why they supported the representatives of the Slovak Greek-Catholics. At the same time, they endeavoured to make bishop Gojdič resign from his post of Apostolic Administrator of the Eparchy of Prešov.⁸

At the time of the culminating campaign for his resignation in 1939, a memorandum of the Greek Catholic clergy was created, and the Slovak Greek Catholic clergymen were listed as authors without a list of names. Therefore, we cannot say with certainty who was the author of the memorandum. Among other things, they tried to question bishop's pro-Slovak attitudes and abilities in the memorandum. Several accusations were brought against Bishop Gojdič, calling him a supporter

⁶ AGAP, fond Presidential files, sign. 8, 1939, *Pastoral Letter on Racism and the International Situation No. 400/39*.

⁷ M. P e k á r, *Východné Slovensko 1939-1945*, Prešov 2007, s. 86.

⁸ P. B o r z a, *Gréckokatolícka cirkev na okupovaných územiach Československa 1938-1945*, Košice 2019, s. 62-64.

of Hungarians, Ruthenians and the Jews. They pointed to unfair decisions in the occupation of parishes, the persecution of Slovak parish priests, nepotism and the inability to lead the diocese.⁹ These accusations demonstrate the opinion of the individuals who seem to have identified with the ruling regime and fully correspond with the positions of the government. The statements of Andrej Dudáš – the governor of Šariš-Zemplín County – contained in a comprehensive report from January 1941 addressed to V. Tuka, provide a detailed description of the negative positions of Bishop Gojdič towards the regime, his alleged anti-Slovak attitudes along with nepotism and thus they question the bishop's qualities.¹⁰ In his diary entry of November 11, 1939, the Slovak ambassador to the Holy See, Karol Sidor, captured the statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak State, Ferdinand Ďurčanský, who, according to Sidor himself, expressed himself very irresponsibly about church matters when he said about Bishop Gojdič that “he will have him driven out with the irresponsible rabble”. He stood in the way of the government elite's unifying national plans as a defender of the Rusyns and a critic of the regime's racial policy.¹¹ The state and police authorities suspected Bishop Gojdič of sympathies with Hungary, but they lacked evidence; not even the post-war State Security, controlled by the communists, succeeded in finding them.¹² The negative mindset of the Slovak elites (including those of the church) is represented by the opinion of the Catholic intellectual Ladislav Hanus, which was published in his memoirs. He perceived bishops Gojdič and Hopek as pro-Hungarian adherents, even as tyrannical bishops, whom, according to him, the faithful served as serfs. According to Hanus, the bishops refused to cooperate with Slovak Roman Catholics. However, Hanus tried to balance his negative view with a sympathetic portrayal of Bishop Gojdič in prison. This is a completely different opinion from the previous statement.

⁹ SNA Bratislava, fond ÚŠB 209, kar. 290. Letter of the Presidium of the Police Directorate in Prešov No.7.764/39 prez..

¹⁰ SA Prešov, f. Police Directorate – ÚŠB, 1477, Ruthenian question 1927-1943.

¹¹ K. S i d o r, *Vatikánsky denník I. (Od 17. júna 1939 do 11. júla 1940)*, Bratislava 2011, s. 169.

¹² M. B a r n o v s k ý, *Biskup Pavel Gojdič ako objekt politiky*. In P. Marek, *Osobnosť v Cirkvi a politice. Čeští a slovenští kresťané ve 20. stolytí*, Brno 2006, s. 535-536.

Hanus created it after he had got to know the bishop better, and since then we can talk about their mutual friendship. He wrote about him: “A true friend, we liked to walk together, he was a pleasant person, fatherly, modest, friendly, reasonable, funny. I told him all kinds of Hungarian jokes, he enjoyed them enormously, he could laugh a lot.”¹³ Hanus, abandoning certain ideological clichés about Gojdič’s pro-Hungarian attitude, states similar character traits that we have already learnt from Skorodenský. The Slovak historian Michal Barnovský, evaluating bishop’s attitudes towards the politics during the oppression period, stated: “As a Greek Catholic bishop, professing Christian values, he could not accept Nazism – “modern paganism” – or its racist theory. There are indications that the Nazis knew about this, as well as about Gojdič’s humane attitude towards the Jews, so he did not have their trust. [...] Gojdič’s humanism manifested itself not only in relation to the persecuted Jews and opponents of Nazism, but also to the refugees fleeing from the approaching front and communist terror. [...] P. Gojdič looked upon politics through the eyes of a Christian. He also assessed communist politics from the Christian values point of view.”¹⁴

The communist regime threw the bishop into prison, where he spent the rest of his life. Many testimonies from this unwelcoming environment confirm his humanity, goodness, cordiality, modesty, humility and a lot of other good qualities. The fellow prisoner Leopold Peřich, a Czech writer, wrote about his concentration during work and prayer, from time to time interrupting his work with prayer just to continue, strengthened by Christ. He stated that the bishop enjoyed great respect among the prisoners for his humility, which helped him to endure the hardships of prison.¹⁵

A positive relationship with the Jews was born as a natural result of contacts with the Jewish community in the vicinity of Bardejov, experience in Budapest, and especially of working in Sabinov and Prešov. It is the town of Prešov which provided us with the evidence of closer relations with the Neolog Jewish community. They had a synagogue and a school on Konštantínová Street,¹⁶ where Bishop Gojdič liked to

¹³ L. Hanus, *Pamäti svedka storočia*, Bratislava 2006, s. 652-657.

