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## Language as an ethno-identification sign of the German minority in the upper Nitra in the context of historical and social changes\*

**Abstract:** Some Germans are among the traditional national minorities in Slovakia. Their ancestors came to this territory from the 13th century onwards, mainly as miners. One of the locations where they settled was the upper Nitra and the surroundings of Nitrianske Pravno. Until the late 1940s, the German population had a majority representation in these municipalities. Due to the political and social changes after the Second World War, when they were displaced, their numbers are radically reduced and the ethnic identity is also weakened. The study focuses on historical and social changes that condition the ethnicity of this minority community. It focuses on the elements by which the Germans in the upper Nitra declare their togetherness and difference from the majority population. We pay particular attention to language as one of the essential components of ethnic identity, its practice and significance in the self-identification of the German minority. The main methodological procedure is a biographical and oral history interview, conducted with respondents from the municipalities of Nitrianske Pravno, Malinová, and Tužina in 2022.

**Keywords:** German minority, upper Nitra, language, ethnicity, German dialect

**Słowa kluczowe:** mniejszość niemiecka, górna Nitra, język, pochodzenie etniczne, gwara niemiecka

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The ethnic diversity of Slovakia's population is conditioned by historical development but also by modern processes. It is shaped by different geographical, economic, political, cultural, and social factors. In the context of ethnic minority communities, we tend to talk about traditional and new minorities in Slovakia (Letavajová, 2019). Among the traditional, so-called autochthonous, minorities whose presence on the territory of Slovakia is long-term and continuous are Germans (also called

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Carpathian Germans). German colonists came to Slovakia in several waves from the 13th century onwards and settled mainly in Bratislava and its surroundings, in Spiš and in the localities of central Slovakia, the collective historical name of which is Hauerland. Kremnica, Handlová, Veľké Pole, and Nitrianske Pravno became the main centres of the Hauerland area, which included a total of 24 towns and villages. The German population was the majority here until the late 1940s. The possibilities of their minority development and self-realization were significantly weakened. Primarily by political decisions and legislative measures against minorities after the Second World War, which resulted in the expulsion of Germans from Slovak territory. Self-sufficiency in satisfying economic, cultural, social, and emotional needs was significantly limited and reduced in their case. Ladislav Lenovský (2014: 7) defined it as key to the survival of ethnic communities. Since this period, we have noticed a significant demographic decline of the German population, the weakening of ethnic identity, assimilation tendencies, the disappearance of cultural traditions in many areas, including language, the disintegration of traditional communities and the gradual cultural and physical extinction of the minority.

## Objectives and methodological procedures

The main goal of the presented study is to clarify the factors that shape and condition the ethnic identity of Germans in the upper Nitra region. We will follow the elements on the basis of which Germans declare their ethnicity. We will focus on their development in the context of historical and social changes, the most significant of which took place in the late 1940s and early 50s. We will pay particular attention to language as one of the most important components of ethnicity. We will try to interpret its significance for the ethnic identification of members of the German minority, record its use and status since the early 1950s, and clarify the reasons for changes in the present.

We will investigate the issue of language as an ethno-identification sign of the German minority in the upper Nitra. We will use biographical and oral history interviews, which we conducted in 2022. We conducted field research in three localities of the upper Nitra region – in the town of Nitrianské Pravno (today it also includes the villages of Solka and Vyšehradné) and the villages of Malinová and Tužina. We conducted the interviews in the Slovak language, in the case of specific terminology also in the German language. In total, we spoke with 17 respondents (5 men and 12 women) born between 1931 and 1965. From the point of view of the breakthrough events after the Second World War, we can divide

the respondents into two categories. We classify the oldest of them into the so-called generation of experience (Kreisslová, Nosková, 2022: 50). It means that they remember the post-war events based on their own experiences. Nine respondents born between 1931 and 1939 survived the post-war events and resettlement of the German population during their childhood. The generation of respondents born after the war is represented by 6 respondents (born between 1950 and 1965). The respondents come from families where both parents were German (11 persons) and from mixed German-Slovak families (4 persons). Another 2 respondents (born in 1965 and 1969) are partners of persons of German origin, but they themselves are of Slovak origin. There were also three married couples among the respondents. Two of them with both spouses of German origin and a single mixed German-Slovak married couple. The remaining respondents were not related by blood or marriage, but many of them knew each other. We obtained respondents on the basis of a recommendation from local authorities. They were the mayors of the investigated localities and representatives of local cultural associations based on the ethnic (German) principle. Subsequently, we used the so-called snowball method, that is, obtaining respondents by the recommendation of persons with whom we have already conducted an interview.

