

Marta Gyori

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Kosice

Slovakia

Interviewer: Edward Serotta

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Our religious life

I was born in 1947. We had a strong Orthodox community. We'd go on a picnic, and the shochet and his seven children would come, the rabbi and his family, too. This was back in 1953. We would have secret brit milahs in our home.

The rabbi was born in Berevovo, a very Orthodox village in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. He only attended cheder, not a regular school. But even without a secular education, he was bright and perceptive. After the war, he came here to Kosice, which then acted as a magnet for Jews of eastern Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was given to the Soviet Union.

During the Communist period

My family was preparing to leave Czechoslovakia, and we had our papers signed and even our furniture was shipped off. Everything was packed, and then my brother came down with diphtheria. The doctor told my parents: "Your brother's life or Israel, take your choice."

My father was not allowed to emigrate, and he said, "So I'll piss on the Communists; I'll stay a religious Jew." He tried to emigrate in 1948 and then again in 1962. My brother, Alexander Grossman, studied for a year in the rabbinical seminary in Budapest. In 1969, he traveled to London and he stayed there for a month, then moved to Israel.

My father kept geese and chickens at home so that during the Communist period, he could always have kosher meat, which he would ritually slaughter himself. There was usually kosher meat available; it came from a shochet who would come through here when he was in eastern Hungary. But you couldn't depend on it, I suppose, so my father made his own preparations, too.

Growing up

Back when I was growing up, it was very difficult. We went to school six days a week then, and my father made a shaygitz carry my books on Saturday.

We had a soup kitchen here in Kosice all during the Communist times, but we called it a restaurant. Naturally, it was kosher. The Goldberger brothers ran it. Up to 100 people ate there every day. And when I was young, whoever needed to pick up dinner cheaply because they didn't have the money, could do so.

Even in the 1950s, we had a strong community. My father was one of the last of the Hevrah Kadishah. Up to the end, he would get on a bus or a train and travel to some small town in Slovakia to prepare the dead for burial.

One day my father came back from a Hevrah Kadishah meeting - they met every Sunday - and he was enraged. The Communists had made them sell the Neolog synagogue, the great synagogue in the center of town. And they took it for almost nothing, he said.

He was a baker by trade, and baked challah. Everyone would buy from him. Every Friday he would be busy at home baking, but he had another bakery help out and they would prepare around 200 challahs.

We had a great deal of trouble from the Communist government here. In the 1960s, the Jewish community received medicines donated by a Swiss charity, and the Party made all sorts of problems. But still, for all the holidays, children my age would attend synagogue and we had community seders as well. For the holidays, our big synagogue, the old Orthodox one, was always full. We continued to have services there, even though the crowds got smaller and smaller, until five years ago.

In 1971, we made plans in secret to visit my brother in Romania. This was the only Communist country that didn't break its ties to Israel, and as Czechoslovaks, it was one of the very few countries we could travel to. We planned to say that we would be meeting a medical specialist for a problem in the family, and we fixed the location and place. It was done well, we thought. But the day we returned to Kosice, the police were waiting in front of our door. They knew when we left, where we went, who we met and when we would return. They took our passports away; we didn't see them again for six years.

Married life

When I married a non-Jew in 1965, my father sat shiva for me. When he saw me on the street with my first son, he would cross to the other side and keep walking. It killed me to see this. How I suffered so much because I married a non-Jew. To cope with this has been an enormous burden. One day,

after my first son was born, I realized that if I didn't act, I would lose my father forever. I went to him and knocked on his door. I said, "This is your grandson." He said, "He will be my grandson when he has a brit milah." I said, "So make the arrangement."

Well, my father was right: I should have married a Jew. The differences between my husband and me were great and became even greater.

My mother died in 1990, and my father died in 1994. I'm sure that he wouldn't have talked to interviewers as he lived his simple, believing life and he never spoke about it with strangers.

Our community

After 1989, many more people started coming to the community. Some came because they wondered if they could get something out of it, but most came because they were really interested. At least 10 families left on aliya in the first few years. Now there are very few interested in leaving.

Our community isn't uniform now, and there seem to be three types of Jews here. The first group has a strong Jewish background from their families. They know more than just the basics; they know how to pray. A second group is coming mainly to explore their past and make a reconnection to Jewish life. They want to be involved, but not in a religious way. The third group is comprised of those who have very tenuous roots. They are simply curious and don't have any background at all.

The biggest problem is that the middle generation doesn't want to observe religion at all, but still wants to maintain traditions. The question is: What is enough? Some people say that just admitting being a Jew is quite enough. It's not.

The elderly cannot understand any of this. When I speak with them, I realize that they will not soften their views at all. But, to involve the younger families, they will certainly have to bend. But they won't. So I'm looking for a compromise. I'd like some sort of Reform Jewish movement to grow here because if we don't get that, it will all come to an end. You see, of the young Jews in Kosice today, almost none of them know how to pray.