

Jan Fischer

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Prague

Czech Republic

Interviewer: Silvia Singerova

Date of interview: November 2003

Jan Fischer is an 82-year-old man who lives near the center of Prague. Old photographs of his family, father and wife hang in the room where this interview was held. Despite his age, he is still physically and mentally very agile and he has an excellent memory and a great sense of humor. A theater director by profession, he is a great storyteller with the ability to describe events vividly and graphically, as well as being admirably frank. He tries to connect his personal story with historical and social events. In the course of his narrative, he often seeks to explain the circumstances surrounding the historical development of Jews in Bohemia, which attests to the broad scope of his knowledge. In 1998 he published his memoirs, entitled 'Sest skoku do budoucnosti' (Six Leaps into the Future), published by Idea servis, Prague, from which, with his permission, I shall cite additional information. To fill in certain points, I have also used his family chronicle which he kindly lent me.



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My family background

Our family was assimilated, so we had no direct connection with Jewish traditions. We weren't observant, didn't eat kosher food, and didn't go to the synagogue. As a family we were traditionally aware of our Jewishness, so it was respected but not celebrated. I knew I was a Jew, except in those days knowing you were a Jew meant something completely different from what people think today. It wasn't anything particularly special, for we were surrounded by people like us. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary; it was just like you were a member of Sokol [1](#) or something. You were a Jew, so you were a Jew. We weren't practicing Jews. We kept company with Jews who were assimilated like us.

My dad's father - that is, my grandfather, Jakub Fischer - was a gentleman's tailor. He was born in 1856 in Beroun. Rural Jews had to speak Czech, of course, because otherwise they would have

found it hard to make a living. So their nationality kind of alternated - I call it 'movable'. [Editor's note: Supposedly rural Jews spoke Czech more likely than urban Jews, so they could communicate with their Christian surrounding. However, the official language in Austria-Hungary was German. Jakub Fischer most likely spoke German as well.] He came to Prague to learn about tailoring. In Prague he trained as a tailor; he was apparently good, for he soon got his own business, a tailor's salon on Jungmann Square, by which time he was already speaking German. I didn't know him; he had died in the year when I was born. I suppose he learned German only in Prague, because of business reasons. He was trained at tailor Mr. Orlik's, the brother of the famous Czech painter Emil Orlik [1870-1932]. There I suppose they spoke German. The most money he earned was from sewing clothes for professors at the German University of Prague; in those days they wore uniforms. So I guess that he must have sewn the uniform worn by Einstein when he was in Prague. [Editor's note: Albert Einstein spent 17 months in Prague in 1911-12]. My dad's father had ten employees, so he was pretty wealthy. It was a comfortably situated family.

One realizes now that the opening of the ghettos after 1848 must have been a big explosion. Jews gained astonishing freedom and self-confidence. They had great educational potentiality - Jewish cheders, writing ability, philosophy, Talmud etc. There was a big explosion of doctors, advocates, professors; an explosion of education.

I think granddad was a practicing Jew. He is said to have been a great joker, too. We must have inherited his love of animals, because we've always had various creatures around us. Granddad had a boxer which was well-trained; it used to guide my dad home at night when he'd been drinking. It was customary for mom to find him in the morning lying on the floor, the dog in his bed. They also had a parrot that could speak; my grandfather kept it in the workshop where they did the sewing. Grandfather Jakub died in Prague in 1921.

Grandfather Jakub had a sister, Emma Kitten [nee Fischer], who was born in 1862. She married a cantor from a Prague synagogue, Josef Kitten, and was a practicing Jew. She kept a mezuzah on her doorpost and went to the synagogue regularly. She was a small, white-haired lady with her hair tied back in a little bun, a deeply religious person who went to every service, celebrated every holiday and prepared strictly kosher food, in accordance with all those complicated laws. She was a virtuous Jew, a terrific old lady, wonderful and kind. She was a typical kind old lady like from a fairytale and she always cooked something good. When I was little, we lived in an old house on Tynska Street, but we moved later on and I then lost contact with her.

My grandmother, Rosa Fischer [nee Reiss], was born in 1856 in Stirin. I can remember that she was still a practicing Jew. She spoke German and, of course, Czech. That was normal. With the staff you spoke Czech, at home German. I never knew my grandfather Jakub, as he died in the year I was born, but I got to know my grandmother for a few years. Grandmother Rosa was a small, plump, charming old lady. It was fun with her, for she had a sense of humor. She didn't live with us, though. At first she was on her own, then she lived for a time with her son, my uncle Oskar, as he didn't have any children, whereas at our place was the family. My grandma died when I was about ten; she is buried in the Jewish cemetery [in Prague].

My dad, Richard Fischer, was born in 1885 in Prague. His mother tongue was German. He was a level-headed, cheerful person who liked to appear dignified and to put on airs. His hobby, which he had avidly pursued since childhood, was photography. In the army he was with the 28th regiment,

which was based in Prague. During the war [World War I] he was in Bruck an der Mur [today Styria, Austria] and in Carinthia [today Austria], which was where he served. He was a graduate of the Commercial Academy and a 'one- year volunteer' (Einjährig Freiwilliger). That was an Austrian institution for graduates who volunteered to an army for one year and by that made their service shorter. He was promoted to the rank of first lieutenant and, what's more, he became the regiment photographer. He took photos of the officers riding horses, infantrymen, of course, their wives and children, and of various celebrations. In time he became indispensable. Although World War I was under way, he wasn't sent to the front, so he survived it all hidden away in Styria. Photography became his fate. After World War I, he managed to get an agency as a representative of a German optical works, where he sold cameras, lenses, binoculars, microscopes, and such like. My dad sympathized with the social democrats. They were liberal, slightly left- leaning.

Dad had two brothers, Oskar and Erich, and a sister, Anna. My dad's younger brother, Oskar Fischer, was born in 1890. I think he was also a graduate of the Commercial Academy. When my dad got the agency, he went into partnership with Oskar who had a third share in the firm. Oskar got married to a woman from Vienna, Valerie [nee Pietsch]. She lived with him here [in Prague]. She was an Aryan. Oskar was sent to Terezin [2](#) during the war [World War II]. Towards the end of the war, people of mixed race and of mixed marriages were transported there. Just for three or four months; they arrived in November, I think. Although they didn't have much food, they were not endangered by transports. After the war Oskar was sick. He had a heart attack and was paralyzed as a result. He became a big communist; he used to sit at home reading 'Rude pravo' ['Red Law', communist newspaper] and whenever I visited him we quarreled about politics. Oskar died at the turn of 1962-63. He didn't have any children.

My dad's other - also younger - brother, Erich Fischer, was born in 1893. He made a living in all kinds of ways, but didn't have much luck in life. He worked as an employee at various firms, and I can remember him selling tires. He didn't acquire much wealth though. Erich was married to a woman whose first name I can't remember; her maiden name was Weiner. They had a son called Jiri Fischer. He was a trained plumber and was with me in Terezin, where we worked together. So that was the poor side of the family. They weren't religious, and none of the younger generation [Oskar, Erich] was. My grandparents were, but not my parents. Erich died in Terezin, I think it was in 1943. I was sitting by his side at the time. He had cancer of the stomach.

My dad's sister, Aunt Anna, was born in 1895. She never went to work, I think. She married Rudolf Altschul. Here's something interesting. Rudolf Altschul was a Prague wholesaler in tropical fruit. So they were pretty well off. He was a typical Jewish intellectual: a handsome fellow with small glasses, the nose, bald spot, and so forth. And what an amazing mind! He began to study technology but could also do shorthand for a living, so he went to the parliament to take down the minutes. But as his father got cancer, he changed over to medicine so he could help him. He graduated in medicine from the German University of Prague. He specialized in psychiatry. He spent about two semesters at the Sorbonne and after graduating he worked at a practice in Rome where there was a famous professor by the name of Mingazini. Rudolf worked there about a year or two and then returned and set up a practice here. He wasn't very rich, of course; it wasn't any good being a German psychiatrist in Prague when Hitler was around. I remember that, even back then, what interested him in psychiatry was neurology, and it was through neurology that he got into histology. He used to get sent the brains of various animals, which he would study under the

microscope and write about in numerous papers. He was already married to my aunt by then.

They emigrated just before the war; at the first sound of canon, they took off to Canada, although their ship sank on the way. The first response to his scientific papers, which he distributed around the world, was from Canada. Later on, he got even better offers from America, but he said no, the Canadians were the first to reply, so he was going to Saskatoon. They sailed on the Athens, which was the first civilian ship the Germans sank. That was in 1939, sometime in October. It was sunk off the coast of Scotland, but they managed to get rescued and then made it to Canada, where Uncle Rudolf became a university professor. He also knew about literature and history and could speak Italian, French, English, German and Czech, and all perfectly well! He died shortly after. He was a person who towered above the average. He didn't have children, unfortunately.

I don't know anything about my mom's parents. I don't even know what her mom was called.

My mom was called Julie Fischer [nee Lederer]. She was born in Prague in 1884. She was from the poorest of families. She was an illegitimate child. I think her parents weren't married. Her mom, who I didn't know, died young. She fell in love with a dashing young fellow from Serbia, a journeyman goldsmith by trade, who turned on the charm, had two children with her, and after some time just took off and abandoned her! He was a goy, an Aryan. A real bastard, alcoholic and so on. He used to get drunk and beat his wife and children and he left them in complete poverty. All her life my mom had scars on her back from the beltings he gave her. They lived somewhere in the Old Town of Prague, where they shared a single room that was divided in the middle by a chalk line; two families lived there.

When her mom died, my mom was sent away to be brought up by an aunt, but it was no bed of roses there. My mom was adopted by this aunt whose name was Lederer. My mother was a non-practicing Jew. Marrying a boy from a good family, my dad, released her from her misery and loneliness. I always knew that my dad married her as a poor orphan. My mom had a sister who I have seen twice in my life. She was in a wheelchair, lived in an asylum.

