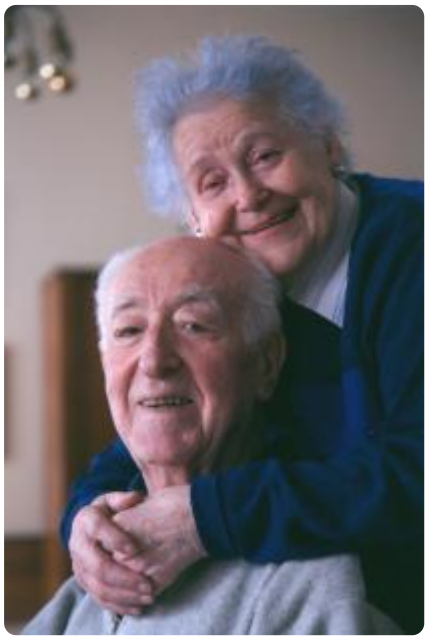
# Bernard Knezo Schönbrun

Bernard Knezo Schönbrun
Bratislava
Slovakia
Interviewer: Martin Korcok
Date of interview: November 2005 – March 2006



Mr. Bernard Knezo Schönbrun was born into an Orthodox Jewish family 1 in Eastern Slovakia. He grew up in very modest living conditions. Modest conditions and sports activities, in which he excelled among his contemporaries, induced him to join the leftist-oriented Jewish youth in Michalovce. The war years and the tragedy that befell Jewry only served to entrench him in his leftist views. Unfortunately, he became inconvenient for the totalitarian system that came to power in the post-war period. Despite his education, he was stripped of his position and was assigned to manufacturing. Of course, Mr. Knezo's family, which he loves above all else, helped him overcome all trials and tribulations that life brought him. During his life he always steered himself by the philosophy with which he also guided his family: 'You always have to help people, because sooner or later it will return!' I can't but take this opportunity to mention that it was an honor for me to meet such modest people, with such big hearts, as are Mr. Bernard Knezo Schönbrun and his wife, Anna.



## Family background

My father was named Moric [Moritz] Schönbrun, Jewish name Mojshe. He came from Subcarpathian Ruthenia 2. He was born in 1876, but I don't remember the exact place. In 1929 he got pneumonia and was in a hospital in Kosice, where he also died. They buried him in one of the local Jewish cemeteries. My mother was named Mina, nee Fuchs. She was born in Eastern Slovakia, in the town of Pozdisovce, in 1883. She died during transport to Auschwitz, if you can say that she died. On the way there they trampled her to death in the wagon.

I don't know my family from my father's side at all, and neither did I ever find out anything about them. Neither do we know the names of my grandparents on my mother's side. All I know is that they were very poor people. They had ten daughters and they all lived together in one room in

Pozdisovce. I of course don't remember the names of all ten girls. I remember only one of my mother's sisters, we called her Ilonka neni [Auntie Ilonka]. From the time I was ten, I lived in Auntie Ilonka's family in Michalovce.

As I've mentioned, my father was from Ruthenia. How did he get to the territory of today's Slovakia? After World War I, the population started moving around. People went where they'd be better off. The living conditions in Ruthenia were worse than in Eastern Slovakia, and so my father moved here. After World War I there were 18 Jewish families living in the village of Inacovce, in the Michalovce region, where he settled. Mainly poor people of course, like tailors, shoemakers and also cleaners. But the number of Jewish families in Inacovce slowly decreased. Right before World War II, there were already only three Jewish families living in the village 3. It was apparently because poverty drove people towards a better life, westward.

In my mother's native village, Pozdisovce, there were more Jewish families, that I know for sure. In the regional town itself, in Michalovce, there were in those days about 12,000 inhabitants, of those about 4,000 Jews. On Friday evening, when the stores closed, the whole town emptied and was empty on Saturday too. The Jewish population was at the synagogue. There was one beautiful synagogue in the town. People congregated either there, or in other smaller prayer halls.

I don't know how my parents met. All I know is that my father was married twice. His first wife died. My father brought a son into the second marriage, he was named Lajb. After World War I Lajb moved to the USA and there he changed his name to Louis. Well, and with my mother my father had another three girls and me. My parents spoke Yiddish to each other. Our mother tongue was also Yiddish, and of course we also learned the Zemplin dialect. This dialect was used in our surroundings. At home we also spoke Hungarian, but we spoke Hungarian only very rarely. In those days Hungarian was the language of 'better' people, that's how one could put it.

Together with my half-brother there were five of us children in the family. The oldest was my sister, who was named Malkele, or Malvin, Malvinka. Another sister was named Lincu, or Lina, Linka or Karolina. Her Jewish name was Lea. The last of my sisters was named Surele, or Sarika, Sarolta. My half-brother was Lajb. He left for the USA after World War I. He settled in the city of Detroit. Occasionally he wrote us something. Always, when a letter from him arrived, we had something to laugh about. In each letter he wrote the same thing: 'Di geshefte geyn zeyer shlekht. Mer kanayes ken ikh oykh nisht shrayben un ferblayb ayer bruder Luis.' In Yiddish this means: Business is very bad. Otherwise there's nothing new to write, yours truly, your brother Louis. That was how he ended his letters. We relished laughing at this so much that it's stayed in my mind until now.

I never met Louis. During the First Republic 4 I was still small, and during the time of the Slovak State 5 it wasn't possible. After the war he did a very nice thing. He sent my wife and me a so-called affidavit and ten dollars, that we should come join him. We didn't leave and I returned the money, saying that when we do once come to America, he can give us the money. That it would help us more there than here, as it was 70 Czechoslovak crowns. Apparently my brother was offended, as we didn't use the affidavit and returned the dollars. I guess he really was doing 'schlecht' [badly]...

Jews differed from the other village inhabitants in the clothes they wore. This was also the case with my parents. My father always wore dark clothing and wore a hat on his head. My mother's hair was cut very short and she wore a kerchief on her head. My parents were strictly Orthodox Jews.

Now I'll mention one touchy subject. There's a rule that after menstruation women have to wash in running water. My mother took this rule so seriously that in the winter, together with one of her daughters, she'd chop a hole in the ice on a nearby stream and bathe, because that's what the rule said. The result was that towards the end of her life it caused her to have serious rheumatism. During her last years she just laid in bed. The Bergmans from Senne, who brought her food, also helped her. Her strict observance of religious rules indirectly resulted in her becoming an invalid, and during the deportations they just threw her, crippled, into a wagon. People didn't pay her any heed and trampled her.

At that time I was already with Auntie Ilonka in Michalovce. The way it was, was that my father died in 1929 and I was supposed to recite the Kaddish for him. As there weren't enough men [for a minyan, a minimum of ten men above the age of 13 needed for prayer] in Inacovce, I had to go to Michalovce. I wasn't even 10 yet, and I recited the Kaddish for my father. At that time my mother was already suffering from serious rheumatism. I remember that she wasn't even able to wipe the sweat from her forehead. Always when she raised her arm, she said, 'My boy, it hurts.' I was still little, so I didn't understand it, and answered, 'Mommy, how could it hurt?'

Our father also closely followed religious rules. For example it would be Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We didn't have a minyan. So Jews from three to five villages got together and would go to one village favorably located for this purpose. Jastrabie was the central village where we used to gather at the home of one Jewish family. My mother, the poor thing, would go with us in the evening on those sore legs of hers, so that she could be at the Kol Nidre. Those two kilometers were no small feat for a sick person. The men went there every Friday evening for Sabbath and during holidays, women only for the High Holidays.

Normally, usually once a week, not only during the High Holidays, but also on other days, my father used to go with other men to bathe in the mikveh. Imagine that, in that hole, in Inacovce, there was a mikveh. When I was still a young boy I used to bathe in the mikveh, on Friday. I went there with my father. Later I also went to a mikveh in Michalovce. The religiosity of Jews in Inacovce also showed in the fact that the three, four Jewish families there had a melamed – teacher, for their children.

Unfortunately my father died very early on. I couldn't directly participate in the funeral, because my father, and thus also I, were kohanim – priests, from a tribe of priests, favored among all the Jewish tribes. For example during the High Holidays I blessed the entire kehila [kehila: the Jewish community in any given town], where they'd wash my hands beforehand so that they'd be clean during the blessing. I stood on a wall and recited the Kaddish. They buried my father right by that wall. Kohanim weren't allowed in the cemetery, so that they wouldn't come near unclean corpses. It was this privilege of theirs. I'd say that kohanim were considered to be a special tribe.

## Growing up

I was born in the town of Inacovce, as my parents' fourth child, in the year 1919. My parents named me Dov ben Mojshe. Dov means bear, and as I was still small, in Yiddish little bear is Berele. So that's why at home they called me Berele. In official documents I was registered with the name Bernat. Our family house was made from unfired bricks. The whole house was shaped like the letter L. In the front there was a store, about 4 x 2.75 meters. From the store you entered a room. The room had small windows, two by three panes. There were two beds and a couch in the room. Also

there was a wardrobe, cupboards, a sewing machine, table and chairs. Our whole family slept there and in the neighboring kitchen. In the beginning we had only that one large room. After my father's death the house was 'redone.' After the room there was a kitchen and a door out into the courtyard. From the kitchen you could walk through a closet into the stalls, where there was a cow and horse. We all took care of the livestock. The horse was used mainly when we'd go to town to do the shopping. We bought things from merchants in Michalovce. They were named Bley and Izo, both were Jews, the upper crust from Michalovce.

In Inacovce, people called us by the nickname 'malovany' [fancy], as during Purim my deceased father had dressed up as a youth and sang: 'I'm a fancy lad, I've got a laced coat...' That stuck with him for good, from that time on no one in the village called us by any other name. Maybe it was also because for people that spoke only the Zemplin dialect, it was hard to pronounce the surname Schönbrun. At best they pronounced it 'Scheybrun.' Some people even mangled our nickname and called us silken or snazzy.

In the courtyard we had a well and troughs into which water for the animals was pumped. By the well we had a wooden sukkah with a roof that could be opened. The non-Jewish residents in our region called Sukkot 'shack.' They'd say, 'The Jews are going into the shack.' I liked Sukkot very much, it was a pleasant holiday. Everything was decorated with greenery and flowers. I also liked Passover. Beside the sukkah was a small garden where we grew vegetables. Mainly carrots, parsley, kohlrabi and a few potatoes. At the back of the courtyard we had another garden where we grew other vegetables. Since we had a cow and horse, there was a manure pile in the back, in the other part of the courtyard. We milked the cow twice a day and because we were very poor, we even drank milk milked during Sabbath. Poverty forced us to.

We also had a dog, and I remember there being an outbreak of rabies in the village. Which is why they decreed that all dogs in the town should be shot. My sisters put pillows over their ears so that they wouldn't hear the shooting. At that time I didn't understand it very much yet. We couldn't afford to get another dog, as we had no money for a new one.

My father used to go to Michalovce to shop. He'd harness up the horse and go. I already knew approximately when he'd return, and would be on the lookout for him in front of the village. He always returned by the same road. He'd take me on the wagon and sit me on his knees. He'd give me the reins and I'd steer the horses.

Before Sabbath my mother baked bread for the whole week. When I was staying with Auntie Ilonka in Michalovce, my mother used to return the favor for me staying with them by also baking sweet cakes and would always send them over with someone. Of course, on Friday we also baked barkhes. For Sabbath a chicken would be slaughtered, because we also kept chickens in the courtyard. During Sabbath we weren't allowed to turn on any lights and weren't even allowed to light or stoke a fire in the stove, back then we heated with wood. Even on weekdays my parents prayed twice a day, and of course we said blessings over everything, broche. For example we said blessings while washing our hands, while eating bread, basically we blessed everything 'Ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz.' 'Blessed is the bread of the earth.'

When we bought new dishes or cutlery for the household, which happened rarely, we immediately koshered it all. We'd stick the cutlery into the ground and left it like that for a certain amount of time. I don't remember the exact procedures any more. But buying something new was rare in our

household. Dishes that could be, were seared, but I don't remember this procedure either.

When I was young Inacovce had between 300 and 400 people. There were about a hundred houses. We didn't have a market in the village, people used to go to Michalovce. Markets took place every Tuesday and Friday. The big market was on Friday. Farmers would come on horse-drawn wagons. Michalovce was such a dirty, muddy hole that there you had to know how to cross the street. The main street was paved with stone, but the other streets were only packed dirt. The farmers stood at the sides of the road and sold their goods.

