Zuzana Minacova

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Zuzana Minacova (75) was born in Bratislava, into an emancipated Jewish doctor's family. Her parents raised her in a non-religious manner, though she did have the opportunity to come into contact with Orthodoxy in her grandparents' family in Betlanovce, where she used to go for summer holidays, and where she had various adventures. Zuzana Minacova's idyllic childhood was however soon severed - she was only 8 years old when the Slovak State 1 broke out, and overnight her family was forced to deal with a number of restrictions and persecutions. Her initial experiences were while she was in hiding with her sister, however after someone informed on them, they were both transported to the Sered 2 collection camp, from there to Auschwitz, followed finally by a forced labor camp in Vrchlabi. She experienced the liberation as a 13-year-old girl. The war's events had forced her to prematurely grow up; after the war the cares and worries of other girls her age suddenly seemed alien to her. As she herself says, she wasn't interested in the difficulties of her classmates at school, she wanted to begin to live real life, to find work and do something fulfilling. This came to be - she became a well-known and successful photographer, and to this day is involved in this profession. She joined the so-called "new wave" of the 1960s, which expanded the expressive possibilities of photography. Her work is characterized by imagination, philosophical contemplation, poetic playfulness and experimentation. She is the author of photographic series such as Time, Waiting, Connections, Play, Stopping On the Way, Actors' Portraits, and Trees. Almost 60 years after World War II, Zuzana Minacova decided to "renew" her childhood family album, which she had lost during the chaos of World War II. In 1996, she began the "The Reconstruction of a Family Album" project, an evocation of her childhood through photographs. She involved her son Matej and his family in the project, as well as her friends and other familiar personalities, who took the place of her own relatives that she'd lost during the war, and of whom no photographs had survived. As she herself is a well-known photographer, she decided to reconstruct this album on the basis of her memories.

Family background">Family background

My father's parents were truly Orthodox Jews; during visits and summer holidays that I spent at their place, I had the opportunity to come into contact with religious life. My grandmother was

named Maria Silbersteinova, née Hexnerova, and my grandfather was named Adolf Silberstein. They were both from Betlanovce, which is a small village near the Tatra Mountains in the Spisska Nova Ves region.

My grandmother's family had originally come from the Iberian Peninsula. The Hexner family left Spain when the Jews were being expelled from there at the end of the 15th century 3. They had originally wanted to settle in the Czech lands, but there was a law in effect here that a Jewish family could have at most perhaps only two children, so they settled in Slovakia. In their case it was a necessity, as they had a terribly large number of children! So my father used to crack jokes on this subject, though it was actually no joke, it was reality - when people asked him how it was possible that all those Hexners were one and the same family, he answered, 'It's like this: once there was this Hexner and he had twelve sons, each of those sons also had twelve sons, and those also twelve, twelve and twelve sons, and all of them are my relatives...' But I guess there's some truth to it, because the Hexners really were very numerous. Unfortunately, most of these relatives of mine died during the war in concentration camps, all of my cousins, aunts and uncles... I know of just one great-great-uncle, Erwin Paul Hexner, who immigrated to America and became a famous economist. From this whole large, branching family, only this one uncle survived.

It was said that my paternal great-great-grandfather, who had lived at the beginning of the 18th century in Betlanovce under the Tatras, had been a strong and handsome man. They say that once he was driving home some barrels of beer, and took a shortcut through the forest. In the forest he was ambushed and stopped by boys belonging to Janosik's band of outlaws 4, who wanted to take his beer. But he defended himself so handily that Janosik gave him a chance. He told him that if he managed to lift a 50- liter barrel of beer above his head, he could keep it. My great-great-grandfather managed it with ease, thanks to which Janosik took such a liking to him that he made him a part of his eleven-member band.

In the family it was handed down that when the outlaw Janosik was executed, it wasn't as it's commonly thought that his outlaws divided the money among the poor. Reputedly they divided the money among themselves. Thanks to this, my great-great-grandfather became a very rich man, and upon his return home he bought up the entire village, starting with the Catholic Church and ending with the Betlanovce renaissance chateau.

Betlanovce was a small town, where Grandma and Grandpa had a small general store. Grandma and Grandpa had a farm that they worked on. There was no synagogue in Betlanovce, or in the surrounding villages, so my grandparents decided to have one built. They initiated and financed its construction, so thanks to them there's a synagogue in Betlanovce. I figure this was probably sometime during the 1920s.

Jewish customs were observed in the family of my paternal grandparents; they cooked kosher food 5, separated their dishes for various foods and holidays, attended synagogue, and lived an Orthodox 6 lifestyle. I was a child, so I don't remember any details that clearly, but I do remember that my cousins, sister and I were always at my grandparents' during summer holidays, and had the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with true Jewish sentiments. We were still kids, so we often got things wrong, and then Grandma and Grandpa had to correct our mistakes, so I remember that we had to stick knives into the ground, where they had to stay for several days so everything would be ritually clean again.

