Jewish News and Reflections on the Great Depression in Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

The article explores how the Great Depression was reflected in Jewish newspapers, particularly the Czech-language Zionist periodical Židovské Zprávy *(Jewish News). It highlights the key issues that Zionists considered crucial during the economic crisis. Additionally, the article provides an overview of the status and economic situation of the Jewish minority in the former Czech lands, including their integration into the Czechoslovak economy. The crisis exacerbated disparities between the Czech lands, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus, as well as between internal and border regions. Alongside topics related to the impact of the crisis and the differing conditions of the Jewish minority in various regions of Czechoslovakia, Zionists also addressed the effects of the crisis on Palestine.*

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Introduction

In the autumn of 1929, during the crisis on the New York Stock Exchange, there was little indication of the catastrophe the world was heading towards. Yet the Great Economic Depression undoubtedly contributes to understanding the events and processes that led to the radicalization of societies in the second half of the 1930s. Even in Czechoslovakia, no one anticipated such a development. We still lack a clear consensus on its exact causes or the appropriate economic policies that could have successfully confronted it, despite this topic being extensively explored in Czech historiography.[1]

The global economic crisis in Czechoslovakia is typically defined by the symbolic "Black Thursday"—the crash on the New York Stock Exchange in the autumn of 1929 and 1934. The peak of the crisis in Czechoslovakia was in 1933, when unemployment reached its maximum in February, with 920,000 people unemployed. In the following years, the unemployment rate gradually declined, albeit slowly.[2]

The "Great Crisis" caused a decline in the banking sector, industry, and agriculture, affecting the entire society and shaping its future course. The following text will focus on the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia during the 1930s. It will lay out the economic situation of Jews, their religious and socio-cultural composition, and their integration into society. The analysis primarily focuses on the territory of Bohemia and the eastern part of the country. While I am aware of the differing political-historical contexts, varying demographic dynamics, economic developments, and linguistic, national, and cultural differences within individual regions of the entire Czechoslovak territory, it is impossible to provide a thoroughly detailed analysis of all the regions. Last but not

[1] Vlastislav Lacina, *Velká hospodářská krize v Československu 1929-1934* (The Great Depression in Czechoslovakia 1929-1934) (Praha: Academia, 1984). Jakub Rákosník and Jiří Noha, *Kapitalismus na kolenou. Dopad velké hospodářské krize na evropskou společnost v etech 1929-1934* (Capitalism is on its Knees. The Impact of the Great Depression on European Society, 1929-1934) (Praha: Auditorium, 2012). Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky (1918-1938)* (The Czech Lands in the Era of the First Republic (1918-1938)) (Praha: Libri, 2002).

[2] Respectively, in 1935, when GDP in Czechoslovakia reached its bottom, while in other countries, based on the decline in production, it was in 1932. Rákosník and Noha, *Kapitalismus na kolenou*, 86-88.

least, it will delve into the topics that the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia followed and reflected upon in the Czech journals that wrote about the crisis.

The Jewish Minority in the Czech Lands: General Patterns

In Bohemia, the second half of the 19th century ended the legal constraints on the economic activities of the Jewish population. This granted them full civic equality and helped to transform the Habsburg Monarchy into a relatively liberal environment, facilitating the free movement of goods, capital, and labor. During this period, various regions within the Monarchy experienced significant industrialization, modernization, urbanization, and disproportional economic development. Hungary witnessed a surge in agriculture and the food industry. At the same time, Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia experienced a boom in the textile, engineering, and metallurgy sectors, as well as in mining for raw materials. Vienna and Budapest emerged as pivotal commercial and financial centers in the Monarchy. Consequently, many people, including Jews, migrated from impoverished, predominantly agricultural regions to urban and industrial areas.[3] Education and migration had significantly impacted the socio-economic status of Jews since the second half of the 19th century, and the Jewish community in Bohemia opened up to Czech and German cultures. The Czech Lands experienced an economic and social boom and became the industrial center of the Habsburg Monarchy. The successful participation of Jews under the new conditions can be further traced at several levels, including their linguistic and ethnic affiliation, their attendance at educational institutions, and their involvement in the economic and social structures. [4] The urbanization of the Jewish, Czech, and German populations accompanied this process. The increasing concentration of Jews in cities led to their gradual but significant decline in small towns and the countryside, culminating in the 1930s, when only about 17 percent of Bohemian and 15 percent of Moravian Jews (of a total of almost 80,000 Jews in Bohemia and

[3] Jana Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde: Jews in Bohemia between the Enlightenment and the Shoah* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), 146.
[4] Ibid., 127.

