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**Anti-Semitism and Right-Wing Extremism
in the Czech Republic**

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The purpose of this lecture is to give a summary of anti-Semitism in the Czech republic in the most recent period, i.e. after the political changes in 1989. Such information must necessarily start with the statement, based on the evaluation of experts recording and analysing anti-Semitic incidents all over the world, that the local situation is significantly better than in many other post-totalitarian states and moreover better than in most of the western countries. That of course doesn't mean that anti-Semitism does not exist in the Czech Republic, however it says that incidents of this kind are marginal and in fact xenophobia is in general not directed against Jews but rather against Roma, Vietnamese, Ukrainians and other foreigners. Documentary evidence, in the form of surveys of public opinion made by local agencies as well as by the American-Jewish Committee¹, supports this view.

To explain causes of this phenomenon, it is of course necessary to look back at the history of the country. In the Middle Ages, many pogroms as well as anti-Jewish manhunts took place. The large pogrom, which occurred in Prague on 18th April 1389, is still remembered in the Czech Luach². The placing of Jews on an equal footing with the majority population in the middle of the nineteenth century gradually brought about the development of the Jewish community as well as great enrichment of the social and cultural life of Bohemia. I am convinced that the substantial progress made in Czech cultural life between the two World Wars was, among other things, caused by the process of emancipation of Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century in Austria-Hungary.

This golden era was ended by a wave of anti-Jewish feeling in many European countries. At approximately the same time (the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), three important anti-Semitic cases took place in Europe. The first of them occurred in France. An officer of the General Staff, Alfred Dreyfus, was accused in 1894 of High Treason and sentenced to demotion and and life imprisonment in Devil's Island. Emil Zola appeared in defence of Dreyfus and publicly accused his own nation of the abuse of patriotism and of an appalling miscarriage of justice. Mainly thanks to his personal courage and perseverance, Dreyfus was fully pardoned in 1906³.

In Kiev in October 1913 there was the case of Mendel Beilis. He was accused of ritual murder but although the government interfered in an effort to secure a guilty verdict, he was acquitted for lack of evidence. The jury included five peasants.

The third case took place in Bohemia. At Easter in 1899, Leopold Hilsner was arrested and accused of ritual murder of Anežka Hruzová from Polná, a small town in the Czecho-Moravian Highlands. He was sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted to life-imprisonment by Imperial sanction. During the general amnesty of 1918, he was released but was never pardoned. Professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk stood up in defence of Hilsner. Like

¹ David Singer, What Czechs know about Holocaust? figures taken from new research by American Jewish Committee, in: Fenomén Holocaust, Collection of texts from international scientific conference, Prague – Terezín, 6-8 October 1999,

² Jewish calendar

³ Helena Krejcová, Stories of Passions and Noise (Příběhy plné vášní a rámusu), Jewish Yearly 751 (1990-1991), Council RŽNO in Prague;

Zola in France, Masaryk saw anti-Semitism as a fatal danger to the Czech nation. As a result, he became a target of a considerable and spiteful hate-campaign, which was connected to growing Czech nationalism. Many Czech anti-Semites profited politically from anti-Jewish manhunts and some Czech nationalists lost their inner inhibitions and openly expressed their anti-Semitism. In the light of this, Masaryk's personal courage in upholding his principles is all the more impressive and these qualities were later important both in the founding of the Czechoslovak State and the position it established for itself on the world stage.⁴

For the twenty years of its existence, the First Republic was clearly democratic and very tolerant towards Jewish individuals and communities. It was to a high degree Masaryk and his demonstratively expressed pro-Jewish attitudes that formed non-written norms. In a time of increasing anti-Semitic and anti-democratic persecution in Germany, this republic was an oasis of democracy, which provided a refuge for people endangered by Nazism and also the opportunity of escape through emigration to other countries.

