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Care of monuments in Slovakia after political turning points (1948 – 2000)

As introduction, some statistics.

According to the latest data obtained by the revision of the Central list of cultural monuments in Slovakia (1998 – 2008), the religious cultural heritage represents with 3.171 entered immovable cultural monuments (23,99%) of all (13.228) protected immovable cultural goods in Slovakia. A higher figures– up to 98% – is the result of the comparison with entered movable monuments – 29.978 movable cultural goods. Compared with that, the number of entered manor houses and curies– the former noble seats of higher and middle-class aristocracy which were a part of the historic picture of Slovak villages and rural land is much lower. This non-satisfactory situation could not be improved by including castles in good conditions or ruins of castles – 113 in total – into the statistics. Nowadays, we have 437 manor houses and curies in the central register; movable property has been in the most cases lost for ever, only in a few cases it was possible to preserve the movable property from these houses, especially in case they had been transferred to the state deposits and managed by museums.

The fate of these two categories of cultural heritage with extraordinary spiritual, architectural and esthetic values in Slovakia was in the 20th century very sad and complicated. The most damage was not caused during the both world wars as we would expect due to the geopolitical position of Slovakia. Even more negative was the peaceful period following the second world war, especially the start of the new social order after the communist coup in 1948.

In this period, the new forces which were democratic on the outside led a harsh battle with all ideological enemies, predominantly with non-obeying religions. From this point of view, the fate of monastery complexes of male and female religious orders is interesting as they were destroyed in an act of violent in 1950. The new state power felt that the religious orders are dangerous ideological competitors who can influence masses of people, but on the other hand, the state power was interested in the property of these orders as they had extraordinary financial and cultural value and ideological strength. By arranging a process with representatives of orders which have been charged with high treason and espionage, a climate for destroying religious communities by the state security (secret police) under the cover code „K“ – male orders and then „R“ – female orders was built. In the night from April 13th to 14th, 1950 which was named by the Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec /an important representative of the secret church/ as „Barbarian“, religious communities were destroyed, monasteries were occupied by the state power, order members (nuns and monks) were transferred to

selected monasteries /Hronský Beňadik, Šaštín, Jasov and Podolíneec and the so-called punitive monastery in Pezinok/ which were transformed to collection camps with prison regime. In this way, 76 monasteries and 15 religious orders were destroyed and put under state control. Their property was transferred to the state administration and was later on used for the purpose of army, local governments, agricultural cooperatives, big storehouses, children's homes, retirement homes and other secular institutions. As a part of this process, the contents of the monasteries were destroyed, stolen and devastated due to which many paintings of high values, sculptures, property, library funds, manuscripts and precious publications were damaged or even destroyed. In case they were not destroyed on the spot some of these things were thanks to enlightened local officials transferred to state deposits managed by the state administration or to national cultural institutions. Here, the devastation was continued following a selection method based on which the most precious artefacts, old books, publications or manuscripts were preserved and the rest was destroyed and scrapped. Following this successful operation, the new state power continued with destroying the female order monasteries , so 137 objects were emptied.

At this moment, the new historic era of monastery complexes began which was connected with long-lasting spiritual, material and moral devastation. For some of them, their fate was terminal, other monasteries survived even the 40 years of devastations and with new power, they initiated their spiritual and architectural revival after the changes in 1989.

It was a paradox of that period that the state administration – although its attitude to the religion was very harsh – tolerated the existence of the religious cultural heritage, of course, only in the frame of the correct marxistic and leninistic interpretation of the value of things as the result of creative work of masses of people. Thanks to this, these architectural jewels with the extraordinary sculptural and painting decorations were protected by the same state administration. In this way, the state administration declared and presented its generosity in cultural area. Before 1989, subject of socialist monument protection were 81 monasteries out of which 19 were property of religious communities and 16 were used as retirement homes for monks, others were property of the state but were not used properly. The opinion of experts which wanted to protect these objects according to legal norms was accepted in the end of 60s of the 20th century when the ideological grip was loosened.

The reconstruction of precious architectural bodies and in some cases also the continuous reconstruction of precious preserved interiors were possible after adopting restitution laws after 1989 based on which some proprietary damages caused to religious communities shall be mitigated and based on which their proprietary rights shall be settled. According to these laws, renewed religious orders were allowed to apply for their property and to start its reconstruction and revival. In restitution

processes, it was possible to return 41 monasteries to renewed order communities, further 20 objects were returned to the Roman Catholic Church.

The restriction of collecting freedom in the new socialistic order led to the prohibition of religious festivities, pilgrimages and processions in public as well as to the devastation of calvary complexes and pilgrim places which formed important elements of Slovak landscape. These are sets of halts with pictures of suffering and death of Christ that were established in the 17th and 18th century. Latest monographic pictures with this topic are documented 113 objects. Although until 1989, 21 calvarias and pilgrim places were in the list of protected cultural monuments, their protection was only formal. Principally, the state administration was not interested in helping these monuments financially although from the historical and architectural point of view, they presented extraordinary architectural, sculptural and painting works, e.g. in Banská Štiavnica where the state of the monuments led to entering the Calvary into the list of 100 most endangered monuments in the world although it is situated in the protected region of world cultural heritage. The systematical reconstruction of these monuments started in 1989. It was connected with the continuous revival of traditions of religious festivities to which local inhabitants and parishioners contributed a lot. The contribution of activists was also extraordinary in the fields of public awareness for the religious cultural heritage as a general value without any denominational membership. To name just one example I have to mention the founding of the Calvary Citizen's Found in Banská Štiavnica whose aim is the revival of the probably most famous Calvary in Slovakia, in Banská Štiavnica. /One example of a successful reconstruction of calvary sites we can present the extraordinary successful reconstruction of the Calvary in Banská Bystrica which was arranged by the Bishop's Office and the Carmelite Order/.