I have good memories of all my siblings. My oldest sister, Malvinka, was a brave person. In time she married, unfortunately her marriage wasn't a happy one. They had one child, who died as a baby. Her husband came into our family from the village of Mokca. Mokca is located on the border of Slovakia and Hungary. An interesting thing is that we were the Schönbruns, and all my sisters married Schöns. The husbands of my younger two sisters were brothers, while the husband of the oldest one hadn't been related to them before that, they just happened to have the same surname. I don't remember Malvinka's wedding, I was still very small at the time.

Malvinka's husband used to take money from the store and go to Uzhorod [today Ukraine]. There he'd lose all the money playing cards and would then return home. He'd take some more money and leave again. In this way our whole little store went to the dogs. Even the little that there was came to naught. Malvinka later divorced him. Her fate was very sad, she ended up in Auschwitz, where she died. Her little boy was buried in the local Jewish cemetery in Inacovce. The cemetery still exists, even though it's in a sorry state. From some sort of fear of the 'Jewish God,' the residents 'leave it be.'

My second sister was named Karolina. She was exactly the same type of person as my wife, assertive and self-confident. A very pretty girl she was. She married another Schön, Eugen, in Stretava. Eugen had a store in Stretava, and they did fairly well. Stretava was the second to next village from Inacovce, one went there through either Senne or Palin. All the women in the family, beginning with my mother, rest her soul, worshipped me, as I was the only boy. They spoiled me. Karolinka was doing well, and so during my visits she would 'fatten me up.' Once she made me an omelet out of 12 eggs. I ate it all, and then felt horribly ill. My mother told her that she'd never let me go see her again. They had a better house, and larger as well, also from unfired bricks. They had two children. The daughter was named Gyöngyi, or Pearl, the son Vladko [Vladimir]. The whole family was dragged off to a concentration camp, where they died. To this day I've got the postcard that they sent me from the Miedzyrzec 6 camp.

My youngest sister, Sarika, was a delicate creature. She married Eugen's brother, Maximilian Schön. We called Maximilian Mishi. I still remember their wedding. The dance for the young people that came to the wedding took place in a pub in Inacovce. Pubs in these small villages served as social gathering places, cultural centers of sorts. The day of their wedding, there was a lot of mud in the village, and so that the wedding guests wouldn't get dirty, they hired some gypsies. Their task was to carry the young people on their backs to the pub, for which they got paid. This was because at Jewish weddings, young Jewish people that knew the bride and groom also participated.

My brother-in-law Mishi, a healthy, strong fellow, a vulcanizer by trade, got into the 'Sonderkommando' in Auschwitz, which means that he carried the dead from the gas chambers to the crematoria and put them onto the grates. One day he got my oldest sister, his sister-in-law,

Malvinka, to cart over. Then he had to cart over his dead brother, Eugen. One day he got his own wife, Sarika, to take over. That finished him off, as two people told me independently of each other. The ‘Sonderkommando’ were preparing to bring in explosives and blow up the crematorium sky-high. But one fellow prisoner, a Pole, betrayed them. The Germans burned that Pole alive. They said that anyone who betrays his own will betray them as well. On the basis of the Pole’s testimony they then hung my brother-in-law and the others.

After our father’s death my oldest sister Malvinka took care of everything. At that time Mother was already seriously ill. Malvinka was a very slender woman. When she looked good, she weighed 51 kilos, otherwise she weighed 49 kilos. This woman took care of the family. It was misery. All of us lived in two rooms, as the closet was converted into another room. As my sisters grew, more room was needed. As far as books go, those went to my sisters, albeit rarely, as they were older. I didn’t get books until I was in high school. I left our family home right after my father’s death. Then my sister Linka also moved away.

The young people in the village began to gradually live more progressively. For example, the generation before us entertained themselves as follows: about 20 young single men and newlywed men would gather, and walk, singing, in the direction of the neighboring village. Young men from the neighboring village would on the other hand walk towards ours. When they were about 15, 20 meters from each other, they yelled: ‘Wanna fight?’ And tore into each other. Once they stabbed someone from our village, another time someone from the neighboring one. I’m not exaggerating. I saw it once as I was sitting on the couch underneath the window, when one youth caught up to another one, and stuck a knife into his back. He had to pull on it twice to get it out. That was their fun. I want to stress that Jewish boys never did this. When we came, my generation, we brought a new culture to the village. We put on plays. On Sunday, we’d play soccer. We were the first generation of Jewish children that began to make friends with non-Jews.

Those of us who attended school in larger towns, there were five, six of us, brought culture to the village. We sang city songs, put on plays, played volleyball and of course soccer. As there weren’t enough of us, we began to initiate the local village boys into the secrets of soccer. In the beginning they would kick once into the ground, once into the ball, but gradually they got better, until we could form a village team and play against the neighboring village. Our fellow village dwellers were already coming to watch us; ‘How our troopers are kicking that ball.’ Village fights were gradually replaced by sports events. The village elders, when they saw what we’re doing, that we’re bringing culture to life in the village, gave us property for a soccer field. The property was called ‘Olosinka.’ I’ve even heard that someone wrote about how we changed life in the village. Instead of fights, it was: ‘We’re going to have a look at our troopers, how they’re kicking that ball.’ Once it happened to me that after one such game, where there were already people from the village, one woman said to me, ‘Mr. Bernat, listen, they do so much running around after that ball, and when they’ve got it, instead of taking it and going home with it, they kick it away.’ That was her understanding of soccer.

As I’ve already mentioned, after my father’s death I moved to Michalovce, so that I could recite the Kaddish. Because that’s how religious we were. I was around nine, ten years old. My mother sent me to Michalovce, to her sister Ilonka. Ilonka was a very brave person, when she added me to her already eight children. They had only two rooms to live in. Their children were named Boriska, Anuska, Sarika, Rozika, Zolika, Sanika, and unfortunately I don’t remember the names of the last

two. Aunt Ilonka's husband was named Blau, and had a quasi-café. Quasi because you can't compare it with a café in today's sense of the word. Auntie Ilonka baked tarts, supplied them to her husband, and he sold them in the café. Old Jewish men used to come there to play cards. During cards they'd order coffee and a tart to go with it.

Still during the time of the First Republic, Ilonka and her husband sent their oldest daughter Boriska to America, to live with some family. Thanks to this she stayed alive. After the war my wife and I invited her to come for a visit. We drove her around Eastern Slovakia. She was overjoyed, and wept profusely when she stood in the places where she had grown up. I wasn't all the same to me either. Well, and we also were in America to visit her.

In those days there were about 4,000 Jews in Michalovce. So necessarily there were also more prayer halls there. The largest, a beautiful synagogue, stood downtown across from City Hall. During the time of the Communist regime they tore it down and built a parking lot in its place. Apparently they tore it down so that there wouldn't be a Jewish church across from City Hall. In the east non-Jews called synagogues 'buzna.' This main synagogue had a secondary room where devout old people used to go, who used to from the early hours of the morning pray there, and studied the Gemara. I also used to go pray there, each morning before going to school, to recite the Kaddish for my father. Of course there were more such places, where they met and prayed the mincha [afternoon service] and ma'ariv [evening service], for example on Hodvabna Street.

I began attending school in Inacovce. There I attended up to Grade 3. At that point I transferred to school in Michalovce. The religion teacher there was 'Uncle' Hellinger. He always walked around in a Sabbath overcoat. He didn't know how to express himself properly in any other language, which is why he spoke Yiddish and Zemplin. He convinced my mother to put me into high school, that he would prepare me for German exams. I guess he prepared me well, as I passed the exam and transferred from council school, where I absolved only one grade, to high school. I liked gym a lot, as I was excellent in it. I was a good athlete, running, high jump, shot put, that went well for me. I also used to play soccer. I took sports seriously. I liked it a lot, it seems that our second-born daughter has taken after me in this.

At the same time, I also very much liked to draw. I excelled at it. When we went outside as a class to draw, my teacher told me, 'All right, you'll sit down here and you'll draw this scene.' This flattered me. What young person wouldn't be flattered by this? People saw that I was drawing something different from the others. This teacher, who was named Müller, he was a Czech, also gave me advice regarding my future profession and my future in general. I went to him for advice. I was considering going to an academy, where we'd be taking drawing. He told me, 'No, I wouldn't recommend it, as there'll be times when you'll have lots to eat, and times when you won't have anything to eat.' I was also good at natural history. Otherwise, it can't be said that I lagged in something, I was this better average. I didn't lag in anything, but neither did I excel. To this day I've got all my report cards filed away.

Up to the age of 13, I also attended cheder. I had various teachers. One was named Katz, that was in Grade 6. The classes were graded. Then there was also 7th and 8th grade. There our teacher was, by coincidence, a certain Blau, but of a different type. He once told me this: 'Berele, du bist eyn groyser sheygetz.' You're one big sheygetz. That means Christian, rascal or something like that. I excelled in Yiddish grammar. I had very nice handwriting. I even wrote out report cards for

our home room teacher. To this day I know the entire Yiddish alphabet. So I attended cheder up to the age of 13, and also normal elementary school. Then I attended council school for one year, and then transferred to high school.

Besides Auntie Ilonka, two families from Michalovce have been permanently engraved in my memory, the Reichs and the Polaks, at whose places I used to eat ‘teg’ during the school year. [Editor’s note: ‘Teg’ is the plural form of the Yiddish word ‘tog,’ meaning day.] This means that they used to feed me one day a week. They liked me and treated me in the best possible way. They never made me feel like I was dependent on them. Their attitude towards me molded my character. Mrs. Reich has remained in my memories my whole life as Auntie Zelma, and her older son, my friend Erisko. Mrs. Polakova was Auntie Sidi and her son Arnold our ‘son,’ whom my wife and I took in after the war.

Each year on 28th October, a big celebration took place in Michalovce, to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the First Republic. On that day town delegates and non-Jewish officers of the Czechoslovak Army would visit the synagogue, which was a great honor for us. The cantor would sing a song about the founder of the republic, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk 7. I remember it as if it had taken place today. The cantor was a very congenial person, he sang beautifully, and we young guys liked his daughter.

Back then there were also several upper-class Jewish families in Michalovce. Among them were the Gutmanns who moved to Michalovce from our village. They had a car and mainly drove people to the train station with it. The Michalovce train station was quite far away from the center of town. The car would be parked in front of the Zlaty Byk [Golden Bull] Hotel, when someone needed it, he came and they drove him there. Similarly if someone for example needed to quickly get to Kosice, he had himself driven there. The Gutmanns sometimes allowed me to sit in the car.

At the age of 15, 16, I began with questions like, ‘Mummy, what sort of bride should I bring to meet you?’ ‘Son of mine, if you’ll like her, I’ll like her as well’, was her answer. But at that time soccer was already being played in Michalovce. I liked this sport, because besides simple shoes you didn’t need anything else to play it. But my cap used to bother me while heading the ball, so I turned it around backwards. It also bothered me on backwards, so I asked my mother, ‘Mummy, why can’t I play soccer without a cap, when my friends are playing without caps?’ ‘Zun mayner, dos torstu mikh nisht fregn, dos iz an aveyre.’ ‘Son of mine, you’re not allowed to ask about that, it’s a sin to ask.’ [Jewish laws decree that from the age of 3 all boys cover their heads during the entire day]. That was my mother’s outlook on the world and on life.

In Michalovce I lived with Auntie Ilonka, and as they were also very poor and had many children, I used to go for lunch to other Jewish families. One day a week I used to for example go to the Polaks’. Their son Arnold was a very spoiled child. For example, when he didn’t like the soup, he’d put a hair in it and proclaim, ‘I don’t want soup that has a hair in it.’ They gave him a different soup, he took a fly from the flypaper and threw it in it, so that he’d have a reason to rebel.

