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## From the Monarchy to the Holocaust: The Zahler Family of Košice/Kassa

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# FROM THE MONARCHY TO THE HOLOCAUST: THE ZAHLER FAMILY OF KOŠICE/KASSA

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## Abstract

The study aims to map the life and career trajectory of a Jewish attorney from the city of Košice between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the immediate post-WWII years. Based on archival documents and materials from the Zahler family archives documents, the different historical contexts in which the Zahlers lived are investigated including the Dual Monarchy, the first Czechoslovak Republic, the wartime Hungarian Kingdom, and post-WWII Czechoslovakia. It aims to answer the following questions: How did the Jewish elite from this region of East Central Europe experience the shifting regimes? How did they relate to the minority policy of interwar Czechoslovakia? What characterized the language use of the Košice Jewry in the period under investigation? What survival strategies did Jews choose during World War II? And what do we know about family members who survived the Holocaust? It is argued that the investigation on the Zahler family represents an excellent case study for research on the Jewish upper middle class which settled down in historical Hungary in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or earlier and lived in the Slovak-Hungarian border region until the immediate post-WWII years.

**Keywords:** Jewish strategies, Neolog Jewry, holocaust in the borderlands

## Introduction



*Picture 1 Aladár Zahler*

The paper examines the life trajectory of Aladár Zahler, a Jewish attorney from Košice (in Hungarian Kassa, today in Slovakia) who witnessed a turbulent period of changing borders and political regimes in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and who in 1944 became a victim of the Holocaust in Hungary. Although on June 6, 2024, a stumbling stone<sup>1</sup> was erected for his memory in front of his former house in the city center, little has been written about his family and the local Jewish upper middle class to which he belonged. Based on archival documents, the contemporary press, and personal family documents, which were recently made available to me by the

<sup>1</sup> *Stolpersteine*, or stumbling stones in English, are blocks installed into the pavement in front of the homes of Nazi victims.

descendants of Aladár Zahler, the main research aim of this article is to map the different historical contexts in which the Zahlers lived. It aims to answer the following questions: How did the Jewish elite from this region of East Central Europe experience the shifting regimes? How did they relate to the option of the Czechoslovak statistical category of Jewish nationality<sup>2</sup> which was introduced in the interwar Czechoslovak censuses statistics? What characterized the language use of the Košice Jewry in the period under investigation? What survival strategies did Jews choose during World War II? And what do we know about family members who survived the Holocaust?

The variety of the examined sources—archival and statistical data, ego-documents, contemporary press, and others—allows us to better learn about strategies and the multilayered identity of the Jewry of the Slovak–Hungarian border region with special attention to their religious affiliation, nationality declaration, education, and public role. The story of the Zahlers represents an excellent case study for research on the Jewish upper middle class which settled down in historical Hungary in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or earlier and lived in the Slovak-Hungarian border region until the immediate post-WWII years.

As for the first names used in the study below, for the sake of simplicity, I will use their Hungarian language forms, because all these persons were born before 1918, even if some of them later used the Czech, German, Slovak, English or Spanish language forms of their names during their lifetimes.

### **Early History of the Zahlers and the Neolog Religious Community of Košice**

The Zahlers settled down in the region of North Eastern Hungary no later than the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the Hungarian census of 1869, Adolf, the father of Aladár Zahler, was born in 1851 in present-day Podhorany (in Hungarian Ásgút, in its former Slovak name Hašgut) in the Šariš (in Hungarian Sáros) region,<sup>3</sup> where the Zahlers worked as tavern-keepers.<sup>4</sup> Later, it was only Adolf who moved to the Abov-Turňa (in Hungarian Abaúj-Torna) County, but most of the family members remained in Šaris until World War II. The Zahlers of Prešov (in Hungarian Eperjes) became prominent in the Neolog Jewish community.

<sup>2</sup> The term nationality refers to ethnicity in this context, not citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Czechoslovak census of 1930, he was born in 1855. See: Slovenský národný archív (Slovak National Archive - furthermore SNA), fond Sčítanie ľudu v roku 1930 (1930 Census), Sčítací hárok 365/622, Berčénioho 7, Košice.