Respondents of both groups interpreted the investigated events and relationships differently and attributed different meanings to them. Their interpretations of past and present events were conditioned not only by their own experiences, but also by intergenerational transmission. It was about passing on the experiences of their parents and grandparents, as well as sharing the experiences of their children and grandchildren. We obtained the necessary information from telling their life stories, capturing their memories of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and the old age. We recorded their interpretation of past events and current conditions. The main areas of the conversation were focused on ethnicity, language and its ethnic contexts. We were interested in how the Germans self-identified, how the Slovak population perceived them, and which elements of their difference they considered the most significant. We tried to find out what role language played in their self-identification as an ethnic group. We focused on the ways and environments in which language acquisition took place during their lives (mother tongue – German dialect, Slovak language, written German), on possibilities and opportunities for practicing the language, on regional language specifics, on local relations influenced by ethnicity and linguistic differences of groups. It was also important how the respondents

look at breakthrough historical events that affected their minority status, the use of the minority language and how they evaluate its current state.<sup>1</sup>

The respondents approached the interview voluntarily and willingly. Several had the need to talk in detail about the events and name their actors. Some of them initially resisted the interview for several reasons. They were shy to talk in front of a stranger. This gap was bridged after a more thorough presentation of the researcher as a person and their home university. Another element was the feeling that as persons they were of little significance in terms of research. At the same time, they recommended us to other people “who know more to talk about it.” During the interview, the silence or reluctance of the respondents to talk about some specific topics also proved to be serious. It was related to having a guilty conscience, a feeling of guilt. They tried to forget some events and not talk about them. They especially avoided talking about concentration camps, about informers, especially if these persons were still alive or their descendants were alive. They feared that bad relations would be renewed.

## Theoretical aspects of ethnicity and language

Social or group identity affects the way of looking at oneself and others, collective belonging and, conversely, difference from other groups. One's own group is defined by the agreement of its members, and members of other groups are defined, on the contrary, by its difference. Group identity is conditioned by the similarity of individuals in several areas. One of the elements that create and consolidate group identity is ethnicity. Ethnicity is explained by several theories. Primordialist (essentialist) conceptions understand ethnicity as an essence, a basic human characteristic and heritage that an individual acquires automatically by birth. This approach views ethnicity as a static phenomenon, unchanging over time. Ethnicity is defined here on the basis of common history, territory, culture, and language, as well as religion, norms, values or ethnic naming (Ondrejovič, 2008).

This exclusive view of ethnicity was overcome and replaced by the concept of modernism (constructivism, situationalism). Modernism perceives ethnicity as a dynamic social phenomenon, dependent on the situation, circumstances, constantly shaped by social interactions. Ethnic identity is a matter of emotions, it is never finished, it is constantly maintained, reformed, but also questioned. The individual chooses or

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<sup>1</sup> The respondents' statements are presented in italics in the text and identified based on the respondents' gender and the year of birth.

creates it him-/herself. The focus of this approach is on borders (cultural, political, real spatial, and symbolic), their subjective marking, maintenance, and transgression. Boundaries between groups are variable, their importance fluctuates depending on social contexts, they can change, shift or disappear completely (Bačová, 1976; Mann, 2006: 64). Frederik Barth (1969) states in his work that ethnicity expresses the emphasis and meaning attributed by members and non-members of the group to the differences of the group and the consciousness of difference. When groups come into contact, they are defined and demarcated. He calls this delimitation ethnicity. Groups use anything from biological traits such as hair or skin colour to religious observances to traits such as favourite foods or hairstyles as a demarcation tool.

Several factors affect the change of ethnic identity and ethnic structure of the population in time and space. Internal factors originate from a specific individual or ethnic community, external factors are determined by the surrounding environment. These include, for example, intergenerational assimilation, the size of an ethnic group, significant linguistic differences or mobility. The vitality of an ethnic group is also determined by social factors, for example economic status, the position of the language in the community and society, institutional support, implemented for example through educational institutions, also policy towards national minorities (Majo, 2014: 50–151; Botík, 2007). Political decisions in relation to national minorities can cause sudden changes in their development. We can refer to these processes as ethnotransformative.

One of the most important elements of ethnicity is language. The close connection between language and ethnic identity is also discussed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who considered language to be an external manifestation of national mentalities. According to him, people who use the same language create a similar subjectivity or worldview (Humboldt 2000 according to Laşak-Gaidoş, 2008: 390–391). Leoš Šatava (2013) perceives language as the main sign of ethnicity and considers it the “cultural capital” of the ethnic community.

