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# The Holocaust in the Bohemian Lands

Research Questions and Voids, Sources and Data

## Abstract

This introduction summarises the rationale for this ‘national’ special issue devoted to the history of the Holocaust in the Bohemian lands. It discusses the legacy of the historian Miroslav Kárný and the historiographic pause and disorientation following his death in 2001. Before summarising the articles, it analyses the recent polarisation of historiographic debates with regard to the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. It tackles disputes around the local, or Czech, entanglement in the persecution of Roma and Sinti and around comparisons with the genocide of Jews. It discusses the attacks on research that critically challenges common assumptions about Czech solidarity with Jews and the one-sided, top-down approach to the history of the Holocaust in the Protectorate.

This special issue of S:I.M.O.N revisits selected aspects of the history of the Holocaust in the Bohemian (or Czech) lands. Triggered by the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Miroslav Kárný, the towering personality in Czech Holocaust research, it is informed by the perception of a certain gap in research which developed after the first period of interest following the demise of state socialism in Czechoslovakia. It also connects to the discontinued *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente*, a journal which served as a forum for the scholarly (re)discovery of the Holocaust in the Bohemian lands.

The life trajectory of Miroslav Kárný illustrates the quest of many survivors not only to understand and to document the Holocaust, but also their impact on our knowledge and the historical narratives of the genocide of Jews. Kárný, who was born in 1919, had just embarked on his studies at the Charles University in Prague when the Czech universities were closed in November 1939 by order of the occupation authorities in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. His education was interrupted by his persecution and deportation to the Theresienstadt (Terezín) Ghetto, Auschwitz, and Dachau-Kaufering, but historical research became a life-long interest.<sup>1</sup> Kárný’s coming to terms with and research on the persecution and murder of Bohemian and Moravian Jews intertwined, but also stood in tension, with his political life as a committed communist.<sup>2</sup>

Side-lined as a result of the antisemitic Slánský trial and again after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Kárný – now acting as a pensioner and supported by his wife Margita, also a Holocaust survivor – turned to research on the Second

1 See: Miroslav Kárný, *Sieben Monate in Kaufering*, in: *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* 9 (2002), 13-24.

2 Jaroslava Milotová, *Miroslav Kárný (1919–2001)*, *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* 9 (2002), 25-32; Jan Tesař, *Miroslav Kárný. Studie o vlivu ideologie a politické moci na jedince v letech 1919–1974* [Miroslav Kárný. Study of the Influence of Ideology and Political Power on the Individual in the Years 1919–1974] (BA Thesis), Prague 2010.

World War and the Holocaust. Their apartment in the socialist-era building in Prague's Jižní město (Southern District) developed into an unofficial research centre, full of books and card files, and a substitute for the missing institutional basis for Holocaust research in Czechoslovakia and the later Czech Republic. In 1989, as the Velvet Revolution ended communist rule, Kárný was ready to become the central personality in research on the history of the genocide of Jews in the Protectorate. Publishing his earlier research in book form,<sup>3</sup> Kárný went on to organise conferences and supervise the documentation efforts that eventually resulted in the publication of a series of Terezín Memorial Books commemorating the names and fates of Bohemian and Moravian Jews deported to ghettos and camps as well as Jews from outside of the country who were brought to Theresienstadt.<sup>4</sup>

The *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente*, which was first published in 1994 (formally as a yearbook), as well as its Czech-language version (*Terezínské studie a dokumenty*, starting in 1996), developed into a central platform for Holocaust research in the Czech Republic. The journal published by the Institut Terezínské iniciativy (Terezín Initiative Institute), a small, under-financed NGO, compensated for the lack of interest and infrastructure at Czech universities and research institutions at the time. It brought together Czech and international researchers, Holocaust survivors, and younger scholars. Given the language of the publication, it had a particular impact on the Czech-German/Austrian conversations about history. Even though Kárný built and cherished relationships with academics and academic institutions, his initiatives were firmly located in the community of survivors, serving to empower them. “The activity of the Terezín Initiative has an indispensable role for [Holocaust] research”, he exclaimed in the introduction to the first volume of the journal.<sup>5</sup>