One evening his parents sent for me. Arnold had enraged his father so much that he would have given him a severe beating. As he was afraid of being beaten, he ran away from home. Of course, eventually night came, and the boy wasn’t home. He liked me, so his parents sent for me, for me to bring him back home. They knew in which direction he’d gone. I went in that direction and found him. He was already returning slowly, step by step. We arrived in front of their house, and he didn’t

want to go another step further, he was afraid. I told him, ‘Well, let’s not sit here all night, you know, I’ve got to go to school in the morning.’ He didn’t want to go home. I told him, ‘All right, I’ll make you a bed in the stable.’ I fixed him a bed from a blanket that was used to cover horses. That was too smelly for him. Finally I got him into his room. I put his pajamas on him, and in the meantime his father had calmed down.

His parents were very good to me. By coincidence, that’s how life wanted it, Arnold’s parents died during the war. He remained alone, and so my wife and I took him in as our own son. A beautiful relationship, which had already been growing from youth, developed between us. After the war he studied at a mechanical tech school in Kosice. Then he wanted at all costs to go see the world. In the end, though, he listened and after tech school also finished university in Prague. Then he moved to the USA, where he worked his way up to being a university professor. He currently lives in Cincinnati. My wife and I have been there to visit him.

## At school

Young Jewish people used to speak Yiddish and Zemplin among themselves. Those of us that attended school spoke Slovak. We had excellent teachers and professors. For example, we liked ‘Uncle’ Hellinger very much. He taught us religion. But non-Jews also used to come to his classes, because we were all very amused by him. As I’ve already mentioned, he properly spoke only Yiddish, and when he wanted to say something in Slovak, he always mangled it. For example he asked, ‘How many of Moses’ books do we have?’ Right away he showed five fingers and answered his own question; ‘Hive.’

We also very much liked a professor by the name of Vymazal. He was a Czech and had a Jewish wife. He used an excellent method on us students. He always said, ‘Next week I’ll begin testing. Learn what I’ve dictated to you, I’ll call up to the blackboard the first two or three.’ We had one boy in our class whose father was the regional chief. Huncut didn’t study. He didn’t have to. His father was a non-Jew and he basically got everything, as his father was a chief. Who would have dared go against the chief’s son? We told that student, ‘If you don’t learn it, we’ll break your arms and legs.’ Under threat he learned.

We also worshipped our Slovak teacher, Dr. Alexander Matuska. He was our homeroom teacher in our last two years of high school. In class we would compete as to who would have read more books. In two and a half years I read 136 books, but I was only in 7th or 8th place. There were those that had read a whole lot more books. We read everything that was worth reading. I can’t forget how annoyed Matuska was when one student, later the chairman of the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Prague, Dune [Dezider] Goldfinger, had read Romain Rolland [Rolland, Romain (1866 – 1944): French writer, musical scholar and pacifist], and he, a major literary critic, hadn’t. When he’s young, a person has time for everything.

When I was older, we used to have class or school dances. We also had dances for the Jewish holiday of Purim. Unfortunately, I had to rent a suit for these dances. At the age of 16, I already measured 180 cm and weighed 80 kilograms. I’m saying this because I was physically more mature than others of my age, and thus the rented suits were necessarily shorter. The sleeves were short, so I pulled my arms in so it wouldn’t show. Basically my height and weight made itself felt in sports. As a poor boy I tried to excel in something. I even became a Maccabi [8] leader for Jewish boys of my age. Some of us high school students used to go to the parties along with boys that

were apprenticing as tradesmen. Despite my being a high school student, socially I was closer to those apprentices. The fact that we used to organize Purim dances also brought us together. We'd rent the Golden Bull Hotel and that's where we'd dance. To this day I remember some of the songs that we used to sing there.

As a boy I of course had my idol. He was named Ali Dudlak. Dudlak was my idol because he worked for the Sfinx company, which sold books. Ali and his friend Fredy Saltzmann made a lot of money as buyers. Fredy was from Nizny Hrabovec, a village by Vranov nad Toplou. Two dandies, they made a lot of money, but also squandered it. So, I don't know if I'm allowed to use an ugly expression, but all women, here you could also use a different expression, from Cheb to Jasin, stood in a row when they arrived. When I was 16 or 17 I set out with some friends on a rented bicycle for Uzhorod to see a soccer game. SK Rusj Uzhorod and Slavia Praha were playing. The world-famous soccer player Planicka was in goal for Slavia, for Rusj it was Boksaj. SK Rusj Uzhorod was composed of eleven teachers from all over Ruthenia, who had put together a team. These two teams were playing against each other, as Rusj had gotten into the Czechoslovak league. In the evening we all went to the Berecsényi Café, and when Ali Dudlak and Fredy Saltzmann arrived, the musicians stopped playing their usual repertoire, and began playing their songs. They were loaded and I was very flattered that I could be in their company. I was a pauper compared to them. They dressed like dandies, and I'll repeat it again, everything queued up precisely for these reasons.

I also played soccer. In the 1937/38 season I even battled my way onto the Michalovce 'A' team. Despite the fact that it was only for a tryout, as a juvenile, we played against UKMSC Uzhorod teams and against one team from Kosice. Those were large cities, where there were more teams. I even scored a goal against Uzhorod, and assisted in another for an excellent soccer player by the name of Blazejovsky. After the game with UKMSC I became a 'professional.' I got supper, a large beer and ten crowns. Suddenly the world was my oyster. Everything was coming up roses. When I arrived home in the evening to Auntie Ilonka's, I boasted that 'győztünk' [Hungarian for 'we won'], to which she said, 'Én is?' [Hungarian for 'me too?']. The poor thing, she was funny in that poverty of hers... In those years I also participated in the All-Sokol Slet [Rally] 9 in Prague, which was something like later the Spartakiada.

My political evolution took the following course. When I came to Michalovce, I began to be friends with Emil Fürst. Gradually it began taking 'the left side of the road'. The entire Fürst family was oriented towards the left. Emil and I went through Hashomer Hatzair 10 together. We also took courses. I remember that during the year 1937–38 I was on one such course in Levoca. Jozko Weiser, the 'wisest Jew in Slovakia' at the time, according to my opinion, lectured for us.

As far as sports are concerned, I learned and improved in them in school, for one. We had an excellent gym teacher, Professor Stranaja, the founder of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports and Comenius University in Bratislava. Then in the FAK soccer club in Michalovce, and then finally in Maccabi, where we left-oriented students met up with 'class-related' apprentices. Together with them we rented a room, a workshop, where during the day they repaired cars. In the evening we'd come there, sweep the auto repair shop, and then exercised. We for example bought some old parallel bars from the school, our first equipment. As I excelled at sports, they elected me as their leader. It was this sports leadership position. There were about 10, 15 of us boys.

Some boys from so-called better families used to go exercise at Betar 11. These boys underestimated us a bit, which followed from our social standing. Betar was right-wing. We called them the Fascists. They exercised with clubs and were basically preparing to fight in Palestine. No, we said. In Israel, where we were preparing to go, it's going to be necessary to convince the Arab laborers that we're class comrades. So that the Arab laborers wouldn't work for lower wages, but would ask for the same as Jewish ones. As a poorer student, I overall belonged to leftist-oriented youth.

Of course, in the town there were also boys that were very religious, and they weren't in these two organizations, they had Mizrachi 12. Our outlook on their philosophy was that they were wrong. Slowly we were ceasing to believe in the religious way of Jewishness that our parents believed in. I saw the poverty, but not only saw; I experienced it firsthand. When I lived with Auntie Ilonka, their house was near the Laborec River, and when the water rose, the rats would get all the way up into the house we lived in. At night I wore a cap, in the naive hope that the rats wouldn't bite my ears. As a child I had 'as many as' two outfits. One for everyday wearing, and one for holidays. Most of the time I ran around only in shorts, a t-shirt and tennis shoes, that was all I had to wear. This poverty had a great influence on me. At the age of 15, 16, a person begins to think differently. He tries to understand some things and I wanted to understand them.

In 1940 I finished high school. We were the last Jewish graduates 13. I played sports in high school as well, I was even one of the two best Jewish athletes. Thanks to sports I got to the Eastern Slovakia high school championships in Presov. I was the only Jew from our school who was eligible for a place in this event from a standpoint of performance. It was sometime during the years 1936–1937. As a Grade 10 student, I even got onto the relay team, as its fourth member. I battled for the position with a boy who was two years older, by the name of Stasko. All the non-Jews were rooting for him, and I defeated him in a race, and back then I was very proud of myself.

The first time I noticed strong anti-Semitism was in high school. Back then, the film Golem was showing in Prague. In school and in our class we talked a lot about the Golem [in Jewish folklore, the Golem is an artificial living being created out of inert material]. I remember that Professor Dostalova, who was a Czech, literally provoked a debate on this theme. As I've already mentioned, I was attending a Jewish-Czech class. Back then we argued: 'Your Christ rose from the dead, that was possible? And to make the Golem come alive, that wasn't possible?' That was the argument. It almost ended with a fight.

**During the War**

We were already allocating who was going to fight with whom, if the worst was to come. At that time the Hungarians had attacked Southern Slovakia 14. Part of the territory fell to them. As the surrounding towns were in the border territory, some ended up as part of Hungary and others remained in Slovakia. In this way I lost part of my classmates, who had ended up part of Hungary. That's why in our high school they combined two classes. One was mixed, Jews and Czechs, and the second was made up of Slovak Christians. And that's when it started. Some of my classmates prepared for their graduation exams by coming dressed as Hlinka Youth. [The Hlinka Guard 15 founded youth groups and helped organize their activities. These groups were named the Hlinka Youth.] One of them was named Snincak and the other Hudak. Some of the teachers also promoted the Hlinka Party 16 and supported the Slovak State.

After graduation I was at home until March 1941. I was no longer allowed to work. I made money by giving private lessons. In time I had to stop with this as well. I also managed to make money by drawing. I also gave lessons in descriptive geometry to one high school student and her sister, a university student. In March 1941 they summoned me to the Sixth Labor Battalion 17. I served in it for 28 months.

The Sixth Battalion was a group of Jewish guys. They were all young people. Many of them were university graduates. Among them were doctors, lawyers, engineers, surveyors... men who where already independent. They were also summoned to the Sixth Battalion. The philosophy was likely that when they'll have young Jewish men concentrated in one place, they'll be easier to control. At first they gathered us in Cemerne, in the Vranov nad Toplou region. To there, and later, in the fall, to Sabinov, came about 1200 to 1800 young, healthy, sympathetic Jewish boys from the whole of Slovakia. In the beginning we were ordered about by simple, even primitive wardens, who were from Eastern Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Can you imagine it? A doctor was being commanded by a warden who perhaps didn't even have two grades of elementary school.

In the beginning we only trained. We got old Austro-Hungarian army uniforms and sailor's caps. We of course didn't get weapons. In the beginning the uniforms were green, then blue, so we'd be easily distinguishable, and so that it would be immediately obvious who we are. Then they divided us up among various locations. Construction companies close to the army needed workers, so they asked the army for people, and thus work groups were created. In the beginning I worked in Presov. In time they transferred me to the Borkut region, near Presov. In Borkut we first built ourselves barracks, in which we then lived. Then we were building roads into the forest, where there were army supply dumps. After a month I got home on leave, which I of course had to pay for. At that time my middle sister's husband asked me, 'So, you're not in the office anymore?' [In those days and in that simple village environment, when someone had attended high school, it was naturally assumed that in the army he'd be working in an office, or would have an administrative function.] And I answered him that there were 600 such people there. If all 600 were in the office, they wouldn't have anyone to train. A naive idea and opinion, which I had at the time.

When the Sixth Battalion was to be disbanded, after more than two years, some boys tried to leave the country. So for example, two had themselves shut up in a wagon full of charcoal in Eastern Slovakia. They managed to get all the way to Switzerland in that wagon. This happened in 1943. Not everyone was lucky, though. There were cases when the train stopped at one of the stations and they began to bang on the wagon's walls, believing that they were already in Switzerland. Unfortunately, it was only Austria, and those were thrown in jail right away, and ended up according to whose hands they had found themselves in.

In Presov we were helping build a hospital and paving roads, which means we paved them with stones. First large stones are laid down, then small ones, then the whole thing is covered in gravel and is filled and asphalted. We had to quarry the stone ourselves in a quarry. About fifty of us were working there. As I could draw well, I made some extra money by drawing my friends. They used to give me some spare change for it. Back then, a person counted every crown. Once I drew a tableau for the commander of our unit. His name was Ocvirk. To each boy's face, which was a photo, I drew a body according to his particular characteristics. I got three crowns from each one of them for it. But what was even better, I made some brownie points with Ocvirk. He even hung the tableau on the wall in his office.