The importance of language in the awareness of group identity and ethnicity results from its own essence. Language is not only a means of communication and does not only serve to exchange information, it is a tool of social interaction, it connects members of individual groups. Language strengthens solidarity, creates and strengthens social relations, relies on the participation of group members in common knowledge and common memory, created and reproduced by speaking in a common language. From this point of view, the mother tongue is especially important (Assman, 2001: 122). In the environment of minority communities, the mother tongue is an important ethno-identification and ethno-differentiation tool, its knowledge is an integration, socialization,

and enculturation factor (Lenovský, 2018: 245–246). It constructs the consciousness of origin and group belonging, it also plays a key role in the perception of the group by outsiders (Fishmann, 1999). Richard Jenkins (1997) understands language as a subjective means that facilitates group formation.

## Historical development and ethnicity of the German minority until the late 1940s

The arrival of Germans in the Hauerland and within it also in the upper Nitra region was stimulated by the wealth of precious metal ores, especially gold. German settlers from the central Slovak region, or directly from German lands were invited to mine it (Žabenský, 2022: 209; Žudel, 2010: 118). The centre of upper Nitra became the city of Nitrianske Pravno (*Deutsch Proben*, also recorded as *Aranprouwna* – Golden Pravno in 1413). Nitrianske Pravno is mentioned as early as 1337, when gold diggers obtained privileges in the upper Nitra. Gold mining was also the impetus for the founding of the nearby villages of Pravenec (*Possessio Prona*), Solka (*Bettelsdorf*), Vyšehradné (*Beneschau*, *Majzel*), Klačno (*Gaidel*), Chvojnica (*Fundstollen*), Tužina (*Schmiedshau*), and Malinová (*Cach*, *Zeche*) (Lacko, 2009a: 16; Ďurková, 2007: 5; Pöss, 2002). We also assign the population of three municipalities of the Turiec region to the Pravnian Germans. These are the municipalities of Hadviga (*Hedwig*), Briestie (*Bries*) and Vrčko (*Münnichweis*), whose inhabitants were mainly engaged in agriculture. Gold panning attracted here not only miners, but also craftsmen and buyers. Thanks to the gold yields, Nitrianske Pravno and the surrounding villages prospered. The number of their inhabitants constantly increased. The development of the city is also evidenced by the extraordinary size of its square, which is still one of the largest of its kind in Slovakia (Horváthová, 2002: 35–39). From the 17th century on, the gold mining ceases. The local population gradually switches to agriculture, livestock breeding and craft production. Among the trades, furriers, drapers and tailors were the most important. Later, butchers, tailors, blacksmiths and masons joined them. In Vyšehradné, the population was also engaged in stonework (Žabenský, 2022: 214; Geschwandtner, 2018a: 106–108, 125).

Until the mid-20th century, the German population was the absolute majority in these localities. According to data on the ethnic structure of the population from 1880 (the main criterion was the introduction of the mother tongue), German ethnicity represented 91.3% of the population of Nitrianske Pravno, 92.4% of Vyšehradné, 92.4% of Tužina and

94.5% of Malinová. The share of the German population in Solka was 85.2% (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic). As a result of Magyarization pressures between 1880 and 1910, we note a partial decrease in the number of the German-speaking population, which mainly affected urban environments. In 1910, out of the total number of 2,366 inhabitants of Nitrianske Pravno, 1,996 persons registered as German language and nationality, 266 persons as Slovak and 131 persons as Hungarian (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic). From the population census in 1930, we learn that the proportion of the German population in Nitrianske Pravno was 67%, in Vyšehradné 99.6%, in Tužina 96.3% and in Malinová 93.6% (Geschwandtner, 2018c: 133; Lacko, 2009: 30; Pöss, Fišo, 2015: 28–42; Geschwandtner, 2018b: 62).

Germans in the researched area identified themselves and still identify themselves through the ethnonym *Germans*, or *Carpathian Germans*. All respondents referred to local affiliation also when categorizing their own group. They considered themselves *the inhabitants of the Hauerland* or *the Hauerland Germans*. Identification with the specific villages in which they live was also significant. They derived their name from the German name of the village or its dialect, for example, *Cachovci* (inhabitants of Malinová), *we speak Cachovsky* (dialect of Malinová), *we speak Pereščaf* (dialect of Solka).

