

Politics and Public Space in Slovakia between 1938 and 1945: The example of Prešov

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Abstract

The following text focuses on the analysis of the selected aspects of the relationship between politics and public space under the authoritarian regime, which was established in Slovakia at the end of 1938 and continued until the end of the war in 1945. The subject-matter of the analysis is Prešov, at that time the third biggest town in Slovakia. The work presents not only significant events taking place in the public space (for example public demonstrations and the persecution of Jews), but the author also discusses the way that politics impacted upon the different functions of the town's public space (for example the changing the names of streets and replacment of monuments). This contribution contains an extra paragraph describing the effort to build a completely new town centre characterised by the governing regime as an opposite to the original 'discredited' public space. It can be assumed that the development of the relationship bewteen the regime and public space was copied from German and Italian models of that time, which reflected the dependency of the regime on Nazi Germany in the political sphere. In fact, none of the changes undertaken survived the fall of the regime in 1945, which best reflects the close connection between its public space and the country's politics.

Introduction

As 1938 turned into 1939 the international political situation in Europe resulted in the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the discreditation and fall of the country's system of parliamentary democracy. In Slovakia power was re-distributed in favour of the Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana – HSĽS). Subsequent changes in power-policy involved the process of installing a political system and state regime that reflected the new situation and was better suited to the incoming establishment. The regime moved toward a fascist-styled dictatorship. The new state that was established after the political events of 1939 adopted an ideology based on Christian, national and social principles. In those times the Slovakian state completely depended on Nazi Germany. In the short period, delimited by the years between 1939 and 1945, a range of events and processes took place in Slovakia, which significantly influenced (in general, negatively) not only the lives of the country's populace but also its public space, where politics and practice tended to merge. In other words, here politics was materialised and instrumentalised. These events and processes will be illustrated

in reference to the changes made to the public spaces of the town of Prešov between 1938 and 1945, which was at this time the third biggest town in Slovakia with approximately 24,000 citizens.

Streets as a stage

What is today known as Prešov's Main Street (Hlavná Street) was the traditional and logical centre of all of the town's events and, moreover, offered a suitable space for the congregation of large numbers of people. It was the location of the Town Hall, numerous government buildings, several religious centres and various markets. Furthermore, almost all other significant social-political, religious and cultural institutions were located in its close vicinity and, therefore, Main Street also functioned as a natural connection between these locales. There was a rule that to see and be seen on Prešov's Main Street and its marketplaces was a sign of social and civic standing that was of utility to the town's population.

It was not incidental that events related to the declaration of Slovakia's autonomy on 6th October 1938 took place on this stage. Demonstrations took place here on the 7th and 9th October. Both were of an anti-Czech and anti-Jewish nature and were accompanied by the destruction of symbols associated with the Czechoslovakian state. There even occurred an incident between the demonstrating crowd and the police. This conflict arose due to an attempt to install the Slovakian flag on the Town Hall. Events of those days were a clear signal that the coming rulers were determined not only to occupy public spaces, but to give these spaces new appearances in both political (as illustrated by the installation of the Slovakian flag) and social dimensions (as illustrated by the exclusion of Czech and Jewish citizens).

A massive rally held on 16th October 1938 confirmed the new political situation. It took place in the centre of the town on Main Street, in the premises near St. Nicholas Parish Church. On this day Prešov was visited by prominent political figures of the new autonomous government including the Prime Minister, Jozef Tiso¹. Tiso's speech was listened to by around 7,000 people, whose presence lent an appearance of legitimacy to the recent redistribution of political power within the country.