My mom was melancholic and withdrawn by nature. I don't know if she was like that when my father married her, but that's how I knew her. Although she only had a basic education, she was an avid reader, with an interest in quality literature, even books on philosophy. I cannot say what she got out of the books, but although she was no intellectual, she was always very moderate and thoughtful in her views. I don't know how she died. From Auschwitz she supposedly went to Bergen-Belsen, but there are just vague traces, based on the fact that someone saw her there.

I had a brother called Herbert. He was born in Prague in 1915, so he was six years older than me. I should add that he got the name Herbert after the son of President Masaryk [3](#), just as I was named after another son, Jan Masaryk [4](#). My brother was completely different in nature than me. He was the studious type. At school he always got top marks, and he was great at sports, too. He was excellent at gymnastics, occasionally went mountaineering and had a motorbike that he drove with great vigor. But the thing that most impressed me about him was that he went gliding. He had a good figure, but was a bit on the small side and, unfortunately, he wasn't very good-looking - he had an extremely large nose. After graduating from high school he studied mechanical engineering at the Technical University, but he didn't finish the course. He then got a job in a workshop, similar to the one I worked in; we were both making glasses at the time. It's quite clear that he never took any notice of me at all, for I meant nothing to him.

Herbert got married to someone called Marta, but I can't recall her surname. I've forgotten it. She said she was Aryan, but it came out later that she was half-Jewish. My brother wanted to save her and get divorced so that she wouldn't have to go to a concentration camp. He went instead and never came back. If they had stayed together he might have been saved, since people from mixed marriages were deported only at the end of the war, as my uncle Oskar. They didn't have any children. He was deported to Auschwitz, apparently from Terezin. He probably went to the gas chamber, but I don't know the details. It was probably some time in 1944 that he was murdered.

After the war I had minimum contact with his wife. There was this shadow hanging over her - by divorcing her, my brother had saved her and condemned himself to death, and then we found out that she was half-Jewish, so she had actually deceived us all. And she remarried straight away... You see, she was a bit... light-headed. I don't want to say that she was a bad person, but she didn't have any inner qualities. She later had problems with her feet and wasn't able to walk. It was as if she was a different kind of person. She didn't belong to the family.

Growing up with German and Czech

Back to our family. We spoke German at home and Czech with the staff. I went to a German-language school, for instance. That was probably because my dad was the Czech representative of the German company, Zeiss and Zeiss Ikon Opticians. My brother studied engineering, as he was the intelligent one. I was the stupid one who was supposed to take over the business. So I, of course, had to speak German. Anyway, we were kind of used to the German language at our house. The cultural bent of our family was definitely German: German books, German gramophone records, German theater. From a political perspective, however, our family was strictly pro-Czechoslovakian.

The First [Czechoslovak] Republic [5](#) is hard to understand these days; take, for example, the fact that my brother and I were named after the Masaryks, Herbert and Jan. Masaryk was a great idol. So why Czech, Jewish and German national sentiment? Nationality didn't count. After all, there's nothing at stake in a democratic state. Of course, things turned out slightly differently, but people believed in it at the time. Progressive thoughts, too. Religion was respected but it wasn't necessary to observe it. Democracy really worked and we believed in it for a long time! We lived a bilingual life, which seemed normal to us. If anyone came out with the odd comment, either against Jews or against Germans, it wasn't a democrat, so wasn't worth paying attention to. Our faith in the new republic was firm. We finally had the chance to show what we could do, to show that we were on a par with all other nations of Europe.

Our name, for instance, is spelt as it is in German - 'Fischer'. I'm not aware of the spelling having changed, but countless times during my life, and to this day, it has been written in different ways by different people. Out of Czech laziness they miss out the letters 'ch' and write it 'Fiser' pronouncing it in Czech as 'Fisher'. On the basis of everything I know, I would bet that my ancestors would certainly not have wanted their name to be spelt the Czech way. The tendency to hold on to German culture persisted until my parents' generation, only to be severed by me.

It remains an open question to me as to which language was the main one, the mother tongue, for me. Strangely enough, the first language I learnt was Czech, since I had a babysitter who spoke Czech. They started with German only later... But there was a fundamental difference in the level of my Czech and, later, of my German. Obviously, as I had been to a German school and learnt

German literature, language and grammar, I was better at German at the time. But I was quite rooted in the Czech language; it wasn't foreign or strange to me.

At one time, all documents had a religion column that had to be filled in. During the war [World War I] my parents got baptized and after I was born they had me baptized too, and that was on the 'Augsburg' denomination, which is some evangelical branch [Lutheran protestant branch]. Then they all went out of the church and were 'without denomination'. Somewhere at the back there was always this 'Jew' or 'Jew-boy', depending on the situation. We didn't hide our Jewish origin, but we didn't emphasize it either. Sure, most of our acquaintances were Jews, either baptized or not. From a religious perspective, however, they were all very half-hearted, looking for a slow, painless path to assimilation. We didn't go to the synagogue and didn't observe the holidays, but we didn't turn our backs on the Jewish faith and we felt the right to feel Jewish.

Back to my childhood. We lived at 19 Tynska Street near Tyn Church. If you go down that narrow lane between the church and the House of the Stone Bell, you'll come across two passages. The one on the left leads to an ancient house where there used to be a notorious dive. At night there was always the sound of an accordion playing, and there were always very suspicious characters that would be staggering around. Naturally, I was really scared of this dark spot, so I would run quickly down the left passage that led to our street.

We lived in a turn-of-the-century house, with the windows overlooking the yard. In our street was Mrs. Eisner's grocery store, where we did our shopping. I remember a barrel of pickled herrings there, and a large lump of butter on the counter from which pieces were cut with a wire between two short pieces of wood. I can still clearly see the orange packets of chicory and the 'Certle' boiled sweets in a large glass cylinder. At the corner of the street was a gin-shop, which was quite a big store dominated by shelves with bottles of gin. Drinking was done while standing up, of course. What a variety of labels and what poetic names! We also had a coalman in our street. Steep steps led down to his kingdom and it was not easy to carry the coal out. Emil the coalman could usually be found in the gin-shop. With unsteady legs, he would then carry coal up to the third floor, all with great style and without even hurting himself. Opposite our house was the Tabarin Bar, a place of ill-repute, simply a brothel. It wasn't talked about in our house; I just figured out from significant glances that it must be something mysterious, probably a criminal den. A lot of musicians came to play in the yard - usually an accordionist accompanied by a singer. People would lean out the windows and throw small coins, wrapped in paper so they wouldn't roll away. There was one nasty trick that some people played on them though - they would pick up a coin with a pair of pincers, heat it over a candle and then throw it into the yard. Instead of the usual expressions of gratitude, you would then have got something like 'Just you wait, you shit, you lousy bastard!' At times like that it was worth savoring the beauty of the Czech language.

The distinct character of the Old Town was complemented by plenty of unusual characters. Without a doubt, the king of these was Hasile, the famous beggar, whose last name was Weiss. He was an elderly gentleman who paced with dignity through the streets of Prague, walking-stick in hand. Mr. Weiss went begging only when religious services were being held. He would stay in front of the synagogue or outside the Jewish cemetery. Never one to put his hand out, he accepted charitable gifts with great dignity. Whenever someone gave him anything less than 50 halers, he would take offence and turn down the gift with the words: 'Bin ich ein Schnorrer?' - 'Am I a beggar?'

My father's German agency prospered nicely. Dad even bought a car - a Skoda [Czech brand]. It had extremely big head-lamps and looked very imposing. A chauffeur also came with the car. It was a company car and he used it during the week for his work, but on Sundays it came to Tynska Street. A chauffeur would open the doors and our family would set off on an excursion.

My dad was a successful businessman and made a lot of money. He could therefore afford to hire a babysitter after I was born. I have a photograph of our family sitting on the grass during a trip somewhere. Mom looks very willful, dad looks as if nothing is up, and I'm there, about a year old, in the lap of a delightful young blond girl. This snapshot clearly shows how things were. Dad's uncontrollable weakness - for the tender sex - later became one of the causes for the sad end to our family.

In the Old Town I went to the German five-class elementary school. In the first year I was taken to school by a servant. I can remember that in my little knapsack I had a small black slate board with a writing-tool and a sponge on a piece of string. I can also remember our teacher, Mrs. Kindermann, a kind gray-haired lady with long hair in a bun. Every morning we had to stand up and, Jews and non-Jews alike, start with the prayer: 'Lieber Gott, steh mir bei, dass ich recht, brav und fleissig sei!' - 'Dear God, stand by me, so hard-working I'll be!' When I was ten, we moved to an apartment on the Smichov embankment. We lived on the fourth floor and had a beautiful view of the river. We had moved up two floors not only in the house but also on the social ladder, and the views were stunning.

A short time later the economic crisis set in. Suddenly there were unemployed people and lots of beggars around. At that time I had started to attend the first year of the Realschule [6](#) [technical secondary school], and I felt I knew what was going on. There were a million unemployed people in the republic, which really was a lot. I once saw a young person pass out on the street because he was so hungry. Beggars kept ringing the doorbell, not for money, but for a slice of bread. It was a very depressing experience for a child. Children were suddenly deprived of all their certainties. All of a sudden, it was necessary to save.

A short while later we moved to Podoli, which was then on the outskirts of town. I now had to go to school by tram. But Podoli was a quiet spot and had a lot of attractions. The first of these was the river Vltava. Also, I was five minutes away from the swimming pool, known as the Sports Pool. You could also go rock climbing in Podoli, as there were several quarries in the area. And when it was really cold, the Vltava froze over and then, all at once, you had a skating rink. I actually skated to school a few times. I should add that I had other interests as well, particularly reading. I had a large library at home. And then there was the theater. My parents had season tickets for the Neues Deutsches Theater that is the German Theater. As mom and dad preferred operetta and drawing-room plays, I had the opportunity to see all the operas and the most boring of classical plays. It was all 'second hand'. My brother didn't express any interest in the theater, so it was me who saw the most shows. The German Theater was very good quality. These were amazing experiences for a kid growing up. The theater was probably in my blood by then.