The *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* resembled other publications of memorial sites and initiatives in that many of its authors researched a history in which they had been active participants, and in that it mixed original studies by historians with reprinted documents such as Theresienstadt diaries and memoirs. While not the only journal contributing to research on the ‘Final Solution’ in the Protectorate (see for instance *Terezínské listy* published by the Terezín Memorial), it exemplified the choices and dilemmas of the agenda of Holocaust research in the period of post-communist transformation. With the goal to surpass and correct H. G. Adler’s seminal work on Theresienstadt, Kárný hoped that the yearbooks would result in a new, authoritative monograph.<sup>6</sup> However, such a volume never materialised and Kárný passed away while still working on the impressive *Kalendarium* of the ghetto.<sup>7</sup>

3 Miroslav Kárný, ‘Konečné řešení’. Genocida českých židů v německé protektorátní politice [The ‘Final Solution’. The Genocide of Czech Jews in German Protectorate Policy], Prague 1991.

4 Miroslav Kárný (ed.), Terezínská pamětní kniha. Židovské oběti nacistických deportací z Čech a Moravy 1941–1945 [The Terezín Memorial Book. Jewish Victims of Nazi Deportations from Bohemia and Moravia 1941–1945], Prague 1995; Theresienstädter Gedenkbuch. Die Opfer der Judentransporte aus Deutschland nach Theresienstadt 1942–1945, Prague/Berlin 2000; Theresienstädter Gedenkbuch. Österreichische Jüdinnen und Juden in Theresienstadt 1942–1945, Prague 2005.

5 Miroslav Kárný/Raimund Kemper/Margita Kárná, Vorwort, in: Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 11 (1994), 8.

6 H. G. Adler, Theresienstadt 1941–1945. Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft, Tübingen 1955. See also the English translation of the second German edition (1960): H. G. Adler, Theresienstadt, 1941–1945. The Face of a Coerced Community, New York 2017.

7 See the private e-print prepared by Kárný’s children: Miroslav Kárný/Margita Kárná, Terezínské kalendárium [The Terezín Calendar], Prague 2019, [https://c.holocaust.cz/files/old/pdfs/zdroje/terezinske\\_kalendarium\\_verze1092019.pdf](https://c.holocaust.cz/files/old/pdfs/zdroje/terezinske_kalendarium_verze1092019.pdf) (1 June 2021).

The demise of the journal (the last issue appeared in 2008/2009) was the result not only of financial and organisational difficulties, but also a certain exhaustion of the original drive to document and fill in historical gaps. Kárný's view of Second World War history was still grounded in a top-down approach and the study of occupation structured by narratives of oppression of the nation and its resistance. Although Kárný questioned some of the Czech national mythology surrounding the Holocaust, exploring the grey zones of Czech entanglement and possible involvement, he was not particularly interested either in a critical assessment of the Jewish Council of Elders in Theresienstadt or in the divisions and hierarchies within prisoner society. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the continuation of Kárný's legacy involved a double challenge: To adopt on the one hand more flexible models and transnational views of society under occupation and on the other new methods and approaches from, for instance, gender studies, anthropology, migration studies, digital humanities, and more.<sup>8</sup>

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For a long time, only the genocide of Roma and Sinti generated controversy among historians of the Bohemian lands and in public discourse. Especially the categorisation, criminalisation, and control exercised during the interwar First Czechoslovak Republic and the creation and administration of 'Gypsy' camps during the post-Munich Second Republic and in the Protectorate became a sensitive topic that clashed with idealised narratives of national history.<sup>9</sup> Discussions over the involvement of Czech policemen in guarding these camps and their responsibility for the humiliating and unhealthy conditions ignited debate. It took more than two decades for the Czech government to finally buy out the pig farm located on parts of the site of the former camp in Lety and to begin transforming it into a memorial.