Moravia) were settled in countryside.[5] We can observe both economic success and social prosperity of the Jewish minority even during the interwar period, however, with some obstacles.[6]

The society's dual Czech and German natures shaped the position of Jews in Czech society.[7] The inclination of Jews towards German culture and language affiliation was a natural outcome of the prevailing prominence of German culture in the region during that period, and of the Germanization of Jewish education starting from the era of Joseph II. However, most Jews in Bohemia also regularly interacted with the Czech language and individuals. The growing Czech national revival in the nineteenth century posed a challenging dilemma for Jews, as they had to decide whether to embrace a linguistic identity that non-Jews regarded as a patriotic statement. Regardless of the choice made by Jews, assimilation into a society with two cultural and linguistic affiliations was not easy. With the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, Jews retained their previously acquired rights and generally benefited from the country's stable, democratic, and prosperous environment. Nevertheless, ethnic identity remained a constant tension in the newly formed multiethnic state, although it was a less significant issue in Bohemia than in Slovakia or Ruthenia.[8]

Following the First World War, the collapse of the extensive, integrated market of the Habsburg Monarchy had a negative economic impact on all the successor states. The Bohemian lands, primarily focused on exporting their production, faced setbacks as neighboring countries implemented protectionist policies, losing their traditional Central European markets. They had to adapt and redirect their

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[5] Ines Koeltzsch, Michal Frankl, and Martina Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," in *Prague and Beyond. Jews in the Bohemian Lands*, eds. Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 157-195; 173.

[6] Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde,* 127; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 131-170.

[7] For more information about history of the Jews in Czechoslovakia see Kateřina Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Tatjana Lichtenstein, *Zionists in Interwar Czechoslovakia: Minority Nationalism and the Politics of Belonging* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016). Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 131-170. Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval, eds., *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

[8] Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde*, 128.

trade towards other parts of Europe and the world. In contrast to the macroeconomic situation, the social status of Jews in Czechoslovakia after 1918 was highly favorable. Their civic rights were guaranteed, and the state authorities actively condemned and tried to suppress any expression of anti-Semitism. As a consequence, Jews were able to continue their economic activities without interruption during the establishment of the new state.[9]

Thanks to its multinational composition and foreign policy, Czechoslovakia was well-connected with the outside world. However, the image of Czechoslovakia as an "island of democracy," in contrast to other, less tolerant, European countries, especially its neighbors Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, was dubious. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that "the Jews were actively engaged in these processes, opening up and using the new possibilities and dynamics of political, social, and cultural commitments to Czechoslovak society."[10]

When focusing on the Jewish general economic situation of the Jews and their professional structure in Czechoslovakia, the best data set is provided by Jana Vobecká. The censuses conducted in 1910, 1921, and 1930 offer compelling evidence of the enduring stability in Bohemia's occupational composition of the Jewish community. Approximately half of the Jewish population in Bohemia derived their primary income from trade and finance. They were four times more likely than the general population to be engaged in trade for livelihood. A significant majority of those involved in trade, accounting for 87 percent, were employed in trading goods. According to Vobecká, there was a positive correlation between the economic advancement of a country and the higher representation of Jews engaged in trade. This trend, specific to the Jewish population, was not observed among the non-Jewish population. This suggests that Jews were able to benefit from the increased job prospects in the commercial sector, which resulted from industrial expansion.[11]

Between the two world wars, about half of Bohemian Jews working in the industry were employed in the chemical, garment, leather, and food industries. Similar patterns were characteristic for Jews in Austria, Germany, and Poland. The

[9] Ibid., 146.

[10] Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 160-161.

[11] Vobecká, *Demographic Avant-Garde*, 148-153.

occupational and sector distribution among Jews differed significantly from the majority population. Over half of Jews were business owners or co-owners, and approximately ten percent practiced a free profession. A higher proportion of Jews held white-collar positions, comprising around one-fifth of the working Jewish population. Manual laborers accounted for only about six percent of Jews in 1930. The census data from 1910 to 1930 consistently portrayed Jews in Bohemia as primarily belonging to the middle and upper classes.[12]

Additionally, more than half of Jewish households had at least one house servant, indicating their relatively higher social status. The occupational profiles and employment sectors of Jews in Bohemia closely resembled those of Jews in Germany and Austria.[13]

Taking a closer look at the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia, several other characteristics can be examined simultaneously. The Jewish population of Czechoslovakia consisted of 355,000 Jews by religion, i.e. 2.6 percent of the total population, with crucial socio-economic differentiations. [14] There were differences between the Jewry of the Czech Lands (Moravia, Bohemia, and Silesia), representing an example of the West-European type; the Jews of Subcarpathian Rus of a typical East-European type; and the Jews of Slovakia were characterized as an intermediary case. [15] Among these Jewries existed demographic, socioeconomic, and religious differences, as well as differences in terms of national affiliation. The demographic, social, and economic situation of the Jews of the Eastern part of the Czechoslovak Republic, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus differed significantly from Bohemia-Moravia. The region was one of the most backward territories in Europe, with a significantly lower degree of cultural, economic, and political development. Here, the Jewish population was quite strong, mostly orthodox and ultraorthodox. According to the census of 1930, there were 136,000 Jews in Slovakia and about 100,000 Jews in Subcarpathian Rus.[16]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 153.

[14] Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 172; Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars,* 131

[15] Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 132-133.

[16] Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 174; Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 145-146.