At this point, it is also interesting to mention the designation that fellow Slovak citizens use in relation to the local German population. The German population is referred to simply as *Germans*. However, some of them were named as *echt Germans* (real, right Germans). Slovaks linked this characteristic to the fact that they proudly claimed to be of German origin, they came from families where both parents were German, they spoke a German dialect, and they are more prosperous:

*They were divided into echt Germans. The others were softer and more normal like the Slovaks. But they spoke in Cach language. In these families, Cach language is spoken from morning to night. They were richer, a little superior. Their parents wanted them to marry Germans, that was important for echt Germans. (A woman, born 1965)*

The identity and ethnic consciousness of the Germans was based on group belonging and difference from the majority of the Slovak population. The differences between the Germans and Slovaks up to the mid-20th century were declared by the interviewed respondents based on the example of several elements. They derived the identity of Germans on the basis of bloodline, namely, the fact that their parents, grandparents, and other ancestors were of German origin. Family genealogical lines are evidenced in this environment mainly by surnames. Relics in the

form of German surnames prevailed here until the mid-20th century. Diener, Diera (Dürer), Elischer, Ergang, Filkorn, Greschner, Hanesch, Kasper, Kotschner, Köbeling, Krebes, Kurbel were among the most widespread in Nitrianske Pravno (Geschwandtner, 2018a: 104). It is clear from the statements of our respondents that even when it comes to first names, they were numerous, especially the names of German origin, for example: *Alfred, Elfrída, Joachim, Edita, Manfréd, Ferdinand, Františka, Johana, Gerlinda, Vilhelm, Ernesta, or Matilde.*

Another sign that conditioned the awareness of the difference between Germans and the Slovak population (partly also the differences among Germans themselves) was social status and socio-professional classification. The Germans in the upper Nitra originally belonged to miners, later they made a living from agriculture and craft production. Within the local community, many of them had a higher social status. This social status also determined differences in material culture, for example in clothing or housing. The clothing culture of the local Germans, influenced by the urban fashion of other German mining towns in central Slovakia, was maintained here until the middle of the 19th century. From the first half of the 19th century, a festive women's cap (*zlatohlav, koké*, embroidered with gold thread) also appeared among the clothing items. In this environment, it spread under the influence of rich artisan and middle-class families who accepted the Biedermeier influence. Men's clothing throughout Hauerland was influenced by miners' ceremonial clothing (Richter, Géczyová, 2018: 188, 193; Horváthová, 2002: 65). *Everyone was well-groomed, walking around the house in shoes. They wore such work clothes.* (A woman, born 1965). The richest Germans built their homes closer to the town centre, by the square, used higher quality materials and procedures, and built them on the model of German countries. A higher social status was also attributed to the city of Nitrianske Pravno itself and its population, which, compared to the surrounding German villages, was understood as lordly, bourgeois. *They said: Ich ge ad štót – I'm going to the city. These townspeople were so superior, they were proud of it. Pravnians have always been something better.* (A man, born 1931).

Germans from the upper Nitra professed the Catholic faith, as did the Slovak population in the region. Among the surveyed municipalities, in 1910, Roman Catholics had the largest representation in Solka (99.3%) and the smallest in Tužina (82.5%), where 23 residents of the Jewish faith also lived (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic). Differences between Germans and Slovaks were declared in piety and degree of religious practice. Germans were considered more pious, they went to church more. The togetherness of the German ethnicity was also strengthened

by joint services in the German language, which were held until the mid-20th century.

However, the most striking feature of the difference of the Germans was the language itself. When asked who respondents are and how they differ, language was the first element they referred to. The dialect of the Hauerland Germans was surrounded by the majority Slovak language and underwent a separate linguistic development. Its basis was the mother tongue, which the German colonists brought with them from their homeland. From a dialectological point of view, their language belonged to Upper German (*Oberdeutsch*), Silesian, and Bavarian dialects (Horváthová, 2002: 38; Richter, Géczyová, 2018: 206). The local German language was also referred as Handrbul and its speakers Handrbulci (Rapan, 1954 according to Geschwandtner, 2018a: 87–120). However, we did not encounter this designation in the field.

These German dialects were used to communicate not only in their home environment, but also within the local community, as these were predominantly German villages. Despite the small distance, there were observable differences in the dialects of individual villages around Nitrianské Pravno. They mainly concerned the phonetic and phonemic aspect (Richter, Géczyová, 2018: 206). One of the respondents (a woman, born in 1956) describes the differences as follows:

*Each village negotiated differently. They said “V” in Klačno and “B” in Solka. They had many soft consonants. Solka was “Bettlsdorf”, in our dialect “Pereščaf”, so the dialect was called “pereščaferich”. The Pravnian dialect was called “promrešt”, in Malinova it was “po cachovsky”. By the accent, they already knew on the bus who was from which village. Germans learned the dialect in a natural home environment.*

Other respondents says:

*We were born in a German family. We speak German from the cradle up to now. (A man, born 1931)*