¹⁴ M. Barnovský, *Biskup Pavel Gojdič ako objekt politiky*. In P. Marek, *Osobnost v Cirkvi a politice. Čeští a slovenští křesťané ve 20. století*, Brno 2006, s. 537-541.

¹⁵ http://gojdic.wbl.sk/modlitba_018.jpg (20.6.2022).

¹⁶ P. Kónya, D. Landa, *Stručné dejiny prešovských Židov*, Prešov, 1995, s. 34-39.

walk in his free time. During one such stroll, he stopped in front of the Neolog synagogue to listen to a beautiful mystical chant which had been coming from it when the superior came out of the synagogue and respectfully greeted the bishop. During the conversation, the bishop appreciated the beautiful singing and accepted the superior's invitation to the synagogue. It should be noted here that in the period before the Second Vatican Council, contacts with the Jewish community and a visit to the synagogue by a Catholic bishop was not a common practice. By accepting the invitation, he went far beyond the boundaries of the then perception of the Jews. Having entered the synagogue, he was introduced to the singers of the choir, who sang a psalm to him as a sign of their obvious sympathy. The small episode thus documents the positive attitudes of the Jewish community towards the bishop of Prešov and his positive attitude towards them. He was modest, tolerant of other denominations, sincerely admiring and appreciating everything beautiful and valuable. Bishop Gojdič was a church dignitary striving for peace and understanding. This was confirmed after the onset of anti-Semitic politics after 1939, when the Jews asked him for help without fear and he willingly provided it in various forms according to his possibilities.¹⁷

Gojdič's approach took on a new form after the issuing of restrictive anti-Jewish measures in Slovakia. He used the importance of his office and contacts to help the persecuted. He provided them with shelter for their valuables and false baptism certificates, he helped to arrange various exemptions provided by the state, and finally, he organized harbouring of children and later the entire families. He left a deep mark in the memories of the rescued – even years later they were able to talk about his actions with great gratitude. The Spitzer family from Poprad also owe him their lives. Surviving family members recalled the meeting with the bishop and the help he gave them. They unanimously mentioned his friendly behaviour towards their father Pavol Spitzer, who came to him with a request for help. The daughter Marianna said that the bishop had received the father very kindly and had done everything in his power to help her family. Another one of the rescued, Juraj Spitzer, attested the friendly approach of the Greek

¹⁷ P. Krájňák, P. Biskup, *Gojdič v synagóge*. In *Slovo – dvojtýždenník gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*, 1993, roč. 25, č. 5, s. 16.

Catholic bishop and the clergy. Proving Gojdič's great affection for the Jews, there is an event telling us about the time when the members of the HG were catching the Jews in the town. Bishop Gojdič was walking down the street with Pavol Spitzer, who was very frightened, but the bishop took his arm and lead him safely out of danger. The bishop, cooperating with others, provided them with presidential exemptions and children could live in the church dormitory. There is some documented information that he supported the issuing of both real and fake baptism certificates and in one case he even administered baptism himself. It was the Grün family from Prešov. He contributed to saving their lives by baptizing Herman and Amália Grün together with their daughter Margita Harsten and granddaughter Judith who was also placed in the monastery, where she stayed for several months.¹⁸

The determination to help was manifested in the rescue of the little girl Erika Fleischer and her parents. The family were loaded into a train to be deported in May 1942, but during a stop in Prešov, they were removed from the train at the direct initiative of Bishop Gojdič, who personally prepared and confirmed the baptism certificate of Erika, daughter of Zoltán Fleischer, and Regina, born Wildmannova.¹⁹ Owing to this fact, the exception of the Constitutional Act No. 68/1942 Coll. on the deportation of Jews from May 15, 1942, applied to the whole family. Erika was four and a half at the time, but she could remember some traumatic moments very well. Their family owned a candy store in Sabinov, which was liquidated on January 20, 1941. It was taken over by an aryanisator from Sabinov. Sometime later, their family home was also transferred to the State. She remembered how the Jewish families from Sabinov were concentrated before the transport in front of the school, from where they all had to go to the station. Their possessions consisted of personal belongings stored and tied in a sheet. She felt uneasy in the carriage, as there were many people, and they were standing right next to each other. Her grandmother was holding her in her arms. The locked train moved on May 22, 1942, and stopped in Prešov, where they were freed. She described it as follows: "It was at one station – now I know it was in Prešov –

¹⁸ P. Borza, *Gréckokatolícka cirkev a Židia na Slovensku v rokoch 1939-1945*, Prešov 2017, s. 127.