Unfortunately, the idyllic summer vacations and carefree childhood at my grandma and grandpa's ended when I was eight. The Slovak State began, all those horrors and the persecution of Jews 7, and we stopped going to see our grandma and grandpa. Our parents had other worries, they had to worry about what to do, to hide whom where, how to survive. Starting at age eight, I was never in Betlanovce again. My father's entire family died in concentration camps. My father managed to save Grandma from the transport, he hid her in Bratislava until 1944, but in the end the transport didn't miss her, and she died in Auschwitz. I don't know the details of Grandma's hiding and subsequent arrest, I was too small to remember it; what's more, for a long time after the war, I had no desire to talk to anyone about wartime events.

My father was named Dezider Silberstein, and was born in Betlanovce in 1894. As a child he attended Jewish elementary school, but as an adult he no longer followed Jewish customs. My father wanted to become a farmer, and his brother Filip was supposed to go study. But Uncle Filip was a bad student, so their parents decided that he'd run the farm, and because my father on the contrary was a very good student, his parents sent him to school, although he would have preferred to be a farmer. He registered for medicine and became a doctor.

My father was the merriest person in the world. He liked to play various jokes; life with him was one big laugh. Unfortunately, after the Slovak State broke out, life was no longer very much fun. I remember one funny story, when as a joke, my father told me that an incredibly fat person was coming to our place for a visit, and that we had to prepare for it. He claimed that the man was so incredibly fat, that he wouldn't even fit through a set of double doors, and that he'd have to squeeze through them sideways. He also told me that we'd have to wash all our washbasins and pails, because we were going to be serving him food and drink in them. I was then terribly disappointed when that person arrived. He was very fat, but had no problems at all walking through the door, and what's more, he ate from a plate like everyone else at the table.

My father was very kind, for example once before Christmas he took me by the hand and led me to the couch in the living room. For a few seconds he took out from behind it a well-hidden doll, for which I had been yearning for a terribly long time. He told me that I'd get it for Christmas, but for me to forget about it again for a while, and mainly for me to not tell my mother.

I don't remember my mother's parents, neither Grandma Janka Löwyova, née Neumannova, nor Grandpa Emanuel Löwy, as they died before I was born. They're buried at the Jewish cemetery in Nitra. I know little about them; they were farmers in Nitra and had six sons and five daughters. When they grew up, they all lived around Nitra in southern Slovakia, and some of the sisters lived in Prievidze.

From what I've heard, I know that my mother's brothers, so my uncles, were extremely merry people. Of my five uncles, only one got married, the rest were bachelors and lived at the expense of their sisters. During the summer my uncles worked on the farm, and during the winter they then lived a profligate lifestyle, and played cards at the casino in Monte Carlo. They lived like counts, but they weren't counts - they weren't all that rich, and neither did they have the kind of property to be able to afford such a luxurious lifestyle, so then their sisters' husbands had to pay off their debts. Because my aunts had married into rich families, their husbands paid the debts of these uncles of mine, so as not to cast the family in a bad light. They were definitely merry, forthright and profligate people! My uncles used to organize various hunts, trips into the countryside, they played

cards for money, invited Gypsy bands to play at parties, there was no shortage of fun. But with the coming of war, this all unfortunately soon ended.

I used to like going to my relatives' during summer vacation, and used to have various adventures there, for example my uncle let one of my cousins drive an expensive car, and I accompanied him. Or once, when one of my uncles had been winning all night at cards at a party, he stuck a 500 crown note to my forehead, which back then was a lot of money, especially for me, a six-year-old girl! [Editor's note: In 1929 it was decreed by law that the Czechoslovak crown (Kc), as the Czechoslovak unit of currency, was equal in value to 44.58 mg of gold.]

One uncle, Jackie, was a violin virtuoso, and a very sociable person, an enchanting beau and seducer of women. Another uncle, Maxi bacsi [Hungarian for Uncle Max] decided to leave for America at the age of 15. He took with him part of his inheritance, and crossed the ocean. There he used his fortune to buy the Buffalo Bill Circus. Years later, when he returned to his native village, he brought with him his American wife, Paula, a horse and buggy, and a lasso, with which he roped the children in the courtyard. We had lots of laughs and fun with him.

Another uncle for a change decided to go to Chile. He was a big hotshot, somewhat frivolous, and yearned for adventure. Before he left, he had a lot of expensive, fashionable suits custom-made. When he left, his relatives got the bills for all this finery, and had to pay them.