The local German population acquired contact with the standard written German language through school education. Until the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867, German was the main language of education in the entire territory of Slovakia. At the end of the 19th century, under the pressure of Magyarization policy, it was replaced by Hungarian and German became a foreign language (Plewnia, Weger, 2008: 250 according to Richter, 2017: 7). The process of Magyarization (also called: Hungarization) affected all strata of the population, including the German population. The Hungarian government perceived education as one of the most effective tools of assimilation policy. Aponnyi's laws in 1907

completed the process of nationalization and Magyarization of public education. The aim of the measures was to create a monolingual Hungarian political nation. Non-Hungarian children had to learn to express their thoughts in the Hungarian language both orally and in writing by the fourth grade. It was very difficult for children who did not know Hungarian at all before starting school (Juriščinová, 2017: 147).<sup>2</sup> For the current generation of Germans, the memories of Magyarization have been preserved only in the form of fragments. They mentioned that their parents had to speak Hungarian at school, but they spoke a German dialect at home. During the first Czechoslovakia, vernacular schools in the native language were restored. School education had the same development in the examined municipalities. In Nitrianske Pravno, there was a girls' and a boys' school with classes in German language. After the establishment of the Republic, the school board decided on teaching in German and in the first and second grade, children were obliged to learn to read and write in Hungarian and Slovak. Since 1924, a minority Slovak school was also established in the town (Husárová et al., 2018: 282). Documents about the existence of a school with German as the language of instruction come from the beginning of the 19th century in Malinová (Lacko, 2009a: 23). Since 1918, the school taught in German and Slovak, and in the 1930s in German (Lacko, 2009b: 39). During the Second World War, the German school was closed and replaced by a Slovak one (Richter, 2017: 11). In 1942, a German kindergarten was also established in the village (Lacko, 2009c: 84). In the 19th century, there were three elementary schools in Tužina with German as the language of instruction. Since the Hungarianization of education in 1907, they taught in Hungarian, and after 1945 in Slovak (Škultétyová, 2018: 134).

Children from German families first met Slovak at school and through Slovak peers on the street. *Nobody. The whole village did not speak Slovak. The teacher wrote me a report card: To repeat the class due to lack of knowledge of the language of instruction.* (A man, born 1936). Contact with the majority Slovak language was closer in mixed Slovak-German families, where several communication models worked. According to the statements of the respondents, the most common was the bilingual model, when the spouses spoke to each other in Slovak and to the children in their own mother tongue.

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<sup>2</sup> The issue of Magyarization is very important from the point of view of shaping the linguistic identity of the Germans in the upper Nitra. For more on Magyarization policy and the development of education in Slovakia, see for example Potemra (1990, 1978), Pšenek (2012), Gabzdilová (2014).

## Language and ethnicity since the Second World War

The continuum of development of the German national minority in Slovakia was interrupted by the events of the Second World War. Some of the local Germans sympathized with Nazi Germany, while others, on the contrary, joined the side of the partisans fighting against the German troops. The same was true in the upper Nitra. In Malinová 120 inhabitants and 25 people from Nitrianske Pravno joined the resistance fighters. Several Germans from Kľačno and Malinová distributed communist leaflets in the German language (Gabzdilová-Olejníková, Olejník, 2004: 32; Geschwandtner, 2018d: 135). In Malinová, where there was a large number of German anti-fascists, a total of 42 people were detained in October 1944 and dragged to the German concentration camps (Lacko, 2009c: 46–47).

In 1944, out of fear of the advancing Soviet army, Germany ordered the evacuation of members of German minorities from the territory of Slovakia. Between September 1944 and May 1945, approximately 120,000 people were evacuated from Slovakia in this way (Botík, 2007). Voluntary evacuation, which was used by about 5,000 Germans from Nitrianske Pravno, began in January 1945. In March, mandatory evacuation was ordered, due to which another 2,000 Germans left the region. Those who refused the displacement fled to the mountains. A total of 15,000 people were evacuated from the Nitrianske Pravno area. In the first stage, school-age children who had to survive the danger in the western Sudetenland were pushed aside. The next deportation concerned women, in particular women with small children, and the elderly, and finally, in the last wave, the German population was to be transferred to a German training camp (Geschwandtner, 2018c: 133–138).