As an example may serve the escape of German writers and social scientists Thomas and Heinrich Mann, who were granted the right of domicile in the small Czech town of Proseč by Skuteč and, on this basis, received Czechoslovak nationality. With the help of Czechoslovak passports they were subsequently able to emigrate to the U.S.A.

Thomas Mann remained a Czechoslovak citizen until he received American nationality in 1944. His brother, Heinrich, remained a Czechoslovakian citizen until his death in 1950. Ten thousand other refugees, mainly Jews, tried to save their lives by fleeing to this last democracy in central Europe and for some of them it was the route to freedom.

The signing of the Munich Agreement, which completely changed the political situation in Czechoslovakia, ended this situation. Extremist parties and movements including Czech Fascism, which had until that time been of marginal importance and insignificant, acquired more power. But even democratic parties advocated fascist and anti-Semitic policies after that time. This was characteristic of the Agricultural Party and the so-called National Socialists. These rapid political developments created a situation markedly in contrast to the ethical and moral principles respected in the period before the Munich Agreement. It is clear that these unnatural, imported changes caused by the Munich Agreement prepared the internal social conditions for the coming German occupation and the beginning of the genocide of the Jewish inhabitants of the country. Anti-Semitism played an important role in the development of the ideological apparatus of the regime and even of individual political parties.

With the German occupation and the creation of the „Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia“, these negative processes speeded up. Czech society structured itself similarly to many other occupied lands. A group collaborating with the occupying powers was created. But only a small part of this was ideologically motivated. Many more collaborators expected material profit as a result of their co-operation in the new political climate. An example of this is the actions of the medical and legal associations, which, on their own initiative, excluded their Jewish colleagues as a way of gaining additional clients. It is known that the Protectorate authorities intended to confiscate Jewish property through its own auspices. This was prevented by the German occupying powers themselves who, after the experience of confiscations in Slovakia, had no intention of missing out on the opportunities this process offered. However, the majority of the non-Jewish population was merely passive by-standers, while a certain part allowed themselves to be corrupted by the small advantages collaboration

⁴Helena Krejčová, *ibid*;

afforded them. Others were likewise corrupted in their endeavours not to complicate their own lives or were blackmailed by the possibility of putting themselves in danger. Sample of Czech actors may serve as a good example. Of these I can name Jára Kohout and Jindřich Plachta who actively performed in the anti-Jewish sketches broadcast by the Protectorate.⁵

The persecuted Jews themselves watched the approaching disaster with growing tension and only a few had a genuine chance to save themselves. However, they still felt themselves to be the inhabitants of a democratic Czechoslovak Republic. Evidence of this comes from not only the testimonies of survivors but the fact that Czech Jewish women, on the brink of death, sang the Czech National Anthem, „Where is my Home?“ as well as Hatikva in the gas chambers at Auschwitz.⁶

The returning fragments of Jewish communities became the object of another wave of anti-Jewish feeling. In Slovakia, several pogroms occurred, sparked off by disputes over the possessions that should have been returned to their original owners. In Bohemia, there were similar feelings, but these did not lead to actual physical violence, but rather to an attempt to misuse President Beneš's decrees, which were an unnecessary redress of the situation created by Nazi legislators. Several cases about Jewish possessions, which were confiscated on the basis of the accusation that the rightful owners were German, still remain unresolved. Local communists, who, by making confiscations in this way, seized factories, buildings and businesses, played the biggest role in these court-cases. It has to be said that these communist confiscations were only surpassed by the robbery of the century, which was the nationalisation after 1948.

The post-war epoch did not mean a full return to the democratic situation of the First Republic. The influence of Moscow changed many things and, as many communists returned from exile in Moscow, they brought with them the Russian brand of anti-Semitism. The failure to co-operate between the political parties in the so-called National Front was only the prelude to the practical degradation of democracy, which led to unlimited government by one party – the communists. After February 1948, when the communists carried out the Palace Coup and took over all power in the country, other parties were excluded. Democrats were removed and sentenced to lead only an apparent existence. They existed formally but had no opportunity to develop real political activity, and were replaced by easily controlled puppets.

