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REMEMBERING IVAN DÉRER

The year 1984 marked the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Ivan Dérer, the eminent Slovak jurist, politician, and cabinet minister en permanence in Czechoslovakia's prewar governments. This anniversary of a man who contributed so much to the development of Czechoslovakia's democratic system is being remembered neither in Prague nor in Bratislava, where a plethora of primary sources on his life and work exist. While the following account of Dérer's political activity necessarily reflects an inaccessibility of much pertinent documentary material stored in the Czechoslovak archives, the author believes that its main contours and conclusions concerning this great Slovak patriot and Czechoslovak statesman are sound.

Ivan Dérer was born on 2 March 1884, in Malacky in western Slovakia, into the patriotic family of an attorney. His father was an administrator of the prestigious Dionýz Štúr scholarship, established for Slovak students who studied at universities in Prague, Vienna, and Budapest because there were no Slovak universities or secondary schools at that time. Thus, from the very beginning of his life young Dérer was influenced by his immediate environment and brought up in the ideas of Slovak patriotism and close cooperation with the Czechs. After completing his studies at a Hungarian academic secondary school in Bratislava, Dérer left for Budapest to study law. He received his doctorate in jurisprudence from Budapest University in 1907.

While practicing law in Bratislava before World War I, Dérer became politically active. Together with contemporaries such as Juraj Slávik, Ivan Štefánik, Emanuel Lehocký, and Samo Zach, he was loosely identified with two groups called Young Hlasists and Prudists. These groups, whose names were derived from the names of the Slovak periodicals Hlas and Prúdy, followed a strong Czechoslovak orientation and advocated progress and democracy. They were greatly influenced by Tomáš G. Masaryk’s philosophy and the practical political thinking of Dr. Pavol Blaho, a physician from Uherska Skalica who represented this part of Slovakia in the Budapest parliament. Dérer participated in several peasant conferences organized by Blaho at which he spoke on the legal aspects of hunting, hereditary law, and similar topics. Between 1912 and 1914, he was co-editor of Národný hlásnik and contributed articles to the workers’ newspaper Robotnické noviny.

3. Interview with Blaho.
Upon the outbreak of World War I, Dére was arrested by the Hungarian authorities for an article in which he attacked the militaristic ambitions of the Habsburg dynasty. Later, he was drafted into the army and served as a regi-mental auditor in Vienna. There he came in contact with Czech Social Demo-cratic leaders František Tomášek, Vlastimil Tusar, and František Soukup, a circumstance which greatly affected his political future. Vienna at that time was an important link between Prague and Slovakia. Some of the most emi-nent Slovak politicians lived in Vienna during the war, while others used the city’s proximity to Bratislava often to travel there to meet Czech politicians.

From the beginning of the establishment of the new Czechoslovak state Dére played an important role in shaping its destiny. Two days after the pro-clamation of the birth of Czechoslovakia in Prague on 28 October 1918, a gathering of Slovak representatives met in Turčiansky Svätý Martin to adopt a manifesto in which the Slovaks declared their secession from Hungary, pro-claimed themselves in favor of a joint Czechoslovak state, and announced that the “Slovak nation is part of the Czecho-Slovak nation, united in language and in the history of its culture.” It was Dére who brought to this gathering from Vienna a proposal concerning the administration of Slovakia which, however, was not acted upon.

In Martin, Dére was promptly made a member of the newly constituted Slovak National Council which dispatched him, together with two other dele-gates, to Prague to present the Martin Declaration to the Czechoslovak Na-tional Committee. Upon his arrival in Prague, Dére emphasized that the “Czech and Slovak people are united and the Slovaks see their security only within one Czechoslovak nation.” Later, when commenting on the significance of the Martin declaration, Dére stated that, “Without the events in Prague on 28 October and without the declaration of the Czechoslovak state in the Bohemian capital on that day there would never have been the Martin Declaration two days later.”

While in Prague, Dére was made a member of the Czechoslovak National Committee, a body which at that time exercised not only legislative but also executive powers in the new state. When this committee was later transformed

5. Interview with Blaho. Dére was wounded in battle in 1914 and later declared fit only for non-combat duty.
8. Interview with Blaho.