Almost every official visit of the country's top representatives had the character of a celebration, of varying scale, which took place according to a planned schedule and attended by local political figures. This obviously did not only apply to the period between 1938 and 1945 but in this period, for a regime that intentionally organised and expected, by its very nature, the mass mobilisation of the public, these events became all the more significant. These celebrations engaged every demographic of the town's inhabitants, whether in an active or passive form, ranging from children with flowers, bread and salt, to representatives of local social-political, religious and cultural life, to whole organisations, uniformed troops and students. Folk costumes and national symbolism played an important role in these public spaces and events. The primary goal of these events was not so much to welcome and honour the visitors, but rather to conduct an 'interactive theatre performance' for the wider public in order to create the desired collective awareness and the appearance of consent for the regime through the formal manifestation of loyalty. This was achieved in part by setting these events in public spaces whose significance and celebratory decoration allowed them to intensify the

¹ Jozef Tiso (1887-1947) was a Catholic priest and a People's Party representative. In March 1939 he became the first Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic following its declaration of independence. Seven months later in October 1939 he was elected as the Republic's President. He was executed after the war.

overall impression and importance of the event, thereby infiltrating the collective memory in a discrete manner.



A public demonstration held in the traditional premises near the St. Nicholas Parish Church on the occasion of the congress of the Slovakian Catholic Students and in connection with the visit of Jozef Tiso in Prešov on 30th June 1940. (Source: Slovak National Archives Bratislava, Slovak Press Agency Fund, No. 3836.)

A similar aim was also pursued with other festivities situated in public space including the regular birthday celebrations of regime representatives and other living and deceased politically accepted personalities of various rank, and the celebration of events that were deemed significant by the new regime (including the anniversaries of the Pittsburgh Agreement², the Žilina Agreement and the declaration of an independent Slovakian State³). Given the conditions of the post-1938 authoritarian regime such celebrations were mostly initiated by the People's Party or government bodies. Celebrations were institutionalised and

²The Pittsburgh Agreement was a document formulated by T. G. Masaryk signed on 31st May 1918 by the representatives of the Slovaks and Czechs living in the USA. The Agreement entrenched the autonomy of Slovakia in the case of the establishment of a common state.

³ An independent Slovak State was declared on 14 March 1939.

ritualised. As such, they were intended to contribute to, to confirm and to maintain the status quo. They were intended as public demonstrations of a particular tradition that showed loyalty to the regime and unity⁴. A paradox of these celebrations was that on the one hand, the regime desired to have as many people attend them as possible, and yet, on the other hand, given the historical context in which they took place, they intensified intolerance and segregation, since particular groups of the town's inhabitants were excluded from participating in them.

The town's public space not only reflected the politics of the time through pro-regime rallies and celebrations but also in connection to the tragic events related to the greatest trauma of the Slovakian history of that period, the deportations of Jews to concentration camps. It is generally known that the regime passed legislation to restrict the movement of Jews in public space that also hoped to create spatial as well as social segregation and to strengthen in turn the racial hatred of Jews by the majority of the population. A significant measure in this respect was the aryanisation of Jewish domestic property that was launched by the regime in October 1940. It was accompanied by the involuntary residential segregation that forced Jews to leave public spaces, including firstly the streets and squares named after Hlinka⁵ or Hitler, and later, more arbitrarily, other public premises. In Prešov this meant not only the entirety of the town's Main Street, which was renamed Hlinka Street (see below), but also the whole of the town's extended centre.

A further initiative that was launched in the early 1941 was linked to the eviction of the Jews from selected streets in Prešov and further restricted the rights of the town's Jewish population. A meeting of representatives of all the major government and HSL'S organisations took place as early as 11th January 1941 in which a whole range of resolutions were adopted to further restrict the movement of Jews in public spaces. The attendees of this meeting resolved, for example, that Jews would be prevented from entering the public marketplace until nine o'clock in the morning. In addition, further temporal and spatial restraints were imposed: only two cafés were left available for use by Jews; a section of the Hlinkova/Hlinka Street was delimited for the permitted use by Jews; and Jews were assigned places in local cinemas, baths and sports grounds.

The streets of Prešov also witnessed the most tragic events of the period – the Jewish pogroms during the 1942 deportations. Thus, for some, public spaces literally became places in which to fight for one's life.