In the post-war period, the position of the German population was radically changed by the decrees of President Beneš (1945). Their goal was to rid Czechoslovakia of the Germans, based on the principle of collective guilt, by confiscating their citizenship and property and their mass displacement to the American and Soviet occupation zone in Germany, which were adjacent to Czechoslovak border. The internment of Germans took place immediately after the advancing armies crossed the border. The Slovak population was supposed to move into the depopulated dwellings after the Germans. In this way, the possibility of settlement for up to 10 thousand people appeared in the upper Nitra. Previously evacuated Germans upon their returning home after the war found their homes already occupied. Many of them were immediately detained and interned in camps. The Germans in the upper

Nitra were concentrated in a labour camp in Nováky,<sup>3</sup> where they were to remain until deportation. The camp had been established during the Slovak State (1939) and in terms of its capacity was one of the largest in Slovakia. Anyone who did not obtain state citizenship had to leave the Republic. Many looked for a solution in concluding a marriage with a Slovak citizen, others tried to transfer the property to relatives of Slovak nationality (Geschwandtner, 2018c: 133–138; *Tábor nútených prác v Novákoch* [1948–1951], 1998: 9). Residents from the nearby villages of Lazany, Poruba, Čičmany, Fačkov, and Podhradie, as well as from the Orava region, moved to the displaced German houses in Nitrianske Pravno and the surrounding area. In addition to Slovaks, Slovak repatriates from Romania and Hungary also settled here.

These events caused a radical reduction of the German population in Slovakia. While in 1930 they made up 4.6%, according to the first post-war census in 1950, their share decreased to 0.15% (Gabzdilová-Olejníková, Olejník, 2004: 153). The ethnic composition of the population also changed in the investigated municipalities. The German population, which had been predominant until then, suddenly became a minority. For example, in 1946 there were already 980 Slovaks, 552 Germans, 6 Czechs, 3 Ruthenians, 2 Hungarians and 2 Jews living in Nitrianske Pravno (Geschwandtner, 2018c: 137). Changes also occurred within the administrative division. In May 1945, the former Nemecké Pravno (German Pravno) was renamed to the current Nitrianske Pravno and in 1950 it was connected with the municipality of Solka and 10 years later with the municipality of Vyšehradné. As a result of post-war reprisals, one of the municipalities – Hadviga – disappeared. After the displacement of the German population, only two inhabitants remained there in 1954, and the village became part of the village of Brieštie (Brieštie, 1977: 247–248).

Today, the events from the mid-20th century are associated by the oldest among the inhabitants with incurring great wrongs and a feeling of helplessness. They understand political decisions and the subsequent social situation as a discontinuity in the development of their minority. These events were a milestone in their lives, they caused the rupture of family ties and local relations.

Certain differences in the statements depend, of course, on the respondents' individual life experiences. The situation was better tolerated by the Germans, who could stay at their birthplace and keep their property. To the contrary, those who experienced fundamental life changes remembered the events as more traumatic. They are more critical and emotional. Their families were displaced, they lost family members, their

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<sup>3</sup> The camp had been established during the Slovak State (1939) and in terms of its capacity was one of the largest in Slovakia.

property was confiscated. In narratives, several of them focused not only on describing the events themselves, but also on naming those they considered guilty. They identified the Hitler regime and the Czechoslovak post-war politicians. Part of the local population also belonged to them. These were informers, immigrants who took their homes and property, and people who treated them disrespectfully.

*The partisans were in the mountain[s]. After the war, they fought among themselves and shared their homes. They argued about who would they drive away from their homes. They wanted to send richer Germans to Germany. They could then handle their property. (A male, 1936)*

*The immigrant[s] felt like superhumans. While the people of Malinová were clever people, masons, carpenters, miners, they were professionals. They went to Prague and Budapest to build, they were more educated. Germans would have developed that village if they had not been dragged away. Immigrants couldn't do anything, so they came here. They got everything here. When they didn't like one German house, they went to another. There was everything in those houses, food, clothes, duvets. And they also got 5 hectares of field, and our parents had to work very hard. That was a difficult time. (A woman, born 1952)*

These events significantly contributed to the further formation of the group identity of Germans and the distinction between the concepts of “us” and “them”. In this context, the German population defined itself especially in the opposition to the newcomer population, which took the property of the Germans. They named them *Slovaks*, *Slovač*, *immigrants* or, more specifically, for example, *Čičmanci* (inhabitants who immigrated from Čičmany). *They also ruined those relationships. Then the Čičmanci came and we called them čvarga* [pejorative term for a poor, hateful person]. (A woman, 1939). *Then the Slovaks overpowered us. There were already more of them. Slovaks have settled here. (A woman, 1950).*

In the post-war period, a turning point also happens when it comes to the use of the mother tongue. Slovak was introduced as a compulsory language in education, including for German minority communities. The ways of expressing German nationality, including the use of the German language, were condemned and punished.