The national affiliation in the census mentioned caused intense debates.[17]

> A positive tendency toward Jewish nationality in 1930 did not automatically mean a growing allegiance to Zionism or Jewish nationalism. It also offered an opportunity to express the everyday bonds to Jewish culture and tradition, or to avoid declaring another nationality, or both. In contrast to the Jews of Bohemia, nearly half of the Moravian-Silesian Jews thus declared Jewish as their nationality, a third declared German, and 17 percent declared Czechoslovak.[18]

In Slovakia, in the 1930 census, approximately half of the Jewish population identified themselves as Jewish by nationality. Another third declared Czechoslovak nationality, while only seven percent identified with Hungarian or German nationality.[19]

Thus, the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia did not represent a homogeneous entity. It was internally divided along linguistic lines regarding their perception of national identity, inclination towards Zionism, or the Czech-Jewish program.[20] These currents naturally reflected and interpreted contemporary political events and focused on the mutual relationship of their supporters to opposing movements and their stance towards the Czechoslovak Republic and its political representatives.

In the early stages of consolidating the new state, Jews defined their political agenda by establishing the Jewish National Council, representing various political and religious orientations. This council aimed to achieve recognition of Jewish nationality and equal civil rights.[21] The council was a Jewish voice against anti-Jewish violence as well as for a humanitarian approach to Jewish Refugees from

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[17] For the topic see Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia.*

[18] Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 175.

[19] Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, 131-170; Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 176.

[20] Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia,* 27-28.

[21] Ibid.; Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 161-165.

Subcarpathian Rus.[22] Later on, Židovská strana (the Jewish Party) became the leading political representative of the Jews, whose liberal program appealed to Jewish voters of both Zionist and non-Zionist inclinations.[23] However, Orthodox Jews in the eastern part of the republic rejected it.

> Only in 1929, and in a coalition with three Polish minority parties, did the Jewish Party manage to win two seats in the Czechoslovak parliamentary elections, which they kept until the end of the First Republic. In 1935, the party abandoned neutrality and joined the Social Democratic faction in the parliament. Although the Jewish Party was supported by many German-speaking Jews, its deputies were chosen from people who were fluent in Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Yiddish, and Russian.[24]

There was also a certain level of interconnection among Jewish representatives with both the members of the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party.[25]

One of the main focal points of the Jewish political agenda, as well as Jewish community life, was social welfare. It was significantly challenged several times in the course of the first republic. The first time was during World War I when Jewish refugees came from Galicia and Bukovina due to the shifting front of the war; then during economic and social crises in interwar Europe; and last but not least, in the 1930s, as a means of flight from Nazi Germany.[26] The social help for the Jewish refugees was predominantly in the hands of Zionist women organizations and their female representatives. Since the late 1920s, these Jewish welfare organizations

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[22] Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 165.

[23] Marie Crhová, "*Jewish politics in Central Europe: The Case of the Jewish Party in Czechoslovakia*" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2006), http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/02_crhova.pdf, accessed September 2, 2024.

[24] Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 167.

[25] Ibid.; Vít Strobach, *Židé: národ, rasa, třída. Sociální hnutí a „židovská otázka" v českých zemích 1861-1921* (Jews: Nation, Race, Class. Social Movements and the Jewish Question in Czech Lands in 1861-1921) (Praha: NLN, 2015).

[26] Koeltzsch, Frankl, and Niedhammer, "Becoming Czechoslovaks: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1917–38," 181-183.

mostly focused on the territory of Subcarpathian Rus and Slovakia because of the poor living condition of the Jewish population.[27]

The Great Depression and Jewish News

At the outset, I will mention the story of an extraordinarily successful Jewish entrepreneur, whose name is still known today and who remained untouched by the Great Economic Crisis. His tale underscores the profound diversity of fates among Jewish entrepreneurs and the broader Jewish population during the Great Depression.

At the turn of the century, one of the most famous industrialists of Jewish origin was Emil Kolben, an electrical engineer and entrepreneur, founder of the world-famous Kolben and Co.[28] In his student days already, Kolben was highly successful and managed to study in Zurich, Paris, and London. Soon after that, with his wife Malvina (née Popper), he traveled to the United States to work for the Edison General Electronic Company. Kolben met with Edison several times in the United States and Prague. His encounter with Nikola Tesla and his Tesla Electric Company was no less important for his business career.[29]

After his time in the United States, Kolben returned to Prague, where he and several partners opened an electrical engineering factory in Vysočany called Kolben and Co. The factory grew dynamically. By 1910, it had produced tens of thousands of electrical machines and equipment for factories in this country and worldwide. After the establishment of Czechoslovakia, the company transformed several times until finally a new engineering company, Českomoravská Kolben-Daněk (ČKD), was established. The company produced turbines, aircraft, and trolley cars for Prague and participated in electrification. Českomoravská Kolben-Daněk had a significant share in making interwar Czechoslovakia one of the most

[27] Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia,* 235-240.