Names of streets, monuments and memorials

As mentioned, one of the first symbols of the 1938/1939 political changes to become traceable in public space was the renaming of streets. In general, street names can be classified as two types. They are either not immediately significant for the present, and do not fulfil an important social function (in this case they serve an orientation function), or they are part the regime's system of official political and cultural identification (whereby they also serve a commemorative function). In the latter case, it is their role to serve as a linking device between the ideas and values of the past and the present, to honour figures or events and to

⁴ Cf. K. Bergmann, «Gedenktage, Gedenkjahre und historische Vernunft», in *Geschichte und Öffentlichkeit: Orte – Medien – Institutionen*, S. Horn, M. Sauer, Hrsg., Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009, p. 27-28.

⁵ Andrej Hlinka (1864-1938) was a Catholic priest and a leading personality of the Slovak People's Party and the autonomist movement oriented toward the Catholic Church and nation in the inter-War period.

point out the qualities or values attributed to them as symbols of collective memory.⁶ All that, however, within the limits imposed by the governing regime.

By renaming the streets the new regime actually adopted the model of the first Czechoslovakian Republic. The first wave of street renaming occurred in the territory of Slovakia in 1918, after the creation of Czechoslovakia. Act No. 266 was adopted in 1920 to provide guidance for the naming of streets in terms of their ideological and historical acceptability. Streets could not be named after any personality that had showed hostile ideas toward the state or nations united therein, or after events deemed to have an anti-state content. The ideological nature of that Act was one of the starting points of the renaming of streets in the 1938-1939 period. As with other social-political changes of the time, the renaming of streets could be traced to the influence of Nazi Germany where the politicisation of public space was demonstrated to an extreme degree. In the post-1933 period in Germany the street names of the Weimar Republic were consistently replaced by the names of the “martyrs” of the new regime.⁷

Thus, for ideological and political reasons, Prešov’s Main Street, which had been officially called Masarykova/Masaryk Street was renamed Hlinkova/Hlinka Street and Antonín Švehla Square⁸ became Námestie Pittsburskej dohody/Pittsburgh Agreement Square. Even streets in the old town centre with historically non-political names were unable to avoid politicisation and were renamed after personalities from the autonomist movement as demonstrated by Veterná/Windy which became Jozef Škultéty Street, Jarková/Pitch which became František Majoch Street or Nižná/Lower which became Ján Straka Street. The name of the oldest of Prešov’s streets – Slovenská/Slovak Street was supposed to be changed, too, but it was rescued due to its ancient history and undoubtedly also because of its suitable original name. From April 1941 Prešov also had an Adolf Hitler Street. According to the German model, there were also streets named after other People’s Party martyrs. The changes reflected an association between the name of the street and hierarchies of public space. The first Republic’s Štefánikova/Štefánik Street⁹ that was in the neighbouring vicinity of the historical town centre was renamed Martýrov Tomášovcov/Tomáš Martyrs Street¹⁰, and the former Košická/Košice Street, a direct southern extension of what was at that time Hlinkova/Hlinka Street became Štefánikova/Štefánik Street. The new names of the streets generally came from a narrow set of events and figures that were connected with the People’s Party and the autonomist movement of the beginning of the twentieth century. Personalities associated with the formation of a modern Slovakian nation were represented to a lesser degree.

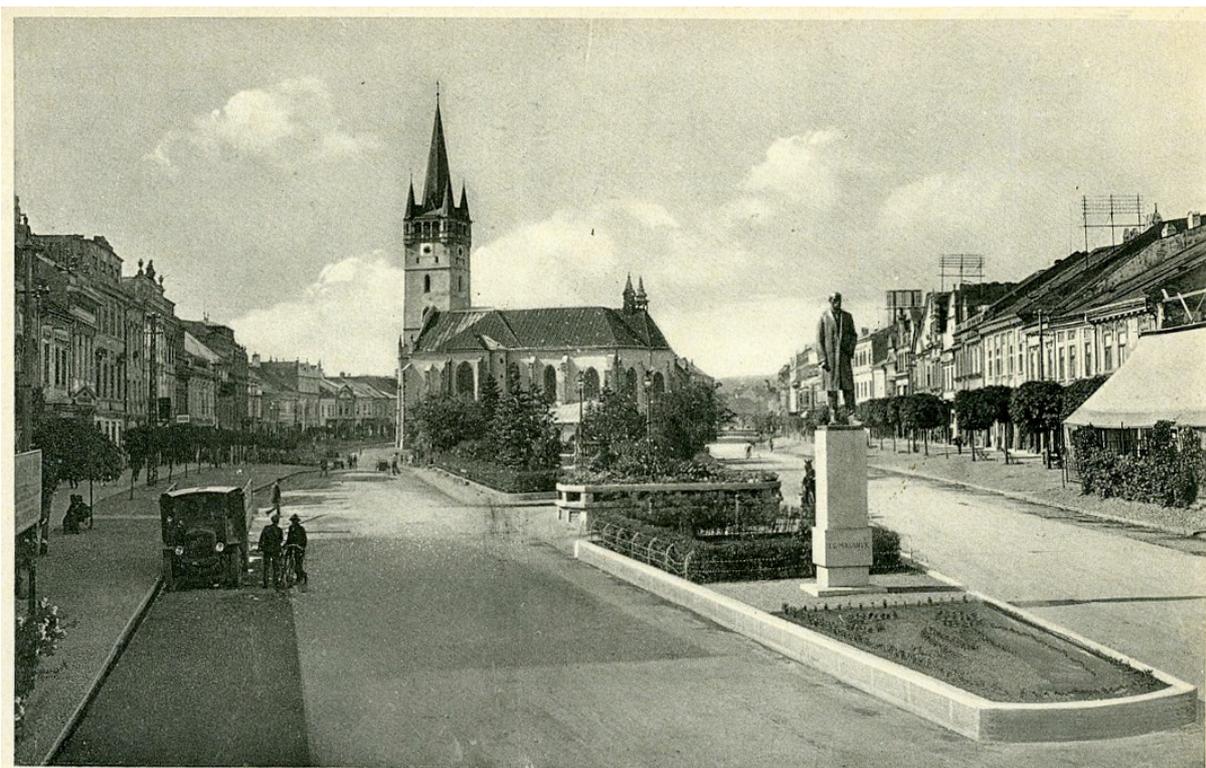
⁶ M. Martens, «Straßennamen – Lesezeichen im kulturellen Gedächtnis» in *Geschichte und Öffentlichkeit: Orte – Medien – Institutionen*, S. Horn, M. Sauer, Hrsg, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009, p. 61. P. Macho, «Poznámky k procesu premenovávanía ulíc a námestí v Trnave (1918-1924)», in *Acta historica Neosoliensia*, 11/2008, p. 396.

⁷ M. Martens, *Straßennamen*, p. 65.

⁸ Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937) was a Czech scientist, politician and statesman, founder of Czechoslovakia and its first president. Antonín Švehla (1873-1933) was a representative of the Agrarian Party and Prime Minister of three governments.

⁹ Milan Rastislav Štefánik (1880-1919) was a Slovakian astronomist and politician and one of the founders of Czechoslovakia. He died in an air crash in 1919.

¹⁰ Father and son Andrej and Ján Tomáš were murdered in Prešov by Hungarian Bolsheviks in 1919.



Statue of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. (Source: The Archive of the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic in Bratislava, Postcards Collection, no. 10351).