My mother, Pavla Silbersteinova, née Löwyova, was born in 1898 in Nitra, and was the ninth of eleven children. She apparently attended Jewish elementary school, but as an adult, in her marriage, she didn't keep Jewish customs. My mother was the first girl in Nitra to graduate from high school. She couldn't even attend school, but studied privately at home, and then took the exams. The she went to study medicine, which in those days was absolutely exceptional, for a woman to go study like this. She became a doctor. I don't know where or how my parents actually met, but I think that probably in medical circles, as both my father and mother were doctors.

Growing up">Growing up

In childhood I played with all children, Jewish and non-Jewish. There was no need to set them apart. There's this general sort of Christian notion, that Jews are somehow incredibly close and support each other, but in my view this isn't true at all. It's true that after the war, there were organizations that helped refugees, such as for example Joint 8. But in my view, the situation today is different. Certainly, if you decide to immigrate to Israel, it's not the case that you'll have an advantage because you're a Jew.

Today, when I'm unfortunately already 75, I think that I'm a witness to times long gone. Both my parents were Jews, but the religious side of things wasn't observed much in our family. We already lived in a non- religious way. We lived in Bratislava on Stefanikova Street, in a beautiful five-room apartment. My sister and I had a Christian nanny. Our father was a well-known doctor, and had his practice in the same building. Curiously enough, the apartment we used to live in is now occupied by Slovak Police, so when I was renewing my ID a couple of years ago, I went to our apartment to pick up my documents! When the harassment and persecution of Jews began, I was small, but I remember that my father had to have a sign at his practice where it was written that he was a Jew. We also had to wear a yellow star 9 sewed to our clothing.

During the war">During the war

During the war, my mother and father hid with some people they knew. At one time before the war, my father had as a patient one Count Palffy, from a very well-known aristocratic family. The two of them had an agreement that if the Russians came, my father would hide Palffy and his family, and if on the other hand the Germans came to Slovakia, Palffy would hide our family. Palffy really did hide our father; in the beginning they also hid Grandma. Mother and Father were at Palffy's place for about three months, but he then decided to emigrate, packed up all his property, paintings and valuables, and left the country with his entire family.

Then my mother and father hid somewhere else. When the Slovak National Uprising 10 broke out in 1944, someone informed on Grandma and they transported her to a concentration camp. I don't know exactly where and with whom my parents lived during the war. After the war, I never discussed it with them. I myself didn't want to talk about what I'd lived through and seen in the concentration camp. I didn't have the least desire to return to those wartime experiences, and that's why I didn't talk to my parents about what they did during the war and how and where they lived, either.

My sister and I were in a different place, our father hid us there, with reliable people he thought, but they actually ratted on us and my sister and I ended up in a concentration camp. Our parents had no idea that they'd nabbed my sister and me and dragged us off to Sered and subsequently to Auschwitz. Those people ratted on us, but kept taking money from our father for purportedly concealing us. During the whole war, my sister and I didn't know either what our family was doing, whether they were even alive.

My sister, Anna, and I ended up in the Sered collection camp, where we were for about a week. Sered was a transfer camp before the trip to the concentration camps, I'd compare it to Terezin 11. After a week in Sered, we were transported to Auschwitz. I arrived there in 1944, when I was 13. To this day, I've still got a number tattooed on my forearm. I think that my sister and I were there for about a month.

After some time spent in Auschwitz, a selection took place, more precisely they were picking people for work in some distant factory. They said for everyone between the ages of 16 and 25 to step forward. It seemed to me to be a good age, so that it would probably be advantageous for me to apply, even though I was only 13 at the time. I stepped forward, but they threw me out, saying that I didn't belong. They left my sister with them, she was 15, and seemed to be satisfactory to them.

I began crying, and suddenly something like a miracle happened. Suddenly my distant cousin, who'd already been in Auschwitz since 1942, appeared. When she noticed the fuss I was making, she took me aside during an unguarded moment so that no one would notice me. She knew that if I cried and made a fuss I'd draw attention to myself, and so had no choice but to calm me down - she gave me such a cuff to the head that I saw stars, and it gave me such a fright that I immediately calmed down.

When the selection ended, my cousin unobtrusively mixed me in with those selected for work. By doing this she saved my life! And so thanks to her, I got into the Hohenelbe work camp, today

Vrchlabi in Czech. Each person that survived a concentration camp survived, one could say, due to some miracle. It was a big life lottery, who survives and who doesn't survive, a string of the most varied coincidences. I think that due to the Holocaust, the world lost many geniuses, artists, inventors, and smart and interesting people, because six million people is a terribly immense loss.

There weren't only Jews in the Vrchlabi work camp, there were other nationalities as well, but the Jews had it the worst. In Vrchlabi we worked in the Lohenswerke factory; we manufactured radio tubes, weapons and all sorts of other things. Apparently towards the end of the war the Germans had a problem, because they had many people at the front, and so needed a lot of workers. I spent almost nine months in concentration camps, from September 1944 to May 1945.