[28] Kolben Emil Collection, Inventory No. 271, Archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

[29] Koben Emil Collection, Business Correspondence, Archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague; see also Ivo Kraus, *Vědci, vynálezci a podnikatelé v českých zemích: Škoda, Křižík, Kolben, Klement, Bata* (Scientists, inventors, and entrepreneurs in the Czech lands: Škoda, Křižík, Kolben, Klement, Bat'a) (Praha: Jonathan Livingston, 2007), 93-119.

developed countries in the world and one of the largest arms manufacturers.[30] These were mainly armored vehicles, trucks, and tanks. At the height of the boom, twelve thousand employees worked at ČKD.[31] As the rich archival holdings and literature show, the Great Depression hardly affected ČKD.[32]

During the economic crisis, stories of prominent and successful entrepreneurs indeed were not a topic that the press or the populace dwelled on unless they directly sparked labor strikes and exacerbated unemployment. For the further analysis of the Great Depression in the Jewish press, I have chosen the Czech-language Jewish periodical *Židovské zprávy* (Jewish News), published by the Central Zionist Association from 1918 until 1938.[33] The newspaper had both a news and an editorial section, focusing not only on current political, economic, and social issues of the time but also on philosophical, religious, linguistic, national, and sociological questions. It included cultural and literary content and reports from the world of sports. Among the most influential editors of the *Židovské zprávy* was Emil Waldstein, later correspondent for *Lidové Noviny* in Mukačevo. Jewish periodicals associated with the Zionist or Czech-Jewish movement also paid attention to intra-party events and provided detailed information, particularly on organizational life and related issues. So, which topics were reflected on in connection with the Great Economic Depression?

In August 1931, a series of articles titled "On State Capitalism" were published in the *Židovské zprávy*, written by Zdeněk Landes. The series addressed another

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[30] Ibid., 101

[31] Ibid.

[32] After the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Germany in 1939, Kolben had to resign from his position at ČKD. The company was soon transformed into Böhmisch-Mährische Maschinenfabrik, A.G., and Wehrmacht confiscated hundreds of tanks produced for the Czechoslovak army. Emil Kolben was allowed to live in his family villa in Prague's Vinohrady district until June 1943, when he was transported to the Terezín ghetto, where he died of mental and physical exhaustion on 3 July 1943. Dr. Emil Kolben, https://www.holocaust.cz/databaze-obeti/obet/101454-emil-kolben/, accessed September 2, 2024.

[33] Indeed, there were several other publications as well, such as the Zionist German magazine *Selbstwehr* (Self-Defense), the magazine *Rozvoj* (Progress), and *Česko-židovské listy* (Czech Jewish Letters) of the integrationist Czech-Jewish movement, as well as the *Česko-židovský kalendář* (Czech-Jewish Calendar). In the following analysis, however, I only touch upon them peripherally, as the topics covered in the press often overlapped. Avraham Greenbaum, "Newspaper and Periodicals," https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Newspapers_and_Periodicals#idobqh, accessed September 2, 2024.

important topic related to the crisis: economic anti-Semitism. While not a new phenomenon in Czechoslovakia, the subject was approached with greater caution than the general topic of anti-Semitism in neighboring countries.[34]

In one of the articles, the author stressed that Jewish capitalists are equally affected by the crisis as non-Jewish ones.[35] However, in the subsequent series, the same author warned of the danger that threatened Jews: "State capitalism will be, and already is, politically accompanied by exclusionary nationalism. Every state will seek to exclude non-national elements from its business. Among others, Jews will be considered non-national elements, which will be the case worldwide, wherever they reside in larger numbers."[36] The author also referred to a negative example in the Czechoslovak Republic, where Jews were dismissed from companies at first. "A delegation from Vítkovice came to former Minister and Member of Parliament Stárek for support. According to the press, the minister responded: 'Get rid of the Jews and Germans, and we will help you!' "[37]

The topic was also mentioned in relation to municipal elections and the Jewish parliamentary representation of the Jewish Party. The economic crisis was seen as the cause of the breakdown of thousands of Jewish families and the damage to the Jewish middle class. The fact that many Jewish officials and employees lost their jobs was also a consequence of economic antisemitism. In their rhetoric, some political parties and anti-Semites referred to the large share of Jews in the country's economic life and their high concentration in trade and crafts. For parts of the population, anti-Semitism became a weapon in the competitive struggle and helped to develop and explain social, political, and cultural issues. Similarly, banks and industrial companies refused to hire Jewish applicants, and Jews were the first to be dismissed.[38]

Jews and Jewish politicians were concerned about the deteriorating economic situation of the Jews. The economic crisis in the territory of Subcarpathian Rus

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[34] Michal Frankl and Miloslav Szabó, *Budování státu bez antisemitismu? Násilí, diskurz loajality a vznik Československa* (Building a state without anti-Semitism? Violence, the Discourse of Loyalty, and the Creation of Czechoslovakia) (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2015).

[35] Zdeněk Landes, "O státním kapitalismu" (On State Capitalism), *Židovské zprávy* (Jewish News), August 18, 1931, (XIV), 34: 1.

[36] Zdeněk Landes, "O státním kapitalismu," *Židovské zprávy*, August 21, 1931, (XIV), 33: 1.

[37] Ibid.