New centre

A separate problem in examining the relation between public space and politics relates to the regime's intervention in the existing physical appearance of the public space, or its effort to create new public spaces according to its own criteria or needs. In this respect, the situation in Slovakia partly differed from the conditions in Germany, which was a natural model for the regime. The Nazis did not create their own theory of architecture, but architecture as well as all the other artistic branches were subject to the process of 'Gleichschaltung', in other words their full integration into the Nazi state and its ideological caucus. Architecture returned in a peaceful, but rather fast, manner to traditionalism linked to Greek and Classicist models, but with a preference for Nazi values. What was typical of Nazi architecture was the fact that it utilised various styles depending on the type of structure. For public buildings a monumental Neo-Classical style was adopted whereas the architecture of residential quarters was characterised by a traditional 'Heimatschutzstil'.¹⁶ In Slovakia, too, there occurred a process of merging the modernist style with traditional elements, although not in such a fierce form as in Germany. The impact of politics on architecture might not have been so visible, but even here voices were heard proposing the need for a single professional organisation for all engineers¹⁷ and the majority of constructions were realised by the state Universal Construction Cooperative (Všeobecné stavebné družstvo).¹⁸

¹⁶ H.-W. Kruft, *A history of architectural theory: from Vitruvius to the present*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, p. 389-392.

¹⁷ M. Dulla et H. Moravčíková, *Architektúra Slovenska v 20. storočí*, Bratislava, Slovart, 2002, p. 167.

¹⁸ Universal Construction Cooperative was established by the Act No. 177/1940 and obtained a monopolistic position in the matters of expropriation of a real property to create a work of public interest.

As for its artistic aspect, a higher inclination for the noble and socially engaged Italian models was demonstrated in Slovakia. If the models of Nazi Germany as well as fascist Italy are considered it becomes clear that the roots of this inclination are linked to Christian principles and ideology¹⁹. In Italy the construction boom focused on the elimination of unemployment, increasing living standards and extending the authority of the fascist state.²⁰ Similar features in this respect, although in a reduced form, can be observed of Slovakia in this period.

The construction boom that lasted until 1942 in Slovakia was also made evident in Prešov. In that time a plan was introduced to build a town square that was supposed to become a new city centre. The traditional city centre – the space in front of the Town Hall, between the park and St. Nicholas Parish Church – did not have the capacity that would suffice to cover the needs of the regime that fostered the mass mobilisation of citizens of not only the town itself but also its surrounding region. Moreover, today's Main Street was discredited in the eyes of the regime. In the Middle Ages it was populated by German immigrants, but the Hungarian element, and also the Jewish gradually took over, with the latter being significantly present even in the early 1940s.

The idea to build a new city centre was linked to the need to construct a Court of Justice, itself discussed as early as the mid 1930s. However, its implementation started only after the declaration of the Slovakian State. The foundation stone of the Court of Justice was laid by the President of the Republic, Jozef Tiso²¹ and the Minister of Justice on 30th June 1940. A celebratory opening of the Court of Justice attended by Tiso took place on 5th September 1943 – an almost unbelievable date given the building's size and its period of construction. The local judicial authorities found their seats in this set of buildings. A penitentiary was built along with residential premises for the penitentiary's employees behind the Court's main building.

¹⁹ M. Dulla et H. Moravčíková, *Architektúra Slovenska*, p. 167-169.

²⁰ L. Mulsby, «The Piazza degli Affari and the contingent nature urbanism in fascist Milan», *Urban History*, 38, 2011(1), p. 65.

²¹ Jozef Tiso became in March 1939 the first prime minister of Slovakia after declaration of independence. Seven month later in October 1939 he had been elected for president.



