

## Public Health as Resistance in the Sered' Camp in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>

“Since the camps must exist, we must support them,”<sup>2</sup> declared Abraham Armin Frieder, a Neolog Rabbi and member of the Jewish Center (*Ústredňa Židov* in Slovak; *Judenzentrale* in German) in Slovakia—an institution similar to “Jewish Councils” in Nazi-occupied Europe. Established in September 1940, the Jewish Center was subordinated to the Slovak Central Economic Office (*Ústredný hospodársky úrad*, ÚHÚ) led by Augustín Morávek and supervised by the Nazi advisor for Jewish affairs in Slovakia Dieter Wisliceny.<sup>3</sup> If they did not directly select members, Slovak authorities approved the leaders of the Jewish Center. While the Jewish Center differed from other “Jewish Councils” in terms of its name, some local organizational elements, and the fact that it was established in a country not occupied by Nazi Germany, the Jewish Center indeed functioned as “Jewish Councils” elsewhere. Every member of the Jewish community and every person of Jewish origin was forced to become a member,<sup>4</sup> and the Jewish Center, in turn, was obliged to implement all antisemitic laws and orders and anti-Jewish regulations

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2 Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter YVA), M.5, File 81, Protocols of meetings, 02 April 1943–24 August 1944.

3 The Central Economic Office was established in September 1940 to manage everything connected with the exclusion of Jews from Slovak economic and social life and to transfer Jewish property to Christian Slovaks. The office was directly subordinated to the prime minister. Katarína Hradská, *Prípád Wisliceny. Nacistickí poradcovia a židovská otázka na Slovensku* (Bratislava: Academic Electronic Press, 1999), 31.

4 Eduard Nižňanský and Lívia Gardianová, eds., *Holokaust na Slovensku 6. Deportácie v roku 1942. Dokumenty* (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 2005), 41.

introduced by the Slovak State.<sup>5</sup> One such task was to participate in the creation and operation of a network of concentration and forced labor camps and centers. Slovak state officials introduced this network in order to segregate Jews from the non-Jewish population, exploit them for labor, and prepare them for deportation. In autumn 1942, once the sole function of the camps became forced labor, the Jewish Center believed that by asserting control through the self-organized administration in the three main forced labor camps in Slovakia—Nováky, Sereď, and Vyhne—the Center would be able to protect inmates from deportation. In this article, I analyze the role of the Jewish Center and the Jewish leadership of Sereď—through the camp’s Jewish Council (*Židovská rada*)—in developing a public health system, framing it as a daring act of resistance against the antisemitic policies of the Slovak state and the genocidal plans of the National Socialist regime.

Taking the conditions of the forced labor camps of Slovakia into consideration, I understand public health as preventing disease and promoting health through the organized efforts and informed choices of the prisoner society—including physical and psychological health and social well-being.<sup>6</sup> Efforts to maintain public health in Sereď included the development of strategies to promote sanitation and cleanliness in the camp, as well as the construction of a medical care system, alternative healthcare resources, and childcare facilities. This article focuses especially on the Jewish Center’s contributions to the development of this public health system in Sereď between the fall 1942, when Sereď began operating solely as a labor camp, and the end of August 1944. After the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising—an armed insurrection against the collaborationist Slovak state that broke out on August 29, 1944—Nazi Germany occupied Slovakia, initiating a new phase of deportations. Nazi authorities also began using Sereď as a concentration camp starting in September 1944 until March 31, 1945.<sup>7</sup> Once Nazi authorities took over Sereď, the Jewish leadership in Slovakia lost most of its capacity to provide aid to Jews incarcerated in the camp.

By focusing on the Jewish Center’s coerced cooperation with the Slovak state and its use of bribery to try and improve conditions in

5 Gila Fatranová, *Boj o prežitie* (Bratislava: Múzeum židovskej kultúry, 2007), 48.

6 Penka D. Gatseva and Mariana Argirova, “Public Health: The Science of Promoting Health,” *Journal of Public Health* 19 (2011): 205-6.

7 See Ján Hlavinka, Eduard Nižňanský, and Radoslav Ragač, “Koncentračný tábor v Sereďi vo svetle novoobjavených dokumentov (september 1944–marec 1945),” *Druhá vlna deportácií Židov zo Slovenska*, ed. Viera Kováčová (Banská Bystrica: Múzeum Slovenského Národného Povstania, 2010): 50-80.

camps, this article analyzes the Jewish leadership's evolving efforts to introduce public health measures in Sered'. In order to discern the nature of Sered's public health, I draw from records of the meetings of the Jewish Center and the Jewish Council in Sered'; documents produced by Slovak state authorities; articles published in the newspaper of the Jewish Center, *Vestník Ústredne Židov* (henceforth *Vestník*); and the testimonies of survivors. I argue that the effective public health system constructed by the Jewish leadership hindered Slovak political elites' efforts to destroy the Slovak Jewry; moreover, this system was part of a large-scale survival strategy developed by the Jewish Center. Using Sered' as an example of a public health system constructed in a society *in extremis*, I illuminate one of the core dilemmas *and* accomplishments of the Jewish leadership in Slovakia during the Holocaust. This chapter, thus, contributes to discussions concerning "Jewish Councils'" public health measures as a form of resistance to extermination.