*After the war, someone came to say that if she didn't speak Slovak, he would shoot her. He was aiming a gun at the old woman. He was some kind of immigrant. But they didn't know any Slovak. (A woman, born 1952)*

*After the war, it was terrible here. We went to school as children. When the Slovaks were walking along the road, they didn't want to hear or see*

*us. Even though it was our home village. So we stopped talking in German until they passed. Even the adults kept quiet, they didn't want it to be bad. It is not our fault that we are Germans. (A woman, 1937)*

The use of the German dialect thus moved exclusively to the domestic environment. The intergenerational transmission of the mother tongue was therefore disrupted. The local dialect was still used in the generation of grandparents and parents, but the children gradually abandoned its use.

*My parents and grandparents were German. From a young age, we were led to language. I only went to a Slovak school. After that, I didn't want to speak German with my parents anymore. They spoke German and I answered to them in Slovak. One was probably already ashamed that one's neighbourhood and friends spoke Slovak. (A woman, born 1950)*

## The current state of language and ethnicity

The results of the census from 2011 tell about the current ethnic composition of the population of the investigated municipalities as well as about their language.

**Table 1.** Slovak and German ethnic composition and language of the inhabitants Nitrianske Pravno, Malinová, and Tužina according to the census in 2011 (total number of inhabitants)

Population		Nitrianske Pravno	Malinová	Tužina
		3 197	883	1 219
Nationality	Slovak	2 855	812	1 143
	German	60	51	45
Mother tongue	Slovak	2 832	837	1 151
	German	49	33	30
Language used at home	Slovak	2 867	822	1 097
	German	20	20	14
Language used in public	Slovak	2 832	837	1 154
	German	12	11	10

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (the table does not include data on persons of other nationalities and languages)

The table shows the preponderance of the population claiming Slovak nationality. The German population makes up 1.9% of the population of Nitraske Pravno, 5.8% in Malinová and 3.7% in Tužina. At the same time, approximately 2/3 of this persons also declares that their mother tongue is German. This fact indicates that some of the people who

consider themselves ethnically German do not speak German anymore. They apparently also base their ethnicity on blood ties and descent from German ancestors, as evidenced by the following statement: *We don't speak [the language] anymore, but my parents were German* (A woman, born 1956). Despite the fact that part of the population declared German as their mother tongue, the data show that only about half of them communicate in German. Another knowledge resulting from the census is that they communicate in German more often at home than in public.

However, the field research indicated that some of the respondents who consider themselves to be German, come from German ancestors or speak a German dialect, no longer state their German nationality in their documents. Their ethnic identity is not necessarily linked to the official registration of German nationality.

According to the statements of the respondents, today only 20–25 people in all three municipalities speak the German dialect. They are from the oldest generation. The advanced age of the last people who actively use the German dialect was the reason for the following statement of the respondent: *The German root is dying out.* (A woman, born 1935). They are trilingual, they speak Slovak, a specific German dialect (typical for Germans in the upper Nitra), and many of them Standard High German: *Sometimes, when someone asks me what I'm reading, I don't know whether it's in Slovak or German. Because I think in Slovak and German.* (A woman, born 1937). Only a few of them actively and daily use a dialect of German. These are spouses who speak the dialect in everyday communication at home. Individuals whose relatives do not speak the dialect can communicate in it during meetings in the street, neighbourhood conversations, but also in association activities.

In several cases, we noted the use of the German dialect in contact (especially by telephone) with relatives abroad who had been displaced. *He went to Alaska, got married there and lives in Alaska. He obtained state citizenship there. We always talk on the phone in our dialect. That's my uncle, my mother's brother.* (A woman, born 1939).

Until the mid-20th century, the German dialect and the Standard High German was also used during the meeting of the population at German masses. Today, German masses are held only sporadically on festive occasions, which are usually meetings of natives. Praying in the German language is left to the home environment. *I pray at home in Slovak and German.* (A woman, born 1935).

Relics of the original upper Nitra dialect have also been preserved in the form of terminology that we find in several areas of life. It is quite prominent in family names, clothing items or traditional dishes. Some of the terms are known and used daily (kinship terminology) or occasionally (names of dishes, parts of costume) even by younger generations

or descendants from mixed Slovak-German marriages who do not speak the German dialect. As an example, we present a sample of the kinship terminology used by current habitants of the investigated municipalities:<sup>4</sup>

father/*vóte, tata*/Papa; mother/*muter, mute, mama*/Mutter; son/*ziúf, zon, zoo*/Sohn; daughter/*tokte, tocht, tochte, tochtr*/Tochter; grandmother/*omama, grula, ómama, óma*/Oma, Grossmutter; grandfather/*otata, ótata, grúvoté*/Opa, Grosswater; grandson/*enkle, enkl, enke, énenko*/Enkel; granddaughter/*enkle, enklin, enkelin, enke, énenko*/Enkelin; cousin/*kuzen*/Cousin; cousin/*kuzine*/Cousine; father-in-law/*ón, švigfotr*/Schwiegervater; mother-in-law/*šbégar, mama, švigmama, špéblmute*/Schwiegermutter; father's and mother's sister/*tante*/Tante; father's and mother's brother/*onko*/Onkel; brother-in-law/*švégr, šbég, švogar*/Schwager; sister-in-law/*švégerin, šbégerin*/Schwägerin; nephew/*nefe*/Neffe; godfather/*téf pot, véte pót*/Pate; godmother/*táf pot, pótli*/Patin; godchild/*spótela*/Patendind.