<sup>4</sup> See the documents uploaded by Peter Absolon: [https://www.geni.com/documents/view?doc\\_id=6000000073377901064](https://www.geni.com/documents/view?doc_id=6000000073377901064)  
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QSQ-G99K-HXFR?wc=QZ77-188%3A323642201%2C323740101%26cc%3D1986782>

One of the key members of the Neolog religious community was Elek Zahler in the interwar period.<sup>5</sup>

Up until the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867, Hungarian Jewry was organized into the so-called *Communitas Judeorums*, which functioned as both religious and administrative-self-governing units. At that time, approximately 10,604 people of Jewish faith lived in the territory of Šariš County.<sup>6</sup> The Hungarian Parliament passed the Law on the Emancipation of Jews in 1867 which abolished all provisions that had previously restricted their life in Hungary and opened up previously unknown opportunities for their socio-economic advancement. By 1867, however, the conflicts among the various denominations had become so acute that a split became inevitable. The Hungarian National Israelite Congress between December 1868 and February 1869 was intended to resolve these contradictions. It aimed to establish a self-governing body for the Jewish community within the framework of which it could manage the religious and educational affairs of Jewish citizens, and through which it could negotiate with the state. Following the congress, three country-wide organizations were formed. One of them was the progressive, congressional, or otherwise known as the Neolog denomination, which the Zahlers also joined. The second was composed of Orthodox Jews. A few religious communities did not join either those who accepted the congress resolutions or those who opposed them, so they formed a separate camp called the *status quo ante*. These three Jewish denominations continued to exist within the first Czechoslovak and in Hungary as well.<sup>7</sup>

Adolf Zahler (1852-1934) who joined the Neolog Jewish Community and who appears in the late 19th century sources as a landowner, had two children, Aladár (1881-1944) and Ernő (1883-1939). Both of them were born in a small village called Seňa (in Hungarian Abaújszina, today Slovakia) situated in the historical county of Abov-Turňa, 20 kilometers south of Košice, where Adolf invested his wealth in buying and renting out land in the surroundings of the city. However, the connections to Prešov and the Šariš region remained strong. Adolf's sons graduated from the famous secondary school (gymnasium) of the Evangelical College of Prešov where most of his relatives studied.<sup>8</sup> Choosing this educational institute was typical

<sup>5</sup> Veronika Szeghy-Gayer: "Associations in the Life of the Jewish Community in Prešov" in Maroš Borský - Jana Švantnerová (ed.), *Treasures of the Jewish Museum in Prešov III*. (Bratislava, Židovské komunitné múzeum v Bratislave, 2021), p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> Ödön Potemkin: *Sáros vármegye leírása* (The description of the Šariš County). (Pest, Nosedá Nyomda, 1860), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> About the development of these denominations in interwar Czechoslovakia see: Veronika Szeghy-Gayer: "Die Juden in der Slowakei Zwischen dei Beiden Weltkriegen" (The Jews in Slovakia Between the Two World Wars) in Martin Zückert (ed.), *Handbuch der Religions- und Kirchengeschichte der Slowakei im 20. Jahrhundert* (Handbook of Religious and Church History of Slovakia in the 20th Century), (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024), pp. 243-262.

<sup>8</sup> See the yearbooks of the school: [https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/collection/ADT\\_IskolaiErtesitok\\_Eperjes\\_07704\\_evangelikus\\_kollegium/](https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/collection/ADT_IskolaiErtesitok_Eperjes_07704_evangelikus_kollegium/)

among the Jewish families of Šariš. By the turn of the century, almost half of the students were Jewish.<sup>9</sup>

Aladár, Adolf's elder son, subsequently studied law in Budapest,<sup>10</sup> while his brother Ernő earned a business degree in Berlin.<sup>11</sup> In 1903, Aladár became an assistant notary at the Registry Office in Hanušovce nad Topľou where he probably spent his apprenticeship years.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, the family's life reached a key turning point: in July 1908, Aladár married Irén Fischer<sup>13</sup> and the Zahlers decided to definitively move to Košice,<sup>14</sup> where they bought a plot of land on Bercsényi Street (in present-day Rooseveltova) for their future house. Firstly, they lived on Main Street. They had two children who lived to adulthood, György (1909-1982), and Katalin (1912-1989).

By moving to Košice, the Zahlers became representatives of one of the largest Neolog communities of Northern Hungary where the first synagogue on present-day Moyzesová, later used by the Neologs, was built in 1866.<sup>15</sup>

In 1929, Aladár Zahler was elected as the financial leader (pénzügyi előjáró) of the religious community<sup>16</sup> and he also acted in the leadership body of the Neolog Chevra Kadisha of Košice.<sup>17</sup> His wife regularly donated to the Israelite Women's Association, the oldest Jewish



Picture 2 The window that the Zahlers donated to the Neolog synagogue in 1927. Source: Ernő Naményi: *Kozma Lajos kassai zsidó temploma (The Jewish Synagogue of Lajos Kozma)*, in *Múlt és Jövő* 19, no. 9 (1929), p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> Annamária Kónya: "Az eperjesi evangélikus kollégium gimnáziumának története és diáksága a dualizmus korában" (The Students and the History of the Secondary School of the Prešov Lutheran College during the Age of Dualism), in *Sárospataki Füzetek*, 2013, n. 1–2, p. 123–124.