Post-war">Post-war

In Vrchlabi my sister and I experienced the liberation. The Germans that had been guarding us there suddenly disappeared. About two days later the Russians came; with the Russian army came liberation. In a festive manner they put us on a train and were shooting salvos in the air; it was big celebration. Our train was overfull, so after about 40 kilometers it couldn't go on, and broke down. So we went on a train that had these boards attached to it, which we held on to, we held on to the windows, then we even sat on the roofs of the rail cars. My sister and I also had to walk part of the way. So in this adventurous fashion we made it to Bratislava after about a week's travels. When we arrived, we didn't know where we should go, so we went to our parents' friends. They knew that our parents had survived the war, so took us to them.

Of our family, only our parents, my sister and I survived. Otherwise all our other relatives died in concentration camps, except for my one great- great-uncle, Hexner, the economist who had immigrated to America. After the war my father returned to his medical practice. He died in 1961. My mother died in 1947 of a heart attack. After the war, my sister graduated from business academy, met a young man from Prague and moved to Czech; she married that young man, Mr. Engelsmann, and lives in Prague.

After the war I began attending school, but I didn't enjoy it much. I was almost 14 years old when I returned from the concentration camps. Everything in school and the cares and worries of my contemporaries seemed to me to be terribly trivial in comparison with what I had experienced during those months during the war. I said to myself that I wanted to do something worthwhile in life, to really work, and I didn't much care what it was, as long as it wasn't school. I was making up my mind between becoming a dental technician or a photographer. The life of an apprentice seemed to be very interesting to me, so I decided to become a photographer.

A little ways away from where we lived in Bratislava, at Na Palisadach, they opened an applied arts high school, which seemed to me to be very close to what I wanted to do. So I decided to study applied arts. The school was very well led. They accepted everyone, and then after three years the less capable ones got a vocational certificate, and the more capable ones could continue on and graduate. I identified more with the 'incapable' ones, and wanted to leave, while they were trying to convince me to stay, that school is the best time of your life, but I wanted to already go and work.

I remember saying to myself that it's possible that your school years are the most beautiful time of your life, but how is it then possible for life to be so boring? Is life really so uninteresting, that this horrific school is the best that will meet me in life? I couldn't reconcile myself with this idea, so I left school. I began to truly work, I started working at the film studios in Bratislava, and suddenly I realized that life isn't that boring! I enjoyed my work, and I'm a photographer to this day. I do what I really enjoy.

When the state of Israel was founded in 1948 12, I considered whether I shouldn't emigrate. Even before the war, my parents had considered us leaving for Palestine, as many of our friends and acquaintances had gone. One thing is to consider something, but the important thing is always what one really decides and what he does; we didn't decide to emigrate, and didn't leave. I've visited Israel about ten times. The first time I was there was after the revolution in 1989 13, back then Czechoslovakia didn't have an ambassador in Israel yet. President Vaclav Havel 14 arranged a special military flight, three planes in all, with a few of his friends and his personal guests, so I also flew with them.

I married the writer Jan Minac; my husband wasn't of Jewish origin. He was the brother of the famous Slovak writer Vladimir Minac. [Vladimir Minac (1922 - 1966): Slovak author of prose, essayist, scriptwriter, publicist, cultural and political figure] My husband and I met at a Youth Union meeting. At that time they were telling us that we all had to know Marxism. I had no desire at all to read those Marxist books! I found out that Jan was a soccer player who had a hemorrhage in his knee, and so was working in the library. I said to myself that instead of me reading those horrific books myself, it would be better for him to explain it to me. And so it happened that we began going out together, and in 1951 we got married.

When I got married, my husband and I had no place to live, so we sublet from one lady whose husband was being prosecuted in the communist show trials 15. With her we lived through all those horrors, the interrogations, the StB 16 used to visit her, it wasn't pleasant at all. I never fell for the Communist ideology, I think that I saw through Communism quite quickly. I was never a member of any party, and neither was my father ever in any party. There were a lot of people who fell for those Communist ideas, they believed the ideology, but that was never the case with me.

I've got to say that I never met up with prominent anti-Semitism, as our family didn't live in any religious fashion, we lived in Bratislava and my father was a respected doctor. He had both Jewish and non-Jewish clients, our neighbors liked him, he associated with acquaintances and doctors who weren't Jewish. We never had any problems with anti-Semitism, except for when the Slovak State broke out, then various measures against Jews arrived, but I was little, I was eight, so I didn't notice it that much.

I've got two sons. The older one, Jan, was born in 1953, and lives with his family in Canada, where he's a math professor at university. My younger son, Matej, was born in 1961, graduated from the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Bratislava, and became a movie director. Matej makes both fictional and documentary movies.