During this first period, there was support for the foundation of the state of Israel. The Czechoslovak Republic even supported the Jewish fighters with important weaponry, which decided the outcome of the country's first war of liberation. But from the point at which it became obvious that Israel would not be an obedient satellite of the Soviet Union, there was a return to the traditional pattern of anti-Semitic policies, this time applied on the basis of the relationship to the state of Israel. Because anti-Semitism itself was unacceptable under its own name, it became „anti-Zionism“, Zionism being labelled a product of imperialism.⁷ This code word was used to disguise anti-Semitic acts, expressions and so on. This blatantly transparent disguise was used in the famous court-case of Rudolf Slánský, General Secretary of the Czech Communist Party in 1952.⁸ The Soviet advisors singled out Slánský because of his Jewish origin and it was used against him as a substantial part of his persecution as well. This

⁵ Just Vladimír, *Vlasta Burian (Rehabilitation of the King of Comics)*, Rozmluvy, Prague 1993

⁶ Salmen Gradowski, *In the Heart of the Hell (V srdci pekla)*, in : *Terezín Studies and Documents 1998*, Academia, Prague 1998, page 311;

⁷ I am using terms in their contemporary forms, it would be more correct to use everything in inverted commas.

⁸ He was arrested in December 1951, tried in November 1952, and sentenced to death.

camouflage (hiding anti-Semitism behind the name anti-Zionism) was used throughout the communist period. It is even possible to meet this confusion today, mostly in the context of left-wing anti-Semitism as part of Marxist or, more precisely, communist ideology. Communist anti-Semitism was not merely limited to propaganda. Jews and Jewish communities were under the permanent control of the STB. Individuals were summoned for interrogation. Many people co-operated with the secret police, and provided information about what was going on inside Jewish communities. I can demonstrate this with a specific example. My mother worked at that time in the Council of Jewish Religious Communities and she had been summoned for interrogation many times, summons which she defied by claiming ill health. I was myself checked by the State Police simply because of the fact that I visited her at work from time to time. The cultural and individual life of communities was controlled. Each theatre performance or celebration of a holiday had to be first discussed and accepted by the religious secretary of the Ministry or an appropriate religious office. Although religious services were tolerated, organising purely cultural events at the Jewish town hall was considered to be suspicious. Teaching Jewish traditions and the preparation of new generations was not allowed. People were afraid to declare their Jewish roots. Jews were not murdered but the race was to disappear in a „natural“ way. In this way the totalitarian regime continued what the Nazis began.

November 1989 brought enormous changes. Straight away, there was a rapid transformation in the material life of Czech society. This was followed by a substantially slower-changing moral outlook of the inhabitants, the hierarchy of their values and stereotypes of behaviour. This contrast is growing and is possible to observe immediately in everyday life. I can quote a whole range of examples: the staff of supermarkets who still behave towards customers in the same way as under communist rule: tradesmen who quote extortionate prices for low-quality workmanship: and, on the other hand, customers who can't summon up the courage to defend themselves against such people, and so on. One part of this moral anomaly is a loss of own identity, social and other life certainties, and connected to this is a rise in criminality and general aggressiveness. For some members of certain social groups, the increasing social tension is released by xenophobic acts which, for the time being, are directed towards racial groups other than Jews. The evidence to support this is that anti-Semitism has not been (and for the moment still is not) a card that can be played for political benefit. And this is true even though some political parties from the far right tried in the past to use anti-Semitic themes.

Periodically, repeated surveys into the relationship of the Czech population to other nations and to ethnic minorities have provided a relatively stable range of attitudes. Unambiguously, the most positive relationship the Czech population has is with Slovaks. More than two-thirds of people questioned expressed positive attitudes. Somewhat less positive was the relationship with Jews, Germans and Poles. On the other hand, in the third group, negative attitudes outweighed positive ones. This was the situation regarding Vietnamese, Russians, Ukrainians and inhabitants of Baltic states. Strongly negative reactions were found in regard to Roma people.