The comparison between different forms of exclusion, violence, and genocide turned out to be no less difficult. Over the past three years, tensions over the interpretation of the genocide of Roma and Sinti also extended to the Terezín Initiative Institute, Kárný's creation. As described in Aletta Beck's report in this issue, the institute engaged in the documentation of names and fates of Roma prisoners from the Bohemian lands and developed a number of educational activities concerning this subject. However, this effort and especially the unease over the comparison of the two genocides triggered negative reactions among a part of the leadership of its founding organisation, the Terezín Initiative (the association of Jewish survivors). Its members criticised the usage of the term 'Roma Holocaust' in the [www.holocaust.cz](http://www.holocaust.cz) portal, with the conflict peaking around the issue of reading both Jewish and Roma names on the Yom ha-Shoah remembrance day, a deliberate expansion of the meaning of an originally Jewish memorial day. As this issue goes to print, the conflict over how far Kárný's legacy can be extended has resulted in the removal of the institute's director.

Yet these tensions also indicate the growing contestation of research in the Holocaust of Jews in the Bohemian lands, which is increasingly turning into a hostage of the polarisation of Czech historiography and the return of national(ist) historical

<sup>8</sup> Michal Frankl, Free of Controversy? Recent Research on the Holocaust in the Bohemian Lands, in: *Dapim. Studies on the Holocaust* 31 (2017) 3, 262-270.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance: Ctibor Nečas, *The Holocaust of Czech Roma*, Prague 1999; Pavel Baloun, "We Beg You Not to Equate the Names of Gypsies and Knife-Grinders with Honest Traders", in: *S.I.M.O.N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation*. 6 (2018) 2, 44-54.

frameworks and categories. The meticulous research by the historian Vojtěch Kyncl, which suggested that a woman from Lidice denounced a hidden Jew, triggered an equally heated public controversy. Lidice, one of the villages annihilated by the Nazis in revenge for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in 1942, has a key symbolical value in Czech narratives of Second World War history, as a lieu de mémoire for Czech resistance and suffering. The resulting nationalist campaign led to the director of the Lidice Memorial, who had adopted a balanced approach without outright denouncing this new historical research, being forced to resign.

Similar differences came to light in reactions to Wolf Gruner's history of the Holocaust in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia published in 2016.<sup>10</sup> Applying perspectives that significantly advanced research on the exclusion of Jews, the expropriation of their property, and their deployment for forced labour in Germany and Austria, the accomplished historian aimed to return the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to the (figurative) map of Holocaust research. However, his analysis of local initiatives and Czech participation in the exclusion of Jews and their exploitation met with incomprehension and criticism. Gruner's book can rightly be subjected to criticism on a number of accounts, for example the lack of inclusion of Czech-language sources and research, the unstable notion of the 'local', the methodologically questionable usage of reports of the Jewish community, and more.<sup>11</sup> Yet the review by Vojtěch Blodig, a historian from the Terezín Memorial, not only discussed Gruner's alleged or real mistakes or omissions, but also exhibited a distinct unease over the reversed perspective in which the actions of the Czech population as well as the Czech authorities become part of an entangled decision-making process concerning the persecution of Jews. Even though Gruner certainly did not intend to diminish German responsibility for the Holocaust, the dissolution of a unidirectional, top-down Nazi responsibility was read as a form of historical revisionism.<sup>12</sup>

Ivo Cerman, a historian of the Enlightenment at the South Bohemian University and a self-styled expert on the history of Jews and antisemitism, searched for an anti-national conspiracy in a new volume on the history of Jews in the Bohemian lands as well as in other publications.<sup>13</sup> (For full disclosure: The author of this introduction contributed to the conceptualisation of the volume in question and co-authored two pre-Holocaust chapters.) Using manipulative methods, Cerman came to the conclusion that Benjamin Frommer (who authored a chapter about the Holocaust) and other contributors selectively focussed on Czech antisemitism and aimed to prove Czech guilt for the Holocaust while ignoring the reality of living in an occupied country with administrative structures in which Czech authorities were subordinated to German authorities.<sup>14</sup> More interesting than deconstructing Cerman's fab-

10 Wolf Gruner, *Die Judenverfolgung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren. Lokale Initiativen, zentrale Entscheidungen, jüdische Antworten 1939–1945*, Göttingen 2016; Wolf Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia. Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses*, New York/Oxford 2019.

11 Michal Frankl, Review of Wolf Gruner, *Die Judenverfolgung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren. Lokale Initiativen, zentrale Entscheidungen, jüdische Antworten 1939–1945*, in: *Bohemia. Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur der böhmischen Länder* 58 (2019) 2, 405–409.