### *Facilitating Public Health in Sered'*

Prior to the launch of the Jewish Center's efforts to improve conditions in Sered', the camp's main function was assembling persons in preparation for their deportation from Slovakia. Built on the premises of a former military barracks, Sered' served as a transit and concentration center; once a sufficient number of Jews had been assembled, they were deported to destinations in the General Government (German-occupied Poland) between March and October 1942.<sup>8</sup> But already in July 1942, Sered' began to take on an additional function as a labor camp, which was reflected in its name change—from Concentration Center for Jews in Sered' to Concentration and Labor Camp for Jews in Sered'.<sup>9</sup> Starting in the fall of 1942, Sered' functioned solely as a labor camp, and from January 1943, the name of the camp changed again: to Labor Camp for Jews in Sered'.<sup>10</sup> Once the Slovak authorities finalized plans for the deportation of Jews from Slovakia in October 1942, the Jewish Center came to believe that labor camps and their profitability would ensure the survival of camp inmates and,

8 Nižňanský and Gardianová, eds., *Holokaust na Slovensku* 6.

9 About the changes of names and functions of Sered', see: Eduard Nižňanský, Vanda Rajčan, and Ján Hlavinka, "Sered'," in *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933-1945*, vol. 3, ed. Geoffrey P. Megargee (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2018), 881-83.

10 Eva Vrabcová, "Pracovní tábor Židov v Seredi (1941-1945)," *Archivum Sala. Archivna ročenka* 2 (2005): 110-24.

thus, part of the Jewish community of Slovakia.<sup>11</sup> However, any of the actions of the Jewish Council in Sered' or, for that matter, any agency of the Jewish Center was limited by Jewish organs' subordination to the Slovak state, which pursued antisemitic policies. Consequently, the Jewish community in Slovakia did not endorse the Jewish Center and its promotion of labor camps as a means of survival. Many Jews recognized the potential dangers of concentrating the Jewish population in labor camps even when such placement was promoted by the Jewish Center. In other words, the institution imposed by Slovak and Nazi authorities lacked the trust of the community.<sup>12</sup> But for members of the Jewish Center, and especially those active in the Working Group—a clandestine organization that sought to aid Jews and halt the deportations, the existence of labor camps was understood as one of a range of efforts to protect Jews from deportation.<sup>13</sup> Because there was no chance of preventing the creation of forced labor camps, the Jewish Center focused on ensuring the safety of inmates and working together with Sered's Jewish leadership to facilitate acceptable living conditions for forced laborers in the camp system.<sup>14</sup>

Slovak state authorities refused to take any direct responsibility for Jewish life in the camps. On the contrary, the intentional and systematic persecution of the Jewish community in Slovakia and its pauperization through the process of Aryanization was designed to inflict as much harm on the Jewish community as possible.<sup>15</sup> But once the main function

11 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (hereafter USHMM), RG-60.5010, Testimony of Andrej Steiner. See also: Emanuel Frieder, *To Deliver Their Souls: The Struggle of a Young Rabbi During the Holocaust* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1987), 104.

12 See: YVA, M.5, File 81, Protocols of meetings of representatives of labor camps, in the Ustredna Kancelaria Pracovnych Taborov (Central Office of Labor Camps for Jews), regarding the economic activities of the camps, 02 April 1943–24 August 1944; Aron Grünhut, *Katastrofa slovenských Židov* (Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2015); Denisa Nešťáková, "Jewish Centre and Labour Camps in Slovakia," in *Between Collaboration and Resistance: Papers from the 21st Workshop on the History and Memory of National Socialist Concentration Camps*, ed. Karoline Georg, Verena Meier, and Paula Oppermann (Berlin: Metropol, 2020.): 117-45.

13 For more about how Jewish Center members understood its role, see: Frieder, *To Deliver Their Souls*; Oskar Neumann, *Im Schatten des Todes. Ein Tatsachenbericht vom Schicksalskampf des slowakischen Judentums* (Tel Aviv: Olamenu, 1956); USHMM, RG-60.5010, Testimony of Andrej Steiner.

14 Denisa Nešťáková, "'Privileged' Space or Site of Temporary Safety? Women and Men in the Sered' Camp," in *Places, Spaces, and Voids in the Holocaust*, ed. Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 315-21.

15 For more on Aryanization in Slovakia, see: Eduard Nižňanský and Ján Hlavinka, eds., *Arizácie* (Bratislava: Stimul, 2010); Nižňanský and Hlavinka, *Arizácie v regiónoch Slovenska* (Bratislava: Stimul, 2010).

of Sereď shifted to forced labor, high profits with low overhead and individual opportunities for enrichment became the main motivations behind Slovak authorities' willingness to implement some of the Jewish Center's plans for the camp. Already in mid-1942, the Jewish Center entrusted several men from its own ranks with the administration of Sereď and its workshops.<sup>16</sup> But only in April 1943 were these men officially organized by the Slovak authorities into the camp's administrative body, the "Jewish Council" in Sereď.<sup>17</sup> Sereď's self-administration gradually expanded as the Jewish Center managed to strengthen their position thanks to agreements with the Slovak state that were primarily focused on transforming the camp into a profitable enterprise. But any agreement to improve conditions in Sereď was very closely connected with "purchased sympathy," that is, bribes to important politicians and functionaries.<sup>18</sup> Thus, apart from collecting resources that would improve material and physical conditions for inmates and facilitate the construction of a social welfare system, the Jewish leadership had to have sufficient resources for payoffs that would allow them to implement their plans in the first place.

In September 1942, the former head of the camp guards Jozef Vozár, a man notorious for his violence toward inmates, was replaced by Imrich Vašina, who was keen to leverage his new position for his own benefit and accepted bribes from the Jewish Center. The Jewish Center created a special fund called the "Black Account" in order to improve conditions in the camp; this fund held a significant amount of money used specifically for bribing Vašina.<sup>19</sup> The head of the eight-member Jewish Council in Sereď and representative of the Social Department of the Jewish Center, Alexander Pressburger, provided further details about the Black Account: "It was funded by rich Jews and the Jewish Center—it should help provide sick inmates with medicine and better food, and from this fund, 10,000 KS [*Koruna slovenská*—Slovak crowns] were given to Vašina monthly ... to try to secure some relief for the inmates."<sup>20</sup> The last Elder of the Jewish Center Oskar Neumann agreed with Pressburger and added

16 See: USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 859.

17 Slovak National Archive (hereafter SNA), Fund MV, Box 421, File 406-543-2.

18 About the corruption in the Slovak state and the Holocaust, see: Ivan Kamenec, "Fenomén korupcie v procese tzv. riešenia 'židovskej otázky' na Slovensku v rokoch 1938-1945," *Forum Historiae* 5, no 2 (2011): 96-112.