At secondary school, the German Realschule, I was a bit below-average and it was a struggle to pass the exams that were necessary to move up a class, and once I had to do a re-sit. Perhaps I should say something about our school. It was a German Realschule on Mikulandska Street. We were quite a motley bunch, both in terms of personality and politics. The European situation was

reflected also in the makeup of the school. Among the pupils were politically aware Germans, both rich and poor, and a good half of the class was Jewish. The democratic spirit began to disintegrate slowly, though, and at the end of the 1930s our teachers began to seat us according to racial stereotypes. Quietly and inconspicuously, without words or reasons. Most of the pupils didn't respond to it. I think it actually brought us closer together, the fact that we were a band of blackguards. We had known each other since the first grade. Childhood friendship and rebel solidarity at the time had a certain force and persistence.

At the end of the 1930s Hitler took on more power and the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia was becoming tenser. Dad's business was getting worse and worse, as less people were now buying German goods. So we had to move again to a cheaper apartment, this time in Vinohrady [today a neighborhood close to the city center]. It was a small but comfortable one.

In 1938 my dad's German agency was taken away from him. At the time he had debts, since German products were obviously not selling as well. As an honest businessman, he couldn't bear the fact that he had debts that he wasn't able to repay. So he committed suicide in 1938. That morning I woke up by the sound of crying of our charwoman. She told me that my father had done something to himself and my mom and my brother already ran to his office. I didn't ask more and ran there. I saw from the distance that there was an ambulance and they were taking someone on a stretcher inside. There was a lot of blood. Then the ambulance went away. My mom was standing on the sidewalk and my brother was trying to console her. It happened like this: My dad bought a razor on his way to work, locked himself in the office and cut his arteries on his neck and hands. They tried to save him in the hospital but the next day he died. Dad had arranged an insurance policy with the insurance company Fenix for 100,000 crowns and he knew that this would provide for the family. That's why he chose an honorable death. However, a large proportion of the insurance company was in the hands of Germans, who took out their capital. It soon declared bankruptcy. They then took everything from us, confiscated the lot. We were stony-broke, my mom, brother and me, basically without any money at all.

After graduating from school, I was faced with the problem of how to make a living. Before the war and during the German occupation I had done several menial jobs. I worked in a photography shop for a while, but it wasn't long before they fired me, because the boss was an ardent fascist. For a short while I sold theater programs in the Lucerna complex [famous theater and cinema complex in the centre of Prague], and then I got a job as a laborer in a workshop where they made glass frames. I worked there with my brother Herbert, who in the meantime had got married and moved into his own apartment.

I experienced my father's death as a big shock, but in an objective rather than subjective way. I liked him, but it wasn't a personal tragedy for me, for we had never been particularly close. It was more of a catastrophe in terms of our position in the world and in life. No money, no base, no future. Our world had completely fallen apart. It was the end of an era, the end of the First Republic: Dad's bankruptcy in 1938, after the Munich Pact [7](#), and his death a month later. It was the tragedy of anti-Semitism and Czech fascism here... That was the most tragic moment so far. I was 17. One could say that a world had collapsed. It was the first huge disappointment for humanity as such, not just in that fascists and Vlastka [8](#) newspapers came out, but also because people who were close to you suddenly changed in a terrible way. It was not just that you saw them in a different light, but that they saw you in a different light! Until then the word 'Jew' hadn't

meant anything. It was something like being a minority, something we just took as a fact.

My parents were big supporters of President Masaryk... I have told my children this numerous times. What had happened was a bigger shock to us than the German occupation! Because it was a betrayal from within. You suddenly realized that you had been standing on thin ice... that there was something underneath that you could only sense or guess by instinct, because it wasn't official. What came later was only the consequence of this disintegrated image of humanity. After that, things only got worse and worse. But it was no longer anything new. It was new after the Munich Pact. That stayed with me much more than Auschwitz, the terrible disappointment. That's why I am so distrustful of people... On the contrary, the other side of humanity weighed down on the scales. I'm not saying anything new here, but if there hadn't been friendship or personal contact, which always helps you to cope with external pressures, you couldn't have survived in the concentration camps. It wasn't possible to survive without friends, without solidarity...

During the war

This was now the period of the Protectorate [of Bohemia and Moravia] [9](#). I can't leave out 15th March 1939. In the morning, when I was going to school, the first motorized divisions were already coming into Prague: a few armor-plated vehicles, motorbikes with sidecars and plenty of trucks on which soldiers with guns between their legs were sitting rigidly, like sculptures that cannot see or hear. It was snowing heavily, crowds were pushing forward and they were shouting, whistling and spitting at the soldiers. There was a huge amount of tension in the air, and no-one knew how to act or had any idea what could possibly happen. There could have been a massacre, but it didn't happen. Soldiers were already running about at the school. For me, everything that was German ended that day. I forgot the German language and began to hate Germans. 'Schluss aus' [German for 'all is over']. Our family's situation got increasingly worse, but I was 18, an age where there is a strong desire to live. Out of an understandable inferiority complex, I joined a boxing club. Apart from my sporty friends, I also mixed with a different sort of people with whom I frequented cafes, went on trips, went canoeing on the Vltava in summer, and so forth.

Then they stamped the letter 'J' in my ID-card [see J-passport] [10](#), and when ration cards were introduced, we received less food. But the worst thing came next. I was forced to wear a yellow star with the inscription 'Jude'. As I recall, the regulation to wear it came into force by the end of the week. [In the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia the yellow star was introduced in March 1939] So I went up to the captain of my hockey team, who didn't suspect I was a Jew and that I had to wear the star, and I told him that I wouldn't be coming to the match on Sunday. 'Don't be daft', he said. 'You know there's a lot at stake on Sunday.' To which I replied: 'I'm a Jew and as of Saturday I have to wear this badge.' And I showed him the nice yellow cloth star. He went silent for a while and then said, 'Oh shit! Well, don't bother about the bloody star now. Just start wearing it on Monday!' So I went to play hockey on Sunday and then shook my mates' hands. No more fun.

I waited to see how people on the street would react, how they would behave when faced with this new fashion? Everyone pretended not to see you. I wasn't allowed to go in cafes, pubs, the cinema or the theater. On the tram I was only allowed to use the rear carriage, and I had to be home by nine in the evening, and so on, and so on. I moved with my mom to an even smaller apartment in Vrsovice [on the outskirts of Prague]. I slowly started to get the feeling that something had to happen soon. This was not life, it was something makeshift.

In our house lived another Jew, Mr. Weil. When we met on the stairs, he always made very pertinent remarks. One word led to another, and he invited me in for tea. After a while it turned out that he was a member of the Communist Party [of Czechoslovakia] [11](#). I soon fell for his ideology. I longed to do something active. I hated fascists and Nazis from the bottom of my heart and Communists were their arch-enemies. One day I asked Mr. Weil if I could become a member of the Party. I wanted to fight. But I wasn't asked to join. Apparently they needed working-class cadres, and I was apparently an intellectual; I doubted that one. I was told, however, I could work for the Party in my particular sphere, spreading the word, and so on, and so on. I was bitterly disappointed, but things were moving swiftly on and soon it was all sorted out for me.

In December 1941 I received an order to turn up at six in the morning at the old Trade Fair Palace. We were allowed to take mattresses and quilts with us. Our transport was AK2, Construction Unit No. 2, a thousand young men who were supposed to make all the necessary preparations at Terezin for the arrival of other transports. Hence the mattresses and quilts, for there was absolutely nothing in Terezin. We were each given a number. My number, 687, was painted on my mattress. To my amazement and joy, a cousin of mine from Uvaly, Jirka Fischer, turned up and was given the next number, 688. We had hardly seen each other before. He was a great guy from the country, a trained plumber. We were both genuinely pleased to see each other, as it was clear things would work out better if we stuck together. For two or three days we had to wait in some barracks before they took us to our destination.

The strangest person there was Mr. M, who had been appointed by the religious community to keep order. Taking the Germans as his role model, he went around in riding breeches and jackboots, had a horsewhip, shouting and threatening. He was basically a lout and a stupid Jew. We went on normal passenger trains to Terezin, as people. Then everything got worse. We were crammed into some kind of large warehouse: mattresses on a concrete floor, tiny washbasins, dirt everywhere, and no detergents. People used whatever they had; those that had nothing had bad luck. This 'suffering' at the start of our anabasis was laughable in comparison with what was to come, but every beginning is difficult and it seemed cruel and inhuman to us. My dear cousin arranged for me to work as his assistant, and because a plumber is an exceptionally important person, we had certain advantages from the outset. It was great luck for me that I worked with him in Terezin. I had a good job where there was relative freedom.

One day they lined us up in the yard. One of the SS commanders had a few words to say: 'We have found several letters that some of you put into mail boxes in the town, even though this is strictly prohibited. Those who committed this offence, take two steps forward.' They knew our names anyway. I was one of the sinners, as I had wanted to send a letter to my mom in Prague. I was about to step forward when the person standing next to me held me back. 'Don't be an idiot,' he said, 'if they know the names, let them call them out.' I thought he was right, so I didn't step out of the line. Nine lads stepped forward. 'Take them away!' Then they disappeared into the slammer. A few days later we were officially informed that those nine lads had been hanged for gross breach of orders. One of us had had to carry out the execution. It was an ambulance man from the pathology section who set about this terrible task. He thought he could get over it better, since he was used to death. He was evidently mistaken. I found him one day in a large empty room, sitting on a straw mattress, crying. It was a brutal psychological trick the Germans had played as a way of ensuring discipline. A lot of things were to happen later but this terrible execution was a singular case.

Suddenly everything changed around us. The normal world disappeared beyond the horizon. The lives we had been leading until then came to an end and the new, horrifying reality showed its face. We were in the hands of madmen and murderers and, from then on, no-one could be sure of his life. Amen.