[38] "Židoská strana–volby" (Jewish Party–votes), *Židovské zprávy*, September 11, 1931, (XIV), 36: 1.

became a pressing issue, and it was not surprising that it received significant attention among the Jewish political representation due to the high percentage of Jews in that area. Even one of the deputies of the Jewish Party, Julius Reisz, spoke about the poor economic situation of Jews in the parliamentary chamber. He addressed an equally important topic that strongly resonated in the Jewish press. He criticized the high unemployment rate in Subcarpathian Rus and called for tax exemptions for new constructions and a flat-rate textile tax on turnover in the textile industry to improve economic conditions in Slovakia.[39]

As mentioned earlier, the eastern part of the republic had been in the spotlight of Zionist organizations since World War I, when thousands of Jewish refugees arrived on Czech territory. In the 1930s, a large number of refugees from Germany came to Czechoslovakia once again. They were assisted by the Jewish Central Welfare Office (Židovská ústředna pro sociální péči), Jewish charitable associations, B'nai B'rith, and especially Zionists affiliated with international organizations such as HICEM (Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society), the Jewish Colonization Association and Emigration Direction. Additionally, women from the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), led by Marie Schmolková and Hanna Steinnerová, played a significant role. At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, WIZO also organized assistance for Jews from the eastern part of the republic regarding emigration, focusing on aiding Jews from Subcarpathian Rus, partly financed by the Jewish Distribution Committee.[40]

By the late 1920s, the situation in Subcarpathian Rus caught the attention of Vally Waldsteinová, the former wife of a correspondent for the newspaper *Lidové noviny* (*The* People's Newspaper) in Uzhhorod. She cared for the material needs of local Jews living in extreme poverty. The collection and redistribution of material and financial aid was directed both to the poorest Jewish population and to the population of the eastern part of the country, which was poverty-stricken as a result of the crisis. Later, however, it gradually began to turn into aid to Jewish refugees fleeing Germany for Czechoslovakia. Schmolková and Steinerová further contributed to the redistribution of aid and the procurement of material resources. Hanna Steinerová herself served as the Jewish Women's Relief

[39] "Poslanec dr. J. Reisz o hospodářské krisi" (Deputy J. Reisz on the economic crisis), *Židovské zprávy*, March 20, 1931, (XIV), 8: 3.

[40] Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*, 235-240.

Committee chairwoman for Subcarpathian Rus. Their assistance to German refugees in the 1930s seamlessly continued based on these experiences.[41]

In the early 1930s, the Jewish (Zionist) press was filled with articles about the dire economic and social situation in the eastern part of the republic, along with calls for food, financial, and material collections for Subcarpathian Rus. The press stressed that unemployment, hunger, and poverty were particularly severe in the eastern part of the country due to the economic crisis. If help did not reach the local Jews, Jewish families would die of starvation.[42] Appeals for solidarity with Eastern Jews were directed at both the Jewish and non-Jewish public with the slogan "Hunger knows no political differences."[43] These appeals were made by the Aid Committee of Jewish Women for Subcarpathian Rus (Pomocného výboru židovských žen pro Podkarpatskou Rus).[44]

Due to the duration of the crisis, the eligibility criteria for state unemployment benefits became more stringent. For instance, the requirement for trade union membership, a prerequisite for receiving support, was extended, the maximum daily support amount reduced, and active employee care programs were introduced. The state established an emergency public community service system, and unemployed individuals were not allowed to refuse it, unless they would lose their entitlement to assistance. Another prerequisite for receiving support was registration with a labor agency. Consequently, public collections, soup kitchens, and other charitable events played a crucial role. Jewish aid understandably did not focus solely on the eastern region of the republic. In December 1930, the Society for Assistance to the Unemployed (Pomoc nezaměstnaným) was established in collaboration with six German and Jewish humanitarian organizations to provide meals to the unemployed. An article titled "Note on Jewish Humanity" mentioned that during November and December 1931, 192,512 meals were served

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41 Ibid.

42 "Proti bídě a hladu" (Against poverty and hunger), *Židovské zprávy*, February 2, 1932, (XV), 8: 1.

43 "Židovská fronta humanity" (The Jewish humanity front), *Židovské zprávy*, February 2, 1932, (XV), 8:1.

44 The Aid Committee was headed by Hana Steinerová, see also "Podkarpatoruské problémy" (Problems in Subcarpathian Rus), *Židovské zprávy*, February 26, 1932, (XV), 9: 1; "Další výzvy proti bídě a hladu" (Another appeals against poverty and hunger), *Židovské zprávy*, May 13, 1932, (XV), 20: 2.

to those in need in four kitchens operated by the society, regardless of their religious affiliation. The food was cooked by the wives of members of the founding organizations (Lodge Odd Fellows, B'nai B'rith, Hort, Societa, and Confraternity, Usneseno (Resolved)). The article's authors wanted to emphasize that solidarity and assistance were part of Jewish nature, although the government and municipalities should primarily organize this aid.[45]

The newspapers also addressed demographic issues related to the crisis. As mentioned earlier, there was a gradual migration of Jews from rural areas to cities, which was evident in the official census of 1930. In an article titled "How Jews Disappear from Czech Countryside", an unknown author discussed the decrease of the Jewish population its causes were discussed. There was a decrease of 3,476 individuals or 4.36 percent since the last census in 1921, while the overall population had increased by 6.58 percent. The most significant change was expected to occur in rural areas, where the number of Jews decreased by a quarter in several districts. In Prague, however, the Jewish population grew from 31,751 to 35,425 individuals (out of 76,301 Jews in Bohemia).[46] Similarly, Dr. Josef Nechamkis discussed in his article "Decline in Birthrate among Jews in Western and Central Europe" that the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia had the lowest birthrate, expressing concerns about the future of Jews in Europe. He further stated that declining birthrates were evident in all European countries and among all nations. He identified two reasons for this phenomenon: "1. Familiarity of all population strata with means of contraception; 2. Unfavorable social and economic conditions that lead to the use of these means."[47]

The impact of the Great Economic Depression on man became a comprehensive, multilayered topic, as shows the analyses of this issue which can be found in the *Česko-židovský kalendář* (Czech-Jewish Calendar) by Dr. Otakar Guth, titled "Towards the Current Moral Crisis." Dr. Guth addressed not only the declining sales of goods, high unemployment, financial difficulties, and the increasing

[45] "Poznámka o židovské humanitě" (A note about Jewish humanity), *Židovské zprávy*, May 1, 1931, (XIV), 16: 6.