19 YVA, M.5, File 152, Legal documentation of the trial against Imrich Vašina, 01 March–22 May 1947.

20 YVA, M. 48, File 66.

that “due to the aforementioned so-called ‘favours,’ [Vašina]—especially in 1944—started to treat inmates better.”<sup>21</sup> As was the case for many labor camps or ghettos, the Jewish Center believed that forced labor camps could potentially function as a form of protection for the Jews incarcerated in them.<sup>22</sup> The Center also proposed new projects to the Slovak state functionaries, such as establishing workshops for state companies in the camps; these plans were intended to demonstrate that the camps (and by extension the Jews imprisoned in them) were valuable assets to the national economy.<sup>23</sup> The Jewish Center was not exceptional in its use of bribes. Similar to what Anna Hájková has shown for the Theresienstadt ghetto, in the case of Sered', by asserting control via the self-organized administrative structure of the camp through the help of bribes and their coerced cooperation with Slovak and German authorities, Jewish functionaries aimed to redefine Sered'. By so doing, they sought to create a social space on their own terms in order to yield some benefit from an otherwise dire situation.<sup>24</sup>

The poor living conditions in the camp were directly related to its original function as an assembly camp. Sered' could offer nothing more than a short and miserable stopover prior to deportation. Insufficient food, poor-quality drinking water, the lack of medical supplies, and non-existent care for children and the elderly were among the challenges the Jewish Center and the Jewish leadership of the camp had to address. Consequently, any operational costs and resources needed for construction and maintenance had to be covered by the profits of camp workshops or with funding provided by the Jewish Center, which received donations from members of the Jewish community in Slovakia and financial aid from abroad.<sup>25</sup> The Jewish Center put Gisi Fleischmann in charge of securing funds for provisions for the labor camps in Slovakia; Fleischmann was an employee of the office of the Jewish Center in Bratislava and the leader of the working group in charge of cultivating

21 YVA, M. 48, File 67.

22 See Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010); Michal Unger, *Reassessment of the Image of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008).

23 Eduard Nižňanský, Igor Baka, and Ivan Kamenec, eds., *Holokaust na Slovensku 5. Židovské pracovné tábory a strediská na Slovensku 1938-1945* (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimešku, Židovská náboženská obec, Vojenský historický ústav, 2004), 229-37, 276-81.

24 Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 58.

25 SNA, Fund MV, Box 175, File 1310/1943.

contacts with numerous Jewish organizations abroad.<sup>26</sup> Photographs showing happy, healthy young men and women and smiling children were taken by the Jewish Center as a proof that resources were being used to promote wellbeing in the camps, and they sent these images to secure more funds from abroad to further improve conditions for inmates of the camp.<sup>27</sup> But the assets of the pauperized Jewish community in Slovakia were shrinking, and it became more difficult to collect financial aid from abroad because the Slovak state entered the war as an ally of Nazi Germany.<sup>28</sup> Securing alternative sources of financial support became an existential problem for the Jewish Center. Calls to support Jewish inmates in labor camps started to appear in *Vestník*.<sup>29</sup> Numerous religious and literary texts highlighted charitable activity—*tzedakah*—to appeal for donations.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, the Jewish Center planned to establish a system through which people could make regular monthly contributions.<sup>31</sup>

Yet the agency of the Jewish leadership was limited by both the Slovak regime and the Hlinka Guards, who functioned as camp guards whose role was to control, punish, and enforce the objective of the camp—the segregation of Jews from the Slovak majority—and who were originally responsible for overseeing the concentration and deportation of Jews from Slovakia. Nevertheless, the Jewish administration in the camp was committed to ensuring the safety of camp inmates and improving living conditions in Sereď. The coerced cooperation of the Jewish Center and especially the bribes made to create a Jewish self-administration in the camp through the camp Jewish Council managed to shape life in Sereď. But even though forced laborers were promised they would be exempt

26 See: Katarína Hradská, ed., *Holokaust na Slovensku 3. Listy Gisely Fleischmannovej (1942-1944), snahy Pracovnej skupiny o záchranu slovenských a európskych židov* (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, Židovská náboženská obec, 2003), 14, 31-44. See also: Katarína Hradská, *Gizy Fleischmannová* (Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2012); Denisa Nešťáková, “Gisi Fleischmann—przywódczyni Żydów na Słowacji podczas II wojny światowej,” *Elity i przedstawiciele społeczności żydowskiej podczas II wojny światowej*, ed. Martyna Grądzka-Rejak and Aleksandra Namysłó (Warsaw: IPN, 2017): 473-89.

27 See: YVA, Photo Archive, File Slovakia, Album of various labor camps prepared by the Ústredná Židov (UZ) for the Slovak authorities.

28 YVA, M.5, File 81, Protocols of meetings, 02 April 1943–24 August 1944.

29 “Sociálna pomoc židovským pracovným táborom,” *Vestník ÚŽ*, February 26, 1943, 1.

30 See: Denisa Nešťáková, “Židovské reakcie na antisemitské postupy na Slovensku na stránkach Vestníka Ústredne Židov (1941-1944),” in *Judaica et Holocaustica 9. Propaganda antisemitizmu na Slovensku 1938-1945*, ed. Eduard Nižňanský (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, 2018), 25-54.