Once another non-com, Grohol, stopped by our commander's office, and saw the panel. Ocvirk was of course flattered by it, as he was pictured in the function of commander in it. Grohol asked him: 'What's this you've got here?' 'I've got very clever Jew-boys, and this one is good at drawing.' 'Would you lend me this Jew-boy?' So I ended up in Grohol's office. Our job there was to record army things being sent to the Eastern Front.

But I had an enemy in the commander of our group. My antagonist was the officer Psenicka. He arranged for me to return to where they had transferred me from. He literally bullied me. He used to come see how I was working, and he didn't like the way I was digging. When I was in the latrine, he harangued me that I'm there all day. Once on Saturday, I came to ask him for leave to go home, where my ill mother was lying in bed. I reported, 'Lieutenant, Sir, Laborer Jew Schönbrun, reporting my arrival in the office.' That's how we officially announced ourselves, 'Laborer Jew.' It should be mentioned that in the beginning we reported as 'Worker Jew.' The command decided that this was too dignified for us, which is why they changed the title to 'Laborer' for Jews and Gypsies, while Slovaks who weren't fit for battle and were in the Sixth Battalion, were called 'Worker.'

Psenicka didn't pay any attention to my reporting. I'd been standing there, at attention, for about 15 minutes, when he turned to me with the words: 'What do you want here?!' 'Lieutenant, Sir, I'd like leave. I want to visit my mother.' 'Why do you want to visit your mother?' 'Because she wants to see me.' 'So send her a photo!' That was the answer of one officer of the Slovak Army. A person full of contradictions.

As punishment, he told me that on Monday I'll be working on our section for 150 minutes longer. On Monday he didn't forget to come to our section to have a look if I'm working, if I'm plugging away. He didn't do this to anyone but me. The next Saturday, I came to see him after work. He threw me out, saying that I hadn't shaved. The third Saturday I went home, on the sly, without leave. But I no longer found my mother there. They had deported her in the meantime. On Monday Psenicka came to see me and asked, 'How come you didn't come see me?' At that point I didn't care about anything any more, and so I shot back, 'I was already home...' and started weeping. Apparently it moved him, because he left me alone. So much for him. After the war he became a member of the Communist Party Central Committee. He was the chairman of the Regional Party Committee in Presov. The chairman of the Central Committee distributed financial aid for Eastern Slovakia, big-time millions.

In the post-war period I became the general secretary of SPROV [The Federation of Anti-Fascist Prisoners and Illegal Workers], and as such I tried to have Psenicka removed from his position. First they wanted to jail me instead, that I was sullying the Party. Some time later, I was going for an audience with Siroky 18, and Psenicka was just leaving his office. I asked Siroky: 'Comrade Siroky, what did that person want with you?' 'And you know who he is?' 'Of course I know! The commander of the army Jewish labor division.' At that time I already had some authority in SPROV, and wanted that person to be punished. Later it happened. There was a confrontation, and I testified against him. I'm not claiming that they jailed him only due to me, but I definitely contributed, as by this fact his cup of sins had run over. I found out that he had plotted against me and told two boys to falsely testify against me. It took five years until things were put right. After some time he was once again rehabilitated, and I was afraid to go to the East, in case he'd bought some gypsies 'for a bottle,' who'd stab me... Even these sorts of things could have happened back then.

I also have this memory of Presov. We had one warden who was small in stature. His name was Fajcik. This little Napoleon, who bellowed at us from morning till evening. We were working with the bricklayers at the army hospital construction site, where two weeks before there had been typhoid corpses. We were carting away soil on railway handcars from the hospital courtyard outside, where we were leveling it. As it was already late fall, the soil had frozen overnight, and in the morning we dug under it, so there was this kind of roof, on top of which this warden was standing, in all his haughtiness. As we were gradually undermining the soil, it collapsed and the warden fell off it, but immediately got up and began running. The frozen soil knocked him down. Luckily for him, he'd fallen into the angle formed between the soil and the tracks that the handcars were driving on. So the dirt hadn't completely crushed him. The eight of us that were nearby immediately ran over and with a great effort lifted that huge chunk of frozen earth, and one of us pulled the guard out. His reaction was: 'kleban' – 'a priest.' We carried him to the army hospital building that stood in that courtyard. I don't know if it was five, or twenty seconds, but the way we had reacted to the situation saved his life. He stayed in the hospital for six weeks, and when he returned, he never yelled at us again. He probably realized what we'd done for him.

At the end of 1942 and beginning of 1943, I arrived at Kuchyne pri Malackach. There were about 30 or 40 of us Jews there. There were also kosherites among us. [Editor's note: kosherite, from the word kosher (ritually clean). In this case a person keeping ritual rules to do with food.] They didn't have an easy life. In conditions like that, and to keep kosher on top of it. From there I went to Liptov. It was basically due to my friend, Bandy Sulc. Bandy was one of the surveyors, who were working on the building of a track from Liptovsky Hradek to Jamnik. Near the town of Jamnik there was a military airport. General Catlos 19 was from nearby Liptovsky Petr. As part of the construction of the tracks, the ground there was being meliorated. We had it really quite good in Liptov. The unit commander, but also the locals, Protestants, were very decent people.

On 31st May 1943, the Sixth Labor Battalion was officially disbanded. The guys from the battalion were assigned to the Sered and Novaky camps. A number of them stayed to work on the regulation of the Sur River. Many of them later joined the SNR 20 and many of them also fell in it. They kept 48 of us in the army as necessary ones. Among us were doctors, lawyers, builders, surveyors, tradesmen and guys with qualifications that were useful for the Slovak Army. Strangely enough, even here there were two people to be found that didn't wish us well, the Protestant priest Rolko and the notary Reiskop, who railed against us. Luckily we already had our kindhearted protectors who were in our favor and helped us.

Until the rebellion broke out, I worked with the surveyors as a draftsman. After some time I got to Bratislava. I worked in one warehouse for a certain non-com by the name of Valko. On payday, he'd send all the guys under him home on leave, and took their pay. But the soldiers were glad that they could go home. He also did other things, like for example selling military materials – blankets. At that time I was doing the recordkeeping, which was dangerous both for him and for me. He knew that I knew what was happening. He needed to get rid of me, so he made me available [for transfer].

This section was under Major Franz, who had a Jewish wife. He asked why they wanted to get rid of me in the warehouse: 'Don't worry, you can tell me.' 'Major, Sir, if you want to know the situation, there's black-marketeering going on there. The commander knows that I know about it. He needs to get rid of me.' The major asked me, 'What do you know how to do?' 'Everything.' I wanted to

save myself from the fate that would have awaited me, so I had to know how to do everything. ‘Do you know how to type?’ ‘No, but if a sixteen-year-old girl can do it, I’ll learn it too.’ I became a typist.

At that time they were bombing Bratislava. Major Franz had an apartment in the center of the city, and during one raid was hit. We went to help them pull out their things from underneath the rubble. He and his wife became fond of me. I’ll say once again, his wife was Jewish and he was a German. See what coincidences happen in life? After the war he left for Czechia, where he had big problems due to his being a German. At that time I was in SPROV. I wrote him an assessment as to how he had behaved towards me during the war. You can imagine what an assessment from SPROV meant in those days. Thus I saved him from being expelled to Germany.

During those times I met my future wife. I met her by the Danube, where the Propeler [a former river steamboat that was converted to a restaurant] is these days. It was after lunch on Saturday. A friend of mine and I were sitting on a bench, and we saw a pretty girl walking around there. As I later found out, they were making a hat for her nearby, and she was waiting for it to be finished. On Sunday after lunch I set out to visit one mixed family in Lamac. They had a very pretty girl, Irenka. They were named the Picks. When I got there the mother and daughter were having a picnic. It insulted me, as they had taken the father, a Jew, to a concentration camp, and they were having a picnic. I said to myself, they aren’t the right partners for me. I turned around and left.

On the way back I laid down on a meadow and fell asleep. Later some soldier walked by with a girl. They unintentionally woke me up. I looked over, and walking behind them was the girl I’d seen the day before on the riverbank. I started talking to her, as there was no other way of getting to know her. During the time of the Slovak State, I never used to hide my origins. I always did this, regardless of who I was talking to, except for the police. Well, and in the beginning she didn’t understand what I meant by it. She was from the town of Pukanec, from central Slovakia. She was surprised by my opinions. She even asked me, ‘The strange way you’re speaking, are you Spanish, or Italian?’ I answered, ‘No, I’m a Jew.’ That’s how we met. She was a seamstress. Of course, I walked her to the building where she lived. She went up to her apartment and brought me down some bread with lard and cracklings. It tasted very good to me, as I was hungry. That was the beginning. Then we used to meet. My wife, back then still my girlfriend, helped me very much later.

When the uprising broke out and the Russians were slowly approaching, I thought about how I’d save myself. I had a good friend from Inacovce. His name was Jozko [Jozef] Knezo, and he was a priest in the Eastern Slovak town of Vysoka nad Uhrom. He was a very good friend of mine. With his agreement I falsified my name as Knezo. He also sent me some documents and he and my future wife both helped me very much. When the uprising broke out, I acquired and made myself some false papers. I also made papers for people I knew. The seals of the Slovak State were easily forged. You just used special ink to draw a double cross and three peaks and that was it. [Slovak state symbol: First became the symbol of Slovakia during the revolutionary years of 1848-1849. The triple peak symbolizes the three Carpathian mountain ranges, Tatras, Fatra and Matra (currently on Hungarian territory). The double cross symbolizes Christianity and at the same time the traditions of St. Cyril and Methodius 21, who brought Christianity to the region during the time of Greater Moravia (9th Century)] I can’t imagine the problems it would have caused to have to forge the Czech lion. [The so-called small state insignia of the Czech Republic shows a white two-

tailed lion, as the symbol of the entire Czech Republic, with a gold crown and gold claws].

With the arrival of the Germans in Bratislava, in 1944, my girlfriend, now my wife, and I decided to go to her home town, Pukanec. But there it wasn't possible to hide properly. We soon returned to Bratislava. It was before Christmas, I had to hide. The owner of the apartment I was hiding in was named Turza. He lived there together with his brother-in-law. He was named Kocvara. They didn't know I was a Jew. One night there was a large roundup held all over Bratislava. During the night an SS soldier woke me up. He was shining a flashlight right in my face. We had to get dressed immediately. When the SS soldier went to check the other room, I surreptitiously stuck my real documents under a suitcase on the wardrobe and left my false ones in my pocket.

There was a big commotion in the city due to the raids. Mr. Kocvara and I lived on Spitalska Street, along which they led us in the direction of the Manderlak [Manderlak: considered to be the first so-called skyscraper in Bratislava as well as in Slovakia. It has 11 floors and for a long time was the tallest residential building in Bratislava]. Through my head ran the thought that if they aim us to the left, it's bad, because this was the way to the bridge to Petrzalka, where they shot people without mercy. In front of the Manderlak we turned right, up to the square. At that moment it meant a certain relief and the postponement of death. On the way I with difficulty tore up and ate one of my false documents. It didn't seem to me to be the best forgery and I was afraid that they'd discover it.

We came to a place, Edlova Street, where they were gathering people. My roommate, Kocvara, found out from one girl that here they were concentrating Jews that had been in hiding. He was flabbergasted. He said that there'd been some mistake, that he's not a Jew. As I've already mentioned, he didn't know anything about my origins. We agreed that he'd let me do the talking. They were putting the people they'd caught into various rooms of the building. In the meantime I'd gotten my bearings and found out that the Slovaks and Germans who'd been picked up by mistake were meeting with the commander in one room. Kocvara and I joined them and I managed to convince the commander, a member of the SS, that we didn't belong to the rest of the people that had been rounded up. I think that the main reason for our release wasn't false documents, which also helped, but the fact that that SS officer was probably a lenient person. I saw how he also released other Slovaks.

