

Alexander Grossman's Bar Mitzvah



This is a picture from the bar mitzvah in 1961 of my brother, Alexander Grossman. After the war, we had a strong Orthodox community in Kosice. My father was a baker, and baked challah. Every Friday he would be busy at home baking, but he had another bakery help out and they would prepare around 200 challahs. 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. 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. My family had been 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 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, so my father made his own preparations. 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. It was kosher, and up to 100 people ate there every day. 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. 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. It killed me to see this. 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.'