12 Vojtěch Blodig, Review of Wolf Gruner, *Die Judenverfolgung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren. Lokale Initiativen, zentrale Entscheidungen, jüdische Antworten 1939–1945*, in: *Judaica Bohemica* 52 (2017) 2, 141–151.

13 Kateřina Čapková/Hillel J. Kieval (ed.), *Zwischen Prag und Nikolsburg. Jüdisches Leben in den böhmischen Ländern*, Göttingen 2020.

14 Ivo Cerman, *O české vině za holocaust* [On Czech Guilt for the Holocaust], in: *Aktuálně.cz*, 3 February 2020, <http://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/ivo-cerman.php?itemid=35774> (14 July 2021); Ivo Cerman, *Nad knihou o Židech a českém nacionalismu* [A book about Jews and Czech Nationalism], in: *Český časopis historický* 118 (2020) 3, 725–750; see also a fabricated attack on Jan Láníček: Ivo Cerman, *Nevíte, co se stalo 10. června 1942* [Don't You Know What Happened on 10 June 1942], in: *Blog iDNES.cz*, 20 June 2020, <https://ivocerman.blog.idnes.cz/blog.aspx?c=753302> (14 July 2021).

rications is his general image of a national history under attack by a group of Western scholars and their local lackeys. By casting them as ‘revisionists’, he could link them to historical attempts to revise the results and interpretations of both world wars. Other reviews by a small and interconnected group also used similar arguments and focussed on what these critics understood as a primarily politicised, anti-Czech approach to modern history.<sup>15</sup>

Leaving aside the possible arguments about what a short synthetic work intended for an international readership should and should not include, the different focus and language is striking. Whereas Frommer did not package his argument in the language of nation and is rather more interested in the behaviour of Jews and others under occupation and persecution, his critical reviewers posit national histories as the building blocks of historical narrative and expect national responsibilities and ‘guilt’ to be clearly attributed. Expecting that others would read the text through the same lens, the different accentuation transformed the volume into what they perceive as anti-national, political, or possibly revisionist. Hence, the hitherto mostly uneventful Czech coming to terms with the Holocaust is increasingly structured around similar fault lines as it is in Poland and Hungary.

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The articles published here developed out of a workshop organised by the Terezín Initiative Institute and the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague in September 2019, which assessed the current state of the field and mapped the developments in research since Kárný’s death in 2001.<sup>16</sup> Even though, as a result of Covid-related constraints, not all papers could be turned into articles, this issue aims to fill some voids and explore new methodological approaches. Examining the persecution and mass murder of Jews and Roma, the authors discuss the reactions and entanglements in an occupied country, probe testimonies, and, significantly, explore data-driven approaches. The issue also hopes to be in line with other promising research, such as the freshly published and long anticipated book by Anna Hájková, which provides a new critical perspective on society in the Theresienstadt Ghetto<sup>17</sup> and the research by Benjamin Frommer examining the persecution of Jews in the Protectorate before their deportation.<sup>18</sup>

Jan Láníček’s article enriches the difficult debate about Czech participation in the persecution of Jews. Examining eyewitness testimonies and post-war retribution files, he provides a nuanced picture of how the members of the Czech gendarmerie (police) unit, under SS control, interacted with Jewish prisoners in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. While Kárný pioneered this research and questioned the myth that many policemen were executed for helping prisoners, Láníček notes the general lack of in-

15 Ivetta Cermanová/Alexandr Putík/Daniel Baránek, Židé mezi Prahou a Mikulovem. Pokus o souhrnné zpracování dějin Židů v českých zemích [Jews between Prague and Nikolsburg. An Attempt at a Summary of the History of Jews in the Bohemian Lands], in: *Roš chodeš* 82 (2020) 4, 18–19.

16 The workshop and the preparation of this issue were kindly supported by the Czech Foundation for Holocaust Victims.

17 Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto. An Everyday History of Theresienstadt*, New York 2020.