After my release I didn't spend the next night on Spitalska Street. My future wife and I soon returned to Pukanca and kept on hiding. We could no longer return to Bratislava. In the meantime, the front had stopped at Pukanec for three months. One time there were Russians there, another time Germans. It changed several times. I was so confused by it all, that when the Russians came, I started speaking German to them. At last the front moved westward, and after the liberation of Bratislava we also left for there, in April. After World War II, I wanted to change the world. Back then I thought that socialism was the right choice. To this day I say, 'Every reasonable person can't be other than progressive, but of course not in the sense of socialistically progressive.'

After liberation I went to have a look at my home village. I was hoping that at least my youngest sister's husband would have survived. Because he was, as I've already mentioned, physically a very strong man and those types were more likely to survive. Unfortunately, I've already told you about his fate. For the villagers I was Bernat. I belonged among them, as I'd already been friends with them before the war. I also remembered how one of them Jozko Knezo, had helped me. Other

good friends of mine were Misko Hajducko, Durco Zvonik, Mikulas Fedorik, ... This happened, for example. After the war I went to see a neighbor in the village. She was blind, and when I entered she was lying in bed. I greeted her politely, ‘Good day Auntie Kutasova.’ ‘Good day, good day.’ ‘Do you want guests?’ And she answered, ‘Yes, yes, just let them tell me who they are...’ When they wanted to show respect, they referred to people as ‘they.’ ‘...as I, a blind woman, can’t see.’ ‘So guess.’ ‘Let them say something more.’ She guessed who I was. ‘And they came to see a blind woman?’ So she was glad that I’d come to see her. I was also glad, as she was a good neighbor. But there were also other types.

## After the War

Right after the end of the war I began, among other things, to look for a place from where I could avenge the deaths of my nearest and dearest, my mother, sisters and their husbands and children and all the others. All told about 80–90 relatives. For this was the resolution I had made that Saturday night when I had gone home on the sly from the labor camp, from Presov, due to Psenicka not wanting to give me leave. I had found that my mother was no longer at home, she had gone to ‘work,’ helpless... They trampled her, poor thing, in the wagon on the way to Auschwitz.

The police were located on Ceskoslovenskej armady Street [Czechoslovak Army Street, in the building called U Dvou Levoch, or The Two Lions], and the chief was a certain Major Colak. He was a reputable, mature person that one could talk to reasonably. After a detailed conversation about where I was from, what I had experienced, what brought me to consider working for the police, it came out that he was also from Michalovce. His brother had been my professor at the Michalovce high school, whom I had gotten along well with. I had even worked for him in his office. When we got to the evaluation, he told me exactly this: ‘My dear countrymen, they should forget about the police. That’s not for them, for their temperament. They won’t be able to stand it, to root around in muck, in the dirt, believe me...’ Those were his expressions, which I’ve remembered my whole life. After considering all the pros and cons, I listened to him and didn’t join the police. I admitted that I didn’t suit them and they didn’t suit me. In the end the times confirmed this. All Jewish guys that joined the police ended up worse than catastrophically. They threw them all in jail. I didn’t end up all that great either, but not as badly as those that were with the police.

After the war, several institutions were formed in Slovakia, such as for example the Federation of Slovak Partisans, the Federation of Anti-Fascist Prisoners and Illegal Workers [SPROV], the Federation of Foreign Soldiers, the Federation of Soldiers-Rebels [SVOJPOV] and the Federation of The Racially Persecuted. You could say that every political party needed to have someone ‘behind them.’ That someone were these federations. The Federation of Anti-Fascist Prisoners and Illegal Workers, SPROV, was leftist-oriented, the same as the Federation of Slovak Partisans. The Federation of Foreign Soldiers, those were leftists as well as rightists, depending on if they had been at the Eastern or Western front, and what sort of upbringing they’d had. The Federation of Soldiers-Rebels was created by the Democratic Party, as a counterweight to leftist-oriented federations. This is how it gradually evolved. I joined SPROV, as its ideals corresponded with my thoughts and ideas about progressiveness. Back then I thought that only socialism can be progressive, and I wasn’t alone, even more mature and grown-up people thought this way.

The most influential federation was the Federation of Slovak Partisans. Unfortunately, this federation was partially anti-Semitic. In 1946 they demonstrated against Jews. They wanted to break windows in Jewish homes and shouted slogans: 'Jews out!', 'Jews to Palestine!' Many Jews had been in the partisan ranks during the war. That's why members of this federation didn't condemn everyone. Their principle was: 'My Jew friend is a good Jew, but not the others!' Partisans approached all things in a military fashion, in the style of: 'Damn it, I'll get my machine gun...'

Of course, there were also people of high principles among them. Not long ago Mrs. Hana Malatkova-Potocna died, that was a real partisan! Among other things, she expressed pro-Jewish sentiments. Another influential federation was SPROV. Its top official was first Andrej Bagar and then Viliam Siroky, later the premier. We had a lot of economic and political power. For example, the national administration was portioned out. That means that our people were installed into companies belonging to Fascists and collaborators. Very many important politicians also came from these circles.

In those days I was the general secretary of SPROV. There were many Jews among our membership. We published the newspaper Hlas Oslobodenych [Voice of the Liberated], which our people liked a lot, as we promoted their demands. Jews were secretaries in many regional towns. For example in Kosice it was Braun, in Michalovce Dr. Goldstein, in Dunajska Streda, Steckler. Mr. Steckler was a very honest person. Without a recommendation from the resistance elements, nothing happened. SPROV was politically a very strong organization. The largest federation in terms of numbers was SVOJPOV. They accepted almost anyone into their ranks, even former Guardists. SVOJPOV was connected to the Democratic Party, who needed to show boost their numbers.

The Federation of The Racially Persecuted didn't have the same powers and influence as the other four. Its leader was an exceptionally capable person, Dr. Kucera. Basically every Jew had been racially persecuted, but after the war it was difficult to claim. At that time the state of Israel was also being created, which from the beginning had been leftist oriented. As I had been a member of Hashomer Hatzair before the war, I took it as a very positive thing. In 1948, as well as the state of Israel being created, the merging of the federations took place. Four federations, the Federation of Slovak Partisans, SPROV, SVOJPOV and the Federation of Foreign Soldiers merged into one. The Federation of The Racially Persecuted depended on the support of Jews that were in the other federations. The merger was ordered by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia.

As 'there can't be too many roosters in the henhouse,' the leaders of the Federation of Slovak Partisans, Faltan, Salgovic and Drocar, sidetracked their future competitors in advance. Gradually they had them put in jail. First in line was SVOJPOV. Erich Uberal and Imre Rudas, who was half Jewish, were jailed.  Next up was the Federation of Foreign Soldiers. They arrested Messrs. Sindler and Mestan. Mestan was the cousin of the current director of the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava. Him I managed to get out of the slammer, as they'd jailed him on the basis of falsified records, which I found out and notified the attorney general. The day after he'd been released, he came to my apartment to thank me.

Finally, after SPROV I was to be next as well. During the preparations for the merger of the federations, the division of individual positions gradually crystallized. As I had almost finished

economics university, I was to be given an economical management function. To prevent this from happening, they prepared a dirty trick for me. We were on a large farm in the town of Kravany that belonged to the Federation of Partisans. My task was to take over the farm and approve everything that had happened on it prior to that with my signature. But I didn't have the authority to take it over, I was only allowed to run it, direct it. I realized that they were preparing something. To prevent this, I quit my job at SPROV, giving as a reason that I wanted to finish school. With this I simplified the situation for the aforementioned 'officials,' as the federations were battling for power among themselves and they had gotten one competitor out of the way without a fight. They threw the guy that took the farm over in jail for 18 years by pinning on him dirty tricks that had been perpetrated there before him.

In 1945 I at first applied for construction engineering. After some time I found out that I'd be studying for five years, that for five years my wife would be working to support me, and we'd go hungry. That was the reason why I left it. Because there it was mandatory to go to lectures, you had to do drafting and so on, which took up a lot of time. Attending this school as well as working on top of it would have been possible only with great difficulty. That's why I transferred to economics, where I didn't have to attend all the lectures. An advantage was also that the studies lasted only four years. Back then economics was taught at the Business University Na Palisadoch in Bratislava. I successfully graduated from school. In 1946, during my studies, my wife's father, who'd been a blacksmith, died. His neighbor had given him some iron to make a spit. He put it in the fire to heat it up. Apparently there had been a jammed cartridge in it, which exploded due to the heat. It exploded so unluckily that it literally ripped out my wife's father's guts.

I looked upon the year 1948 22 as a victory. The victory of the leftist oriented. Back then I thought that it was the best path for us. Unfortunately, I only gradually realized that the talk went one way and socialism another. I saw that major, serious mistakes and injustices were happening. For example, a few years after the war, I got into the commission for the resolution of the Hungarian 23 and German 24 question, for the expulsion of people out of the country. At the first session we got a list. I asked, 'What did this person do? Did he kill someone? Did he rat on someone?' The answer was, 'No, but he's a Hungarian.' 'Is he supposed to be expelled for the fact that he was begotten by a Hungarian, despite the fact that he's not guilty of anything?'

The result was that I immediately quit the commission. The head of the commission was named Benko. He and higher party and state organs very much resented this, and I began to have problems that lasted for years, for the fact that I hadn't grasped the party line. Gradually I was thrown out of everywhere. It began with them throwing me out of work, and finally also out of my own apartment. That was in the year 1951. It was a very tragic time. My wife had to return to her family home in Pukanec, as we didn't have anywhere to live.

At that time there was also a country-wide initiative taking place, when many people, all together 77,000 25 were taken from administrative positions and put into manufacturing. I was among them. Up till then I'd been working at the Industry and Business Commission. Later it was split and I was at the Business Commission. Within the scope of this I was supposed to lecture at the Business University. When I found this out, I went to Luhacovice to have my throat treated. I still had problems with it from the war. One day a letter from Dr. Stahlova came to the spa for me. She was a friend of mine, the wife of one Czech intellectual, a very reputable man. She wrote me: 'Don't be surprised, you're on the list as a factory worker,' although only two weeks earlier I'd been named

as a university lecturer. From the position of secretary of a Party organization at the Business Commission I got onto the factory worker list, without being told anything, why, or for what.

I became a class enemy. At first I couldn't find any work. They followed me every day. Finally, through a friend of mine, I got an interview at Slovnaft. A friend of mine was working there as the director of one construction company. They allocated me work there. The first day I came to work, and one of the workers there asked me, 'What do you want here?' 'They allocated me here.' 'You're supposed to work here?' Then he told me to watch carefully. He stuck his finger into boiling lead, stirred it, and said, 'When will you manage to do this with your fingers?' I still get chills up and down my spine when I remember it. I was there in manufacturing for three days, and had myself declared ill.

I was ill for three months and finally a person I knew helped me. He found me another job. For two years I had to work as a radio repairman, though I didn't understand that work at all. I 'repaired' old radios. The only thing that I was capable of doing perfectly was that I cleaned those old radios out. Those radios, that was physical and mental suffering. To be doing something that I didn't understand, what didn't interest me, just torture. But I learned to wind transformers, this kept me going. The StB 26 followed me. Every day one copper came to have a look if I'm really at work. The way it was, was that each snoop had a few companies allocated, which he had to watch. At that time they watched pretty well everyone. One day they threw me out of manufacturing as well. The reasons were prosaic, 'I had studied during the First Republic' and I had 'helped' Fascists. So the fact that after the war we'd been rounding up Fascists to put them on trial had turned against me.

After two years in manufacturing I met up with an acquaintance of mine, a doctor. We'd met each other before. We began talking and so she learned that I was actually 'on the street.' She told me she'd help me. I was to drink some really strong coffee, and she'd send me for an EKG. So I did this, and after the coffee my heart began pounding, which showed up on the EKG. She wrote down that my health wasn't in order and that I need different work. Thanks to this lady doctor, in 1954 I got into geodetics as a draftsman. A draftsman still qualified as a worker in manufacturing.

After some time they asked me whether I'd like to do different work. I answered that yes, but that I can't. I've got to work in manufacturing. The director was a decent person, a Russian immigrant from the First Republic, Mr. Borovsky. He arranged permission for me, I think that it was a decree from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, that I was also allowed to work in a different area. Borovsky was supposed to gradually start up a new company, though as a surveyor he didn't understand economics. I of course helped him, like he had me. Finally the Regional Geodetic and Cartographic Institute was created. I was then employed in this resort for 31 years. I worked my way up through various positions to head economist. We built one seven-story building, 21 multi-story buildings and nine cottages. In those days I of course already knew that socialism won't save the human race, that a different era had to come.