It is very difficult to describe life in the ghetto. Even the Germans didn't know how things would be there. The 'Endloesung', the final solution of the Jewish question, was just being explored. In the meantime they were trying to cram as many people as possible into Terezin. Civilians moved out and the town was filled with poor wretches who had been thrown out of their homes and forced to live in inhuman conditions: everywhere three-tier bunks, even in the attics, hardly any food, the most appalling hygiene, medical care with great doctors but without medicaments or instruments. Women and men lived separately in barracks, children in homes. Lights out at about 9pm. We were protected from the world by ramparts and walls, and by our jovial Czech gendarmes. They guarded well.

Mortality in the ghetto was colossal and there was soon no room for burial. As they were afraid of epidemics, the Germans decided to build a large crematorium quickly. Jirka and I were called on to finish off the water mains for the building. We worked from morning to night and two ovens were already working at full blast. Coffins weren't used, of course. The dead were carted in on rough boards with loose lids in three consecutive rows. The boxes were returned and only the lid was incinerated. Involuntarily, we became experts in cremating bodies. It is a terrible thing, but one can get used to anything, even dead bodies. The ones who didn't get used to it were our roommates in the barracks. They cursed us: 'You stink of dead bodies, you shits! Go and sleep somewhere else!' Yeah, we all stunk of dead bodies, but we couldn't smell it yet.

After the initial horrors, the Germans then came up with the idea of a transit camp. Transports in, transports out, the latter usually sent to their deaths. With time, the Germans lost interest in what was going on inside the old fortress. Let them sing and dance, play football or do theater. What difference does it make? They won't escape their fate anyhow.

I have already admitted to having had a love for the theater since childhood. In my room, on the opposite bunk to me, there was a great guy, Zdenek Jelinek [1919-1944, born in Prague, died in Auschwitz]. He was a poet and translator who also wrote his own stuff. He was a person full of humor and always in a good mood. I owe a lot of my knowledge, wisdom and observations to him. He lent me the book 'Lasky hra osudna' [Fateful Play of Love], which was written by the Capek brothers [see Capek, Josef and Capek, Karel] [12](#). I was enthused, carried away, enamored. 'We have to play that!' More enthusiasts came forward, one person got hold of one thing, another came by something else, and one day we found we had a stage in the attic of an abandoned building. For lighting we had a powerful light bulb on wire. We didn't need a curtain; after all we were the avant-garde! I played the part of Scaramouche and my costume consisted of the bottom part of a gent's leotard. The costume was ready once Franta Zelenka, that wonderful person and great set designer, had painted colorful diamond shapes on my body. There are many things that I can't remember about this, but I will never forget the wonderful atmosphere. In that dark hole we suddenly had poetry; a world of fantasy filled us with joy. It was our world. The real world was an awful long way off. Someone had to keep guard at the entrance to see if the SS were about. At that time, you see, culture was still prohibited. Nothing was 'normal' - not us on the stage, nor those in the audience, not to mention the period. The theater was given a completely new dimension, one

that surpassed all criteria.

We were not good actors. I didn't see this at the time, of course, but I didn't know anything about it, as I was a novice. Most of us were amateurs. We couldn't have acted well, but that was not what it was all about. This is a key to everything. We did theater, with the same people in the audience and on the stage. It wasn't that the actors were looking for contact with the audience; they just wanted to say something to each other. They all said one and the same thing. That viewer/actor correlation was completely different there... The 'timeless' nature of the thing played an evident role, because it wasn't about career, money or love - none of that existed. It was about some residue of the soul that was desperately calling out for help. The soul was all the stronger and our efforts had to be all the stronger, too...

The second show that I was involved in took place during the 'Freizeitgestaltung', an awful word that, in its clumsy way, was supposed to mean leisure time. By now, our captors had realized that they would have fewer problems if they let us express ourselves through culture. Gogol's [13](#) 'Marriage' was, I think, one of the best shows in the ghetto... I played a smaller role, the suitor to the bride, called Chubkyn. The only thing I know is that my arm was in a sling, as I had a festering inflammation that just wouldn't heal. I had two operations, without an anesthetic, but without success. Later on, fortunately, a young doctor managed to save my arm. There had been a risk of amputation. The arm in a sling looked particularly sophisticated. I also acted in a folk play about Esther, which was once prepared by E.F. Burian [Czech theater director] and which was brought to Terezin by the writer Norbert Fryd [1913-1976]. People sang, acted, recited and danced in Terezin. Never again will you find so much culture in one spot...

By the time my bad arm had got better, however, my plumbing days were over. I then was in charge of the youth library. I don't know where the books came from, though. They were available on loan only for people under 20. There was a hunger for education. In addition, we held lectures, which was an even more important activity. The Germans were given only the titles of individual lectures, so they didn't suspect that the lectures comprised entire series. These were intended as a substitute for school. We tried to give young people at least a basic education, as there was no school. The library was run by a council composed of people of various political persuasions, from Communists to Zionists. They began to argue with each other only after the war. It was great work and made sense. At the given moment, that is.

There was quite a famous actress who appeared in Terezin. She was older than me and had a husband in Terezin, but I was madly in love with her. Totally and hopelessly. She sometimes came to our rehearsals, gave bits of advice now and again and I ran after her like a dog. The marriage of my beloved Hana, as she was called, was going through some kind of crisis, so my crazy infatuation with her didn't remain a secret. As a prominent person, Hana had been given her own, small room. So we had a relationship, but one that was not purely sexual. It also had a romantic side. I can remember one time when I was playing chess with her husband. He was a likeable, intelligent guy, and it wasn't possible for me to hate him. So we played chess, as she looked on. Things suddenly got tense, though, and we realized that we were playing for her love. Her husband was a better chess- player than me, but he was obviously too sure of his victory, because he made a mistake and lost.

I loved Hana so much that I have to admit to an ethical indiscretion. I haven't yet mentioned that my mom, Julie, was also in Terezin by that time. She had come over at the beginning of 1944 and worked in a warehouse full of clothes that had been stolen from people. We saw each other occasionally; I went to see her in the barracks, but I really had little time. Work, theater, love, it was all too much. She had received her deportation order in the fall. In this situation there emerged a terrible dilemma for members of the family: to register voluntarily or not. We suspected that we would be going to a worse rather than a better place, perhaps a labor camp. We didn't know anything about the reality of Auschwitz, so deportation was just an uncertain kind of threat. It was difficult for me. My conscience told me that I should go, but my mind told me that I would hardly be able to protect her. My sense of morality drove me to the transport. But I was in love, I had my civic duties in the library, and I adored the theater. There was a faint glow of hope. After all, mom was a 'Mischling', of mixed race! Her father was that Serbian bastard I mentioned earlier; perhaps it would be possible for her to be spared from deportation! That was the card we were betting on, so I didn't volunteer for deportation.

On deportation day I secretly sneaked into the barracks, from where they were departing. I got up to the attic so as not to be seen, and looked down at the yard. In the middle of the yard stood the SS chief deputy Bergl. Mom was there, wearing an old trench coat, low shoes with heels and a scarf around her head. She looked terribly small and wretched from that height. I saw her as she stepped before that demigod, stood to attention and started to explain something to him. He stood, slightly swaying. I think he was drunk. He waved his hand towards the gate and the little figure of my mom left through the open gate and got onto the freight train. That was the end. I broke down in tears. I wanted to go out of the barracks, but was stopped by the 'Ghettowache', the internal Jewish guard, and they shook me. I collapsed and started to cry hysterically and fell to the ground. They had to bring me round and attend to me, so they were glad to get rid of me after a while. I never found out any concrete information about my mom after that. I don't know where, when or how she perished. My brother Herbert disappeared in a similar way. He came to Terezin where he worked as a sewer cleaner, but he didn't stay there long. He left on a transport to the east, where he vanished without trace.

Back to that fateful game of chess. It was the fall of 1944 and mass transports were now under way. The first to leave was Hana's husband, then it was my turn and then Hana voluntarily registered for deportation, as she wanted to go to see her husband. She returned, as did I, but he perished. He lost the game.

There is one incident that I feel I should mention here, one that I remember well. It all began to break down very quickly: transports were dispatched one after another, until we went too. But in the intervening time, before things started to break down, before we knew that the ghetto was being dissolved, that something was going on here, we were sitting together and someone, I don't know who, brought in a postcard that he had apparently just received. He didn't know where it was from - some place called Auschwitz. It was in those few lines that were permitted, that we deciphered the first letters, 'Gastod' [German for 'death by gassing']. And now what? It is incredible, but we didn't have any idea what it was! It wouldn't have occurred to anyone that there were gas chambers there, that people were being liquidated in gas chambers! That they were being shot, hanged, bludgeoned to death, yes, but gas chambers? We didn't believe it! It's a strange detail... you don't realize that what you've experienced, stays inside you. That you can't

get rid of the experience. It's like when you have an unexploded bomb inside of you. Today, now I know it won't explode in me at my age, that's clear to me. Without knowing, you are inevitably marked by it.

On 28th September 1944, St. Wenceslas Day [St. Wenceslas, patron of Bohemia], a transport of 2,500 men aged 18-50 was dispatched from Terezin. This was quite evidently a work transport. From this we figured that they need us for work somewhere, perhaps digging trenches on the eastern front. We were crammed into cattle-trucks, in groups of 50 per truck, luggage included. It was nice of them to allow us luggage, as they immediately took it off us when we reached our destination. On the journey we used the luggage as something to lie on, but that was also why it was so crammed in the truck. For hygiene we had two buckets. First of all, we headed north. That seemed promising, for we'd take work in Germany! We went through Dresden but then we turned to the east. We knew this from the position of the stars in the night sky. It would probably be more accurate, however, to say that we were stationary rather than moving. We weren't given any food or water. Each person had a bit of food with him and there was water in a bucket for fifty people. Next day we went through Breslau and it was then clear.

Auschwitz

After two and a half days I saw the sign for Auschwitz. I could also see fires burning. I assumed that it would probably be a kind of steelworks where we would be working. By the time we got there it was already getting dark, and we were glad that we could finally stretch our legs. There was suddenly a great deal of confusion. 2,500 people were herded together onto a ramp where they waited to see what would happen next. While unloading the luggage, prisoners in striped uniforms kept mumbling under their breath: 'Alle gesund!' [German for 'All healthy']. We didn't understand what this was supposed to mean. Everything seemed to be under a spell... A long line of prisoners slowly began to move forward in the same direction. We moved very slowly and I couldn't see what was going on at the front. Finally, I got to see. At the end of the ramp stood an SS officer, a self-styled judge. In his hand a riding whip. Left or right... I thought it was some kind of work allocation. Then it occurred to me what 'Alle gesund!' meant. He was apparently asking about their state of health. It would probably be a mistake to speculate for lighter work and use illness as an excuse. I was sent to the right, so I joined the guys who were already standing there... After they had later washed us and shaved our hair, the number 1.650 was written on a blackboard in the baths. That was how many of us had arrived at the camp. 850 young and healthy men went to the gas chamber straight away. So decided Doctor Mengele.

They divided us up and put us in timber huts that had served earlier as stables for horses. A thousand of us were crammed into one of those stables. When it was time for bed, we were lined up in groups of five with our backs to the wall and, on the order, had to fall to the ground. It was necessary to spread your legs, so each person sat between someone else's legs. Just try getting to sleep like that. There wasn't a night that went by without a beating or bawling.

The technical term for our camp, Birkenau, was 'Vernichtungslager', a terrible word that means extermination camp. It was situated on a slight slope. At the bottom was the entrance gate through which the trains entered and where the famous ramp was located. Higher up were the gas chambers and crematorium. From above, you could see each transport arrive, the people getting out. A few hours later, flames would shoot out of the low chimneys of the crematorium and a thick

cloud of smoke hung over the camp... The Germans had a form of entertainment they called 'Selektion'. Try and imagine what it feels like when you are standing, completely tense, as you wait for the judge's gaze to fall upon you. Will he stop or will he pass on to another one? You have to look fit, young and strong. You mustn't have a rash, you mustn't have stubble, or be dirty or depressed. All this can play a role. The food was catastrophic. After all, it wasn't about surviving here. In the morning you got bitter fake coffee and a small slice of bread. At midday, usually beet soup and sometimes a handful of unpeeled boiled potatoes. In the evening another slice of bread and sometimes, just sometimes, a piece of margarine or substitute marmalade. In a word, disgusting! Hygiene: cold water faucets and that was it. No soap, no towel, not even a piece of paper!

I can't remember now how long I stayed at Birkenau, perhaps it was a few weeks. Then fortune smiled on me. A transport of about a hundred people was being selected for another camp and I was chosen. We went to Hlivic [Gleiwitz], where a new camp, Gleiwitz III, was being built next to a factory. In comparison with Birkenau, it was like being in a spa. You slept in single bunks in a heated hall, got reasonable enough food and the guards were tolerable. To this day I don't know what they were actually making in that factory. We assumed that they were some kind of rockets components, but God knows. In addition to us, there were also Poles, incarcerated like us, but Aryans, and prisoners of war, French and Italians. With my specialization as a plumber, I was assigned to a German foreman who was welding compressed air pipes with an oxyacetylene burner. Clean and, on the whole, light work.

The major Soviet offensive began on 12th January 1945. Laborers were no longer taken on at the factory. We, that is to say Jews, were assembled in an empty hall and one of the officers gave a speech. We didn't even have to stand to attention. He said that the war, which they would win, was drawing to a close, but that in the meantime we would have to move back a bit. We had nothing to worry about! After the war we would be rewarded and everything would be fine... The march west was awaiting us. There was severe frost and snow everywhere... Everybody knows about the death marches now. Unfortunately, we only suspected at the time. We now had to bear up at all costs! The crowd pulled together and an instinctive kind of self-help came about. The strong looked after the weak.

On the third night we slept in a small concentration camp that was hidden away in the forest. In the morning I was awoken by shouting and cursing - our dear SS-men were loading their luggage onto carts and were looking for slaves to pull them. They had found out that the Russians were approaching swiftly from the north. I looked out the window at this circus... I was not the only one who had decided to stay... For several days we had been almost without food. Suddenly a mass hysteria broke out over food - somebody had discovered a storeroom full of loaves of bread. Complete loaves! Brutal fights broke out. Hunger had turned people into animals and clouded their minds. Feeling sick at the sight of it all, I went back into the building... Then we discovered the camp kitchen, and there was nobody there. In the pots we found potatoes which we immediately started to cram into empty bags.

Then there was the sound of gunshots. A military guard of the Wehrmacht had got into the camp, saw the fight that was raging between the prisoners and started to fire at whatever moved. Fortunately, they had little time and were terrified because of the Russians. When a soldier fired into the kitchen window, the shell exploded against the chimney and the cartridge hit me in the

groin... They carried out their task in a messy way and were quickly gone. It was suddenly quiet, as if time didn't exist. It was actually the sound of the dead, as there were lots of bodies outside. The silence ended in the night. There was the drone of tanks and firing from all kinds of weapons. Before noon a Russian soldier appeared on a motorbike. He saw this surreal picture of hell and burst into tears. 'I'll send you help,' he shouted. 'They'll come, for sure! Soon!' And then he left. For me, that was the end of the terrible war.

We soon left the concentration camp in the forest and moved down into the valley. We weren't deserted here. All around us were Soviet troops. They behaved nicely to us, but we soon had to move away as it had become a war zone. We left for Hlivity in the hinterland. It was half-deserted there. We found a nice, empty little villa. Paradise on earth. Beds, quilts, porcelain, cutlery, toilet and a bath. The only worry was food. We stayed in this idyll for a while, but I soon felt a longing for home. As eastern Slovakia was liberated, we decided to go there on our own. The journey wasn't without difficulty, though. The Russians stopped us a few times as they wanted us to join their army, which we obviously had no interest at all in doing. We said that we intended to join our army of General Svoboda [14](#).

Kosice was ours again and I had heard somewhere that someone had seen Hana. She was alive! I had to see her straight away. I began to look for her desperately. At last I found her! On the street. I think we remained silent for a very long time. We felt that the world had changed in the five months we hadn't seen each other... Her husband, for whom she had volunteered to go to Auschwitz, was no longer alive. He now cast a huge shadow over us. I had beaten him at chess when he was alive. But now he was dead, he had checkmated me.

In Kosice I got a job at the Ministry of Information [also see Czechoslovak Provisional Government in Kosice] [15](#). And one day, as they knew I had been involved in theater in Terezin, somebody invited me to work for the radio, as they were going to start broadcasting again. So there were three Czech radio presenters there, sometime in April 1945. The Kosice-based government program was published at that time and our main task was to broadcast this document in the occupied territories. One thing remains puzzling to me, though. I have never met anyone who heard our broadcasts from Kosice. And I was so proud that I had contributed to the establishment of the new republic.

Then mobilization came. I had to leave the radio and join the army. I was conscripted in Kosice and then got to an officers' school in Poprad. We went on foot to Levoca; I think, the trains weren't running. I was there about two and a half months in Svoboda's army but wasn't at the front. At the school we were issued with German summer uniforms, like the ones worn by the Germans in Africa, as well as thin covers. It was early April and pretty cold. It was very difficult to spark any patriotic enthusiasm in me.

Post-war

At last 9th May! The end of the war, time to go home! Next day I asked how much longer we were supposed to stay at the school. In September I would be going home as a lieutenant! Nobody was interested in whether any of my family or friends were alive. But I was interested. Desperate, I turned to the regiment's physician and told him the whole truth. He looked at me for a while and then said: 'You are short-sighted, aren't you? And you have chronic bronchitis.' Dear old doctor. I had to go to another regiment where I was supposed to be demobilized. That was in Kromeriz.

We boarded the train for Prague. I managed to find several friends and even a few people who had returned from the concentration camps or from Terezin, but none of my family had come back yet. I returned to Kromeriz where I had to sign a statement saying that I hadn't graduated from high school, so that I could be demobilized. There was complete chaos at the other regiment. Finally, on 11th June 1945, I was standing on Wenceslas Square [Prague's main city centre square]. I had nothing and nobody.

I was 23 years old and so far had not actually lived. My whole life was ahead of me, but what I had to do now was to learn to live like a normal human being. How quickly could I get over the past? I was still overcome by bitterness and sadness, but on the other hand I had an immense lust for life. I had no specific interests, but also no base and no money.

I genuinely believed in the Communists, whom I joined in all the concentration camps. In Terezin I was a member of an illegal cell which met in secret. I believed the Party, that it was thoroughly anti-fascist and that it would prevent another Munich agreement. I had no political experience, so it should come as no surprise that I believed it. I was not alone. I then decided that I would do what I enjoyed the most - theater. We soon put together a small group of young actors and directors who had similar ideals. Some had returned from our Terezin group. For something to do, we prepared a touring variety show with songs, acts and poems. We went all round the countryside, spreading culture. We didn't get a salary, just fees for appearances. I don't know what I lived on in those days. I received a furnished apartment left by the Germans. After all that I had endured - camps, military service, dirt - I was a human being again! The theater became my home. I lived the theater, breathed its air and became enslaved to it.

After the war I went through some unpleasantness to do with the fact that I was registered as a German. I didn't know this at the time, but that's what was put down in the last census, which I think was in 1933 or 1934, when I was ten. It was only when I had returned and needed papers that I found out I was registered as a German. As I didn't have any papers in the camps, I now needed documents to prove my nationality and lo and behold! I had to apply for my Czech nationality to be acknowledged. I know nothing about this procedure, because it was my wife who arranged it for me. She only had to hand in some application at the offices but it went without problems because first of all I was a member of the Communist Party and second I had been in a concentration camp. I think it was a part of the 'Benes [16](#) decrees'. People of German nationality had to leave the country unless they proved they weren't fascists. That of course wasn't a problem in my case. For me it was a shock when I found out about it: Oh my god I am a German, what shall we do about it? It wasn't my fault that my father had registered me as German in the year 1933. But it was clear I was no German; even if I had gone to German schools, I spoke perfect Czech. Also I wasn't interesting, some assistant of a theater director. Nobody knew about this, I myself didn't know it for a long time, but of course I wouldn't spread it out. I didn't meet any people in a similar position, if there were such cases, they wouldn't talk about it publicly.