It's peculiar, that although I never particularly led my sons towards Judaism, both of them are interested in it, and today know more about Judaism than perhaps even I do. I told them a few little things on the occasion of the Israeli war in 1967 17. I myself didn't want to return to the events of the war in my memories, I myself don't even watch any war movies, I don't participate in memorial

events on the anniversary of the liberation, these themes upset me, and I don't want to recall it at all.

I moved to the Czech Republic in 1993, so at a relatively advanced age. It was actually a bit of foolishness and courage at the same time, that at a ripe old age I decided to live in a 'foreign' country. But my leaving Slovakia was motivated by the sentiments that began to develop there after the division of Czechoslovakia. Nationalist sentiments began developing, where I again saw the Slovak insignia and enthusiasm for Tiso 18; I didn't want to have to watch it any more, and to again be subject to those nationalist sentiments. I decided to leave for the Czech Republic. Today it's subsided a bit, but after the revolution in 1989, there was huge enthusiasm in Slovakia for the Slovak fascist state.

In 1996, at the age of 65, I decided to renew my old family album. In the chaos of World War II, I had lost most of my family photographs, and so I came upon the idea of reconstructing the album with the help of my friends and relatives, who became my models. Thus the publication 'Rekonstrukce rodinneho alba' [The Reconstruction of a Family Album] came about. Most of my relatives died in concentration camps during the war, not leaving behind even one photograph or memento; they were perpetuated only in my memories, and so it occurred to me to bring them to life through photography.

Thanks to the art of photography, to which I've devoted myself my whole life, one can stop time for a while and conjure up something that has faded over time. My family helped me: my son Matej played my father, Dezider Silberstein, and Matej's wife Karin played my mother, Pavlina Silbersteinova. My friends, actors and directors, posed as my uncles, aunts and cousins. While taking the photographs, I actually for the first time told my son Matej various family anecdotes, funny stories as well as personal tragedies. Matej decided to make a movie about our family.

My son, Matej Minac, makes movies on the subject of World War II and the Holocaust. He decided to make a movie about our family, as I was telling him various tragic stories about merry people. However, our family's tale was sad through and through, and so Matej was looking for something positive, so that the film would also contain a bit of hope. He read all sorts of books about the Holocaust, he scanned through all sorts of books in the library of the Jewish Museum in Prague, when one day he came upon the book 'Perlicky detstvi' [Pearls of Childhood] by Vera Gissingova. He was very captivated by her story, where she describes how as an 11-year-old girl she escaped the horrors of war and the certain transport towards death that Jews in a Europe gripped by Nazism were sentenced to.

Vera Gissingova writes: "We were a very diverse group of children, who had only one thing in common: we'd all escaped from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. Some children escaped with their parents, but many, I among them, arrived alone, on a children's train transport. The fact that we managed to escape was mainly the doing of one man - a then 30-year-old stockbroker from London, Nicholas Winton 19..."

Thus thanks to Nicholas Winton's effort, 11-year-old Vera Gissingova was saved, while her parents, who remained in Czechoslovakia, were subsequently murdered in concentration camps. When my son Matej read this, he decided that he'd shoot a movie that would be based on my memories, but would also include the story of a boy who was saved thanks to Nicholas Winton's effort.

When he gave his treatment to one lady for translation, he found out from her that she herself was one of the children that was saved in this way. He became very captivated by the story, and decided to search for the other children that Winton had saved, 669 in all, and for Winton himself. He was immensely surprised to find out that Winton was still alive, and living in Maidenhead, near London. He contacted him and arranged a meeting.

In February 1998 he visited him at his home in England; Winton was very nice to him; with his typical English humor he dispassionately told him about his life, his family and grandchildren, about his interest in the opera he attended, though at that time he was almost 90. Matej was enthralled by Winton, and decided that he wouldn't make only a fictional film inspired by my life, but would also make a documentary about this remarkable man. And so came about a documentary film about Nicholas Winton, entitled 'Sila Lidskosti' [The Power of Good], which among other prominent awards, was given in 2002 an international Emmy for the best non-American documentary. It is narrated by Joe Schlesinger, a Canadian reporter working for the CBS TV station, who is also one of 'Winton's children.'

The documentary describes how Nicholas Winton, born on 19th May 1909 in Britain, where he became a clerk and stockbroker, decided in 1939 to save Czech and Slovak children. Out of modesty, Winton adds that he was only in the right place at the right time, and that everyone would have done the same as he. But that's not the way it was; he was the only one. As my son, Matej Minac, writes in his book, 'The Lottery of Nicholas Winton's Life: Following the trail of a unique endeavor to save children, unique in modern history.': This I couldn't understand. Why didn't he want to talk about it? Why was he pretending that people do this as a matter of course, and that it's utterly common? After all, he's an experienced and intelligent person, and must know that he behaved in a completely exceptional fashion. Thus I was presented with a great mystery, which I wanted to solve at all costs. I couldn't wait to start on the documentary. I was hoping that during my work on the film, I'd find answers to my questions: Why did this person do this in the first place? Why did he keep silent about it for a half century? How did he actually do it? (....) Not even in the Prague of 1939 was he indifferent to the grave situation of endangered Czech and Slovak children. He didn't allow himself to be discouraged by people who reminded him that he had neither the finances nor the time to save the children, and that neither would the Gestapo allow it. What's more, what democratic country would even be willing to accept these children! But they didn't know Winton, whose motto was: "IT'S IMPOSSIBLE - is not an answer!"