[46] "Jak mizejí Židé z českého venkova" (How Jews are disappearing from the Czech countryside), *Židovské zprávy*, January 20, 1933, (XVI), 3: 2.

[47] Dr. Josef Nechamkis, "Pokles porodnosti u Židů v západní a středí Evropě" (Declining birth rates among Jews in Western and Central Europe), *Židovské zprávy*, September 9, 1931, (XIV), 36: 2.

bankruptcies of companies and shops that affected various segments of the population—workers, traders, industrialists, lawyers, doctors, and engineers.[48] Dr. Guth also pointed out that society was experiencing a moral crisis alongside the economic crisis, in Czechoslovakia as well as worldwide. This crisis entailed increasing crime rates, a rising number of divorces, the loosening of social morals, and an increasing number of suicides. He provided statistics from Vienna, where 3,083 individuals attempted suicide in 1931 and 2,875 in 1932. The leading causes were poverty, unemployment, job loss, family disputes, illness, and unhappy love.[49] The author also identified the moral crisis in the cultural sphere.

Dr. Guth strongly warned of the consequences of high unemployment, which could lead to increased crime rates, and addressed another phenomenon of the time, the endless list of job-seeking advertisements in newspapers, using current advertisements of job seekers:

> Can I find a compassionate person? My many advertisements in this section have yet to bring me the desired position, with so far only some occasional earnings that barely support myself and my family! However, as my situation has become highly critical, where I cannot find even the tiniest income, I return to compassionate gentlemen and strongly request any position (due to family reasons!) in Prague! I am a chemist with excellent experience, outstanding editorial skills, and most importantly, I am willing to work honestly. Being married and a father, without means.[50]

In a similar vein, "a young writer severely affected by the crisis humbly requests esteemed gentlemen for any employment [...] Incredibly grateful for the bare minimum to survive."[51] Guth saw the roots of the current economic and moral decline in World War I and warned that the economic crisis revealed a dark side of mankind. "[...] Unemployment, poor business, and insolvencies generate envy,

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[48] Dr. Otakar Guth, "K současné mravní krizi" (On the current moral crisis), *Kalendář česko-židovský*, (LIII), 1933-1934: 150. The author lists the number of companies that went bankrupt by years: 1932: 1216 companies, 1931: 1033 companies, 1930: 885 companies, 1929 646 companies, 1928: 527 companies.

[49] Ibid., 151.

[50] Ibid., 153.

[51] Ibid.

anger, and hostility. Suddenly, a neighbor still doing somewhat well in business, who owns a car or bigger house, becomes the target of gossip and slander. Family life is being tactlessly disrupted."[52]

In Czechoslovakia, unemployment was indeed high, and the state had significant shortcomings in caring for the unemployed; unemployment support was not provided to many of them at all. By the end of 1930, there was a recorded unemployment rate of 58 percent in the territory of Czechoslovakia (including children and elderly individuals), with the eastern part of the republic contributing significantly to this statistic.[53] Numerous strikes and concerns about societal radicalization were integral parts of the social and economic fabric, which the Communists and Fascists, for instance, naturally exploited. They aimed to radicalize society, gain followers, and destabilize the democratic state. [54] Therefore, warnings about threats and deficiencies of democracy were frequently issued.

In the aforementioned article, Dr. Guth further warned against false euphoria about democracy, its ambition, corruption, intolerance, and hypocrisy. "Democracy is a good thing. Let us be glad that we have it but let us not elevate it to the status of a deity; let us not believe in some miraculous power and supernatural ability it possesses."[55] What did he see as the roots of the current moral crisis and its solution? "In the fact that a large part of humanity has lost religion but has not found a compensation."[56] Further, he added that socialism may have seemed like an adequate substitute, but had led to disappointment: "[...] the key to solving the moral crisis is a return to oneself. [...] Until the economic crisis subsides, the moral crisis will not subside. Some also say the opposite: the moral crisis must subside first, and then the public economy will recover."[57]

The author saw the major problem in the increased departure from the churches, especially those requiring religious taxes, such as the Israelite Church. Taxes were too high for many members since people were cutting down on expenses due to the depression. Dr. Guth concluded:

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[52] Ibid., 153-154.

[53] Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky (1918-1938),* 100.

[54] Ibid., 100- 101

[55] Ibid., 154.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 156-157.