31 YVA, M.5, File 81, Protocols of meetings, 02 April 1943–24 August 1944.

from deportation as professionals working in camp workshops, inmates were forced into unfamiliar and poorly equipped barracks where they carried out their everyday lives among strangers. The psychological impact of persecution, the poor living conditions, and the lack of sanitation in the camp posed an imminent threat to the health of the inmates.

### *Public Health*

Unlike the two other labor camps in Vyhne and Nováky, Sereď was in an exceptional position because the Jewish Hospital in Bratislava was relocated to the grounds of the camp. Opened in 1931, the hospital had been one of the most modern medical facilities in Czechoslovakia at the time, and in July 1942, Slovak authorities forced it to move to Sereď.<sup>32</sup> The hospital's legal status was a matter of ongoing debate throughout its existence in the camp, and at the beginning, it was not subject to the camp's administration and was separated from the camp by a fence. Only in May 1943 was the hospital officially subordinated to the administration of Jewish labor camps, and it was supposed to serve the inmates of all three labor camps as well as Jews who were not yet incarcerated.<sup>33</sup> But the Jewish hospital was never directly subordinated to the Sereď camp administration, and, consequently, it was not directly involved in public health matters in the Sereď camp. For this reason, a deeper analysis of its role and function during the Holocaust is outside the scope of this chapter.

Public health activities in Sereď were undertaken by the medical staff of the camp clinic, the camp's Health Service, and later on by the Health Department of Sereď's Jewish Council—led by Dr. Jakub Herzog as well as the sub-department of the Jewish Center's Social Department responsible for health.<sup>34</sup> While conditions in the camp were favorable for outbreaks of disease, the Jewish leadership took action to prevent epidemics. When developing public health infrastructure in Sereď, the Jewish lead-

32 SNA, MV, Box 2473, File 406-570-86.

33 Barbora Pokrejš, "Zdravotná starostlivosť v koncentračnom a pracovnom tábore v Sereďi," *Acta Judaica Slovaca* 16 (2010): 27-33; Vrabcová, "Pracovný tábor Židov v Sereďi (1941-1945)," 110-24; Ján Hlavinka and Eduard Nižňanský, *Pracovný a koncentračný tábor v Sereďi* (Bratislava: DHS, 2009): 84-88.

34 YVA, M.5, File 68, Correspondence between the Central Economics Office and the Ministry of the Interior, the Policajne Riaditeľstvo (Police headquarters), the Central Union of Jewish Communities and other institutions, regarding the confiscation of Jewish property, and a collection of certificates regarding the receipt of Jewish property and its deposit by various offices, 1940-1944. See also: Hlavinka and Nižňanský, *Pracovný a koncentračný tábor v Sereďi*, 83 and 84-88.





Image 1: The Camp Clinic. Source: Slovak National Archive (SNA), Fund Slovenská tlačová kancelária (STK) [Slovak Press Office], photograph no. 444.

ership focused on two main aspects: care for the sick, and preventive measures including vaccination, ensuring the quality of food and drinking water, and overseeing sanitation in the camp. Improving hygienic conditions, providing adequate childcare, high-quality drinking water, proper toilets, and a vitamin-rich diet were seen as crucial for maintaining acceptable conditions in labor camps. Public health measures also included promoting the everyday hygiene of children, youth, and workers by distributing soap and insecticides for combating lice and performing regular disinfections. To optimize funds, sanitary products and disinfectants were produced in camp workshops established for that express purpose. One workshop prepared soaps for the camp laundry; an antiseptic for camp's clinic and later for the Jewish hospital in Sered'; tincture for eradicating fleas, bed bugs, and lice; toothpaste, tooth powder, and bleaches for teeth; oil and ointments for burns and frostbite; paraffin lotions for sore skin; and powder for children. Inmates received some sanitary products for free to prevent epidemics and infestations and to promote cleanliness and good hygiene.<sup>35</sup>

35 Pokreis, "Zdravotná starostlivosť v koncentračnom a pracovnom tábore v Seredi," 30.

## *Sanitation and Cleanliness*

Overseeing hygiene and ensuring cleanliness required the cooperation of all inmates. But it was only in the beginning of 1944 that *mikveh*, the Jewish ritual bath, seventeen showers, five bathtubs, and a steam disinfection device became available. However, while sanitary facilities were constructed only gradually, the strict enforcement of sanitary procedures in the camp was introduced well before 1944.<sup>36</sup> All inmates were required to take a bath or shower weekly and had to write down their name when they visited the washrooms. This list was checked every fourteen days. The names of those who did not have written proof of visiting sanitation facilities were announced in public.<sup>37</sup> If a person avoided showering or bathing, they were reported and compelled to do so. The Jewish leadership suggested that those who rejected this enforcement were to be “publicly punished.”<sup>38</sup> According to the report on the labor camps, any violation of the regulations of the Orderly Service would be punished with a fine, the withdrawal of benefits, additional work, or even imprisonment in the camp prison.<sup>39</sup> It is unclear how strictly these enforcement measures were followed or, for that matter, whether persons were literally dragged to the baths as happened, for instance, in the Vilna ghetto.<sup>40</sup>

Another public health measure required barbers to cut the hair and beards of inmates to reduce the risk of lice. In Sered', there were two camp barbers, Michal Seiler and Jozef Stern, and at least one hairdresser for women, Regina Sternová, Jozef's wife.<sup>41</sup> Every fourteen days, men were

36 Katarína Hradská, ed., *Holokaust na Slovensku 8. Ústredňa Židov* (Bratislava: DSH, 2008), 16-17.

37 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates of the Ustredna Zidov-UZ (Central Union of Jewish Communities), regarding the help given by the UZ to the deportees to labor camps, and regarding the organization of monthly support for these labor camps, 22 April 1942-10 August 1944.