<sup>10</sup> *A Budapesti Királyi Magyar Tudomány-Egyetem almanachja az MDCCCI-MDCCCII tanévre* (Almanac of the Royal Hungarian University of Science and Technology of Budapest for the 1901-1902 Academic Year) (Budapest, Magyar Királyi Magyar Tud.-Egyetem Nyomda, 1902), p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> *Reprezentatívny lexikon Slovenska a Podkarpatskej Rusi* (Representative Lexicon of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia) (Bratislava, Academia, 1936), p. 469.

<sup>12</sup> Kinevezések és áthelyezések (Appointments and Transfers), in *Pesti Hírlap*, 11 February 1903, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Family Archives of the Zahlers, Wedding invitation in the Hungarian language on 14th July 1908. The marriage took place in Tiszajútlak, in present-day Ukraine, in the native village of Irén.

<sup>14</sup> SNA, fond Sčítanie ľudu v roku 1930, Sčítací hárok 365/622, Berčénihó 7, Košice.

<sup>15</sup> Manó Enten: *A košicei hitközség története* (The History of the Košice Religious Community). In Menyhért Lányi, Hermin Propperné Békefi (eds.), *Szlovenszkói zsidó hitközségek története* (The History of the Jewish Religious Communities in Slovakia) (Košice : Athenaeum Kassai Könyvnyomda R.-T., 1933), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Beiktatták Hercz Ignác dr.-t, a kassai zsidó hitközség új elnökét (Dr. Ignác Hercz, the New Head of the Košice Jewish Community Was Installed). In *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 3rd January 1903, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Veronika Gayer, „Zsidó egyesületek Kassán a két világháború között. Kutatási beszámoló“ (Jewish Associations in Košice During the Intewar Period, Project Report). See: <https://www.hebraisztika.hu/attachments/00000453.pdf>



women's organization in the city.<sup>18</sup> The Zahler couple also contributed a large sum to the construction of the new Neolog synagogue which was finished in 1927. They donated one of the six large stained-glass windows of the new building.<sup>19</sup>

## Public Activity of the Zahlers

The important building of the local Neolog community was designed by the well-known Hungarian Jewish architect from Budapest, Lajos Kozma,<sup>20</sup> one of whose first realized projects was actually the Zahler House in Košice. Aladár, together with his brother Ernő, requested permission from the city to build a large-scale tenement house on the Bercsényi (today Rooseveltova) Street in 1912.<sup>21</sup> The following year, he set up his law office here, and the whole family lived here until 1944.

In the period before WWI, the two Zahler brothers, Aladár and Ernő, were both virilists<sup>22</sup>



Picture 3 The Zahlers' House in Košice. Source: *Východoslovenské múzeum v Košiciach*, sign. V.232a.

on the regional and the city level as well,<sup>23</sup> which means that they were among the highest tax-paying residents and could therefore participate in local and regional politics and be elected too. Aladár, the elder brother, specialized in real estate matters, as evidenced by the many advertisements from the pre-war and interwar local press. From 1912, he was a member of the Chamber of

<sup>18</sup> Az Izr. Nőegylet (The Jewish Women's Associations). In *Felsőmagyarország*, 15th March 1913, p. 4.; See also the interwar period: „Az Izraelita Jótékony Nőegylet bálján” (At the Jewish Charity Women's Association Ball). In *Kassai Újság*, 21th March 1930, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ernő Naményi: “Kozma Lajos kassai zsidó temploma” (The Jewish Synagogue of Lajos Kozma), in *Múlt és Jövő* 19, no. 9 (1929), p. 292

<sup>20</sup> Anna Halássová: “Zahlerov dom v Košiciach. Neznáma prvotina architekta Ľudovíta Kozmu” (The Zahler House in Košice. The Unknown First Work of Architect Lajos Kozma), in *Pamiatky a múzea* 47, no. 1(1999), pp. 26–27.

<sup>21</sup> Archív mesta Košice (Košice City Archive, furthermore AMK), Technické oddelenie (Technical Department), Rooseveltova 3.

<sup>22</sup> A virilist in historical Hungary was a person who gained membership in a representative body not by election, but on the basis of paying high taxes.

<sup>23</sup> Abaúj-Torna vármegye törvényhatósági bizottsági tagjainak az 1912. évre összeállított névjegyzéke (The List of the Members of the Municipal Committee of Abaúj-Torna County compiled for the year 1912), in *Abaújtorna Vármegye Hivatalos Lapja*, 11th July 1912, p. 187.; in Jegyzőkönyv Kassa törvényhatósági város bizottságának 1918. december 20-án megtartott rendes közgyűléséről (Minutes of the General Meeting of the Košice Municipal City Committee Held on December 20, 1918), in *Városi Közlöny*, December 1918, p. 171.