If we look at the same data over a period of time, it is possible to claim that despite small movements in opinion in relation to Germans and Poles, attitudes towards Jews and Roma people are very stable. On the whole this data attests to a relatively good situation for members of the Jewish communities in the Czech Republic. However, from the same figures it is possible to foresee potential dangers. Inter-ethnic tensions and symptoms and certain xenophobia in Czech society are obvious. At this time, such feelings are not directed towards Jews but history offers us examples of many dramatic changes in this area. If they are beating Romas it is only a step away from beating Jews.

These conclusions confirm and at the same time extend the results of international comparative surveys which were carried out in 1991 by the American-Jewish Committee in co-operation with agencies in Poland, Hungary and the then Czechoslovakian Republic. The main finding supported current knowledge in confirming that the most negative attitudes towards Jews are to be found in Poland. Czechoslovakia and Hungary represented far more positive environments. But there was a wide range of opinions from Czechoslovak respondents. Those from Bohemia were similar in their views to those in Hungary, whereas those from Slovakia were more similar to the Poles. In all three countries, attitudes to Jews were less negative than towards „Gypsies“, „communist functionaries“, Arabs, Asian and Negroes and so on. In addition, in all the countries there were positive attitudes towards Israel, although at the same time attitudes towards Zionism were strongly negative. This is not difficult to explain. The confusion of terms, which was created by communist propaganda, has survived through its own momentum. Finally, the last of these findings states that in all three countries the predominant opinion is that it is necessary to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust.⁹ All these results were again confirmed by other surveys of public opinion which were undertaken by the American-Jewish Committee in 1999 in the context of preparation for the international scientific conference entitled „The Phenomenon of the Holocaust.“¹⁰

This generally positive evaluation of the situation in the Czech Republic doesn't mean that there is no anti-Semitism at all. Even here we can find neo-nazi leaflets and the publishing of anti-Semitic periodicals or pamphlets. The publication of Hitler's „Mein Kampf“ is still fresh in the memory, as was the „protocol the Zionist Wisemen“ (?). The anti-Semitic weekly „Politika“ was prohibited a long time ago but its publisher, Josef Tomáš, for a very long time successfully defended himself by the use of the code of Civil Law for freedom of speech. For our legislative system and other administrative bodies it was very difficult to find a way to stop this misuse of civil rights. Similarly, the publisher of the so-called „protocols of the Zionist Wisemen“, Miroslav Gabriel, defended himself by claiming that his publication could not be in support of an organisation that, because it is not registered, officially does not exist.¹¹ It sounds unbelievable, but this absurdity was accepted by the district court of Prague 5. Practically the same defence was used in the case of the publication of „Mein Kampf“ many years later.

In the last few years a display of anti-Semitic propaganda of Arabian origin has begun to appear as well, which is intent of questioning the existence of the state of Israel, on spreading crude, primitive rumours and a propagandistic confusion of basic terms. An example is the term „terrorism“. In this propaganda, the terrorists are not the Arabic extremists murdering civilian Israeli inhabitants in coffee shops and on buses. Instead they are members of the Israeli army carrying out defensive security activities in areas captured in the defensive war provoked by the Arabic side.