I hated fascists from the bottom of my heart. I identified them with all that was German. Since 1939-1940 I had finished with the German language and no longer spoke it. Not a single German word came out of my mouth. That's another thing - changes in nationality. For many years I was of the opinion that fascism and the Holocaust were a German matter. It took me a long time to realize that this was not the case, and that other nations were of the same opinion. Of course, it changed my relationship with Germans, as I found out that not every German was a fascist. It wasn't an

impulse; it was a long process of realizing the sad reality. This process was connected with slowly uncovering cards in Russia. Suddenly one had found out that fascism, in other words aggression and violence, was not a specific thing of the German nation, as I had thought until then. That was a very widespread theory at that time. I hated Germans but I never sought for revenge or violence. The Germans I knew were decent people; I felt sorry for them.

The problem wasn't a German but an SS-man. How do you create an SS-man, this question troubled me for a long time. There was something I couldn't understand. My primary experience: when we came to Auschwitz, there was an SS-man who led us up to the camp. On the way he did business with us, asking who had watches or rings etc. In the meantime there were women running out and asking us for some food. We had some bread so fellows threw it over the fence. And this SS-man who did business with us, suddenly turned around, took his gun and shot a woman, then continued asking: 'so, and what do you have?' That was a shock! He was a Volksdeutscher [17](#), not even a native German, spoke in provincial German. A person who shoots a woman, he doesn't even know and then goes on with his profiteering! That was the biggest question: how to create such a man? It was connected with German history, it had happened in that country in such and such circumstances. That bothered me for a long time.

However, there's a difference in your behavior towards an individual who you know and toward a whole nation. It became clear to me that it's impossible to hate a nation for a long time. It's impossible to pigeon-hole and hate them. I also met one German that I considered a decent man. He used to be a Wehrmacht officer and he told me he only found out what was going on in the winter of 1945. This took me by surprise and I had realized some of them really didn't know. But what is it - not knowing? One doesn't know either out of stupidity or because one simply doesn't want to know. We mustn't forget what difficult terms were put on Germany by France after World War I. There was great poverty out of which arose Hitler... The circumstances were ready for hate and revenge. Anti-Semitism and aggression were inertly suitable for them.

After Stalin's death information slowly began to spread. I had realized that communism wasn't all that different. It also created 'SS-men'... Once a person got released from the communist influence, he suddenly realized he had also been on the wrong side, just like the Germans. Nobody had known that Stalin was a murderer, a murderer of millions. Slowly one understood that it isn't a nationality but rather social and political conditions that help to create an 'SS-man'. Of course some ideology must come along with it, some poison added to the soup. Today everybody knows what I discovered back then, sometime in the 1960s.

But when the war was over, the point at issue was the displacement of the Germans. This is my own view: when I got back to Prague, which was in June 1945, still wearing an army uniform, I had, of course, finished with the Germans altogether, as they were the enemy. But I can still recall my journey home from Poland, during which we went a bit of the way on foot and hung around waiting for trains. We came across a Russian soldier who was in charge of ten German POWs working in a field, and we got talking to him. Realizing from our tattoo numbers that we had come from a concentration camp, he gave me his automatic weapon and said: 'Here you are, have a little game with them, try a bit of target practice.' And at that moment it suddenly dawned on me that I couldn't do it. They were people who I didn't know and who I knew nothing about. All I knew was that they were Germans, and that I couldn't do it. That was quite typical. For all I know, most of the people from the camps didn't crave blood, unless they came up against someone they knew and

who they knew to be guilty. They had had enough and didn't intend to do the same things.

But when I returned home, there was a situation that few people can now recall. Firstly, at that time, between the end of the war and the fall, all those things that hadn't been known about during the war suddenly came out: about the camps, all the atrocities. Documents from the Czech archives showing what had happened here, who had been shot... So what happened was that the Germans were suddenly faced with all the horrors that they had committed during the war. Obviously, those people who had suffered the least were the greatest avengers, those guys from the RG - Revolutionary Guards. They were young people; they wore German summer uniforms and a red band on their arms with the letters RG. They showed up after the Prague Uprising in May 1945. They ransacked the apartments, slapped Germans etc.

I didn't come into contact with them very often - they behaved extremely foolishly. They were stupid fools who had suddenly become big fish - they were the downtrodden boys under the Protectorate. I ascribe the brutalities that were inflicted on the Germans here to those people who had apparently not suffered themselves but were acting as the avengers of the whole nation. We were certainly not among them. The fact is that 90 percent of people who were in concentration camps hated brutality. This was a life experience: that there is nothing worse than depriving someone of his humanity and his rights. I don't know many cases of personal revenge of people from concentration camps. All that was bad came down on the Germans, and the nation was in the grip of a terrible mood, one that was based on 'settling scores with the bastards'. That was the first wave of revenge, anger and hatred. People were settling scores, some who had scores to settle; others who didn't but were just venting their anger, or stealing... After all, most Jews had been robbed of all their property. We also lost everything.

The second thing to note here is that after the war there was no proper army over here, except for Svoboda's forces which were in a great deal of chaos. Our postwar government hardly had any chance of implementing a process of denazification, so it just didn't bother about it! Of course, when they saw how bad things had gotten and realized the scandal that was happening, they started to hold back a bit, but they basically had no possibility of intervening. What happened should never be forgotten. It was partly their fault, but partly also their powerlessness. No great effort was made, though, and that's a fact.

I saw Hana from time to time, but the days of our great love were gone. I went to the theater almost every day and that's where, one day, I came across another Hana, the dancer Hana Meisslova. We knew each other from Terezin, where she had worked as a nurse and danced in a number of shows. So now, years later, we met again. I kept on at her about going out together for a drink. In the end I managed to persuade her. We went to a wine bar, then to her apartment, and then spent the next fifty years together.

Married life

My wife was Jewish. She was born in Prague in 1921, but the family lived outside the capital. Her dad was a landowner. They were more Czech than us, but I don't know to what extent. She studied at high school for two years but didn't graduate.

It is interesting that there were many parallels in the fates of our fathers. I know of other cases, too. It was logical during the First Republic. The major crisis of the 1930s hit our family hard.

Hana's dad was a landowner, but he also gambled on the stock exchange. He blew the estate, then became an administrator of another estate, and then of an even smaller estate. His wife, Hana's mother, was a beautiful woman! A posh, elegant lady. When things got worse, she divorced him. My wife took umbrage at this. Her father then committed suicide, like my dad did. He shot himself in the head, but the bullet didn't go straight in. My wife Hana and her sister Dasa looked after him before he died, a short time later. My wife never told me this. I only found out after her death.

Hana's mom remarried a German composer who had written an opera called 'The Emperor of Atlantis', which was very well-known in its day. He already had three children of his own. My wife Hana then ran away from home and set up on her own as a gymnastics teacher. She later got into modern dance; she didn't do ballet.

Hana's sister Dasa was born in about 1924. She was a beautiful blonde, and I still have her picture. They weren't at all alike. Dasa ended up in Auschwitz, which was something that Hana, my wife, found really hard to bear. The wounds were deep. My wife was badly traumatized by the war. Nobody was allowed to talk in front of her about concentration camps or about Jews; she absolutely hated the subject. She would get an instant shock and run away. It had obviously all been too much for her as a little girl, what with her parents' divorce and her father's suicide. Her step-father behaved badly towards his own family and to my wife. She ran away from the family and hated her mom for marrying such an idiot.

We got married in 1947. On returning to Prague I was faced with the problem of what to do. I was nothing. I had graduated from a German school. I didn't know what to do. Perhaps I could have studied, but if you are alone without a base or anything, things are difficult. As I didn't know what else to do, I decided for what I liked the best and what I had done in Terezin - the theater. A few other people who had been in the theater at Terezin got together, so there were about three or four of us. First of all, I lived with people who I knew in Prague - people from the art world I had met and such like. Then I applied for an apartment with Frantisek Jiska, a friend and actor. We got a two-room place where we stayed together. He later got married and threw me out. I then moved in with my future wife who had a one-room apartment. She had arrived in Prague before me - she had been deported back to Terezin earlier; a series of transports had returned to Terezin, as the Germans didn't have anywhere else to put people. So she was there at the very end of the war and went straight on to Prague where she managed to get a small apartment. People from the concentration camps were given apartments. Whoever wanted one could have registered with the Jewish community, but all they had to do was go to the National Committee. We had no papers though.

We lived in a small apartment, poor as church mice, but that didn't matter at all. We were just pleased to have our freedom and suddenly be able to live and do something in life, and we had the theater. I experienced various ups and downs, but in the end I got to the Vinohrady Theater [in Prague] as an assistant to the famous director Frejka, which gave me a great feeling of satisfaction. The pay was miserable, but my wife was also working; she had a job at the trade union central council. On the whole we were satisfied with our lives. We had plenty of friends. A few people from the camps were still around and sometimes they would come by. And then there were the new friends from the world where we worked, especially the theater.

After the war I spoke very little about concentration camps with friends, just when we got together, friends from the camps. People who hadn't been with us used to say that we were terrible cynics. That was because we made fun of it retrospectively. I can't explain this, it was a way of liberating yourself from a terrible trauma, but instead we appeared to be terrible cynics.

I didn't have the feeling after the war that there was any anti-Semitism about, apart from a few, minor incidents. Basically, it didn't play a major role. However, looking back after all these years, thinking about it and seeing more into the nature of things and people, I later realized that a series of incidents or bad results that came about may now be ascribed to anti-Semitism. But these are work-related incidents. Privately I never came across it in a social setting.

I have a daughter, Tana, who was born in 1947, and a son, Jan, who was born in 1949. My daughter Tana was an actress and now works as a member of parliament. My son Jan runs an advertising agency. My son has two children, a son and a daughter. My granddaughter is at university and her brother has got into advertising as a graphic designer. He's a beautiful, tall boy. My daughter has a son, although he is crippled with polio and is in a home.