Lawyers,<sup>24</sup> and also worked as the representative of the Tradesmen Association.<sup>25</sup> As a lawyer, he also acted as the legal counsel for larger banks, such as the Košice branch of the Danube Bank.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to his work as a lawyer, Aladár was also active in the local association that protected the interests of homeowners.<sup>27</sup> He not only dealt with property rights issues in his daily work, but he also owned several pieces of real estate in the city. In addition to the Zahler House, built in an Art Nouveau style, Aladár also owned a family villa (the so-called Gefferth Villa) on the northern edge of the Košice, where the family spent a lot of time during the summer months. Later, in 1936, he also purchased the so-called Csáky Palace on Main Street number 35.<sup>28</sup>



Picture 4 Ernő Zahler

Aladár's son György studied law in Germany and later earned a degree in Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, and passed the bar exam in September 1935.<sup>29</sup> In 1937, he opened his own law office and partnered with his father in their office of the Bercsényi Street House.<sup>30</sup>

In the meanwhile, Ernő, Aladár's brother, who also rented lands around Veľká Ida (in Hungarian Nagyida), became a businessman. In some sources, he is also mentioned as a wool merchant<sup>31</sup> and in the interwar period, he was involved in the interest organizations of the farmers of the Abov region.<sup>32</sup> As the director of the Agricultural and Trading Company called Contimport, Ernő belonged

<sup>24</sup> *Az Athenaeum magyar közigazgatási kalendárium az 1912.dik szököévre* (The Athenaeum's Hungarian Administrative Calendar for the leap year 1912) (Budapest, Athenaeum, 1912), p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> "Országos vendéglős-kongresszus" (National Restaurant-Owners Congress), in *Kassai Hírlap*, 15th May 1912, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Family Archives of the Zahlers, Letter of Aladár Zahler to Jacob Sturcz written in Hungarian, Košice, 3rd February 1931.

<sup>27</sup> "Háztulajdonosok tiltakozása az ingatlanértékelkedési adó ellen" (Homeowners Protest Against the Property Value Increase tax), in *Kassai Hírlap*, 19th January 1922, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Veronika Timuláková: "Šľachtické heraldiky na mestskej palácovej architektúra v Košiciach" (Noble Heraldry on the City Palace Architecture in Košice), in *Šľachtické rody na východnom Slovensku v období stredoveku a novoveku* (Noble families in Eastern Slovakia in the Middle Ages and Modern Times), ed. Jozef Kušnir (Krajské múzeum v Prešove, 2019), p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> Új ügyvédek Kassán (New Attorneys in Košice), in *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 27th September 1935, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ügyvédi hír (Lawyer News), in *Kassai Újság*, 2nd February 1937, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> "Kassai virilistái" (The Virilists of Košice), in *Felvidéki Újság*, 18th October 1917, p. 3.; Keletszlovenszkói gyapjúvásár megnyitása (The Opening of the Eastern Slovakian Wool Fair), in *Kassai Újság*, 1st June 1921, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> "Az abaújmegyei gazdák szövetségének új elnöke" (The New President of the Abaúj County Farmers' Association), in *Kassai Újság*, 20th July 1922, p. 7.



among the most influential businessmen of interwar Czechoslovakia who built up his economic relations with Hungary and Germany. Due to the importance of his activities, he was even included in the representative encyclopedia of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia published in 1936.<sup>33</sup> Ernő also built a large network of contacts thanks to his greatest passion, the bridge. Thanks to his role in the leadership of the Czechoslovak Bridge Association, he maintained good relations with, among others, the Tugendhats of Brünn.<sup>34</sup> In the mid-1930s, he was the President of the Czechoslovak Bridge Association.<sup>35</sup>

### Language and the Issue of Jewish Nationality

Based on preserved family documents and correspondence, we can conclude that the Zahlers' native language(s) might have been German and/or Hungarian. These were the languages they used in their everyday communication, but also in education, work, and in business. Until 1918, they belonged to those Jewish families of Košice which were culturally and politically assimilated into the Hungarian elite. Therefore, the regime and border changes following the First World War certainly represented a turning point for them. After the creation of the first Czechoslovak Republic, whose official language they did not speak, – they probably knew only a regional dialect of the Slovak language, – they had to adapt to the new political circumstances which however were more advantageous as was the case in interwar Hungary. The political changes had a drastic effect and also caused a certain dissimilation for the Jewry of Košice, as it was pointed out by Éva Kovács in her significant research in the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the Czechoslovak censuses had an even more divisive effect on the Jewry of Slovakia, which was both religiously and linguistically diverse. The Jewish nationality which had been introduced in from 1921, represented a sort of „crossroads“ for the majority of Jewry living of Slovakia. This was first pointed out by Aladár Komlós in a pamphlet published in Prešov in 1920, entitled „Jews at the Crossroads.“<sup>37</sup> “I am Hungarian, I am Jewish, and I am international!” he wrote in his introduction, thereby emphasizing that due to the multiple affiliations of the Jews, only one single nationality declared during the censuses could not fully reflect the Jews' complex identity. From 1921, the "main external characteristic" of nationality