38 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates, 22 April 1942-10 August 1944.

39 YVA, M.5, File 68, Correspondence between the Central Economics Office and the Ministry of the Interior, the Policajne Riaditelstvo (Police headquarters), the Central Union of Jewish Communities and other institutions, 1940-1944.

40 See Solon Beinfeld, “Health Care in the Vilna Ghetto,” *Holocaust Genocide Studies* 12, no. 1 (1998): 66-98; McKenna Longacre, Solon Beinfeld, Sabine Hildebrandt, Leonard Glantz, and Michael A. Grodin, “Public Health in the Vilna Ghetto as a Form of Jewish Resistance,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 2 (2015): 293-301.

41 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sered', Registration no. 710, 755, and 756.

required to visit the camp barber.<sup>42</sup> Because maintaining facial hair was viewed as a demonstration of men's orthodox faith, rabbis may have opposed such measures, but as of now, no source linking the influence of rabbis to this preventive measure has been found. The sources do not include any precise instructions for barbers; thus, the possibility that facial hair was accepted by camp authorities can be neither confirmed nor denied.

Often lacking in hygiene prior to internment, the influx of pauperized individuals who arrived after being imprisoned in different camps or labor centers and those who had been in hiding—who were often exhausted, filthy, infested with lice, and ill—constituted a grave risk to public health in the camp. As a preventive measure, the Central Office of Labor published a directive that persons infested with lice were not to be admitted to the camp.<sup>43</sup> Banning the admission of individuals infested with lice was meant to hinder any further infestation in the camp, and thus to prevent wasting resources for subsequent large-scale sanitary measures. It is, however, not clear what the procedure was if a person who had to be admitted to the camp was infested with lice. In Sered, cleanliness was mandated and enforced by the camp's Health Service, which was overseen by a chief physician and his medical staff.<sup>44</sup> All inmates had to clean the barracks weekly, including airing out *paillasons*, straw-filled bed ticks. The Orderly Service and the social counselor oversaw the cleanliness of barracks, and according to the accommodation order from autumn 1942, each barrack commander and his deputy were responsible for maintaining the order, sanitation, and cleanliness of their barrack. Every week, barrack commanders selected a unit to take on cleaning duties: two women cleaned the corridors, toilets, and washrooms, and men took out the garbage. Three persons were also responsible for sweeping the area around the barrack.<sup>45</sup> On the weekends, each family and every inmate had to participate in a thorough cleaning of their barrack, including sleeping and living quarters, corridors, and toilets. Every inmate was obliged to air their bedding and beat mattresses.<sup>46</sup> The weekly

42 YVA, M.5, File 68, Correspondence between the Central Economics Office and the Ministry of the Interior, the Policajne Riaditelstvo (Police headquarters), the Central Union of Jewish Communities and other institutions, 1940-1944.

43 Pokreis, "Zdravotná starostlivosť v koncentračnom a pracovnom tábore v Seredi," 29-30.

44 YVA, M. 5, File 87, Official documentation regarding Sered camp, including the camp regulations, 19 April 1944.

45 SNA, Fund MV, Box 393, File 1021/43.

46 Ibid.

cleaning was an essential preventative public health measure ordered by the Jewish leadership of Sered.

### *Medical Care*

Efforts to improve the conditions in the camp took time to yield fruit. The Jewish leadership secured proper garbage removal in autumn 1942; an adequate number of toilets, showers, and baths were available by the summer 1943; and a new well that supplied safe drinking water was dug only in the first half of 1944. Nutritious food was never secure, though a sufficient number of meals were available by 1943.<sup>47</sup> Until the Jewish leadership was able to successfully implement these measures, inmates suffered both physically and psychologically. Despite the fact that since the very beginning, a clinic operated in each labor camp, Sered's camp physician Dr. Jakub Herzog complained that the equipment furnishing the single room dedicated to patient treatment was primitive.<sup>48</sup> Medical supplies and equipment improved only in the autumn of 1943.<sup>49</sup> In addition to the initial shortage of medicine and medical equipment, the clinic lacked physicians.<sup>50</sup> The Slovak state faced a significant problem with regard to physicians with Jewish origins. In 1939, almost 44 percent of all physicians in Slovak territory were Jewish.<sup>51</sup> The number may have been even higher considering new converts, atheists, or those who did not claim a religion. Slovak authorities were aware that banning such a large number of doctors from practicing medicine would destroy the country's public health system. Therefore, the legal bans on Jewish physicians practicing medicine that had gradually been implemented starting in 1939 had

47 For each aspect of welfare, see: SNA, Fund MV, Box 393, File 1021/43; BArch, R 70, ID 9866760, File Bericht uber die judische Arbeitslager und -zentren in der Slowakei zum 30. Juni 1943 und uber ihre Tatigkeit im ersten Halbjahr 1943.

48 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates, 22 April 1942–10 August 1944. See also: Nina Paulovičová and Jozef Urminský, *Židovská komunita v dejinách mesta Hlohovec (1938-1945). Príbeh, ktorý prešiel tmou* (Hlohovec: Občianske združenie Ex Libris Ad Personam Hlohovec, 2009), 79 and 133; Jozef Sulaček, *Biele plášte. Tragické osudy židovských lekárov na Slovensku v období druhej svetovej vojny. II. Časť* (Bratislava: Slovenské národné múzeum. Múzeum židovskej kultúry, 2006), 45.