Nicholas Winton never talked about his activities in Czechoslovakia; not even his wife had any clue that during the war her husband had saved 669 children from the gas chambers. In 1988, Nicholas's wife, Grete Winton, decided to undertake a thorough housecleaning. When she began tidying the attic, she found an old suitcase. She opened it, and found in it a pile of documents. In the suitcase she found old documents, letters and photographs. She began to go through the documents, but didn't understand them, as they were written in a language foreign to her. By the diacritical markings above the letters, she judged that they were apparently written in some Slavic language; due to the word Prague, she finally decided that the documents were connected with Czechoslovakia. When she asked her husband what all those forms, photographs and letters were supposed to mean, he brushed her off by saying that it was ancient history. Grete was very surprised to find out that her husband had saved so many children from death during the war.

In the suitcase she also found a list of the names of all 669 children, and she found letters where the children's parents for example wrote how to care for their progeny abroad, what they liked, what was bad for them. She gathered that the children's parents likely didn't survive, but that these letters should find their way into the hands of those that they belonged to, that is, the children that had been saved. Grete approached various museums, whether they wouldn't be interested in the documents; she finally succeeded at the Yad Vashem Memorial 20 to the Victims of the Holocaust in Israel, where they were finally stored.

Not even 'Winton's children' had any idea who had been responsible for saving their lives. On official forms, there was only the name of some organization called the 'British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia - Children's section,' which Winton had founded for appearance's sake, but no one knew anything more about it. So Winton's wife, Grete, turned to a British Holocaust expert, Elizabeth Maxwell, who decided to write letters to all 669 addresses of the families that had adopted children from Winton's list. She received 150 replies, and managed to get in touch with sixty of 'Winton's children.' None of them of course knew their savior, and they very much wanted to meet him.

In cooperation with the British BBC television station, Mrs. Maxwell discovered additional 'Winton's children.' As my son writes in his book, 'The Lottery of Nicholas Winton's Life: Following the trail of a unique endeavor to save children, unique in modern history.': "It occurred to the host of the program "That's Life", Esther Rantzen, to invite Winton and the children he'd saved into the studio. She however didn't tell anyone what was going to happen. Winton was under the impression that it was going to be a program about active old age, and that they'd invited him due to his extensive charity work, as he had built several senior citizens' centers around London. One of these is named after him - Winton House. But during the program, it became apparent that the audience around him were people whose life he'd once saved. Few were able to resist the huge wave of emotion that followed. Winton began weeping, and so did everyone around him. People watching the program were moved as well. The first person to be introduced to him was the writer Vera Gissingova. For years, she had been trying to find out who had been responsible for saving her, she had approached various refugee organizations, and had even written the Archbishop of Canterbury, but all had been in vain. And suddenly, there she was, sitting beside her savior! It was the most moving moment of her life. Right during that time, she was publishing her memoirs, and wrote five paragraphs about Nicholas Winton in the introduction."

Matej set out for the Yad Vashem archive, and examined all surviving documents about Winton's activities. There he found a scrapbook put together during the war by Winton's secretary, Barbara Wilson, who as a volunteer had helped him in his London office, opened by Winton after his return from Prague in 1939. Nicholas, his secretary and Nicholas's mother formed a three-member team that began organizing the rescue of Czechoslovak children. This team put together a list of countries that might be willing to accept the children and place them with foster families; they even approached the president of the United States of America, Theodore Roosevelt. He replied courteously, but with the postscript that currently the laws of his country do not allow any such an undertaking. Thus the only refuge remaining for children from Czechoslovak families was Britain.

Winton had brought with him from Prague a list of the most endangered children, which contained thousands of names. Parents had sent him photos of their children, the photos were glued to cards and accompanied by information about the children's abilities, interests and skills. He then sent the

cards out all over Britain, offered them to refugee organizations, everyone who could help in some fashion. And so they managed to place children into many varied and sundry families and households; mostly they were taken in by good people.