The sharing of information about the history and culture of the German ethnic group in the upper Nitra takes place mainly in a family environment. This happens through oral intergenerational transmission in the mother tongue. Some of the respondents mention many occasions when their parents and grandparents told them about the past, about German traditions and turbulent times from the second half of the 20th century. However, in some families, topics such as concentration camps, the deportation of Germans, the killing of relatives, informers or interpersonal relationships were taboo and kept silent. Experiencing these events and sharing them with descendants was an individual matter in each family.

The cultural traditions of the German population are preserved and passed on through local institutions based on the German ethnic principle. The singing group Zlatava has been operating in Malinová since 1998. A year later, the Proben Echo singing group was founded in Nitrianske Pravno. The music group Schmiedshauer operates in Tužina. The groups preserve the German dialect through their repertoire of several songs, written and sung in the local dialect. The group Zlatava recorded two videotapes, which also record the spoken word in the dialect. The ensemble performed in costumes made according to the pattern of the original German holiday costume, which was worn in the village at the beginning of the 19th century. Several cultural activities are covered by the local branches of the Carpatho-German Association, which were founded in the surveyed municipalities in the 1990s. The Carpathian German Association organizes the Hauerlandfest and publishes the

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4 We present the terms in the form: English equivalent/*German dialect*/the SHG.

German-language magazine *Karpatenblatt*. One of the important events are the meetings of the natives. They come mainly from Germany, but also from other countries. The first meeting of natives from Malinová took place in 1994, from Tužina in 1994, and from Nitrianske Pravno in 1998. Initially, the natives' meetings were numerous and attended by emigrants who still actively spoke the German dialect. Under the influence of several circumstances (especially the aging of natives, restrictions during Covid-19 pandemic), meetings are rarer and fewer people participate. During occasional visits, they are increasingly replaced by their descendants from the second and third generation, who do not speak either the German dialect or the Slovak language. *When the Germans returned, they still spoke the dialect, their children already standard German.* (A woman, 1956).

In Nitrianské Pravno, the Museum of the Culture of the Carpathian Germans has been established. It is situated in the so-called House of Meetings. The Municipal Museum in Tužina, established in 2018, is also devoted to the collection and presentation of elements of the traditional culture of the local Germans. All three municipalities have published fairly extensive monographs on the history and culture of the local population (Lacko, 2009a; Greschner, Gaplovská, 2018). The publications provide relatively detailed information about the history, the turbulent fates of the Germans, their culture and language. The collective memory of the German population is also preserved through other popular publications written in the German language. In many cases, their authors are displaced Germans from this area who visited their native villages after the revolution of 1989 (e.g. Richter, Schwertsik, 1979; Zjaba, 1992; Wendelin, 1996; Lichner, 1984). They describe the history of the villages, German traditions, language situation, give examples of dialect terms, lists of German families in the post-war period, describe the stories of deported Germans. These books in the German language can be found by the German population and other interested person in the library in the House of Meetings in Nitrianské Pravno.

## Conclusions

The German population in the upper Nitra was identified in the past on the basis of several factors. One of the elements that united the members of this community and at the same time distinguished them from the Slovak majority were blood ties with their German ancestors, declared through surnames and names of German provenance, also social status, derived from traditional ways of to make livelihood, a greater degree of religiosity, particular elements of material and spiritual cul-

ture, such as clothing culture, gastronomy or architecture, and above all language – a specific German dialect. The development of the German dialect was primarily influenced by the fact that it developed in an environment where the German population constituted the majority for a long time. The situation changed in the mid-20th century under the influence of political decisions and the expulsion of the German population. This situation accelerated the process of ethnic and linguistic assimilation of the remaining Germans in Slovakia and, in particular, in the upper Nitra. Today, Germans define and identify themselves here mainly on the basis of common origin and language. Currently, only a few inhabitants from the oldest generation speak German dialect. Relics of this language can still be seen in several areas of culture. Local associations and organizations based on the ethnic principle are also trying to partially preserve them.

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(Ethnocultural aspects of German minority communities, taking into account the phenomenon of mining in the upper Nitra).

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