The main source of anti-Semitic provocation and aggression are different groups from skinhead movements, which are further differentiated into several organisations. According to the Information Service of the Ministry of the Interior, right-wing extremists have made an attempt to enter the political scene in the Czech Republic. Co-operation exists between

⁹ Renae Cohen, Jennifer L. Golub, Attitudes Towards Jews in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, A comparative survey, AJC-Institute of Human Relations, New York 1991

¹⁰ David Singer, What Czechs Know About the Holocaust, Collection of texts from international scientific conference, Prague – Terezín, 6-8 October 1999

¹¹ Paragraph of the criminal law says that „it is punishable to advocate or support movements which infringe the rights and freedom of other national groups and minorities“ – this is not a quotation but a free paraphrase.

individual organisations and at the same time contacts are kept with extreme right-wing groups abroad. Activists from these extremist organisations know the legislative and legal environments very well and are trying to enter the political arena through larger and large displays. Their hateful ideology and propaganda is not spread directly, but they use arguments, which are on the edge of the law.

The Information Service of the Ministry of the Interior gave this list of the most important right-wing extremist groups:

The Patriotic Front (V.F.) was registered by the Ministry of the Interior on 17th June 1993 as a Civil Association. The majority of its members are nationalistically oriented young people, some of whom still belong to the skinhead movement. As well as the regular association activities, they are trying to operate publicly in the form of organising different demonstrations, concerts and similar meetings, as well as putting up posters, and various publications, which are spread, in a sympathetic environment and on their web-sites. The members of the Patriotic Front participate with the skinhead organisation „Blood and Honour“ at many events.

In the year 2000, the Patriotic Front split, one part becoming the organisation „**Vlast.cz**“, which later on tried to establish a political group under the name „**National Front**“. The remaining part of the Patriotic Front is more successful and established (with 850 signatures) the political group **National Unification**.¹² This was registered with the Ministry of the interior on 12th April 2002.

„**The National Alliance**“ (N.A.) was registered with the Ministry of the Interior from 26th October 1998 to 15th April 2001. Its Membership was about 130 registered members. The N.A. organised alone or took part in various demonstrations and gatherings. It also organised a ceremony to venerate the memory of Doctor Emil Hácha. They published a bi-monthly magazine called Flag, which drew on the publications of the Czech fascists from the time of the First Republic and Protectorate. The National Alliance is basically a regional organisation (from the Rakovník area) with a strong affiliation to skinheads. Their emphasis is on nationalism, national sovereignty and in particular emphasis on the so-called moral revival of the nation (young people). Under this slogan it intends the closure of entertainment venues, the placing of homosexuals and „other sexual deviants“ outside the law, forbidding the production of pornography, sweeping prostitutes from the streets, long-term prison sentences for possessing drugs, death sentences for selling drugs, and a purge of teachers (to exclude those who compromised themselves by co-operating with the communist regime) etc.

Republican Youth: Its constitution was drawn up on the 24th October 1998, by the editorial collective of „Republic“. It was the youth organisation of Sládek's SPR-RSC. On the 5.2.02 the Minister of the Interior decided to break it up.

An important member (vice-chairman RM) was Tomáš Kebza, the author of many anti-Semitic, anti-Roma and xenophobic articles in „Republic“. He is inspired by the activities of Le Pen's youth wing of the National Front. He is still active despite the suppression of the activities of his mother-party. He organised a petition against the spread of drugs. For the

¹² Reminiscences on the subject from the time of the second republic and nazi occupation through which was destroyed political freedom. Individual political parties were allowed to exist only inside of this organisation. The interesting thing is how similar was the structure of the political parties during the communist era.

protection of these events he is co-operating with Nazi skinheads, which are working as bodyguards against anti-Fascists. He also participates in other more militant events.

Blood and Honour: a branch of the international network. Has an ideology of militant neo-nazism and racism. Organises concerts, sells recordings, badges and other materials.

National Resistance- Originally also a branch of the international network. Attempted to establish a political party, later discovered to be unrealistic. Ideologically - camouflaged neo-nazism. Typically replaces the attributes of nazi ideology with transparent substitutes: for example Sieg Heil is substituted for the Czech translation „Success to Victory“. „The last victim of the Second World War- Rudolf Hess“ or substituting „the fight for the white race“ with „the fight for European civilisation“. The obvious aim is gaining political power.