<sup>33</sup> *Reprezentatívny lexikon Slovenska a Podkarpatskej Rusi* (Representative lexicon of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia) (Bratislava, Academia, 1936), p. 469.

<sup>34</sup> “Bridzverseny Pöstényben” (Bridge Competition in Piešťany), in *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 13th June 1935, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Lucie Kohutová, “Z historie československého bridže: Vznik ČBS I.” (From the History of the Czechoslovak Bridge. The establishment of the Czechoslovak Bridge Association, I.) See: <https://www.czechbridge.cz/articles/ruzne-zajimavosti/821>

<sup>36</sup> About this see the first key work on Košice Jewry. Éva Kovács, *Felemás asszimiláció. A kassai zsidóság a két világháború között (1918–1938)* (Ambiguous Assimilation: The Jews of Košice Between the Two World Wars, 1918–1938) (Somorja – Dunaszerdahely, 2004), pp. 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> Álmos Koral [Aladár Komlós]: *Zsidók a választáson* (Jews at the Crossroads) (Prešov, 1920).

on the Czechoslovak census remained the mother tongue, but an exception was made in the case of Jews, since they—except for Subcarpathian Ruthenia—did not speak Hebrew or Yiddish in most of Czechoslovakia.<sup>38</sup> However, in practice, the Czechoslovak census commissioner in many cases recorded the Hungarian or German-speaking Jewry as citizens of Jewish nationality.

Czechoslovak state policy in the territory of Slovakia deliberately sought to place Jews between the Czechs and other nationalities, while at the same time contrasting them with the majority Slovak society and separating them from the Hungarian minority,<sup>39</sup> while those who



Picture 5 The Zahler Family in the Tatra Mountain in 1928

declared Jewish nationality did not become members of the state-forming „Czechoslovak“ nation but were given them „only“ a minority status.<sup>40</sup>

However, from the perspective of Jewry itself, Jewish nationality as a category in Czechoslovak statistics was perceived as an attempt to create a cultural framework that would be able to unite a politically, linguistically and culturally fragmented Jewish community. It is also the main argument of Hillel J. Kieval, who stressed that “the semi-fiction of a Jewish national position in Czechoslovakia afforded Jews—particularly in the eastern regions of the state—a political and cultural structure within which to organize education and public life.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Rebekah Klein-Pejšová argued that Jewish nationality promised to be

<sup>38</sup> *Československá statistika – svazek 9. Sčítání lidu v Republice československé ze dne 15. února 1921* (Czechoslovak statistics – volume 9. Census of the Czechoslovak Republic of February 15, 1921) (Praha, Státní úřad statistický, 1924), p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Rebekah Klein-Pejšová: *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia* (Bloomington – Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> See also Veronika Szeghy-Gayer, “Bárkány Jenő és Austerlitz Tivadar – adalékok a szlovenszkói magyar ajkú zsidóság két világháború közötti történetéhez” (Jenő Bárkány and Tivadar Austerlitz – Contribution to the History of Hungarian-speaking Jews in Slovakia Between the Two World Wars), in *Palimpszesztus: Írások Bárdi Nándor 60. születésnapjára*, (Budapest, Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont Kisebbségkutató Intézet, Kalligram, 2022), pp. 270–287.

<sup>41</sup> Hillel J. Kieval, “Conflict Zones, Empire, War, and Jewish Destinies in East Central Europe” in *Jewish Soldiers in the Collective Memory of Central Europe: The Remembrance of World War I from a Jewish Perspective*, edited by Gerald Lamprecht, Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, and Ulrich Wyrwa. Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2019, pp. 17–41.