I married my wife on 8th April 1946. We've been together 60 years now. Her maiden name was Anna Krajcova. She was born in 1923 in Pukanec. Only one Jew lived in Pukanec before the war, Neumann, a doctor, who was helped very much by the residents during the war. We agreed on our wedding as follows. On Saturday, 6th April, I called her. In those days people still worked on Saturdays. 'On Monday we're getting married!' She says, 'Who?' 'Well, you and I.' 'What's gotten into you?' 'You don't want to?' 'I do, and what should I do?' 'Dress decently and on Monday at 9

we’re going to city hall.’ On Monday we went to city hall and got married. From city hall each one of us went to his own work and after lunch we had a get-together for our friends. About 25 people came. Back then I had a bachelor apartment. In the evening we went dancing and my wife got an armful of flowers.

At the end of the war, my wife had been working as a seamstress at the Hanka Salon. Of course, all the unpleasantness that I experienced from the year 1944, when we met, affected her as well. We lived through it together. In the end we overcame it all. We had two daughters, the first one in 1948 and the second in 1953. During my persecution we were thrown out of our apartment. My wife moved with our older daughter to Pukanec, where our second daughter was born. We were separated. During the week I worked, and on Saturday after lunch I traveled to Pukanec to see my family. On Sunday evening I again left for Bratislava. The girls cried each time I left. When we then returned back to Bratislava, we had to fight with great effort to get an apartment. Here you have to ‘fight’ for everything.

Before our departure for Pukanec, we lived on Kupelna Street. In the neighborhood there lived an old lady whose son had been murdered by the Russians. After the war the boy had been driving from Bratislava to Piestany to see his girlfriend. On the way there, he was stopped by Russian soldiers. Most likely they wanted his car. He didn’t give it to them, and so they shot him. Our neighbor, his mother, took such a liking to me that she saw her son in me. Once she called me, she was lying helpless on the ground. She’d had a heart attack. My wife then took care of her until she died.

Our older daughter, Minka [Mina], in Old German Liebe, was born in Bratislava. We named her after my mother, rest her soul. Our younger daughter is named Evicka [Eva], and was born in Pukanec. Both of our daughters got a Jewish upbringing. They got it because I say that I never had to be ashamed of my father nor my mother! They lived courageously. There was never a single person in the world that could say something bad about them.

I was a member of the Jewish Religious Community in Bratislava from 1945. My wife also became a member, as a non-Jew. My wife is Protestant by origin. In the beginning we observed holidays in the sense that we went to synagogue. We met up with many friends from the Sixth Battalion. I didn’t visit the synagogue because of religious convictions, but because of friends. My wife went with me.

When the children were small, we observed all Jewish and non-Jewish holidays. When our daughters Minka and Evicka went to Pukanec to their grandmother’s place for summer holidays, they prayed together with their grandma. Granny, being a Protestant, taught them this prayer: ‘My guardian angel, take care of my soul, so that I’ll be clean for Moses Christ. Amen.’ She used to say to them, ‘Children of mine, you can’t upset either of the Gods.’ With us, religion was never a problem. We were atheists! Where was God when they were trampling my brave mother?

Both of our daughters attended elementary school in Bratislava. They were very good students. The older one had a certain talent that was already apparent at a very young age. Always, when we put on a record on which a certain Katz sang, she cried. Katz apparently sang over the graves of Jews when they were killing them in the concentration camp. He sang so heartrendingly, that one of the SS soldiers didn’t shoot him with the others. Once we put this record on when our friend, the lawyer Dr. Sabinsky was visiting us. Minka, who was still in diapers, again started crying loudly. No one knew why. We thought that she had a stomachache. The record finished, and the crying

stopped. Sabinsky said, ‘Put that record on again.’ Minka again started to cry. That voice, that sad voice, so touched her that she started crying. Sabinsky proclaimed that this child was going to be a musician. Later his words were confirmed. We still have that record, though by now it’s very worn.

After elementary school we were considering what next, what school should we send the girls to? We tried to guide them from childhood. For example, for Minka I carved a thermometer and stethoscope out of wood, so that she’d have something to play with. Maybe it would lead her to medicine. So we got to the subject of what she’d like to be. She answered, ‘Well, you don’t have money, so I’ll take music.’ ‘What, music?’ ‘You can’t afford a piano, so I’ll take the accordion.’ We bought her an accordion. First a 32-bass one, then a 60-bass, and finally a 120-bass Weltmeister. So all told, it cost us as much as one piano. At the conservatory she had an excellent teacher, a person worth her weight in gold. She was named Szokeova. She taught her the accordion. Minka considered her to be her second mother. To this day, she’s building on what that teacher gave her. Minka finished conservatory and in 1968 27 she traveled to Israel, as a reward for promoting culture among young people in the Jewish community. She’d sit down at a piano, or pick up the accordion, and play. Young people danced and had fun. Finally she also managed to finish Music University in Dortmund, Germany.

Both our daughters were raised in the spirit of ‘don’t start anything, but if someone was insulting them, to hold their own.’ We instilled this in them since they were little. Once in school some boy was calling Evicka names, that she was a Jewess. She knocked him to the ground, kneeled down on him and gave him a proper thrashing. When she came home, she of course told us everything. Our children confided in us with everything. The next day, comrade principal Pijakova summoned me to the school, back then people still used to say comrade principal. When I arrived, I said, ‘Comrade principal, I know why you’ve called me, and I’m telling you right now that I’m not going to punish my daughter, as there’s no reason to!’ ‘But, that boy has a weak heart.’ ‘We brought up our daughter this way, and she’s not someone that gives up without a fight. The boy was insulting her, and she won’t stand for that. So much for the worse that his father is a party official.’ But in the end the principal and I parted amiably.

Perhaps it won’t do any harm if here we get ahead of ourselves and touch upon a theme that ‘sapienti sat’ [Latin: ‘a word to the wise is sufficient’] will indicate something. When she was eleven, our granddaughter Esterka [Ester, the daughter of Mina Neustadt, nee Knezova-Schönbrunova] told us that someone had attacked her classmate, who is from Asia, whose side she took with these words: ‘Why don’t you leave her alone, she’s just a person like we are, her skin’s just a little differently colored...’

Our younger daughter liked sports from the time she was little. This she’s obviously inherited from me. From the time she was little she used to go play soccer with boys. Once after school they came for her, to come play with them. But we raised our daughters that work came first, obligations and then fun. So she told them that until the house is clean, she’s not going anywhere. In the meantime, my wife returned home, and saw that there were ten boys cleaning our place. Evicka said to her, ‘I’ve got a brigade. They want me to go play soccer with them.’ After the cleaning was done my wife told her that everything was fine and that she could go. Our daughter took sports so seriously that she wanted to study physical education. We tried to convince her that she should first of all have – as they say, ‘bread in her hands,’ and after that everything else. First she graduated from civil engineering tech school, and after that the Faculty of Physical Education at

university. Finally she also did Hotel Academy.

When the children were small, we used to take them on walks out into the country. Every Saturday, every Sunday, we spent outside. My wife cooked and baked things in advance, and off we went. We also used to go to many sports events, be it soccer, hockey but also other sports. I very much liked sports as such, as I myself liked to play sports. I used to go to international matches, whether Prague or Budapest. I those days, train tickets were good for three days. So on Friday I'd go on a business trip, on Saturday or Sunday there'd be an international soccer match, and on Sunday after the game, I went back home, no problem.

I always rooted for good sportsmanship. I couldn't stand injustice and brutality. I liked Puskas [Ferenc] and Sarosi [Gyorgy], Sindelar, Piola, Svoboda and others. I also remember a historical soccer match between Czechoslovakia and Hungary in Budapest. Czechoslovakia lost 8:3. Doctor Sarosi, who was a high school teacher by profession, scored on Planicka seven times. That was something, to score on Planicka. He scored seven of them in one game! [During this soccer game, which took place on 19th September 1935 in Budapest, the Czechoslovak team suffered their worst loss in the history of Czechoslovak soccer.]

To this day, still remember the team rosters from the World Cup in 1934 in Italy, when we lost to Italy. Playing for Italy were: Combi, Monzeglio, Allemandi, Ferraris, L. Monti, Bertolini, Guaita, Maezza, Schiavio, Giovanni, Ferrari, Orsi. For Czechoslovakia: Planicka, Ctyroky, Zenisek, Kostalek, Cambal, Krcil, Junek, Svoboda, Sobotka, Nejedly and Puc. [The final game of the World Cup in soccer, Italy – Czechoslovakia, took place on 10th June 1934 in Rome. The home team won 2:1, when Schiavo scored during overtime.] It's interesting, that this I remember, but not some things from yesterday. That's apparently a law. You can't do anything about it.

While still in Bratislava, Minka met this one decent local Jewish boy. They went out for three years, until as a university student he went to Dortmund for summer work experience. Finally he decided to stay there and study, with the agreement of the appropriate officials here. A very clever and good student, he continued his studies in natural sciences at the university there. In 1968 Minka went to Israel. She was also there with the agreement of our pertinent officials for a half year, and she liked it there very much. She worked in kibbutzim and people grew very fond of her. She played various musical instruments like the accordion, piano, organ and flute. She was able to make sure that people had fun and in a good mood. Finally she and her boyfriend agreed that she'd travel to Germany to be with him and that they'd study there together. Of course, I wanted her to come home, to return. Well, her destiny was apparently there. She moved to Germany, where they got married.

Her husband is named Tominko [Tomas] Neustadt. He's two years older than Minka. I was very, very unhappy when Minka emigrated despite being summoned by our officials to return. I took it very hard. I was more than just sad. My wife was also so unhappy because of it that she fell ill, but I have to honestly admit, that though she wasn't any less unhappy than I, she weighed it realistically. I saw that my love, my firstborn, is leaving me. Is this possible? And it was possible, but that's life. Luckily they were both well-liked and one of Tomas's professors at university helped them immensely. Minka's principal, who called her 'Sonnenschein' [Sunshine], also helped them. They gave them various options and advice, so that they could make something of themselves.

In time they had two children, Daniel and Ester. Daniel is 33 and is a music and English teacher. Ester is 28. She recently finished university; she studied music and history. Their mother tongue is German. But they also speak Slovak, with mistakes of course. All the more lovely. The times we've laughed at the muddles they've made in their 'Slovak.' I even wrote those muddles down. Daniel has already started his own family. His wife is named Katrin and they have two children. The boy is named Jakob and the little girl is Ella. So now I've become 'Opa Bercinko' [Grandpa Bercinko].

In 1969 a friend of my older daughter's was getting married in Vienna. At that time Minka and her husband already couldn't come to Bratislava. So we went to Devin, they were on one side of the Danube and we the parents on the other, and so we were waving at each other. Suddenly some soldier with a dog walked up and said, 'Who were you waving at? Are you signaling someone?' We answered, 'We were just waving, people were waving, so we waved back.' 'They're not some sort of signals?' 'No, no.' Soon an already alarmed officer with five soldiers arrived. They had bayonets on their rifles. At that time we were afraid, as the times weren't good. We didn't know what was going to come of it. In the end he was decent enough to just ask us to leave. My wife was crying on the Slovak side. Minka was crying on the other side of the Danube. But there were also other people there, who were waving to each other like this and weeping.

Our younger daughter left for Israel in 1969 through the Jewish community. Visas were issued in Vienna. They weren't hard to get at all. The bigger problem was with Czechoslovak officials, where it was necessary to be issued an exit permit. Finally she did get to Israel, but returned still that same year. During her university studies she used to go to the Tatras for ski lessons. There she met one older, divorced man from Brezno. He drank a lot and Evicka wanted to break his habit, but she didn't succeed. He reported her, that she wanted to escape abroad. Finally they broke up.

Then she wanted to go join her sister in the West, but that was no longer possible. In order to get an exit permit she decided to enter into a false marriage with a Yugoslav citizen. She managed to get a permit to travel to Yugoslavia. For from there it was easier to travel to the West. At the beginning of the 1970s she finally got to Germany. In the beginning she lived with her sister in Dortmund. Finally she married this one friend by the name of Désiré Blitz. He's from Holland. Désiré is a French name and means desired. This was because at a ripe old age his father had managed, besides daughters, to have a son. Désiré is a mixed Jew. He works as a manager, apparently he's successful. Evicka is a housewife. He and Evicka were married in 1995 in Bratislava. They were married by the current mayor of Bratislava, Mr. Durkovsky. I have to touch wood; she's got a very good husband. We're very happy that her life has turned out well.