> The remedy is this: Find inner balance within ourselves and help others maintain it. [...] The worst thing in the world is fear. It is an old experience that fear of catastrophe is worse than the catastrophe itself. Some people fear losing money; others fear the arrival of Bolshevism; others fear losing their jobs. But to live in perpetual fear is worse than living in prison.[58]

The author thus saw the situation as a vicious circle, in which the moral decline went hand in hand with the economic crisis.

And last but not least, there were occasional newspaper articles that warned about physical illnesses related to the economic crisis, such as rheumatism, gout, influenza, headaches, and muscle pain. "It is precisely the current economic crisis that places the greatest demands on every worker and requires work efficiency and, consequently, earning potential maximized to the extreme."[59]

Jewish Zionist periodicals primarily focused on the Great Depression and its impact on the territory of Palestine. Zionists were most concerned about the impact of the economic crisis on the project of building Palestine, and it is not surprising that this topic frequently appeared in their journals. There were persistent and frequent calls to support the Zionist project, despite the economic depression.[60]

In the article "The Global Crisis and the Building Project," an unknown author expressed concerns about how the economic crisis in the United States, the vast unemployment there, and the bank failures would impact Eretz and the insufficient funding of local social enterprises. "If the whole world is suffering, old states such as England, Central Europe, and powerful entities like America facing catastrophic crises, it would be a miracle if the Zionist project remained unaffected," the author worries.[61]

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[58] Ibid., 159.

[59] "Krise a nemoc" (Crisis and the illness), *Židovské zprávy*, April 21, 1933 (XVI), 16: 4. The text also served as a hidden advertisement offering the drug Togal.

[60] See appeals to support Karen Hayesod due to the economic crisis in Jewish News, e.g., *Židovské zprávy*, January 23, 1931, (XIV), 4: 1.

[61] "Světová krise a budovací dílo" (The Global Crisis and the Building Project), *Židovské zprávy*, January 16, 193, (XIV), 3: 2.

"Palestine itself, the Jewish undertaking, has not yet been affected by the economic crisis like Czechoslovakia, England, or other countries. The decline in grain prices has placed a significant part of the Arab population in dire straits, but the Jewish community has not been shaken to that extent so far."[62] Concerns primarily arose due to the financial difficulties of the Jewish Agency related to the depression. In line with supporting the Zionist agenda, the article concludes with a proposal to address the poor economic situation of Jews in Europe, suggesting that they should seek new economic opportunities and emigrate to Palestine. Among the reasonable arguments for emigration was the construction of the Baghdad-Haifa railway, offering advantageous and profitable job opportunities.[63]

Reflections on the global economic crisis and its contextualization with Palestine were widespread. Moreover, as already mentioned, it was an explicit part of Zionist propaganda, which necessarily included a recapitulation of the achievements of Zionist philanthropy.[64] Prominent Jewish philanthropists, their targets achieved, and their economic successes in Palestine were highlighted.

In March 1931, the critical economic situation of the Jews of Poland resonated in *Židovské zprávy*. As the newspaper stressed, around 9,000 predominantly Jewish businesses were liquidated, and the collapse of at least 20,000 more seemed imminent. The traditional Jewish business sectors, such as furriers, haberdasheries, shoemakers, and milliners, were the most gravely threatened. The article titled "Severe Economic Crisis in Poland," however, was linked to the aforementioned topic, the economic crisis in Palestine. The article called for economically conscious behavior among Jews, which meant supporting their market—the so-called *Toceret Haaertz* in Palestine. Consumers were encouraged to be aware of the need to reject foreign products to avoid harming the Palestinian economy. The article also referred to the well-known Czechoslovak shoe company, Baťa, stating, "Industrial growth will undoubtedly eliminate political disagreements, as

[62] Ibid., 3.

[63] Ibid.

[64] See appeals to support Karen Hayesod due to the successes of Montefiore, Alliance Israélite Universelle, as well as the current construction of Jewish factories in Palestine and their ability to employ 11,000 workers, were highlighted. Nellie Mochenson, "Vývoj židovského průmyslu" (The development of the Jewish industry), *Židovské zprávy*, March 13, 1931, (XIV), 11: 1.

demonstrated by the recent joint statement of Jewish and Arab shoemakers against Baťa."[65]

If the economic situation in Palestine was associated with those in the USA and Europe, newspaper authors usually expressed optimism that the depression in Eretz Israel was not as catastrophic as expected, the financial situation was stable, and the Jewish population's unemployment was not excessively high. "There is a severe economic depression in the world, but the domestic economy continues to grow in Palestine. It is the only country where Jews are gaining economic positions. The unemployment of approximately 3,000 people can easily be eliminated by spring for 30,000 pounds."[66]

Articles in the Jewish press that covered topics of the Great Depression were usually also linked to other subjects that the authors regarded crucial. The depression was intertwined with themes of Palestine, (economic) antisemitism, or the escalating poverty in the eastern part of the republic, and often interwoven with the dissemination of ideas and opinions and efforts to maintain support or gain adherents to the agendas that the respective periodical traditionally upheld.