an “authentic” and “neutral” route of remaining “true to ourselves” in the conflict of nationalities.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, for many Jews declaring Czechoslovak nationality may have seemed in part to be a similar strategy to choosing Jewish nationality. Éva Kovács’s research on the Jewry of Košice showed that in many cases, Czechoslovak nationality might rather have been an expression of political loyalty and less an actual expression of national affiliation.<sup>43</sup> In fact, in 1921, approximately 54.3% of the Jews of Slovakia declared Jewish nationality, and their proportion did not change substantially in 1930 (53.1%). The nationality of the other half of those of the Jewish religion was divided between Czechoslovak (22.3%), Hungarian (16.7%) and German (6.7%). At the same time, by 1930, the proportion of those choosing the Czechoslovak nationality had increased the most (to 32.2%), while the proportion of those of Hungarian nationality had decreased by less than half (7.1%), so even though this was a short two-decade period, the trends were clearly visible. It became clear to the state authorities that the designation of Jewish nationality had decreased the number of „Czechoslovaks“ as well.<sup>44</sup>

In 1930, the Zahlers also declared to be of Jewish nationality,<sup>45</sup> as did 60% of the Košice Jews. However, cultural ties with the local Hungarian-speaking community remained decisive for them. The family members continued to support the Hungarian associational life in the city, for example, Aladár Zahler's wife and daughter participated in the charity ball of the Hungarian Journalists of Czechoslovakia.

The peaceful everyday life and the prosperous family business, as well as the grand plans associated with it, were destroyed by the changes following the first Vienna Arbitration, and then by World War II and the Holocaust.

### **In the Authoritarian Regime of Miklós Horthy’s Hungary**

<sup>42</sup> Rebekah Klein-Pejšová: *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 144.

<sup>43</sup> Éva Kovács, *Felemás asszimiláció. A kassai zsidóság a két világháború között (1918–1938)* (Ambiguous Assimilation: The Jews of Košice Between the Two World Wars, 1918–1938) (Somorja – Dunaszerdahely, 2004), p. 118.

<sup>44</sup> Tatjana Lichtenstein, *Zionists in Interwar Czechoslovakia. Minority Nationalism and the Politics of Belonging* (Bloomington, Indianapolis 2016), pp. 103f.

<sup>45</sup> The counting sheet of the Czechoslovakia census from 1921 have not been preserved. Only the results of the Czechoslovak census of 1930 are available. See SNA, fond Sčítanie ľudu v roku 1930, Sčítací hárok 365/622, Berčénioho 7, Košice.



Picture 6 György Zahler, the son of Aladár Zahler

In November 1938, according to the first Vienna Arbitration, the southern parts of present-day Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia were ceded to Hungary and the Zahlers became citizens of the authoritarian regime of Miklós Horthy, where the first anti-Jewish measure was already in force. As a very quick reaction to the radical political and border changes, György, the son of Aladár, converted to Christianity in hope to get the visa more easily.<sup>46</sup> In fact, a few months later he chose the safest survival strategy, he emigrated to Chile via Paris.<sup>47</sup>



Picture 7 Ferenc Zahler, the younger son Ernő Zahler

Just before the outbreak of World War II, unlike the USA and other South American countries, it was somewhat easier to obtain an entry permit to Chile, because the newly elected president Pedro Aguirre Cerda in 1938 had opened the state borders to refugees. As a consequence, Chile welcomed 13.000 to 15.000 Jewish refugees in this period.<sup>48</sup> Before finally leaving for his future home, György probably was present at his uncle's funeral in March 1939. Ernő Zahler died in a Budapest sanatorium and was buried in Košice.

Relatively little information has survived about the lives of Aladár and his family between 1939 and 1944. They were certainly relatively safer than in the surrounding states. In Slovakia, the deportation of Jews began in March 1942. In the meanwhile, in Hungary, Ernő's sons were called up for Jewish labor service (*munkaszolgálat*) in the Hungarian army, and as a consequence, János died in 1943 on the Russian front.<sup>49</sup> His brother Ferenc was probably deported from Budapest in 1944.<sup>50</sup>

In the days after the German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944, Aladár Zahler was probably in Budapest. Proof of this is his photograph with a bilingual text on the other side

<sup>46</sup> The Family Archives of the Zahlers, Cédula Consula Visacion N.1386. One-year residence permit to Chile, confirmed by the Chile consul in Paris, 27h October 1939.; By the end of 1938 also Katalin, the sister of György, and her husband converted to Christianity in Budapest. See: The Family Archives of the Zahlers, "Kivonat a Kispest Wekerle áll. munkástelepi református egyházi szülöttek és megkeresztelték anyakönyvéről az 1938. évből."

<sup>47</sup> The Family Archives of the Zahlers, Cédula Consula Visacion N.1386. One-year residence permit to Chile, confirmed by the Chile consul in Paris, 27h October 1939.