After my wife and I met, we set a goal that we'd travel a lot, see the world. That resolution of ours has also been kept. We've traveled through many countries. Our first trip, after the war, was to Switzerland. We actually planned this trip, in 1946, as our honeymoon. It was like a fairy tale. In 1947 we visited Paris. We were lined up there for movie tickets to the world premiere of 'Rebecca,' and standing in front of us in the queue was a couple of around the same age. They were slobbering over each other in public. My wife and I didn't know where we should look, it was strange for us. People didn't do things like that at the time here, though now they do.

There were years when we weren't allowed to go abroad. So we crisscrossed all of Slovakia and Czechia. During hard times my wife and I helped our friends who had emigrated after 1968. We obtained various documents for them and sent them to them. Later, to return the favor, they even

invited us to the USA a few times. When I was in the Jewish neighborhood in New York, I had the feeling that if I just walked down the street, I'd meet people I know from Michalovce... We were in Israel and in various other countries. One of them is for example Mongolia. Once we were notified at work that there was one free place to go there. No one applied, so I took it. An interesting experience, a Communist country with many Buddhist monks. Unfortunately Mongolia is a very backward country.

I worked for the Geodetic Institute after I retired as well. The last director, who recognized my talent for drawing, asked me if I wouldn't put together a company chronicle. In the beginning I didn't think much of this, but I took it as fun. Finally I immersed myself in it to the degree that I began to truly devote myself to it fully. To this day at the Geodetic Institute they're proud of that chronicle, which is located in the institute's boardroom. While I was working on that chronicle I got into it to the degree that I decided to put together a family chronicle, which I'm very proud of. Finally I also made chronicles for our daughters.

As I've already mentioned, during the time of the Slovak State, we were members of the Sixth Battalion. After the war many of us moved away. The emigrants kept in touch with each other. In Tel Aviv they met every Friday, and they even had two worldwide gatherings. We who stayed here were isolated and didn't dare to meet publicly. Among us there were even those that denied being in the Sixth Battalion. After the Velvet Revolution 28, emigrants began to visit our spas and so we established contact with them.

In 1992 we finally managed to get a few boys from the Sixth Battalion together. It was due to the impetus and money of one of us, a friend from the USA, by the name of Pivko, originally Pick. Besides the fact that he was rich, he had an excellent Jewish heart. With his money, we were able to support boys that were badly off, and widows of Sixth Battalion members that were in financial need. We also organized a reunion in Czechoslovakia, with many international participants, with his money. The reunion took place in 1992 in Piestany. Other conferences and reunions were in Bratislava. Within the scope of Sixth Battalion activities, in twelve years we did a lot of work in the interests of Sixth Battalion members and their widows. With the participation of many prominent Slovak historians and resistance members, we filled in many blank spots in the history of the creation, existence and dissolution of the Sixth Jewish Labor Battalion. In this way we also helped to bring to light part of Slovakia's history. We also documented the participation of Jewish boys in the resistance, as well as how many of them fell. We gained valuable materials from military archives.

I was chairman of the Sixth Battalion for the entire twelve years. This was only possible because my wife helped me the entire time as well. Unfortunately our ranks are shrinking and now basically only my friend Bachnar, the widow Mrs. Borska and I devote ourselves to the Sixth Battalion. With the remnants of the money that we have, we'd like to have one more memorial plaque made, which we'd then have placed on Kozia Street in the building of the Central Federation of Jewish Religious Communities or in the building of the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava. The first memorial plaque is in the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising in Banska Bystrica.

We wanted to succeed in having our being put in the Sixth Battalion recognized by the state as a stay in a labor camp. Government representatives were very much against it. For a long time they refused to accept this idea from the Central Federation of Jewish Religious Communities, until we with great vehemence joined the effort, then things began moving. At a meeting with the Minister

of Justice, Lipsic 29, we presented this request. Lipsic [Lipschitz] is originally from a Jewish family, but doesn't admit to it. Finally, making use of documents from military archives, we managed to have ourselves put into a category that despite not having been in a concentration camp also got satisfaction in the form of compensation. Of assistance in this was a clause in the law which states that 'also those, who were prepared for transport, and who were known to be going there,' were also eligible for compensation, so we were also classified as such. The widows of our friends that hadn't lived to receive it were also classified in this category.

Basically, we can thank the then minister of defense, General Catlos, that the entire Sixth Battalion didn't end up in a concentration camp in 1942. He announced at the request of the Minister of the Interior of the Slovak State that the Sixth Battalion should be prepared for deportation, that the Sixth Battalion will go as the last transport of Jews from Slovakia. But that didn't happen, they didn't get to it! Luckily for us!

**Glossary:**

**1 Orthodox communities**

The traditionalist Jewish communities founded their own Orthodox organizations after the Universal Meeting in 1868-1869.They organized their life according to Judaist principles and opposed to assimilative aspirations. The community leaders were the rabbis. The statute of their communities was sanctioned by the king in 1871. In the western part of Hungary the communities of the German and Slovakian immigrants' descendants were formed according to the Western Orthodox principles. At the same time in the East, among the Jews of Galician origins the 'eastern' type of Orthodoxy was formed; there the Hassidism prevailed. In time the Western Orthodoxy also spread over to the eastern part of Hungary. 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities were registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country, in 1896. In 1930 30,4 % of Hungarian Jews belonged to 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 %).
2 Subcarpathian Ruthenia: is found in the region where the Carpathian Mountains meet the Central Dnieper Lowlands. Its larger towns are Beregovo, Mukacevo and Hust. Up until the First World War the region belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but in the year 1919, according to the St. Germain peace treaty, was made a part of Czechoslovakia. Exact statistics regarding ethnic and linguistic composition of the population aren't available. Between the two World Wars Ruthenia's inhabitants included Hungarians, Ruthenians, Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs and Slovaks, plus numerous Jewish and Gypsy communities. The first Viennese Arbitration (1938) gave Hungary that part of Ruthenia inhabited by Hungarians. The remainder of the region gained autonomy within Czechoslovakia, and was occupied by Hungarian troops. In 1944 the Soviet Army and local resistance units took power in Ruthenia. According to an agreement dated June 29, 1945, Czechoslovakia ceded the region to the Soviet Union. Up until 1991 it was a part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. After Ukraine declared its independence, it became one of the country's administrative regions.
3 Deportation of Jews from the Slovak State: The size of the Jewish community in the Slovak State in 1939 was around 89,000 residents (according to the 1930 census – it was around 135,000 residents), while after the First Vienna Decision in November 1938, around 40,000 Jews were on

the territory gained by Hungary. At a government session on 24th March 1942, the Minister of the Interior, A. Mach, presented a proposed law regarding the expulsion of Jews. From March 1942 to October 1942, 58 transports left Slovakia, and 57,628 people (2/3 of the Jewish population) were deported. The deportees, according to a constitutional law regarding the divestment of state citizenship, could take with them only 50 kg of precisely specified personal property. The Slovak government paid Nazi Germany a 'settlement' subsidy, 500 RM (around 5,000 Sk in the currency of the time) for each person. Constitutional law legalized deportations. After the deportations, not even 20,000 Jews remained in Slovakia. In the fall of 1944 – after the arrival of the Nazi army on the territory of Slovakia, which suppressed the Slovak National Uprising – deportations were renewed. This time the Slovak side fully left their realization to Nazi Germany. In the second phase of 1944-1945, 13,500 Jews were deported from Slovakia, with about 1000 Jewish persons being executed directly on Slovak territory. About 10,000 Jewish citizens were saved thanks to the help of the Slovak populace. (Source: Niznansky, Eduard: Zidovska komunita na Slovensku 1939-1945)

**4 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.

**5 Slovak State (1939-1945)**

Czechoslovakia, which was created after the disintegration of Austria-Hungary, lasted until it was broken up by the Munich Pact of 1938; Slovakia became a separate (autonomous) republic on 6th October 1938 with Jozef Tiso as Slovak PM. Becoming suspicious of the Slovakian moves to gain independence, the Prague government applied martial law and deposed Tiso at the beginning of March 1939, replacing him with Karol Sidor. Slovakian personalities appealed to Hitler, who used this appeal as a pretext for making Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia a German protectorate. On 14th March 1939 the Slovak Diet declared the independence of Slovakia, which in fact was a nominal one, tightly controlled by Nazi Germany.

**6 Miedzyrzec Podlaski**

is a town in the Lublin province of eastern Poland. At the outbreak of the war, there were about 12,000 Jews in the town. During the first year of the Nazi occupation, about 4,000 Jews from other places were deported to the town, including about 1,000 from Slovakia. A ghetto was created in the summer of 1942. Deportations to Treblinka began in August 1942, and the ghetto was liquidated in November 1942. Over 11,000 Jews perished in these deportations.

7 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.

8 Maccabi Sports Club in the Czechoslovak Republic: The Maccabi World Union was founded in 1903 in Basel aT the VI. Zionist Congress. In 1935 the Maccabi World Union had 100,000 members, 10,000 of which were in Czechoslovakia. Physical education organizations in Bohemia have their roots in the 19th century. For example, the first Maccabi gymnastic club in Bohemia was founded in 1899. The first sport club, Bar Kochba, was founded in 1893 in Moravia. The total number of Maccabi clubs in Bohemia and Moravia before WWI was fifteen. The Czechoslovak Maccabi Union was officially founded in June 1924, and in the same year became a member of the Maccabi World Union, located in Berlin.

9 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.

10 Hashomer Hatzair in Slovakia: the Hashomer Hatzair movement came into being in Slovakia after WWI. It was Jewish youths from Poland, who on their way to Palestine crossed through Slovakia and here helped to found a Zionist youth movement, that took upon itself to educate young people via scouting methods, and called itself Hashomer (guard). It joined with the Kadima (forward) movement in Ruthenia. The combined movement was called Hashomer Kadima. Within the membership there were several ideologues that created a dogma that was binding for the rest of the members. The ideology was based on Borchov's theory that the Jewish nation must also become a nation just like all the others. That's why the social pyramid of the Jewish nation had to be turned upside down. He claimed that the base must be formed by those doing manual labor, especially in agriculture – that is why young people should be raised for life in kibbutzim, in Palestine. During its time of activity it organized six kibbutzim: Shaar Hagolan, Dfar Masaryk, Maanit, Haogen, Somrat and Lehavot Chaviva, whose members settled in Palestine. From 1928 the movement was called Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard). From 1938 Nazi influence dominated in Slovakia. Zionist youth movements became homes for Jewish youth after their expulsion from high schools and universities. Hashomer Hatzair organized high school courses, re-schooling centers for youth, summer and winter camps. Hashomer Hatzair members were active in underground movements in labor camps, and when the Slovak National Uprising broke out, they joined the rebel army and partisan units. After liberation the movement renewed its activities, created youth homes in which lived mainly children who returned from the camps without their parents, organized re-

schooling centers and branches in towns. After the putsch in 1948 that ended the democratic regime, half of Slovak Jews left Slovakia. Among them were members of Hashomer Hatzair. In the year 1950 the movement ended its activity in Slovakia.

**11 Betar**

Brith Trumpledor (Hebrew) meaning Trumpledor Society; right-wing Revisionist Jewish youth movement. It was founded in 1923 in Riga by Vladimir Jabotinsky, in memory of J. Trumpledor, one of the first fighters to be killed in Palestine, and the fortress Betar, which was heroically defended for many months during the Bar Kohba uprising. Its aim was to propagate the program of the revisionists and prepare young people to fight and live in Palestine. It organized emigration through both legal and illegal channels. It was a paramilitary organization; its members wore uniforms. They supported the idea to create a Jewish legion in order to liberate Palestine. From 1936-39 the popularity of Betar diminished. During WWII many of its members formed guerrilla groups.

