

JÁN SPIŠIAK (1901 – 1981)



The university professor with two doctorates in law, head of the legal department of Tatra banka, from 1st April 1929 its legal representative and author of many expert and scientific publications, Ján Spišiak, graduate of the Law School of Charles University in Prague, was born on 12th January 1901 at České Brezovo. Interruption of his work with Tatra banka by unpaid leave from 1st January 1940 to 1st October 1944, when he served as Slovak ambassador in Hungary, influenced the course of his life and professional activity.

His memoirs, with the title "Memories of Budapest" (Spomienky na Budapešť) show the demanding character of diplomatic work during the war while securing the rights of the Slovak national minority in the transferred territories. Ján Spišiak significantly assisted with the publication of the Slovak language daily "Slovenská jednota" [Slovak Unity] in Hungary. He helped to solve various problems, including those resulting from price relations and conversion between the Slovak crown and Hungarian pengő. Horthy's government gave the inhabitants of southern Slovakia one pengő for seven crowns, which was discriminatory. At the end of the war, Slovak citizens received only two crowns for one pengő.

However, Ján Spišiak also gave all possible help with saving about 80,000 Jews, who remained in the territories occupied by the Hungarians. It was a very demanding and dangerous effort. He issued so-called letters of protection, which enabled Jews to return to Slovakia. At this time, Horthy's regime was the first in Europe to start persecuting Jews in agreement with the policy of Germany. In Slovakia the Jews were still relatively free. The diplomat Spišiak risked much, when he provided false passports and transported Jews to Slovakia in his own diplomatic car. He also helped Poles, who fled to Hungary after the occupation of Poland. He also gave them false Slovak passports, to protect them from German persecution.

The end of the war found Ján Spišiak in Budapest, and to his surprise he did not have a chance to return to Slovakia. The Soviet army arrested him and took him to Moscow. It was a miracle and perhaps also a result of good contacts with the Soviet ambassador in Budapest, that his life did not end as tragically as the lives of other diplomats, for example the Swede Wahlberg, who also helped Jews.

After returning home, a further surprise awaited him: he had to face criminal charges in 1947. However, the National Court decided on the basis of much testimony, that he could not be convicted of any of the crimes of which he

was accused. The court concluded that "financing the daily Slovenská jednota enabled the accused to participate in a plan to publish in Hungary the illegal paper of the Communist workers in Slovakia. The later commissioner of education Ladislav Novomeský collected about 200,000 crowns for this purpose. The money paid for supplies of paper... He successfully developed activity in the area of protecting the property of Slovak colonists... He helped to protect persecuted Jewish citizens, when the position of Jews in Hungary worsened."

On June 4th 1947, the court accepted a proposal to "withdraw the prosecution" of Ján Spišiak also because "after the offer of the position of ambassador in Budapest, Dr. Spišiak discussed the matter with his friends (Dr. Ing. Začko, Dr. Pietor) and the circle of the resistance movement against the fascist regime decided to advise him to accept the position and use it to defend Slovak interests in Hungary, and act as an informer and link for the resistance movement."

Ján Spišiak could again (also with the agreement or recommendation of the deputy prime minister of Czechoslovakia Ján Ursíny) return to his original function as head of the legal department of Tatra banka from 1st October 1947, and he could again lecture at Comenius University.

He continued to use in his work, knowledge gained from direct contact with European legal and banking theorists, and he gradually renewed these contacts. His knowledge was very valuable to the management of Tatra banka and later after merging with the Slovenská banka to the Slovenská Tatra banka and later still to the Štátná banka česko-slovenskej.

He was an expert on bill of exchange and cheque law, on which he wrote several books and a number of expert articles. He also participated in the preparation of relevant legislation in 1949.

He also solved complex legal questions connected with the fate of Jewish deposits, that is gold and other valuables, which Jews had to give up during the war and which were preserved undisturbed during the war. However, the greater part of them ended up in the safes of the Prague headquarters of the State Bank of Czechoslovakia.

The already mentioned merging of Tatra banka with the Slovenská banka and other smaller banks was not without complications. The period and the effort at centralization demanded great speed and the solution of many questions was legally very complex and difficult. The lawyers headed by Ján Spišiak were very concerned with this. Apart from the legal aspect, this also concerned the destinies of



people. For example, it was necessary to convince the lawyers from the merged banks that they had to give up their own habitual methods and styles of work and begin to do new work together.

On the last day of February 1961, less than two months after his sixtieth birthday, he had to retire from his work in the State Bank of Czechoslovakia. The director of the State Bank of Czechoslovakia Dr. Otakar Pohl replied as follows to Spišiak's request to extend his employment for another two years: "Although I very much value your activity, especially your scientific work, I do not consider it

possible to continue your employment in the regional institute for Slovakia as an additional worker, because on 15th October 1960, the Ministry of Finance officially informed the bank that it had to deal with all additional workers by 31st December 1960."

Therefore, Dr. Ján Spišiak banker and diplomat finally became an unnecessary "additional" person and lived on a pension in Bratislava until his death on 14th November 1981.

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