18 Benjamin Frommer, *Verfolgung durch die Presse. Wie Prager Bürokraten und die tschechische Polizei halfen, die Juden des Protektorats zu isolieren*, in: Andrea Löw/Doris L. Bergen/Anna Hájková (ed.), *Alltag im Holocaust. Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941–1945* (= Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, 106), Munich 2013, 137–150; Benjamin Frommer, *Privileged Victims. Inter-marriage between Jews, Czechs, and Germans in the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia*, in: Adrienne Edgar/Benjamin Frommer (ed.), *Inter-marriage from Central Europe to Central Asia. Mixed Families in the Age of Extremes*, Lincoln 2020, 47–82.

terest by historians in this topic, which is “all the more surprising when considering that this was the only instance that a large group of Czech nationals directly witnessed the Holocaust of European Jews”. Building on research about other regions, Láníček draws more complex conclusions: While a few gendarmes (such as the commander Theodor Janeček/Janetschek) clearly identified with the worldview and behavioural patterns of the SS and terrorised prisoners, only a small number were arrested and sentenced during their service in the ghetto. Disentangling their motives and actions remains difficult, but it transpires that most were investigated for providing assistance, which involved financial, material, or sexual rewards. Most gendarmes, Láníček concludes, operated in a grey zone, which is difficult to describe and conceptualise through the monolithic and politicised terms of resistance and collaboration.

Lisa Peschel’s article offers a thoughtful and reflective assessment of the reliability of survivor testimony. Taking Christopher Browning’s critical reading of testimony and his discussion of possible correctives as a point of departure, Peschel analyses an interview with a survivor who participated in cultural life in Theresienstadt. Her article self-documents an experiment which did not follow a straightforward path. Testing her initial hypothesis that newspaper narratives prevalent at the time of the interview would have influenced the narrator’s views, she compared the testimony with the coverage of three very different Czech newspapers in 2005/2006. While her previous research covering early post-war testimonies identified related “objects of feelings”, she concluded that the more recent interview “no longer reveals pressures that significantly influenced the [...] testimony”. Instead, comparing the survivor’s four testimonies given over the span of sixty years, she discovered remarkable consistency in how the narrator discussed cultural life in the ghetto, including the sensitive subject of German culture. Rather than a universal interpretation or methodology to be simply copied, Peschel’s article is an impetus for critical thinking and searching for new approaches to testimony.

Two articles and two project reports attest to how data drives new research questions and contributes to interdisciplinarity. Štěpán Jurajda and Tomáš Jelínek mobilise the database of Holocaust victims of the Terezín Initiative Institute, one of the most extensive and best developed person-related datasets, for a quantitative study of survival chances and social ties in the Theresienstadt Ghetto and during the deportations to Auschwitz. They provide a completely new view of the database, which was originally developed for the purposes of remembrance and resulted in the series of Terezín Memorial Books. In contrast to assumptions about the significance of ethnicity and/or country of origins for survival in the ghetto, they show that once controlled for all external factors, the country from which the victims were deported did not play a major role in determining their death risks. In another section of their article, they enrich the data in order to assess the significance of social networks, arguing that such connections increased the chances of survival of those who were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. Their article contributes to a promising trend of statistical and econometric approaches in current Holocaust studies and illustrates the significance of the shift from data collected for remembrance and education purposes to research data.<sup>19</sup> Their conclusions by themselves do not dramati-

<sup>19</sup> See for instance: Pierre Mercklé/Claire Zalc, Trajectories of the Persecuted during the Second World War. Contribution to a Microhistory of the Holocaust, in: Philippe Blanchard/Felix Bühlmann/Jacques-Antoine Gauthier (ed.), *Advances in Sequence Analysis. Theory, Method, Applications*, Vol. 2, Cham 2014, 171-190; Johannes Buggle et al., The Refugee’s Dilemma. Evidence from Jewish Migration out of Nazi Germany, in: CEPR Discussion Paper, no. DP15533 (2020), <https://people.unil.ch/mathiasthoenig/files/2020/12/CEPR-DP15533.pdf> (14 July 2021).

cally change our knowledge or interpretation of the fates of prisoners in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, but show how qualitative and quantitative research can mutually reinforce each other.