Similarly and with the same strength, the state administration was fighting against the representatives of the Greek Catholic Church which had more than 300 churches in its property, especially wooden churches/Lemkov and Bojkov types/ from the 17th to 19th century. The action with the cover code „P“ meant the transformation of Greek Catholic Church to the Russian Orthodox Church. This church was officially accepted by the communist state administration, especially due to its positive attitude to the Soviet Union. The Greek Catholic Church was abolished on April 28th, 1950, its transformation to the Orthodox Church was adopted at the Presov Assembly. This Assembly was managed by the Communist Party and the secret police. In order to liquidate this church, all methods were used: from imprisoning leading bishops or non-obeying priests and order members up to resettling whole families of Greek Catholic priests from the Eastern Slovakia to western border parts of the Czech Republic. The whole property was transferred to the orthodox church. With respect to the protection of historic monuments, there was an interesting situation following the abolishment of the Greek Catholic Church. The new state administration after 1950 preferred the orthodox church and supported it financially. Thanks to this attitude, the state administration contributed to the preservation of this architectural heritage. These monuments were

not interpreted as sacral objects but as a proof for the craftsmanship of simple folks who were the leading power of this new society. This positive attitude was demonstrated by an extraordinary form of protection of the most important of these monuments (here, the opinion of experts was accepted). The set of 27 wooden churches in Eastern Slovakia was by the Slovak Parliament in 1968 declared to be a national cultural monument. Although the life of the Greek Catholic Church was abolished its property preserved nearly without any damage. The return of the property to the Greek Catholic Church in 1990 – 1998 was connected with various conflicts between the orthodox and the Greek Catholic Church, so the restitution had to be conducted under the supervision of the Slovak government. At the moment, we have 206 Greek Catholic church under monument protection and only 13 orthodox churches. These are extraordinary picturesque objects of folk architecture with decorated movable parts – iconostasis and icons situated in the wonderful nature. Last year, the best representatives of these monuments were entered into the World Heritage List .

Another important „enemy group“ for the new state power were wealthy people which represented aristocracy. Also the representatives of the world of capital and bourgeoisie were handled with an extraordinary go-ahead manner. Similarly as in the previous examples, the war was not the originator for the devastation of manor houses and curies, in which these people were living and which formed the unique atmosphere of the Slovak landscape. The owners of these manor houses and curies had left them suddenly during the passage of army. We assume that two thirds of them were destroyed and looted by the local inhabitants . The most significant example is the castle in Továrniky built in barock style which was not damaged during the war but which was looted and burnt out in 1947. This property including architectural jewels, noble interior, precious artistic works, parks with many land used for agricultural purposes and forests was in danger after 1948, after adopting the so-called Beneš Decrees and after the start of nationalization and land reform. The evacuation of the original owners was replaced by the long-term resettlement. The original owners stayed in their property only in a few cases (Countess Czobelova in the castle Strážky, today exposition of the Slovak National Gallery). This property was transferred to the state which – similarly as in the case of monasteries, had not accepted the value of the historic substance – has used them as schools /Bernolákovo/, students' homes, social institutes /Halič/, medical centers or storerooms for fertilizers /Divín,Lukáčovce/ or they were used for agricultural purposes. Only some of them were seats of the local state administration or cultural institutions such as regional museums / Michalovce, Markušovce/, galleries or archives /Bytča, Radvaň/. Principal devaluation was caused by dividing land from the buildings as such so these two entities were managed by different subjects and according to different rules. In this way, the surroundings of this property with big parks were continually devastated and then divided into plots of land. Many manor houses and curies were not used and maintained properly so they were devastated and fully destroyed (Ostrá Lúka, Veľký Šariš). After the changes in 1989, the

situation was not satisfactory either. The state administration was no longer interested in keeping them so they were sold to new owner as the restitution laws allowed the return of the property only in a few cases. Objects returned to original owners or sold to new owners were often in the hands of persons who used them not in harmony with the interests of monument protection and who have to solve the problems of devastated property, absence of expert background and the impossibility to place the required capacities without the devaluation of architectural and painting values (Holíč). Rather optimistic are examples of reconstruction of rural curies which were changed to new houses of wealthy owners or companies.

What shall I add to this not optimistic summary?

Our whole society has a common task: caused damage led to the devastation of paintings and artistic and architectural works whose importance can be measured as having a high value for the individuals, for the local community, region, state or the world culture community. Remedy was possible after the changes in 1989 following the adoption of restitution laws in the belief that we do not cause further damage. Due to this legal situation, precious monuments were returned to original owners. Many of them do not longer have the economic position and power, nevertheless, many of these objects go through their renaissance as they are spiritually renewed and as their historic substance is being reconstructed.