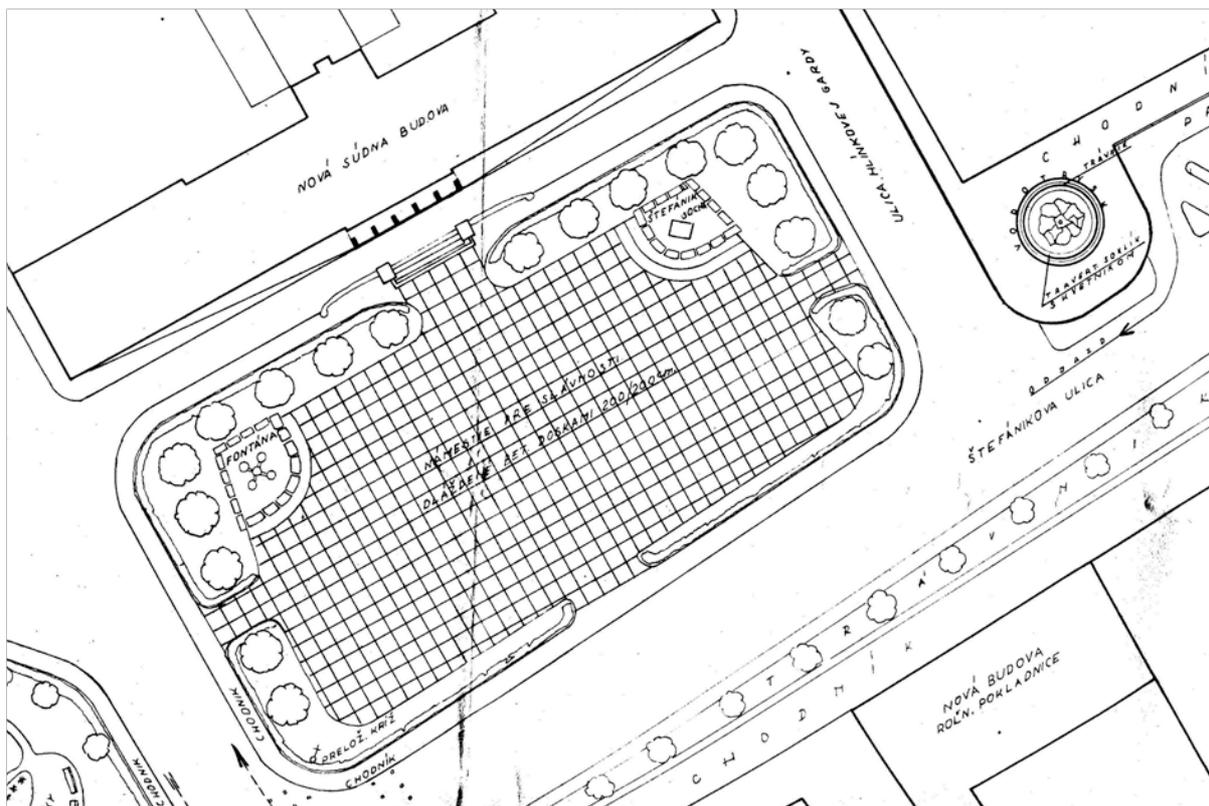
President Jozef Tiso and the foundation stone of the Court of Justice. (Source: Slovak National Archives Bratislava, Slovak Press Agency Fund, No. 3852.)

The Court of Justice was the work of the prominent twentieth-century Slovakian architect, Emil Belluš. Its appearance was complemented by two marble sculptures of Lady Justice and Law, created by Fraňo Gibala, an academic sculptor who was assisted by the sculptor František Draškovič. The statue of Lady Justice is an embodiment of the antique Roman goddess with an appearance of a village woman who carries typical attributes of the goddess (scales, double-edged sword and ribbon covering her eyes). Meanwhile, Law is represented by the mayor of the Šariš region, who carries a book.



The new Court of Justice shortly before its inauguration in August 1943. (Source: Slovak National Archives Bratislava, Slovak Press Agency Fund, No. 21533.)