As previously mentioned, due to turbulent social and economic changes, authors of the Jewish press expressed their concern about the radicalization of society and the strengthening of fascism and communism, as it had occurred in neighboring states. The Jewish Calendar addressed propaganda and many other aspects at a broader level in an article by Vilém Práger titled "About State Propaganda." The author delved into the utilization of scientific knowledge in propaganda, not only in industrial sectors, as the title suggests, but primarily in the realm of the state. He discussed the necessity of state propaganda in a democracy: "The times are exceptional, and therefore democracy must not neglect any means by which its position can be fortified."[67]

The goal of propaganda, tailored to the broad layers of society, was to strengthen the belief in democracy, the Czechoslovak Republic, and its brighter economic future. In this regard, the article's author mentioned the successes of Goebbels'

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[65] "Těžká hospodářská krize v Polsku" (Severe economic crisis in Poland), *Židovské zprávy*, March 13, 1931, (XIV), 11: 1.

[66] "Zasedání Jewish Agency" (Jewish Agency Session), *Židovské zprávy*, July 14, 1931, (XIV), 29: 4.

[67] Vilém Práger, "O státní propaganda" (About State Propaganda), *Židovský kalendář*, 1934-1935: 82-92; 84.

propaganda in Nazi Germany or Trotsky's in Russia, as well as the successful economic propaganda of Roosevelt. However, he emphasized the necessity of thoroughly analyzing the environment in which propaganda operated – capturing the population's mindset, its weaknesses and problems, interests, desires, and needs. For this purpose, the efforts of teachers, journalists, scouts, the Red Cross, police, and, last but not least, women and mothers were to be utilized.[68]

The intended goal was also to be achieved with the help of an economic measure from 1933, an investment loan aimed at addressing the economic crisis in 1933-1934, known as the "Labor Loans." This initiative was associated with the slogans of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk: "If people want to work, money must not idle."[69] Using the example of the "Labor Loans," Vilém Práger highlighted a successful propaganda practice aimed at preserving democracy in Czechoslovakia. He advocated for a clear timeline for promotion according to a system and plan, including advertising through radio broadcasts, films, and songs and through all community, minority, and educational associations.[70] And, last but not least, following the example of the renowned American Ford corporation, humor was also to be employed.[71] A Central Office was to be established to promote Czechoslovak democracy proactively, and every Czechoslovak citizen should be made aware that they were the cornerstones.[72]

Conclusion

In Czechoslovakia, the Great Economic Depression manifested itself with a delay, but ultimately, the crisis became significantly deeper than in most countries. The unfavorable industrial structure, dependence on foreign trade, and often

[68] Ibid., 85 and 88.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., 88-92.

[71] The battle was to be fought using humor, taking a cue from Ford, who collected all jokes aimed at his factory, published them collectively, and personally announced that his favorite anecdote was: "Someone tried in vain to sell his old Ford. After several unsuccessful ads, he announced in the newspapers that at 3 o'clock, he would place his Ford in front of the Statue of Liberty, and the first person to arrive would get the Ford. For free. When he arrived precisely at 3 o'clock with his Ford at the designated spot, he found 120 waiting there – old Fords." Ibid., 88-89.

[72] Ibid., 92.

technological deficiencies in production were to blame, as well as specific agricultural developments, where the global downturn pushed prices down. Particularly in the eastern part of the republic, the situation was dire due to an extensive agrarian crisis.

Moreover, the crisis significantly deepened the disparities between the Czech lands and Slovakia, as well as Subcarpathian Rus, and between the interior and the border regions. It should be noted that a German minority mostly inhabited these border areas, and these were also industrial regions of great importance for the entire Czechoslovakia. Given that these regions suffered greatly from the severe economic crisis, ideal conditions began to emerge here for anti-Czechoslovak resentments and the escalation of social and national radicalism, gradually leading to the emergence and success of the Sudeten German Party led by Konrad Henlein.

The Czechoslovak economy focused on the textile industry, glassmaking, distilleries, construction industry, engineering, power plants, mining, and industrial enterprises, often situated in border areas. The crisis most severely affected small and medium-sized businesses, and because banks owned many conglomerates, Czechoslovakia experienced an accelerated process of capital concentration. All of this had a profound impact in 1938.

The impact of the Great Depression on the Jewish minority was very uneven, as it was on all the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia. As the analysis in Jewish News shows, it was possible to reflect crisis on many levels.

It was central for Zionists to inform readers about the economic situation in Palestine, which was not as catastrophically affected by the crisis as the US and many European states. In the press, one could observe the unceasing calls for financial aid to Eretz and active involvement in building the Promised Land. Therefore, it was unsurprising that these appeals were linked to the issue of the rise of economic anti-Semitism in Czechoslovakia and its possible impact on the Jewish population.

Economic anti-Semitism was another topic widely reflected in the Jewish press from the time of the establishment of the new state. It was connected to a difficult situation of the Jewish population in the economically backward and unprosperous eastern part of the country. Therefore, the crisis's effects were more tangible, and the press wrote of a humanitarian catastrophe in the area. Naturally,

this theme was also reflected in the political agenda of Jewish parties and politicians and on the radar of Jewish aid societies and organizations.
However, as mentioned in the introduction, the Jewish minority entered the new Czech state emancipated and well-educated, and they had participated abundantly in the economic growth of the Habsburg monarchy associated with the Industrial Revolution would later continue to do so in the dynamic economic development of interwar Czechoslovakia.

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