By contrast, Michal Schuster's work on the documentation of the names and fates of Roma Holocaust victims led him to a highly interesting and unexpected local perspective which reaches beyond a black-and-white image characteristic of public discussion on this issue. Rather than quantitative, his approach is micro-historical: He focusses on one Roma family in the Southern Moravian village Hrušky. His meticulous ethnographic and archival research made it possible to unearth details and complexities of local 'citizenship' of Roma families in the village. His interviews revealed an ambiguous picture which confirmed anti-Roma stereotypes by categorising the Dycha family as a positive exception. The peaceful and durable social and economic relations made it possible to negotiate residence rights in the village, which was no small feat for a marginalised Roma family. Even more significantly, it likely saved them from deportation temporarily, possibly as a result of an intervention by village authorities. Thus, Schuster concludes, "focussing on a specific place, community or family through written and oral history sources from the local level can change perspectives and enrich research based on documents of central authorities and institutions."

The new section of S:I.M.O.N acknowledges the significance of "Data and Documentation" as the bedrock of research and an opportunity for the development of new digital humanities approaches. The two contributions share the urge to think critically about and beyond data and its use and to understand that choices made in data collection are not only technical, but refer to conceptual framings and research designs and impact the findings. In her report, Aletta Beck outlines the creation of the database of Roma and Sinti prisoners prepared by the Terezín Initiative Institute and partially published online in 2020. Referring to inspiration from Kárný, she discusses how the expertise – archival, conceptual, as well as technical – gathered in the process of documenting the names and fates of Jewish deportees was used to collect details of Roma and Sinti victims. However, there were distinctions as well: The different forms and timelines of categorisation of Roma and Sinti in comparison to Jews substantiated a different methodology, while the high level of anti-Roma stereotypes in Czech society called for an even more sensitive approach to personal data.

Magdalena Sedlická reports on the activities of the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) in the Czech Republic, showing how documentation on the 'national' level can empower transnational approaches as well as new digital methodologies. In fact, all three projects described here were designed to reach beyond national constraints. For instance, the Terezín Research Guide was developed as an experiment in breaking archival borders, across countries, languages, cataloguing systems, and encoding standards. Sedlická's report can be extended with information on the Czech node of EHRI, currently under construction as part of the process of making EHRI a permanent structure. Organisations with diverse expertise joined forces in the Czech consortium: The Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences as a research organisation, the Terezín Memorial as a Holocaust museum and a specialised archive, the National Archives as the most important archival organisation, and the Terezín Initiative Institute devoted to documentation, digitisation, and public history. This national node applied for evaluation and funding as part of a larger cluster, namely the digital humanities research infrastructure LINDAT/CLARIAH-CZ. If evaluated positively and approved by the Czech government, the Czech node of EHRI will start operating in 2023.

Finally, the contributions hopefully provide an answer to the hypothetical question of why publish a 'national' special issue at all. Indeed, the contributors agree that Holocaust research should be driven by transnational approaches and allow for comparison rather than being focussed on the nation or constrained by state borders. Writing the history of the Holocaust without taking into account transnational histories of ideas and people is almost impossible. However, as the recent tensions and unease also show, the grip of 'national' conceptual frameworks opens up questions about the integration of critical histories of the Holocaust within institutional frameworks as well as narratives of national history. It is precisely the ambition to research locally, to probe the national, and to think beyond this context that has informed the current issue on the Holocaust in the Bohemian lands.

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Quotation: Michal Frankl, Holocaust in the Bohemian Lands. Questions and Voids, Sources and Data. Introduction to the Special Issue, in: S.I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 8 (2021) 2, 5-12.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0221/ART\\_MFRA01](https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0221/ART_MFRA01)

S.I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

This special issue devoted to research in the history of the Holocaust in Bohemian Lands was prepared in cooperation with the Terezín Initiative Institute in Prague and the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences. It represents the continuation of the "Terezín Studies and Documents", a scholarly yearbook founded by Holocaust survivors Miroslav Kárný and Margita Kárná which significantly contributed to the research in the history of the Holocaust in the Bohemian Lands. The preparation was supported by the Czech Foundation for the Holocaust Victims.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 8 (2021) 2 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0221>

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