My children were not brought up as Jews. I don't think they knew they were Jewish when they were little. We told them when they were a bit older. Of course, they identify with their Jewishness, but as an idea rather than a religion. To pass on the Jewish faith... It depends... For me the main idea of Jewishness is this atmosphere of Polacek [Polacek, Karel (1892-1945): Czech Jewish writer, famous for his collections of Jewish anecdotes and short stories about life in Prague at the beginning of 20th century.]. Of course, it is inside me and my children have learnt it, too. But I would say they feel an affinity with their Jewishness. They have an inner relationship with it. My two step-children - Zora and Jindrich - were very quick to take on the Jewish faith, being in the same boat as us. They had not been brought up in a Jewish way, as their mom had been an Aryan and from a not too intellectual family. With the awareness of her mom I told my step-daughter Zora that I am a Jew. Today she has more contacts in the Jewish community than me. I didn't urge them onto it; they came to it by themselves. It was a big surprise for me. We hadn't met so often when my wife was still alive. My son Jan married an Aryan, my daughter Tana remained single.

We didn't talk very much about this topic with our children until they were older. They were both very positive about it. My wife suffered a lot of postwar trauma. You couldn't mention the words 'Jew' or 'concentration camp' in front of her. Otherwise I didn't hide it from the kids; they knew about it.

There are two sides to the Jewish faith, one rational, the other irrational. The irrational side, which is genetically given is about believing in tradition or in the soul, and, in that sense, I am probably much more of a Jew. The feeling is there, and it is also there with my children, but not my grandchildren.

When the victorious February 1948 [18](#) was drawing closer, I was a political novice who believed what the left-wing propaganda came out with. Most artists were in the Communist Party or supported it. Years later I was often asked the question: 'Were you so stupid or blind that you didn't see anything?' I have to admit that I really didn't see what the truth was and what a lie was. But the Party had completely changed. Immediately after the war it was an open organization full of sympathetic, intelligent people. I was in support of the February coup. I believed that socialism was the right solution. My euphoria lasted a bit longer but I soon found out that the comrades were no

longer so open and sincere.

It was the turn of the Jews again in the 1950s, with the Slansky Trial [19](#), even though I would say that the majority of Czech intellectuals rejected them. This was a kind of 'folklore' theater that was intended for the lower classes, not for the highest walks of society. I hadn't experienced much fascism in the theater. I am very sensitive to anti-Semitism! I first came out in protest after the Slansky trial, which was the first shock for me, both for its theatricality but primarily for the fact that the first traces of anti-Semitism had become evident. It was a shock for all the Jews. When you opened the newspaper and there you read 'of Jewish origin' - what was it? It wasn't only about Slansky and Jewishness, the main thing at that time was to disclose the enemies inside the Party. The enemy didn't have to be exactly a spy, but someone who was standing on the wrong side of the line [ideology line]. And this was what they found on me.

I had had some negative personal experience. When I used to work in city theaters, they started to gossip about me, saying that I didn't behave nicely to non-members of the Party. Someone had made it up on me. Nothing happened, the fire was put out. One more time, in the late 1950s started a new wave of anti-Semitism: cosmopolitanism! They considered me as a cosmopolitan. There was a woman working in the Ministry of Culture that I had known for many years, and she told me: 'You know, you are a wonderful director, but you can not direct J.K.Tyl because you are a cosmopolitan. [Tyl, Josef Kajetan (1808-1856): Czech dramatist, actor, prose-writer and journalist, main representative of sentimental patriotic romanticism, organizer of national cultural life.] People would believe such nonsense! It is very easy to slander someone. It was one of their attempts to find the enemy in me. That was the sickness of communists: always to look for an enemy. In the 1960s they succeeded in my case.

Then Stalin died [in 1953]. Another shock. This was followed by the uncovering of personality cult. I called for a special congress to be held in order to make things clear. This marked the definitive end for me. I was then among the open critics and doubters. This didn't remain without consequences.

While I was at the Chamber Theater I had to direct a Soviet play. A very bad one. There was nothing to be done, as it was a compulsory libation to the gods. After the dress rehearsal, a lot of criticism rained down on me. This was a personal attack on me, the youngest director. I knew that to hang your head would mean getting in a shaky position and having a loss of authority. I said what I thought and slammed the door. For good. Making compromises in art is to no avail.

Then I directed the Country Theater, later I was in Brno and Plzen and finally I became established as the director of the Magic Lantern Theater, with which I traveled across the world. In the summer of 1968 I was directing a Czechoslovak show at the Paris Olympics. This cultural event was the work of Bruno Cocatrix, the director of the Olympics. After reading about the Russian occupation, he later sent me an invitation to Paris for my entire family. To this day I am amazed at this gesture and I remain grateful to him. I didn't make use of the invitation, since my children refused to leave their country and I couldn't leave my children. The Russian tanks on the streets reminded me, inevitably, of 15th March 1939. It was my second occupation [see Prague Spring] [20](#). Like nearly everybody else, I was a supporter of Dubcek [21](#) and didn't try to hide it. I was dismissed from my post as artistic director and expelled from the Party in 1971. They accused me of what I hadn't done: as an old comrade I should have known what was right! This was the end of my career, and,

above all, the end of those wonderful years of the 1960s.

I was fired from all my jobs, so I got to do all kinds of work - water pumper, warehouseman, and so forth, but that is not important now. Occasionally I was allowed to direct, for instance a puppet show at Christmas. After a number of years of penury, the Communists became tired and the situation began to slowly improve. I had several jobs as a guest director. It wasn't enough for a living, of course, even less for a pension. I finally reached retirement, which was a considerable relief for me.

I had neither the time nor the interest to get involved in the Jewish question, because if you work in the theater, you have a terribly busy schedule: rehearsal in the morning, show in the evening, with little time in between. Not that I was without contact with the kile. Occasionally I would help them out on Pesach or something, put something together, or sometimes I would go there for lunch, and so forth. I had kind of infrequent contacts with the community. They didn't care about me, or I didn't care about them, I don't know, somehow we weren't exactly friends. But that has all changed now. Now I am downright mad at them! They don't do anything at all for culture, for instance! They don't raise a finger! I sent them a copy of the book I wrote, for example, and they didn't even thank me. They just aren't interested. They don't support people in the theater or in music and they don't invite people to concerts...

I didn't try to get involved. They made me an offer, in the 1950s or something, they said they were glad I was working for them, but that they wanted me to register as a member of the Jewish community. I told them that I was sorry but that I had no conviction. I said I would like to work with them, but that they shouldn't expect me to profess my religion. The situation in Prague and elsewhere in Bohemia is such that religion doesn't really mean much. I'm not an atheist, but the church... I had no desire to become a subject of the church. That would be insincere. But I never denied my Jewishness. Some people changed their names and so forth, but I never did anything like that. On the religious side, I'm not sure whether I'm a Jew or a Christian. I believe in God, but not in any specific one, or one with a specific symbol.

My book was published in 1998. ['Sest skoku do budoucnosti'"] (Six Leaps into the Future), published by Idea servis, Prague, 1998]. My children had been saying for years that I should write it some time, that it was a pity I didn't... And I told them to forget about it as enough had already been written on that topic. When my wife died in the summer of 1997, we buried her here and I then went to stay at our cottage. My daughter left in July, as she does every year, and in late August I was on my own in the cottage for the first time in my life. I had a strange feeling, time for meditation. It suddenly occurred to me that I could start writing now, since I was on my own there.

Then something happened that was quite odd. I had never thought I could write. I thought writing was something that I really couldn't get into. That is why I haven't written much in my life, although I have translated... So I took a pen and started to write. I didn't have to think about it or to cross anything out. As you may know from my book, I wrote it from beginning to end without stopping...Everyone tells me that it is an exiting, interesting read. But I have come to the conclusion that it was not me but actually God who wrote it. It was as if he was dictating to me something that I knew nothing about. It was incredible. I hadn't even had to think while writing.

My children already knew what I was writing about, but not about everything, Auschwitz for example. I tended to hold that back from them. Actually, they knew everything in snippets,

whereas the book describes things in detail. When you are sitting with someone and talking to them, you don't describe what a crematorium looks like. You can do that in literature. But even my book is written in quite an abridged way. I felt that if I were to elaborate any more, it would convey a completely different atmosphere from the one I wanted... I didn't want to write about what a poor wretch I am or so.

In November 1989 I was sitting in the theater, involved in one of those ardent debates. There was speech-making, chanting, and thunderous applause. It was great. The vent had opened and clean, sharp air was starting to circulate in our country. At the time, my nephew asked me how many upheavals I had lived through. I was taken aback but then started counting: '1938 - the Munich Pact, 1939 - the German occupation, 1945 - liberation, 1948 - Victorious February, 1968 - Soviet occupation, and now 1989 [see Velvet Revolution] [22](#), which is number 6. I would say that was quite enough for one life.'

Glossary

[1](#) Sokol

One of the best-known Czech sports organizations. It was founded in 1862 as the first physical educational organization in the Austro- Hungarian Monarchy. Besides regular training of all age groups, units organized sports competitions, colorful gymnastics rallies, cultural events including drama, literature and music, excursions and youth camps. Although its main goal had always been the promotion of national health and sports, Sokol also played a key role in the national resistance to the Austro- Hungarian Empire, the Nazi occupation and the communist regime. Sokol flourished between the two World Wars; its membership grew to over a million. Important statesmen, including the first two presidents of interwar Czechoslovakia, Tomas Masaryk and Edvard Benes, were members of Sokol. Sokol was banned three times: during World War I, during the Nazi occupation and finally by the communists after 1948, but branches of the organization continued to exist abroad. Sokol was restored in 1990.