In front of the Court of Justice, an extension of a pre-existing small park was supposed to create a public space surrounded by other new representative buildings that were developed at the same time. Beside the various buildings of the Court of Justice, this square was also the location of a modernist Post Office building that was connected to a radio branch, a branch office of the Slovakian National Bank (Slovenská národná banka) and the new building of the Agricultural Mutual Treasury (Roľnícka vzájomná pokladnica). A rally held on the occasion of the Court of Justice's opening and attended by the country's top representatives highlighted that this extensive square was an important public space for the People's Party regime. The opening took place despite the fact that the square did not have the final appearance that had been intended.



The original plan of the reconstruction of the square in front of the Court of Justice of 1940. (Source: State Archives Prešov branch of Prešov, District Office of Prešov Fund.)



The square in front of the Court of Justice of 1945. (Source: The Archive of the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic in Bratislava, Postcards Collection, no. 6000).

The construction of the branch building of the Slovakian National Bank was begun in April 1941. The building, generously lined with travertine, was designed by Ján Štefanec, an

important functionalist architect. It was, like the Court of Justice, completed in 1943. The Post Office building, which was also decorated with travertine, was built between 1941 and 1946 according to a design of the architect, Ján Strapec. It was also decorated with travertine.

Architectural historian Matúš Dulla has pointed out that at least in the designs of Belluš, a resemblance to some of the formal elements of German or Italian architecture can be traced – in particular in relation to their vertical facades, symmetry and hint of monumentality.²² The use of travertine or mythology refers mainly to Italian models. As was suggested above, these elements can be observed in Prešov, not only on Belluš' Court of Justice, but also in the architecture of the National Bank, Post Office and Gibala's statue of Justitia.

All of these buildings were situated on the Štefánikova Street, a continuation of the main Hlinkova Street that leads in the direction of Košice. The new modern city centre was intended to be located in the immediate neighbourhood of the traditional centre so that the two areas combined to create a single north-south axis whereby the former was linked to and assumed all of the latter's natural pre-existing communication functions. Thus town inhabitants and visitors were taken by this axis either through the historical core directly to the new city centre, or, in the opposite direction, those coming to the Prešov centre from the Košice direction (including those coming from the railway station), would have to cross the new centre. Several symbols of the regime were concentrated here – the economic (Slovakian National Bank), the governmental (The Court of Justice) and the social (the offices of the Agricultural Mutual Treasury).

Social Housing

The massive support of social housing was one of the state policy tools during the regime of the Slovakian State. Apart from improving the living conditions of workers, craftsmen and civil servants it fitted in with the regime's ideology, it helped to maintain loyalty and could refer to the German model, as was the case in other spheres of social life. The first projects of social housing in Prešov were carried out in inter-war period. The boom in building apartments for the poorest citizens of the town occurred with the establishment of the new authoritarian regime. During the war several blocks with hundreds of low-cost apartments for Slovakian families were built. It was the priority of the regime to support their construction in an effort to enhance national unity. In this way the 'colonies' on what were at that time the peripheral Jarna Street (now named 17. Novembra Street), Žilinskej Dohody Street (now named Čapajevova Street), and the Pod Kalváriou area (now named Gorkého, Matúša Trenčianskeho, Mojmirova and Októbrová Streets) came into existence.

²² M. Dulla et H. Moravčíková, *Architektúra Slovenska*, p. 168.



'The colony' of social appartments in the Pod Kalváriou area. (Source: The Archive of the Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic in Bratislava, Postcards Collection, no. 6025).

Conclusion

It seems quite obvious that politics and public space are mutually connected and the ambitions of any regime (they are much stronger in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes) to interfere with this relationship are logical and self-explanatory. This fact may be demonstrated by a number of particular examples from history, including the changes and events of the years between 1938 and 1945 in Prešov. These changes and events were marked by the influence of the Italian fascists and Nazis that were the ideological and political allies of the Slovakian puppet regime. The mutual interconnectedness of politics and public space is evidenced best by the fact that almost none of the changes of this period 'survived' in their originally planned form following the fall of the People's Party regime in the beginning of 1945 and the emergence of a new dictatorship in 1948.