The first train of children departed Wilson Station in Prague for England on 14th April 1939, the day before the German occupation of Bohemia. Subsequently up to 2nd August 1939 there were another seven trains dispatched. Nicholas Winton managed to secure the emigration of a total of 669 children from occupied Bohemia and Moravia 21, and from the Slovak State. The last transport of 251 children was supposed to leave Prague on 1st September 1939. The parents and all 251 children arrived at Wilson Station on 1st September. There were already 251 families ready in London that had promised to take them in. The departure was prepared, the children were already sitting in their seats on the train, their parents were weeping, but were hoping that sending the children to England was for their good. But the train never started. World War II broke out, and suddenly everything was off. The children had to get off, and no one ever heard of them again; they ended their lives in concentration camps.

At the National Archives in Washington, Matej managed to find period footage that some American news crew had shot at Wilson Station in 1939. The footage shows the 29-year-old Winton together with the children and their parents. Up until then, the employees of the archive had no idea what the footage contained, because it had remained in the archive, unedited, for the entire sixty years. It has never been shown, because right after it was shot, war broke out in Europe, and movie screens were flooded with the latest footage from the battlefield. My son Matej was its first viewer. He thus came by authentic materials which he could use in his documentary about Winton's 'Power of Good.'

Matej is preparing to shoot a continuation of the film about Winton's life, and Winton is supposed to come to Prague along with his children and grandchildren. Even though he's already 97, he's in excellent physical and mental condition, and is preparing to visit an observatory with Matej, because in the year 2000 Czech astronomers named a planetoid they'd discovered in Winton's honor.

In 1999 my son Matej made a movie entitled 'Vsichni moji blizci' ['All My Loved Ones']. The theme was based on my childhood memories, but as the story of my childhood seemed to him to be too sad, he incorporated Winton's rescue operation into the plot. Winton, who came to Prague for the film's premiere, very much liked the picture. The movie was shown at sixty prestigious international festivals, and received a number of awards; among others, it was also submitted to the Academy Awards for the Slovak Republic in the foreign film category.

Glossary">Glossary

1 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.

2 Sered labor camp

created in 1941 as a Jewish labor camp. The camp functioned until the beginning of the Slovak National Uprising, when it was dissolved. At the beginning of September 1944 its activities were renewed and deportations began. Due to the deportations, SS-Hauptsturmführer Alois Brunner was named camp commander at the end of September. Brunner was a long-time colleague of Adolf Eichmann and had already organized the deportation of French Jews in 1943. Because the camp registers were destroyed, the most trustworthy information regarding the number of deportees has been provided by witnesses who worked with prisoner records. According to this information, from September 1944 until the end of March 1945, 11 transports containing 11,532 persons were dispatched from the Sered camp. Up until the end of November 1944 the transports were destined for the Auschwitz concentration camp, later prisoners were transported to other camps in the Reich. The Sered camp was liquidated on 31st March 1945, when the last evacuation transport, destined for the Terezin ghetto, was dispatched. On this transport also departed the commander of the Sered camp, Alois Brunner.

3 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

In the 13th century, after a period of stimulating spiritual and cultural life, the economic development and wide-range internal autonomy obtained by the Jewish communities in the previous centuries was curtailed by anti-Jewish repression emerging from under the aegis of the Dominican and the Franciscan orders. There were more and more false blood libels, and the polemics, which were opportunities for interchange of views between the Christian and the Jewish intellectuals before, gradually condemned the Jews more and more, and the middle class in the rising started to be hostile with the competitor. The Jews were gradually marginalized. Following the pogrom of Seville in 1391, thousands of Jews were massacred throughout Spain, women and children were sold as slaves, and synagogues were transformed into churches. Many Jews were forced to leave their faith. About 100,000 Jews were forcibly converted between 1391 and 1412. The Spanish Inquisition began to operate in 1481 with the aim of exterminating the supposed heresy of new Christians, who were accused of secretly practicing the Jewish faith. In 1492 a royal order was issued to expel resisting Jews in the hope that if old co-religionists would be removed new Christians would be strengthened in their faith. At the end of July 1492 even the last Jews left Spain, who openly professed their faith. The number of the displaced is estimated to lie between 100,000-150,000. (Source: Jean-Christophe Attias - Esther Benbassa: Dictionnaire de civilisation juive, Paris, 1997)

4 Janosik, Juraj (1688-1713)

Slovak folk hero. He was a serf in the Fatra mountains in Upper Hungary (today Slovakia) and became an outcast. According to legend he robbed rich noblemen and townsmen and gave the haul to the poor. Janosik participated in the Rakoczy uprising against the Habsburgs (1703-11). He joined a unit of irregulars and after the suppression of the revolt they became mountain robbers. He was caught by Lipto county authorities and executed in Liptoszentmiklos (today Liptovsky

Mikulas). Janosik is the hero of many Slovak folk tales and legends and also celebrated in folk songs. 5 Kashrut in eating habits: Kashrut means ritual behavior. A term indicating the religious validity of some object or article according to Jewish law, mainly in the case of foodstuffs. Biblical law dictates which living creatures are allowed to be eaten. The use of blood is strictly forbidden. The method of slaughter is prescribed, the so-called shechitah. The main rule of kashrut is the prohibition of eating dairy and meat products at the same time, even when they weren't cooked together. The time interval between eating foods differs. On the territory of Slovakia six hours must pass between the eating of a meat and dairy product. In the opposite case, when a dairy product is eaten first and then a meat product, the time interval is different. In some Jewish communities it is sufficient to wash out one's mouth with water. The longest time interval was three hours - for example in Orthodox communities in Southwestern Slovakia.