49 SNA, Fund MV, Box 393, File D2-14-0200/24742.

50 YVA, M.5, File 68, Correspondence between the Central Economics Office and the Ministry of the Interior, the Policajne Riaditeľstvo (Police headquarters), the Central Union of Jewish Communities and other institutions, 1940-1944.

51 Jozef Sulaček, *Biele plášte. Tragické osudy židovských lekárov na Slovensku v období druhej svetovej vojny. I. Časť* (Bratislava: Slovenské národné múzeum. Múzeum židovskej kultúry, 2005), 44.

to be reversed or amended.<sup>52</sup> A consequence this course correction was that medical staff were often transferred from camp to camp, mistakenly deported, removed from the deportation lists, or freed from camps and allowed to practice medicine. The situation in Sereď was similarly chaotic.

Although medical professionals were incarcerated in Sereď, there was an overall lack of practicing physicians in the camp. After the former camp's chief physician Dr. Marcel Altman was transferred to a state hospital in Žilina, Dr. Jakub Herzog became the chief medical officer, and at one point, he was the only physician working in the camp.<sup>53</sup> Dr. Maximilian Schiff, who was among the Jewish physicians to be deported, eventually served as a physician most probably from October 1942 until the dissolution of the camp in August 1944.<sup>54</sup> Dr. Maximilian Neufeld arrived in Sereď in October 1942 and stayed for over a year until he was transferred to Vyhne labor camp.<sup>55</sup> In December 1942, Dr. Koloman Deutsch was appointed to be a physician in Sereď, but he too was later transferred to the Nováky camp.<sup>56</sup> There were four professional nurses: Margita Kleinová, Edita Rothová, Edita Neumannová, and most likely Irma Pissková.<sup>57</sup> The ophthalmologist and dentist were a more stable presence in the camp. Starting in October 1942, Alžbeta Kornfeldová worked as an ophthalmologist in Sereď's clinic, and she remained in her position until the end of August 1944.<sup>58</sup> From October 1942 until February 1943, Lily Pretzelmayerová worked as Sereď's dentist. There were two dental technicians, Ondrej Neuwirth and Alexander Adler, who both started working in autumn 1942 and were released or transferred from Sereď in January and November 1943, respectively.<sup>59</sup> Livia (Lucy) Pressburger, the teenaged daughter of the head of Sereď's Jewish Council, worked as a dental assistant.<sup>60</sup>

52 Sulaček, *Biele plášte. I. časť*, 38-58.

53 Sulaček, *Biele plášte. II. časť*, 12; SNA, Fund MV Box 410, File 1465/43.

54 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 763; YVA, O.41, File 287, List of Jewish inmates from Czechoslovakia in Sereď camp, 01/1944.

55 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 568; Sulaček, *Biele plášte. II. časť*, 68-69.

56 Sulaček, *Biele plášte. II. časť*, 22.

57 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 373, 685, 589, and 617.

58 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 430; Sulaček, *Biele plášte. II. časť*, 56.

59 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 642, 593 and 5. See also *Biele plášte. II. časť*, 77.

60 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 640.

Sered's medical staff, entrusted by the Jewish Center, closely monitored the occurrence and spread of infectious and non-infectious diseases and sanitation in the camp. The chief physicians of all three camps reported that the increased incidence of illnesses such as an upset stomach, colds, and stomach ulcers, as well as cardiac disorders were predominantly caused by "mental instability among laborers."<sup>61</sup> Discussions between and the reports of the three camp physicians signaled that stress and emotional distress contributed to increases in noncommunicable illnesses. In addition to illnesses triggered and/or exacerbated by stress, Dr. Herzog suggested that Sered's location in a valley and its exposure to a direct wind from two sides produced a windy and dusty environment that led to diseases of the respiratory tract.<sup>62</sup> The limitations of Sered's clinic forced physicians to send their patients to the Jewish hospital or, in complicated cases, to a state hospital. The appropriate treatment of sick inmates was essential for the camp, but preventing the spread of diseases and the early detection of symptoms of illnesses were even more important. Sered's inmates were obliged to attend a preventive medical check-up once a month.<sup>63</sup> Mass immunization campaigns were conducted, and vaccines against typhoid and chicken pox were administered. One case of scarlet fever in November 1943 led to an immediate mass prophylactic vaccination campaign.<sup>64</sup>

### *Alternative Health Care Resources*

Due to the inadequate supply of food and its poor nutritional value, the Jewish leadership looked for sources of vitamins and minerals available in certain foods. The Jewish Center and the Sered Jewish Council remained concerned about a lack of specific vitamins crucial for the health and development of children, such as vitamins D and C. Physicians suggested that all members of the camp receive vitamin C supplements, but due to scarce resources, only children and pregnant women received them. However, the Jewish leadership, in particular representatives of the Health Department of the Jewish Center, understood the dangers of a vitamin C deficiency. This is why Dr. Eugen Guttmann, the representative of the Jewish Center's Health sub-department, suggested an alternative source

61 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates, 22 April 1942–10 August 1944.