[2](#) Terezin/Theresienstadt

A ghetto in the Czech Republic, run by the SS. Jews were transferred from there to various extermination camps. It was used to camouflage the extermination of European Jews by the Nazis, who presented Theresienstadt as a 'model Jewish settlement'. Czech gendarmes served as ghetto guards, and with their help the Jews were able to maintain contact with the outside world. Although education was prohibited, regular classes were held, clandestinely. Thanks to the large number of artists, writers, and scholars in the ghetto, there was an intensive program of cultural activities. At the end of 1943, when word spread of what was happening in the Nazi camps, the Germans decided to allow an International Red Cross investigation committee to visit Theresienstadt. In preparation, more prisoners were deported to Auschwitz, in order to reduce congestion in the ghetto. Dummy stores, a cafe, a bank, kindergartens, a school, and flower gardens were put up to deceive the committee.

[3](#) Masaryk, Tomas Garrigue (1850-1937)

Czechoslovak political leader and philosopher and chief founder of the First Czechoslovak Republic.

He founded the Czech People's Party in 1900, which strove for Czech independence within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, for the protection of minorities and the unity of Czechs and Slovaks. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918, Masaryk became the first president of Czechoslovakia. He was reelected in 1920, 1927, and 1934. Among the first acts of his government was an extensive land reform. He steered a moderate course on such sensitive issues as the status of minorities, especially the Slovaks and Germans, and the relations between the church and the state. Masaryk resigned in 1935 and Edvard Benes, his former foreign minister, succeeded him.

4 Masaryk, Jan (1886-1948)

Czechoslovak diplomat, son of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. He was foreign minister in the Czechoslovak government in exile, set up in Great Britain after the dismemberment of the country (1938). His policy included cooperating with both, the Soviet Union as well as the Western powers in order to attain the liberation of Czechoslovakia. After the liberation (1945) he remained in office until the 1948 communist coup d'etat, when he was announced to have committed suicide.

5 First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938)

The First Czechoslovak Republic was created after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy following World War I. The union of the Czech lands and Slovakia was officially proclaimed in Prague in 1918, and formally recognized by the Treaty of St. Germain in 1919. Ruthenia was added by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Czechoslovakia inherited the greater part of the industries of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the new government carried out an extensive land reform, as a result of which the living conditions of the peasantry increasingly improved. However, the constitution of 1920 set up a highly centralized state and failed to take into account the issue of national minorities, and thus internal political life was dominated by the struggle of national minorities (especially the Hungarians and the Germans) against Czech rule. In foreign policy Czechoslovakia kept close contacts with France and initiated the foundation of the Little Entente in 1921.

6 Realschule

Secondary school for boys. Students studied mathematics, physics, natural history, foreign languages and drawing. After finishing this school they could enter higher industrial and agricultural educational institutions.

7 Munich Pact

Signed by Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and France in 1938, it allowed Germany to immediately occupy the Sudetenland (the border region of Czechoslovakia inhabited by a German minority). The representatives of the Czechoslovak government were not invited to the Munich conference. Hungary and Poland were also allowed to seize territories: Hungary occupied southern and eastern Slovakia and a large part of Subcarpathia, which had been under Hungarian rule before World War I, and Poland occupied Teschen (Tessin or Cieszyn), a part of Silesia, which had been an object of dispute between Poland and Czechoslovakia, each of which claimed it on ethnic

grounds. Under the Munich Pact, the Czechoslovak Republic lost extensive economic and strategically important territories in the border regions (about one third of its total area).

8 Vlajka (Flag)

Fascist group in Czechoslovakia, founded in 1930 and active before and during WWII. Its main representative was Josef Rys- Rozsevac (1901-1946). The group's political program was extreme right, anti- Semitic and tended to Nazism. At the beginning of the 1940s Vlajka merged with the Czech National Socialist Camp and collaborated with the German secret police, but the group never had any real political power.

9 Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

Bohemia and Moravia were occupied by the Germans and transformed into a German Protectorate in March 1939, after Slovakia declared its independence. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was placed under the supervision of the Reich protector, Konstantin von Neurath. The Gestapo assumed police authority. Jews were dismissed from civil service and placed in an extralegal position. In the fall of 1941, the Reich adopted a more radical policy in the Protectorate. The Gestapo became very active in arrests and executions. The deportation of Jews to concentration camps was organized, and Terezin/Theresienstadt was turned into a ghetto for Jewish families. During the existence of the Protectorate the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia was virtually annihilated. After World War II the pre-1938 boundaries were restored, and most of the German-speaking population was expelled.

10 J-passport

Special passport given to Jews during WWII. The red letter 'J' was written into it and every man had Israel, every woman had Sara added to their name.

11 Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC)

Founded in 1921 following a split from the Social Democratic Party, it was banned under the Nazi occupation. It was only after Soviet Russia entered World War II that the Party developed resistance activity in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; because of this, it gained a certain degree of popularity with the general public after 1945. After the communist coup in 1948, the Party had sole power in Czechoslovakia for over 40 years. The 1950s were marked by party purges and a war against the 'enemy within'. A rift in the Party led to a relaxing of control during the Prague Spring starting in 1967, which came to an end with the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet and allied troops in 1968 and was followed by a period of normalization. The communist rule came to an end after the Velvet Revolution of November 1989.

12 Capek, Josef (1887-1945)

Czech painter, set designer, writer and art critic. After WWI, he was involved in the establishment of the Tvrdosijni (Stubborn) art group. In his work he was deeply involved in the fight against fascism. He was arrested on 1st September 1939 and later incarcerated in Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and, finally, in Bergen- Belsen, where he died. Capek's art work was influenced by

Cubism. In later years he created more landscapes, children's motifs, illustrations and drawings for his literary oeuvre and for works by his brother Karel. He also drew illustrations for the newspaper Lidove Noviny, designed stage settings and made outstanding book designs. Among his literary works were Stin kapradiny, Kulhavy poutnik and Psano do mraku. Capek, Karel (1890-1938): Czech novelist, dramatist, journalist and translator. Capek was the most popular writer of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939) and defended the democratic and humanistic ideals of its founder, President T. G. Masaryk the literary outcome of which was the book President Masaryk Tells His Story (1928). Capek gained international reputation with his science fiction drama R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots, 1921) which was the first to introduce the word robot to the language. He blended science fiction with his firmly held anti-totalitarian beliefs in his late drama Power and Glory (1938) and the satirical novel The War with the Newts (1937). Frequently in contact with leading European intellectuals, Capek acted as a kind of official representative of the interwar republic and also influenced the development of Czech poetry. The Munich Pact of 1938 and, in particular, the subsequent witch-hunt against him, came as a great shock to Capek, one from which he never recovered.

13 Gogol, Nikolai (1809-1852)

Russian novelist, dramatist, satirist, founder of the so-called critical realism in Russian literature, best known for his novel The Dead Souls (1842).

14 Army of General Svoboda

During World War II General Ludvik Svoboda (1895-1979) commanded Czechoslovak troops under Soviet military leadership, which took part in liberating Eastern Slovakia. After the war Svoboda became minister of defence (1945-1950) and then President of Czechoslovakia (1968-1975).

15 Czechoslovak Provisional Government in Kosice

formed on 4th April 1945. "National committees" took over the administration of towns as the Germans were expelled under the supervision of the Red Army. On 5th May a national uprising began spontaneously in Prague, and the newly formed Czech National Council (Ceska narodni rada) almost immediately assumed leadership.

16 Benes, Edvard (1884-1948)

Czechoslovak politician and president from 1935-38 and 1946-48. He was a follower of T. G. Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, and the idea of Czechoslovakism, and later Masaryk's right-hand man. After World War I he represented Czechoslovakia at the Paris Peace Conference. He was Foreign Minister (1918-1935) and Prime Minister (1921-1922) of the new Czechoslovak state and became president after Masaryk retired in 1935. The Czechoslovak alliance with France and the creation of the Little Entente (Czechoslovak, Romanian and Yugoslav alliance against Hungarian revisionism and the restoration of the Habsburgs) were essentially his work. After the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by the Munich Pact (1938) he resigned and went into exile. Returning to Prague in 1945, he was confirmed in office and was reelected president in 1946. After the communist coup in February 1948 he resigned in June on the grounds of illness, refusing to sign the new constitution.

17 Volksdeutscher

In Poland a person who was entered (usually voluntarily, more rarely compulsorily) on a list of people of ethnic German origin during the German occupation was called Volksdeutscher and had various privileges in the occupied territories.

18 February 1948

Communist take-over in Czechoslovakia. The 'people's democracy' became one of the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. The state apparatus was centralized under the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC). In the economy private ownership was banned and submitted to central planning. The state took control of the educational system, too. Political opposition and dissident elements were persecuted.

19 Slansky Trial

Communist show trial named after its most prominent victim, Rudolf Slansky. It was the most spectacular among show trials against communists with a wartime connection with the West, veterans of the Spanish Civil War, Jews, and Slovak 'bourgeois nationalists'. In November 1952 Slansky and 13 other prominent communist personalities, 11 of whom were Jewish, including Slansky, were brought to trial. The trial was given great publicity; they were accused of being Trotskyst, Titoist, Zionist, bourgeois, nationalist traitors, and in the service of American imperialism. Slansky was executed, and many others were sentenced to death or to forced labor in prison camps.

20 Prague Spring

The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms.

21 Dubcek, Alexander (1921-1992)

Leader of the 1968 Prague Spring and after the fall of communism chairman of the Czechoslovak federal assembly (1989-92). He was first secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (1967-69) and launched the Prague Spring campaign, aiming at the liberalization of the communist regime. Soviet opposition of reforms resulted in the occupation of Czechoslovakia by five Warsaw Pact countries (Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria). Dubcek was arrested and expelled from the party. He returned to politics after the end of the communist regime (1989).

22 Velvet Revolution

Also known as November Events, this term is used for the period between 17th November and 29th December 1989, which resulted in the downfall of the Czechoslovak communist regime. The Velvet

Revolution started with student demonstrations, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the student demonstration against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Brutal police intervention stirred up public unrest, mass demonstrations took place in Prague, Bratislava and other towns, and a general strike began on 27th November. The Civic Forum demanded the resignation of the communist government. Due to the general strike Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec was finally forced to hold talks with the Civic Forum and agreed to form a new coalition government. On 29th December democratic elections were held, and Vaclav Havel was elected President of Czechoslovakia.