Dr. Rob Rozett, Director, Yad Vashem Libraries

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Lucia Zitnanska, Vice-Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice, Slovak Republic, Martin Korcok, Head of the Sered' Holocaust Museum, the survivor Naftali Fürst, who has come from Israeli to give testimony, dear colleagues and friends. Just noting the sponsors of this event – Slovakia, especially in its capacity as President of the European Union, the Fundamental Rights Agency, without which this conference would never have taken place, the Sered Holocaust Museum and Yad Vashem - suggests how central the events of the Holocaust remain for our identity and self-understanding more than 70 years after the end of the Second World War. I would like to thank the organizers for bringing us here to help us enrich our understanding of those events and to share best practices in education and commemoration. We greatly appreciate the support of our colleagues, like our dear friend from the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava Professor Professor Pavol Mešťan, His Excellency the Israeli Ambassador to Slovakia Zvi Aviner Vapni and His Excellency the Slovak Ambassador to Israel Peter Hulyeni.

I first encountered the Sered camp over 35 years ago when I embarked on the research for my doctoral dissertation under the guidance of Professor Yehuda Bauer: *The Relationship between Revolt and Rescue: Jewish Rescue and Revolt in Slovakia and Hungary during the Holocaust.* I learned of a camp that had a dual purpose. On the one hand it was a transit camp or funnel for deporting Jews to ghettos in the east and to newly functioning extermination centers primarily in spring and summer of 1942, and autumn 1944 and winter 1945; and on the other hand, it was a place where a relatively small number of Jews were to be kept in Slovakia to perform forced labor –

labor that would protect them from being "sent east to work," which is how the Slovak administration explained the deportations. In both of its capacities, entire families were sent to Sered, most thence to their deaths, and some given a chance to survive. Sered, like the camps Novaky and Vyhne at least in part, took on the role of safe-haven owing to the dogged attempt of the members of the semi-underground Jewish rescue organization, the Working Group that tried virtually everything they could think of to keep Slovak Jews alive.

With the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising at the end of August 1944, the Jewish prisoners left the camp. An underground, mostly comprised of young people, had existed in Sered since 1943, and its members, along with some former inmates joined the partisans fighting the pro-Nazi Slovak regime. Many families which had remained together up until that time, now split apart. By the end of September, the uprising was brutally put down, in the course of which some 500 hundred fighters from the three Jewish labor camps were killed; others were deported in the last wave of deportations that occurred during and after the revolt, and yet others fled to the hills to continue fighting with partisan units. From the outline of the story of Sered alone, we can learn that crisis struck Jewish families in many forms and variations during the Holocaust years.

In an album I have recently edited, along with my colleague Dr. Iael Nidam Orvieto, entitled *After So Much Pain and Anguish, First Letters after Liberation*, we presented letters written by Holocaust survivors soon after they were freed. One of the letters was written not far from where we stand today, in Trnava on July 2, 1945, by a survivor from that city, Jakob Weiss.

In 1941, with the arrival of Jewish refugees from Bratislava, the Jewish population of Trnava grew from about 2,500 to roughly 3,600. In the first week and a half of April 1942, family deportations from the city began and over 1,300 Jews were sent to Sered and from there farther east. Further deportations occurred during the time of the Slovak National Uprising. Out of the original 2,500 Jews of the city, some 2,000 were murdered in camps, and at the end of the war only about 250 returned to Trnava. Looking at the story of one person, one family and one community within the wider context of events, helps us to make those events more concrete. The Holocaust happened to people: each with a face, a name, a family and a community.

I would like to quote from Weiss's letter that reached out to unnamed people who were dear to him.

"My dearest ones,

After a long time, we can again write to each other, but to my great sorrow I cannot write anything good.

Thank God, Mom, Fredi [Weiss's nephew Fredi Messinger] and I are in good health, and impatiently anticipate our reunion with you.

Thank God, Mom is doing quite well. She constantly awaits the return of our dear ones, but to no avail.

As you know, as of 1st of June 1943 we stayed at the Sered camp, from which I managed to get Mom home. She maintained her housekeeping. I and Fredi stayed at the camp; after the uprising I was taken, as a partisan, to Poland and Germany. It was very bad there. We were ten people from Trnava; I came back, but all the others perished from hunger. I returned home on the 20th of April 1945. I managed to escape from Germany. I knew nothing about Mom, because Trnava

was cleansed of Jews. Mom stayed at her home. Fredi was with her; he hid for seven months under a bed. Just imagine what kind of life we lived!

Regretfully, there is nothing I could write about other dear members of our family. I would love to convey to you some good news, but I have no such news. From a selfish standpoint I can only say that we are glad that we breathe freely, otherwise there is nothing in our lives. Of those deported in 1942 only a few returned, maybe 1%. It's better not to talk about it. We hope that we'll tell you soon everything in person, although I would prefer not to speak about it.