62 Ibid.

63 YVA, M.5, File 87, Official documentation regarding Sered camp, 19 April 1944.

64 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates, 22 April 1942–10 August 1944.

of vitamin C: rose hip—ideally consumed as a tea, but he also provided a recipe for a rose hip jam. The suggestion was appreciated since rose hips grew abundantly nearby the Nováky camp. Rose hips would soon be collected and distributed to all the Jewish forced labor camps.<sup>65</sup> Baking multigrain bread was also recommended as a source of vitamins and minerals. But the Slovak state had, in general, concerns about logistics. Food shortages, rationing, and the controlled distribution of goods such as flour, sugar, and meat was a reality not only for the Jewish inmates of camps but also for the Slovak population as a whole.<sup>66</sup> To obtain a sufficient amount of vitamin D, a vitamin essential to human health, a sun lamp producing ultra-violet radiation provided by the Jewish Center was available in Sereď. Dr. Herzog suggested that the sun lamp could be used for groups, but there was no suitable room available for such therapy in the camp.<sup>67</sup> Based on physicians' recommendations, children under the age of twelve could spend a few days recovering from an illness (or even the whole summer holidays) with either their family members who lived outside the camp or with willing Jewish families identified by the Jewish Center.<sup>68</sup>

### *Childcare*

Once Sereď's main function shifted to forced labor, it housed entire families, and special attention was paid to the health of babies and toddlers under the age of three. Because the camp was designed to be profitable, elderly persons, babies, and young children were not seen as cost-effective inmates. Additionally, inmates, mainly women, who provided childcare would be absent from work. In Sereď, such care was perceived as a waste of the female workforce.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the Jewish leader-

65 YVA, M.5, File 81, Protocols of meetings, 02 April 1943–24 August 1944.

66 On the economic situation and rationing controls in wartime Slovakia, see: Eva Škorvanková, "'Tiso, Tuka, kde je múka?' Blahobyť alebo život na pridel?," *Tisovi poza chrbát*, ed. Jozef Hyrja (Bratislava: Hadart, 2020): 133–51.

67 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates of the Ustredna Zidov, 22 April 1942–10 August 1944.

68 See: YVA M.5, File 7, Documentation of the Predstavenstvo UZ (administration) of the Central Union of Jewish Communities, including copies of 16 protocols of meetings of the center's administration regarding its current activities and departments.

69 See: Denisa Nešťáková, "'Our Mother Organized It All': The Role of Mothers of Sereď Camp in the Memories of Their Children," *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Nešťáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021), 83–100.



Image 2: The crèche and kindergarten were considered an essential part of childcare and healthcare in Sereď. Source: Moreshet Archive, The Mordechai Anielewicz International Center for Holocaust Documentation, Research and Education. Signature D 23-62.

ship in the camp had to address issues pertaining to birth, new motherhood, postpartum recovery, breastfeeding, and infant and childcare. First the inmates themselves, then the Jewish Center, and later the Slovak authorities organized nurseries and kindergartens in the camp.<sup>70</sup> In December 1942, after the deportations of 1942 concluded with the expulsion of approximately 57,000 Jewish individuals from Slovakia, there were around six hundred inmates in Sereď, including fifteen babies under the age of one and ten breastfeeding mothers. There were also forty-two children between the ages of one and six, and forty children between six and fourteen.<sup>71</sup>

While focusing on the youngest children, childcare activities also considered the wellbeing of mothers. The new roles of women outside of households did not go unnoticed by the representatives of the Jewish Center or the leadership of the camps.<sup>72</sup> The Jewish leadership showed

70 See: YVA, M.5, File 84, Documentation regarding matters of education, culture and religion in the labor camps, 12 December 1942–11 April 1944.

71 See: Pokreis, “Zdravotná starostlivosť v koncentračnom a pracovnom tábore v Sereďi,” 27-33; Vrabcová, “Pracovný tábor Židov v Sereďi (1941-1945),” 110-24.

72 For more about women’s experiences in Sereď, see: Denisa Nešťáková, “Žena—muž—tábor. K otázke vplyvu rodu na prežívanie holokaustu,” *Historický časopis*—



their awareness of the double burden of Jewish women in the camps as mothers and laborers. Thanks to the intervention of the Jewish Center, women in the camps received a short leave from their jobs as “these women have to do housework in addition to their normal work, and therefore absolutely need a few days off to preserve their health.”<sup>73</sup> Although they received respite only from their labor in the camp, such an intervention by the Jewish Center represented an important and gendered form of relief for the women.<sup>74</sup>

An extraordinary form of care was made accessible to mothers of newborns: maternity leave. From the very establishment of the camp until the end of August 1944, twenty-five children were born in Sereď.<sup>75</sup> It is not clear whether the provision of maternity leave for women in camps shortly before and after the birth was the result of a centralized decision applicable to all three camps, but in Vyhne, expectant mothers were exempted from work in the camp two weeks before the estimated due date as well as for one year after the birth.<sup>76</sup> Based on two sources, it is also seems that women who were breastfeeding had some exemptions from work, but it is not clear for how long these applied.<sup>77</sup> For instance, in Vyhne, mothers of children younger than three worked only in their households.<sup>78</sup> But in Sereď, a nursery that admitted children up to two and half years old was established in October 1942; thus, women there unquestionably had to return to work earlier than those imprisoned in Vyhne.

Additionally, photographs taken in the camp show babies in the care of nursery staff, and some appear to be even younger than one year old.<sup>79</sup> In Sereď, Ela Weinerová directed the nursery from October 1942 until May 1943, when she and her husband were transferred to Nováky.<sup>80</sup> A camp physician visited the nursery daily to ensure the health of babies and toddlers and prescribed dairy products, which were scarce in the

*Prenasledovanie Židov na Slovensku v kontexte holokaustu v strednej Európe* 69, no. 4 (2021): 627-54.

73 YVA, M.5, File 81, Protocols of meetings, 02 April 1943–24 August 1944.

74 YVA M.5, File 7, Documentation of the Predstavenstvo UZ (administration) of the Central Union of Jewish Communities.

75 Based on information from the card index, see: USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration.

76 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates, 22 April 1942–10 August 1944.