¹⁹ AA, Testimony of Erika Klein (March 18, 2007).

the train stopped, the door opened and the members of the HG or SS, I am not sure, ordered that my mother, father and I should get off. My grandparents stayed in the carriage. I know from my cousin – he is already dead – that he arrived at the station in Prešov and reported to the HG or SS members that he had been a messenger sent by Bishop Gojdič and presented a document of my baptism, on the basis of which we were released.”²⁰ They returned to Sabinov, where they went on living in poverty and under constant surveillance. They continued to wear the yellow star and as a child, she was not allowed to play with other children. They lived in isolation in great poverty, but as just a few, they were able to avoid deportation thanks to their saviour, Bishop Gojdič.

In May 1942, after having saved Erika and her family, the bishop wrote a courageous letter, moved by the brutal events. He addressed it to the Vatican embassy in Bratislava and requested the Holy See to act against the priest and the president, Jozef Tiso. First, he clearly described the behaviour of the members of HG and called it barbaric, surpassing all inhumanity. He devoted the first part of the letter to this account, explaining his indignation and fear that this atrocious behaviour might be associated with the Catholic Church. He wrote literally: “We were deeply saddened by the atrocities committed during the deportation of the Jews in eastern Slovakia by the so-called Hlinka Guard authorities, which were charged with implementing the decree on the deportation of the unfortunate Jewish people. The barbarities perpetrated on the poor people exceed all inhumanity and remind us of the Communist-Bolshevik actions in Russia, Spain and Mexico. [...] This arouses, on one hand, deep sorrow in the souls of more sensitive people, on the other hand, it wrongs the Catholic matter because there are quite a few who believe that the Holy See is not sufficiently informed about the deplorable barbarities, and therefore does not raise its voice against these atrocities.” The bishop asked the Vatican to put pressure on the President and thus try to prevent the crimes against the Jewish population. If he had not succeeded, according to Gojdič, he should have resigned. It was a radical demand on his part; however, he was aware of the events of the times and therefore proposed that he be forced to return to the secular state. He noted in the letter: “Therefore, I considered it my duty to submit to

²⁰ AA, Testimony of Erika Klein (January 16, 1996).

the noble Apostolic Nunciature the most sincere and courteous report on that matter, which arouses the greatest opposition among the Catholic clergy; I humbly beseech you to kindly reach out to the Holy Apostolic See, so that it would, through its gracious intervention, induce Rev. Mr. President of our Republic as a Catholic priest to stop the aforementioned atrocities committed against the Jews [...]. If this were not possible, let the Holy See deign to call on Rev. Mr. President to give up his office and hand it over to a secular person, so that the odium from implementing the regulations of the so-called Jewish code does not fall down upon the head of the Catholic clergy or the entire Catholic Church.”²¹ In the letter, just as in 1939, the bishop’s universal view on the defence of life appeared, where he defended not only the baptized, but also all Jews against the cruel treatment.

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The bishop saved almost three dozen racially persecuted people with his decisive approach. However, these are only those rescued from the vicinity of Prešov and Spiš because in fact, there were more of them. The documents indicate those rescued from Michalovce and Humenné. Most of them expressed their sincere gratitude to the bishop and appreciated his deep love, humanity and bravery. Already quoted Marianna Zachová, born Spitzerová, expressed her respect by saying: “... he was always very cordial to us. He was a brave, fearless individual who respected the dignity of every person. [...] I would very much like the heroic work of Bishop Gojdič to be recognized at least after his death.”²² This testimony, along with archival documents and other testimonies already cited, became part of the proposal for the granting of the in-memoriam award of the Righteous Among the Nations. The Yad Vashem Commission subsequently examined the request and decided to award the prize at its meeting on August 6, 2007, which was confirmed on October 30, 2007. The award was presented at the Primate’s Palace in Bratislava on January 27, 2008, with the participation of the high-level state officials as well as the

²¹ I. Kamenec, V. Prečan, S. Škovránek, *Vatikán a Slovenská republika (1939-1945). Dokumenty*, Bratislava 1992, s. 124-125.

²² AA, Testimony of Marianna Zach (January 2, 2007).

Bishop of Prešov, Ján Babjaka SJ. The great-nephew of Bishop Gojdič, Ing. arch. Ivan Gojdič, personally received the award Righteous among the Nations in memoriam from the hands of the Ambassador of the State of Israel and subsequently handed it over to the bishop of Prešov. Currently, the award takes the form of a medal and a certificate, which are displayed in the historical exposition of the archbishop's residence in Prešov.²³

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²³ P. B o r z a, *Spravodlivý medzi národmi*. In *Slovo – časopis gréckokatolíckej cirkvi*, 2008, roč. 40, č. 1, s. 12-13.

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