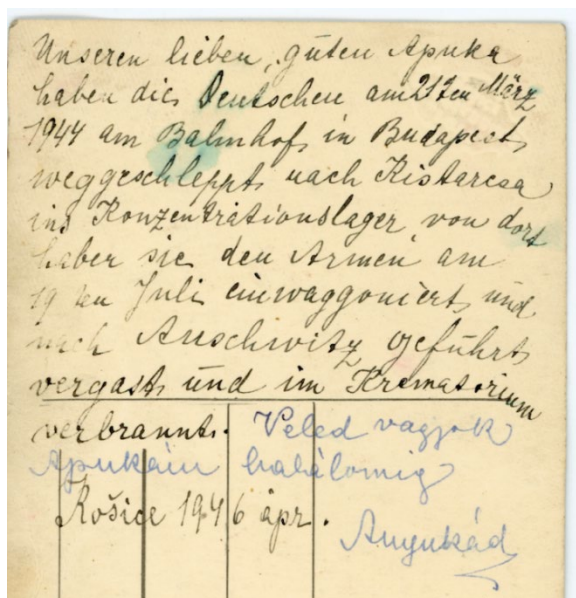
<sup>48</sup> María Paula Vega, "Jewish immigration to Chile during World War II and the untold story of Samuel del Campo," in *Cuadernos Judaicos*, no. 37 (2020), p. 395.

<sup>49</sup> See: <https://www.geni.com/people/Janos-Zahler/6000000054220727846?through=6000000041718087691>

<sup>50</sup> Nadežda Lambertová, ed. *Každý člověk má svoje meno: zoznam obetí holocaustu z Košíc a blízkeho okolia odvlečených do koncentračných táborov* (Every Person Has a Name: the List of Holocaust Victims from Košice and the Surrounding Area Who Were Taken to Concentration Camps) (Košice: The Hidden Child - Ukrývané dieťa – Slovensko, 2004), p. 208.



from the postwar period, according to which he was taken from the Hungarian capital, not from Košice. The text was written by his children and her wife. “On March 21, 1944, the Germans dragged our dear Daddy away from the train station in Budapest to the concentration camp in Kistarcsa. On July 19, they put the poor man in a wagon and took him to Auschwitz, where he was gassed and burned in a crematorium. I am with you, my dear Apuka, until I die. Košice, 1946 apr. Your Mummy”<sup>51</sup>



Picture 8 Postcard written by the children and the wife of Aladár Zahler in 1946

According to this text, which among others documents also the family's language use, Aladár Zahler was among the hundreds of Jews who were arrested by the German and Hungarian authorities on the street and at train stations during the days after the German occupation. As a result of these so-called “*Einzelaktionen*” (individual actions), several hundred Jews were sent to Kistarcsa, the camp from which the first transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau departed on April 18, 1944. Aladár Zahler, who was already over 60 years old at the time, spent more than 3 months in the Kistarcsa camp. Finally, he was

deported by the Germans on July 19, 1944, despite the fact that regent Miklós Horthy had stopped the mass deportations countrywide on July 8.<sup>52</sup>

According to the Slovak-language petition submitted by his widow to the National Council of Košice after the war, Aladár was deported from the Hungarian capital in October 1944,<sup>53</sup> but it is probably incorrect information, since this official document was partly compiled from a template. The Kistarcsa internment camp and Auschwitz are mentioned in a resolution of the Regional Court in Košice from 1946 in which Aladár was officially declared deceased,<sup>54</sup> and also in the letter of Irén Zahler that was written to the German consulate in Chile in 1955.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> From the Family Archives of the Zahlers.

<sup>52</sup> Borbála Klacsmann: “A deportálások végjátéka – a kistarcsai internálótábor” (The endgame of deportations – the Kistarcsa internment camp), See: <https://ujkor.hu/content/deportalasok-vegjateka-kistarcsai-internalotabor>