77 Pokreis, “Zdravotná starostlivosť v koncentračnom a pracovnom tábore v Sereďi,” 30.

78 YVA, M.5, File 80, Lists, reports and certificates, 22 April 1942–10 August 1944.

79 See: YVA, Photo Archives, sg. 82BO1 and sg. 3984/12.

80 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 859 and 860.

camp, to infants in danger of malnutrition.<sup>81</sup> In June 1943, there were already twenty babies and toddlers in the nursery, with four carers looking after them.<sup>82</sup> The youngest babies were most probably the children of women employed as assistants in the nursery, such as Alžbeta Gottschallová, whose son Peter was born in 1942, Malvína Kleinová, whose daughter Klára was born in 1941, and Anna Krumholzová, whose daughter Ruth was born in 1942.<sup>83</sup> Such a pragmatic yet empathetic decision to employ new mothers as childcare workers allowed them to stay with their newborns while still being counted among the workforce in the camp. The constant efforts to improve the camp childcare went far beyond the pragmatism of allowing adults to focus mostly on labor. The Jewish leadership in Sereď and the Jewish Center arranged for donations to improve children's diets, and they collected toys and clothes for infants as a way to create some sense of normalcy, however small, and "make life easier for the inmates."<sup>84</sup>

## *Conclusion*

According to the plans of Slovak state officials, camps were to function as places where the Jewish population would be assembled and/or concentrated before deportation. Once their function shifted to forced labor, these sites temporarily generated financial profits for the state. Although the purpose of the Slovak labor camps for Jews was not murder, the camps functioned as spaces of segregation, humiliation, and exploitation. Many Jews in Slovakia feared that labor camps would lead to future deportation, and they despised the Jewish Center for participating in the creation of these camps and encouraging Jews to apply to become forced laborers. But the Jewish leadership responded to their coerced cooperation with Slovak authorities by organizing social welfare, including public health measures and infrastructure, in camps, and these activities evolved as a form of resistance to policies intentionally designed to harm the Jewish community in Slovakia as a whole. Any improvements to the conditions in labor camps depended on financial support by the Jewish Center, resources from abroad, and donations from Slovak Jewry. The

81 Pokreis, "Zdravotná starostlivosť v koncentračnom a pracovnom tábore v Sereďi," 27-33.

82 SNA, Fund MV, Box 392, File 1010/43.

83 USHMM, RG 57.021, Minister of the Interior, Card Index of Arrested Persons, Sereď, Registration no. 233, 371 and 456.

84 YVA, M.5, File 81, Protocols of meetings, 02 April 1943-24 August 1944.

case study of the Sereď camp shows how the Jewish leadership in Slovakia, despite the enormous pressures they faced, developed radical solutions to ensure public health in the extreme environment of labor camps.

In a climate marked by fear and danger, but one that also reflected the religious and cultural values of the Slovak Jewry, the Jewish Center fostered a communal consciousness among the Jewish community in an effort to support the inmates of labor camps. External financial aid and donations were used to bribe officials, which ensured the Slovak authorities, among them the commander of the camp Vašina, would tolerate measures to improve the conditions of camps. Although this acceptance was purchased, it nevertheless allowed for the development and implementation of an effective system of public health. Developing preventive hygienic measures, safeguarding the health of inmates, and the creation of a childcare system were not only manifestations of the Jewish leadership's concerted effort to help their fellow Jews in need. Indeed, because the Jewish leadership was financially responsible for running the camp, ensuring the recovery of sick laborers, carrying out large-scale disinfection drives and preventative measures, and offering prolonged leave to mothers caring for their babies, etc., were undoubtedly also practical strategies to save scarce resources. At the same time, securing donations and paying bribes in order to provide basic health care and, thus, make inmates' life easier went beyond a pragmatism driven by the desire to maximize labor and profits. Through their construction of a public health system that was remarkably successful in fighting hunger, preventing diseases, and offering children decent institutional care, the Jewish leadership in Slovakia also aimed to preserve some sense of normalcy *in extremis*.

The important actions taken to improve the lives of inmates in Sereď camp represented the continuity of the Jewish tradition of welfare and demonstrate the urgency with which the Slovak Jewry acted prior to any organized communal involvement in improving the lives of forced laborers in camps. Before the Second World War, Czechoslovak Jewish organizations provided help mostly to the German and Austrian Jewry fleeing the Third Reich through Czechoslovakia following Hitler's appointment as chancellor.<sup>85</sup> After the Slovak state deported thousands of Jews from Slovakia to a no man's land on the Slovak-Hungarian border in November 1938, refugees obtained food, shelter, and additional clothing thanks

85 Michal Frankl, "Prejudiced Asylum: Czechoslovak Refugee Policy, 1918-60," *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 3 (2014): 537-55.

only to the Slovak Jewish leadership.<sup>86</sup> In the months preceding the creation of labor camps in Slovakia, the Jewish leadership of Slovakia, now forced to organize itself within the framework of the Jewish Center, became a surrogate public health and social welfare system for Jews in need and those who had been expelled from different parts of Slovakia.<sup>87</sup>

The intersection of religious duty, previous experience in the organization of communal aid, and the venality of Slovak authorities enabled the Jewish leadership to develop a public health system in labor camps that advanced the greater goal of protecting Jews in Slovakia from deportation to National Socialist extermination camps in the East. The public health measures undoubtedly benefited those who were incarcerated in Sered. But most importantly, the systematic efforts to promote public health in the camp were the manifestations of considerate communal awareness, Jewish religious tradition, and the courageous desire to obstruct and resist the Slovak state's antisemitic persecution and the genocidal program of the Nazis.

86 See: James Mace Ward, "The 1938 First Vienna Award and the Holocaust in Slovakia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, no. 1 (2015): 76-108, doi:10.1093/hgs/dcv004; Michal Frankl, "Citizenship of No Man's Land? Jewish Refugee Relief in Zbąszyń and East-Central Europe, 1938-1939," *S.I.M.O.N* 7, no. 2 (2020): 37-49.

87 See Hradská, *Holokaust na Slovensku* 8, 26-29.