By now Mom and we want to explore the possibility of visiting you as soon as possible. In case that could not been done, it would be nice if you visited us. I would be very happy if Mom could enjoy life to a certain extent. She very much longs to see you. Otherwise, thank God, she is in good health and does the whole housekeeping by herself. About a year ago she broke her arm; nevertheless, she stands firm…

About ten days ago we sent a telegram to you. I hope you received it. Please do the utmost in order for us to see each other soon. Write to us more often..."

Jakob Weiss was born in Nagyszombat, Hungary, (later Trnava, Slovakia) in 1901. He worked as an accountant at a lumber factory until May 1939, when the Ludak regime took away his license. In August 1939, just before the outbreak of the war, he was taken to perform forced labor paving roads for a limited time. The following year, again in August, he was taken for forced labor. Just before the advent of the main wave of deportations that began in March 1942 and lasted until the autumn, he received a certificate as an essential worker and was employed in the Domotor brick factory in Trnava.

Although working in the factory saved him from being deported in 1942, it did not prevent him from being sent to Sered later.

On August 29, 1944, when the Slovak National Uprising broke out Weiss joined the partisans. In the wake of the failed uprising, he was deported. He was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and reached the camp on September 12, 1944. In Auschwitz Weiss was tattooed with a number. A month later, after declaring that he was a carpenter, he was sent to Gleiwitz, a sub-camp of Auschwitz, to work at factory that made railroad cars for the German Railways. Injured at work in January 1945, he was hospitalized in Gleiwitz and on January 6, 1945 was selected for death. Before the sentence could be carried out, however, Weiss was sent on a death march to Blechhamer, also a sub-camp of Auschwitz that set out on January 18, 1945. Soon thereafter another death march left Blechhmmer, and apparently at one point late in January or early in February, along with three friends Weiss managed to hide and be liberated by Soviet forces. Following his liberation, he made his way back to Trnava, where he reunited with his mother and nephew.

In December 1946 after getting back most of his health, Weiss left for Mandatory Palestine, where he met and married Anna Rubin .

Jakob Weiss's story includes many facets of the destruction of Slovak Jewry, including time in Sered. His family, as he writes, was devastated by the course of events, and it appears that only his mother and nephew survived from his closest relatives. His greatest desire after returning from the horrors of Auschwitz and the death marches, was to reunite with his "dearest ones."

There is a vast literature about the trauma that struck survivors – a very real and very terrible trauma. But to my mind, the greater story is about those who emerged from the depths of the trauma and built new lives. Many survivors displayed a fervent need to connect, find family, rebuild or create new families, and get on with their lives. It is not surprising that in many of their later testimonies, survivors claim a kind of victory over the Nazis and the accomplices. They point to their children, grandchildren and sometimes great grandchildren as their victory.

As reading Jakob Weiss's letter demonstrates and as we will see in the new material based on the story of Tzwi Herschel, in addition to the overarching themes in history that we need to address and teach, focusing on individuals and families is central to cultivating empathy and understanding. Jews, like Jakob Weiss, were not merely faceless objects, but people with careers, thoughts, friends and families. They were part of the fabric of the places in which they lived. No less important is understanding that those who persecuted their Jewish neighbors, benefited from their tragedy, were accomplices in their murder and sometimes were the murderers themselves, were not monsters, but human beings; and we must try to understand why they acted as they did.

When the first anti-Jewish acts were being proposed and invoked in Slovakia, before the period of the deportations, there was much discussion how best to implement them. A central issue was how should the taking over of Jewish property proceed: who should get it and how; should things proceed slowly or more quickly and radically? But within this discussion there was virtual consensus that their property should be taken from the Jews of Slovakia, since the Jews, it

was believed, had gained it unfairly and were not really a part of the Slovak nation.

The way we perceive and treat our neighbors, the individuals and the families, who are different from us, whether they have been our neighbors for centuries or have recently arrived, remains a very current issue across Slovakia, Europe and much of the world. We are not so naïve as to think that by studying history we will find simple answers to our own condition. But we cannot afford to ignore history, either. We must do our best to confront it head on, even when it is not pleasant to do so; even when it means accepting responsibility as a society for crimes committed by our forefathers. History cannot provide us with simple answers, but it can inform us, help us to draw red lines that we should never cross again, and keep at bay newer iterations of ideologies of hatred.

Places like Sered, genuine sites of tragedy, of confrontation with the past and of commemoration, study and learning, are crucial to our endeavors to ensure that we create and protect the kind of societies where neighbors will not be party to the murder of their neighbors; societies that are able to nurture their cultural heritage, the richness of family and cohesion of community, and at the same time accept difference and protect the human dignity and rights of all.

May our presentations and our discussions help us work toward such an end.

Robert Rozett, November 15, 2016