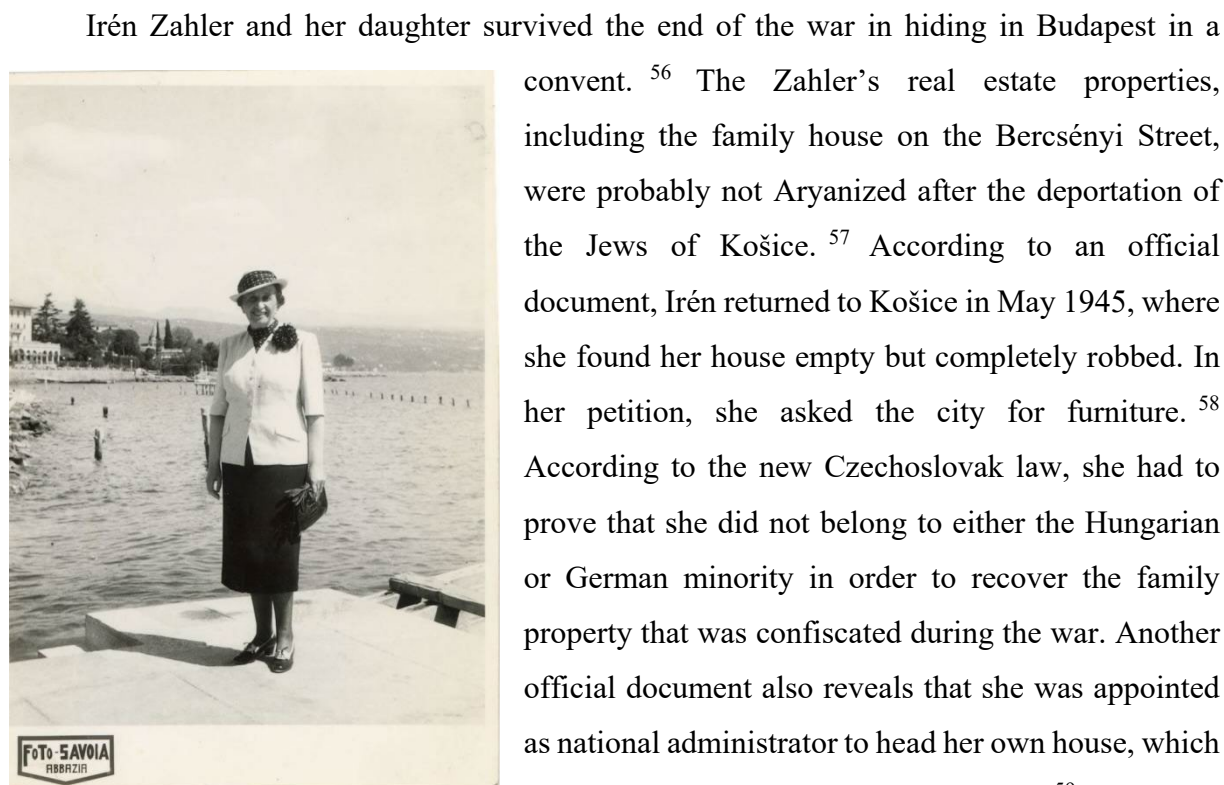
<sup>53</sup> AMK, Národný výbor mesta Košíc 1945-1948 (National Committee of the City of Košice 1945–1948), box 46, file number 15816/1945 Irena Zahlerová, rod. Fischerová, žiadosť o pridel. Nábytku (Irena Zahlerová, née Fischerová, petition for furniture).

<sup>54</sup> Family Archives of the Zahlers, Usnesenie, Okresný súd v Košiciach (Resolution, District Court in Košice), 10<sup>th</sup> March 1946.

<sup>55</sup> Family Archives of the Zahlers, Letter of Irén Zahler written to the German Consulate of Chile in German language, Santiago de Chile, 19<sup>th</sup> October 1955.



## Instead of a Conclusion – Survivors in the Post-WWII Period



Picture 9 Irén Zahler in the interwar period

„national and political loyalty” toward the city administration. However, the rebuilding of a new life in post-war Czechoslovakia was more than complicated. She could only count on the small income from her remaining assets and on the help of her two surviving children. However, her son had permanently settled down by then and started a family in Chile and her daughter lived in Prague, with her husband, who was also a Holocaust survivor. As a consequence, Irén finally followed her son to Chile and so, from 1947, all of the family members lived outside of Košice.

After the war, it was the prominent Košice attorney, Miklós Gaskó who helped Irén and the family in the management of the recovered properties and the related administration, as is confirmed by the correspondence between him and György Zahler, who had a good friendship. The communist takeover in February 1948 created a completely new situation in this regard as

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>57</sup> László Csósz, Veronika Szeghy-Gayer, “Petitioners for Jewish property in Košice: A Case Study on the Holocaust and Local Society in a Slovak-Hungarian Border Region”, in *Mesto a Dejiny* 10, no. 1 (2021), pp. 75-101.

<sup>58</sup> AMK, Národný výbor mesta Košice 1945–1948, box 46, file number 15816/1945 Irena Zahlerová, rod. Fischerová, žiadosť o pridel. nábytku (Irena Zahlerová, née Fischerová, petition for furniture).

<sup>59</sup> AMK, Národný výbor mesta Košice 1945–1948, box 39, number of file P105/945, Irena Zahlerová zaistenie nabytku (Irena Zahlerová securing property).

well, since in the following years, the family real estate which the Zahlers still owned, was nationalized. Finally, Irén returned to Europe with her daughter in the 1970s and died in Vienna on November 1, 1982.

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