**12 Mizrachi**

The word has two meanings: a) East. It designates the Jews who immigrate to Palestine from the Arab countries. Since the 1970s they make up more than half of the Israeli population. b) It is the movement of the Zionists, who firmly hold on to the Torah and the traditions. The movement was founded in 1902 in Vilnius. The name comes from the abbreviation of the Hebrew term Merchoz Ruchoni (spiritual center). The Mizrachi wanted to build the future Jewish state by enforcing the old Jewish religious, cultural and legal regulations. They recruited followers especially in Eastern Europe and the United States. In the year after its founding it had 200 organizations in Europe, and in 1908 it opened an office in Palestine too. The first congress of the World Movement was held in 1904 in Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia), where they joined the Basel program of the Zionists, but they emphasized that the Jewish nation had to stand on the grounds of the Torah and the traditions. The aim of the Mizrach-Mafdal movement is the same in our days too. It supports schools, youth organizations in Israel and in other countries, so that the Jewish people can learn about their religion, and it takes part in the political life of Israel, promoting by this the traditional image of the Jewish state. (Sources: http://www.mizrachi.org/aboutus/default.asp; www.cionista.hu/mizrachi.htm; Magyar Zsidó Lexikon, Budapest, 1929).

13 Jewish Codex: Jewish Codex: Order no. 198 of the Slovakian government, issued in September 1941, on the legal status of the Jews, went down in history as Jewish Codex. Based on the Nuremberg Laws, it was one of the most stringent and inhuman anti-Jewish laws all over Europe. It paraphrased the Jewish issue on a racial basis, religious considerations were fading into the background; categories of Jew, Half Jew, moreover 'Mixture' were specified by it. The majority of the 270 paragraphs dealt with the transfer of Jewish property (so-called Aryanizing; replacing Jews by non-Jews) and the exclusion of Jews from economic, political and public life.

14 First Vienna Decision: On 2nd November 1938 a German-Italian international committee in Vienna obliged Czechoslovakia to surrender much of the southern Slovakian territories that were inhabited mainly by Hungarians. The cities of Kassa (Kosice), Komarom (Komarno), Ersekujvar (Nove Zamky), Ungvar (Uzhorod) and Munkacs (Mukacevo), all in all 11.927 km² of land, and a population of 1.6 million people became part of Hungary. According to the Hungarian census in 1941 84% of the people in the annexed lands were Hungarian-speaking.

15 Hlinka-Guards: Military group under the leadership of the radical wing of the Slovakian Popular Party. The radicals claimed an independent Slovakia and a fascist political and public life. The

Hlinka-Guards deported brutally, and without German help, 58,000 (according to other sources 68,000) Slovak Jews between March and October 1942.
16 HSLS, The Hlinka Slovak People's Party: a political party founded in 1918 as the Slovak People's Party, in 1925 the HSLS. Had an anti-communist, anti-socialist orientation, based itself on Catholic ideology, and demanded Slovakia's autonomy. From 1938 assumed a prominent position in Slovakia, in 1939 introduced an authoritarian one-party regime, its ideology was a mixture of clericalism, nationalism and fascism. Its leader until 1938 was Andrej Hlinka, after him Jozef Tiso. The HSLS founded two mass organizations: the Hlinka Guards, a copy of the German Sturmabteilung, and the Hlinka Youth, a copy of the German Hitlerjugend. After the liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945, it was banned and its highest officials put on trial.

**17 Sixth Labor Battalion of Jews**
the first discriminatory legal statute of the Slovak State in the army was the government decree No. 74 Sl. z., dated 24th April 1939, regarding the expulsion of Jews from public services. On 21st June 1939 a second legal statute was passed, government decree No. 150 Sl. z. regarding Jews' military responsibilities. On its basis all Jews in the army were transferred to special work formations. Decree 230/1939 Sl. z. stripped Jewish persons of rank. All stated laws were part of the racially discriminatory legal framework of the Slovak State. In 1939, 1940 and 1941 three years of Jewish draftees entered army work formations, which formed the so-called Sixth Battalion. The year 1942 did not enter, as its members were assigned to the first transports. The first mass concentration of Jewish draftees into an army work formation was on 3rd March 1941 in the town of Cemerne. On 31st May 1943 three Jewish companies were transferred to work centers of the Ministry of the Interior watched over by the Hlinka Guard. Most members were transferred to labor camps: Novaky, Sered, Kostolna and Vyhne. A large majority of them later participated in fighting during the Slovak National Uprising. (Source: Knezo Schönbrun, Bernard, Zidia v siestom robotnom prapore, In. Zidia v interakcii II., IJ UK Bratislava, 1999, pp. 63 – 80)

**18 Siroky, Viliam (1902–1971)**
from 1921 a member and apparatchik of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). 1939–1940 member of the foreign secretariat of the KSC in Paris, 1940–1941 member of the Moscow leadership of the KSC. In 1941 he was sent to Slovakia to manage the illegal activities of the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) there, but was soon after arrested and jailed until 1945. In February 1945 he managed to escape from jail with the help of Slovak resistance members, and joined the Soviet army. From 1945–1954 the chairman of the KSS, 1945 and 1948–1963 a member of the presidium of the KSC Central Committee. 1945–1953 deputy premier, 1950–1953 Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1953–1963 premier; 1945–1964 a member of the National Assembly. Held a significant amount of responsibility for injustices and political despotism in the 1940s and 1950s, participated in the preparation of show trials and the campaign against 'Slovak bourgeois nationalism.' In September 1963 removed from state and party functions and withdrew from public life. (Source: http://wtd.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?id=444)

**19 Catlos, Ferdinand (1895–1972)**

Czechoslovak officer, Slovak general and politician. During WWI he fought in the Austro-Hungarian Army at the Russian front. Graduated from Military College in France. In March 1938 (at that time

he had the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of the General Staff) he was named General I. Class of the Slovak State and simultaneously became the Minister of National Defense. He fully participated in activities of the Slovak Army during the German-Polish War and also had a hand in the sending of Slovak soldiers to the Eastern Front after 1941. In 1944 he attempted to contact the resistance. After the liberation, he was put on trial within the scope of the retribution decree, and was jailed during the years 1945-1948. He then worked as a civil servant in Martin, and died in obscurity.
20 Slovak Uprising: At Christmas 1943 the Slovak National Council was formed, consisting of various oppositional groups (communists, social democrats, agrarians etc.). Their aim was to fight the Slovak fascist state. The uprising broke out in Banska Bystrica, central Slovakia, on 20th August 1944. On 18th October the Germans launched an offensive. A large part of the regular Slovak army joined the uprising and the Soviet Army also joined in. Nevertheless the Germans put down the riot and occupied Banska Bystrica on 27th October, but weren't able to stop the partisan activities. As the Soviet army was drawing closer many of the Slovak partisans joined them in Eastern Slovakia under either Soviet or Slovak command.
21 St. Cyril and Methodius: Greek monks from Salonika, living in the 9th century. In order to convert the Slavs to Christianity the two brothers created the Slavic (Glagolitic) script, based on the Greek one, and translated many religious texts to Old Church Slavonic, which is the liturgical language of many of the Eastern Orthodox Churches up until today. After Bulgaria converted to Christianity under Boris in 865, his son and successor Simeon I supported the further development of Slavic liturgical works, which led to a refinement of the Slavic literary language and a simplification of the alphabet - The Cyrillic script, named in honor of St. Cyril. The Cyrillic alphabet today is used in Orthodox Slavic countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. It is also used by some non-Slavic countries previously part of the Soviet Union, as well as most linguistic minorities within Russia and also the country of Mongolia.
22 February 1948: Communist take-over in Czechoslovakia. The 'people's domocracy' became one of the Soviet satelites in Eastern Europe. The state aparatus was centralized under the leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC). In the economy private ovnership was banned and submitted to central planning. The state took control of the educational system, too. Political opposition and dissident elements were persecuted.

**23 Population exchange between Czechoslovakia and Hungary**

Eduard Benes, president of Czechoslovakia, besides deportations of the German populace also promoted the displacement of citizens of Hungarian nationality, living predominantly on the territory of Slovakia. He was convinced that the collective blame for events that took place during WWII doesn't apply only to Germans, but also Hungarians, who thus cannot lay claim to rights belonging to national minorities in Czechoslovakia. Pursuant to the agreement of 27th February 1946, he intended to displace as many Hungarians in Czechoslovakia as the number of Slovaks living in Hungary that had requested to return to their native land. Official Hungarian and Slovak sources regarding the population exchange differ, however. While the Hungarians state that 60,257 residents of Slovak nationality(1) moved from Hungarian territory to former Czechoslovakia, Slovak sources state that their number was 73,233(2). According to Hungarian sources there were 76,616(1) residents of Hungarian nationality displaced from Czechoslovakia. Slovak sources state that their number was 89,660(2). Besides this, according to an audit made on 21st January 1949, there were 43,546 persons of Hungarian nationality transported from the territory of today's Slovakia to the Czech lands between 19th November 1946 and 26th February 1947(3)

(1) Valuch Tibor: Magyarország társadalomtörténete a XX. század második felében, Budapest, 2001, Osiris, page 32
(2) Slovak National Archive Bratislava, f. GT, c. 522: Správa Osídlovacieho uradu o ukoncení vymeny obyvatelstva medzi Ceskoslovenskom a Madarskom.
(3) Vadkerty Katalin: Madarská otázka v Ceskoslovensku 1944 – 1948, Bratislava, 2002, Kalligram, page 75
24 Forced displacement of Germans: one of the terms used to designate the mass deportations of German occupants from Czechoslovakia which took place after WWII, during the years 1945-1946. Despite the fact that anti-German sentiments were common in Czech society after WWII, the origin of the idea of resolving post-war relations between Czechs and Sudeten Germans with mass deportations are attributed to President Edvard Benes, who gradually gained the Allies' support for his intent. The deportation of Germans from Czechoslovakia, together with deportations related to a change in Poland's borders (about 5 million Germans) was the largest post-war transfer of population in Europe. During the years 1945-46 more than 3 million people had to leave Czechoslovakia; 250,000 Germans with limited citizenship rights were allowed to stay. (Source:http://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vys%C3%ADdlen%C3%AD_N%C4%9Bmc%C5%AF_z_%C4%8Ceskoslov

**25 'Action 77,000'**

A program organized by the communist regime, in which 77,000 people, judged to belong to the middle class, were dismissed from their administrative positions and were sent to do manual labor in factories. The rationale for this action was to degrade those that the regime regarded as intellectuals. Children of communist parents were given priority in admission to university, while children of middle-class parents were denied the possibility to pursue higher education, and, those who were already at university were often expelled.
26 Statni Tajna Bezpecnost: Czechoslovak intelligence and security service founded in 1948.
27 Prague Spring: A period of democratic reforms in Czechoslovakia, from January to August 1968. Reformatory politicians were secretly elected to leading functions of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC). Josef Smrkovsky became president of the National Assembly, and Oldrich Cernik became the Prime Minister. Connected with the reformist efforts was also an important figure on the Czechoslovak political scene, Alexander Dubcek, General Secretary of the KSC Central Committee (UV KSC). In April 1968 the UV KSC adopted the party's Action Program, which was meant to show the new path to socialism. It promised fundamental economic and political reforms. On 21st March 1968, at a meeting of representatives of the USSR, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany and Czechoslovakia in Dresden, Germany, the Czechoslovaks were notified that the course of events in their country was not to the liking of the remaining conference participants, and that they should implement appropriate measures. In July 1968 a meeting in Warsaw took place, where the reformist efforts in Czechoslovakia were designated as 'counter-revolutionary.' The invasion of the USSR and Warsaw Pact armed forces on the night of 20th August 1968, and the signing of the so-called Moscow Protocol ended the process of democratization, and the Normalization period began.
28 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. A non-violent political revolution in Czechoslovakia that meant the transition from Communist dictatorship to democracy. The Velvet Revolution began with a police attack against Prague students on 17th November 1989. That same month the citizen's democratic

movement Civic Forum (OF) in Czech and Public Against Violence (VPN) in Slovakia were formed. On 10th December a government of National Reconciliation was established, which started to realize democratic reforms. On 29th December Vaclav Havel was elected president. In June 1990 the first democratic elections since 1948 took place.

27 Lipsic, Daniel (b. 1973): a Slovak politician, former vice-premier of the Slovak Republic and minister of justice, currently (2006) vice-president of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH).