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University of Haifa Research Fellow Scholarship (2007-8)

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Research Project :

History of the Jews in Czechoslovakia in the years 1945 – 1989

Description :

The history of satellite countries of the former USSR has for several decades now become the object of interest of many centres of research and of many universities in Europe. Diverse aspects of the communist regimes of these countries of which former Czechoslovakia was one are being discussed at international colloquies and in publications which appear every year in many languages.

Certain themes remain unexplored or are marginal in these scientific studies. Such aspects include the survivors in Jewish communities and institutions after the year 1945. This despite the fact that a small number of Jewish historians from Poland, the USSR and Hungary have already unveiled these taboos.

As Jewish problems relating to the developments of Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 20th century are part of my personal and existential experience I have decided to tackle this area despite the fact that so far my research and scholarly work has been focused mainly on the history, cultural and social, of Jews in the Czech lands in the 18th and 19th centuries and in the early years of the 20th century.

In the context of a post-doctoral thesis which is to cover three years and which is to build the basis for other thorough research projects it seems to me to be indispensable to develop my project around three successive axes:

1. Bibliography and Sources

First of all it will be necessary to assemble bibliography and sources related to the history of the Jews after the year 1945, work which I believe has not yet been done.

The study of two Jewish reviews, namely the monthly Vestnik and the annual Ročenka will be my priority as it will allow me to reconstruct the main events which will reveal the names of actors and institutions in the life of Jews in Czechoslovakia after 1945, and under the communist regime between the years 1948 – 1989. Important illumination will also be made by the non-Jewish press, by official documents, by periodical reports and publications relating to significant events and questions concerning the life of Jews, Judaism, Israel and Zionism put of by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia at that time.

Documents from the archives of the Jewish community in Prague, the Prague Jewish Museum, archives of organizations of Jews from Czechoslovakia who emigrated to

Israel, such as Irgun Yotzei Czechoslovakia and Irgun olei Merkaz Europe will also be used to great advantage. These documents may unveil particular and collective aspects of the life of Jews in Czechoslovakia (connivance, collaboration, criticism or resistance of the Czechoslovak Jews towards the policy and ideology of the communist state in their country of origin as well as in Israel. I shall be studying official archives available to date, of the Ministry of Interior in Prague, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague and its counterpart in Israel. These archives may reveal documents illustrating concrete implementations of ideological directives, such as persecutions and processes of Jewish personalities, the resulting emigration of Jews to Israel and to other countries, etc. Finally I shall study private archives and the testimony of Jewish personalities (scholars, writers, artists, political figures, lawyers and business people) which should complete official sources through personal accounts or notes.

2. Periodization

The period between 1945 and 1989 was not static. The second task of the project will be to suggest a periodization relevant to the situation of the Jews in Czechoslovakia in correlation with the more general changes in world politics and of the internal situation in Czechoslovakia inside the Soviet block. This research will in effect focus on the Jewish question in the light of the following aspects of historic development:

-1945 - 1948 : the first reconstruction . political and economic- of Czechoslovakia and attempts to safeguard its democratic orientation, the reception and integration of people – including the Jews – who returned from the battlefields , from concentration camps, from emigration in other countries, etc.

- 1948 - 1956: the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia takes over power, the subjection of the country to the dictatorship of the proletariat, Marxist ideology and its impact on the economy, political life and culture in Czechoslovakia, Stalinism its impact on Czechoslovakia, the Communist trials and persecution, the great waves of emigration, etc.

-1956 - 1967 – the demise of Stalin and Gottwald, the first communist Primer Minister of Czechoslovakia and the first thaw (relaxation) of the Marxist regime, initiatives aiming at the cultural reconstruction of the country, open participation of intellectuals, etc.

-1968 -1969 – Prague Spring, the renewal of democracy in Czechoslovakia, the start of the economic, cultural and political reconstruction of the country, the invasion of the country by armies of the Warsaw Pact headed by the Soviet Union.

- 1970 – 1977 the period of "normalization", i.e., the return of communist totalitarian rule and oppression, the systematic occultation of the history and memory of minorities, etc., the new wave of emigration to the West.

- 1978 – 1989 - the rise of cultural and intellectual resistance, Charter 1977, the general weakening of the Soviet Block and the velvet revolution.

3. Themes

Following from data studied in the said sources and within the above periodization I shall be focusing on themes and deriving conclusions relating to the attitude of the Marxist state towards the Jews, the activities of Jews within the country, the problems of Jewish identity and the survival of the Jewish memory, possibly also drawing comparisons with the situation of Jews in other historic and geographic contexts. In this regard I would

want to focus on a more profound research and study of the following themes"

- **The State and the Jews.** Czech Jews within the reconstruction of the State after World War Two, the status of the Jews and their relationship with the Marxist State in Czechoslovakia with regard to the Jewish question, the proportion of Marxist ideological anti-Semitism and national anti-Semitism, etc.

- **The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the Jews.** Jewish personalities in the bosom of the CP, programmes and directives of the CP with regard to the Jews, trials and persecution, etc. - Emigration of Czechoslovak Jews – the waves , directions and conditions of emigration, the activities and organizations involved in Jewish emigration , etc.

- **Jewish Institutions and Communities in Czechoslovakia.** The organisation and life of Jewry in Czechoslovakia under the Marxist regime and communal structures, the differences between Jewish life in the capital and in the rural areas, cultural and religious life, etc.

- **Jewish Memory and Identity.** Marxist historiography and the occultation of the Shoa and of Jewish presence in national history, the Terezin Memorial, the Prague Jewish Museum, etc.

- **The Catholic Church and the Jews in the Marxist State.** The Jews in the opinion of Czechoslovak Catholics before and after the second Ecumenical Council, the persecution of the Church and the Jews and the impact thereof on their mutual relations.

- **Jewish Personalities in the Political Economic and Cultural Life of Marxist Czechoslovakia.**

4. Development of Contacts

Within the Project I would like to develop relations between academic institutions in the Czech Republic and in Israel, namely with Professor Milos Havelka of the Faculty of Human Sciences of Charles University who is involved in a similar project.