6 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. In 1896, there were 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country,. In 1930, the 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities made up 30.4 percent of all Hungarian Jews. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 percent).

7 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.

8 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during World War I. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported cultural amenities and brought religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re- establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from Europe and from

Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development. 9 Yellow star in Slovakia: On 18th September 1941 an order passed by the Slovakian Minister of the Interior required all Jews to wear a clearly visible yellow star, at least 6 cm in diameter, on the left side of their clothing. After 20th October 1941 only stars issued by the Jewish Center were permitted. Children under the age of six, Jews married to non-Jews and their children if not of Jewish religion, were exempt, as well as those who had converted before 10th September 1941. Further exemptions were given to Jews who filled certain posts (civil servants, industrial executives, leaders of institutions and funds) and to those receiving reprieve from the state president. Exempted Jews were certified at the relevant constabulary authority. The order was valid from 22nd September 1941.

10 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 29th 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.

11 Terezin/Theresienstadt

A ghetto in the Czech Republic, run by the SS. Jews were transferred from there to various extermination camps. The Nazis, who presented Theresienstadt as a 'model Jewish settlement,' used it to camouflage the extermination of European Jews. Czech gendarmes served as ghetto guards, and with their help the Jews were able to maintain contact with the outside world. Although education was prohibited, regular classes were held, clandestinely. Thanks to the large number of artists, writers, and scholars in the ghetto, there was an intensive program of cultural activities. At the end of 1943, when word spread of what was happening in the Nazi camps, the Germans decided to allow an International Red Cross investigation committee to visit Theresienstadt. In preparation, more prisoners were deported to Auschwitz, in order to reduce congestion in the ghetto. Dummy stores, a café, a bank, kindergartens, a school, and flower gardens were put up to deceive the committee. 12 Creation of the State of Israel: From 1917 Palestine was a British mandate. Also in 1917 the Balfour Declaration was published, which supported the idea of the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Throughout the interwar period, Jews were migrating to Palestine, which caused the conflict with the local Arabs to escalate. On the other hand, British restrictions on immigration sparked increasing opposition to the mandate powers. Immediately after World War II there were increasing numbers of terrorist attacks designed to force Britain to recognize the right of the Jews to their own state. These aspirations provoked the hostile reaction of the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states. In February 1947 the British foreign minister Ernest Bevin ceded the Palestinian mandate to the UN, which took the decision to divide Palestine into a Jewish section and an Arab section and to create an independent Jewish state. On 14th May 1948 David Ben Gurion proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel. It was recognized immediately by

the US and the USSR. On the following day the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon attacked Israel, starting a war that continued, with intermissions, until the beginning of 1949 and ended in a truce.

13 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.

14 Havel, Vaclav (1936-)

Czech dramatist, poet and politician. Havel was an active figure in the liberalization movement leading to the Prague Spring, and after the Soviet-led intervention in 1968 he became a spokesman of the civil right movement called Charter 77. He was arrested for political reasons in 1977 and 1979. He became President of the Czech and Slovak Republic in 1989 and was President of the Czech Republic after the secession of Slovakia until January 2003.

15 Slansky trial

In the years 1948-1949 the Czechoslovak government together with the Soviet Union strongly supported the idea of the founding of a new state, Israel. Despite all efforts, Stalin's politics never found fertile ground in Israel; therefore the Arab states became objects of his interest. In the first place the Communists had to allay suspicions that they had supplied the Jewish state with arms. The Soviet leadership announced that arms shipments to Israel had been arranged by Zionists in Czechoslovakia. The times required that every Jew in Czechoslovakia be automatically considered a Zionist and cosmopolitan. In 1951 on the basis of a show trial, 14 defendants (eleven of them were Jews) with Rudolf Slansky, First Secretary of the Communist Party at the head were convicted. Eleven of the accused got the death penalty; three were sentenced to life imprisonment. The executions were carried out on 3rd December 1952. The Communist Party later finally admitted its mistakes in carrying out the trial and all those sentenced were socially and legally rehabilitated in 1963.

16 Statni Tajna Bezpecnost

Czech intelligence and security service founded in 1948.

17 Six-Day-War

(Hebrew: Milhemet Sheshet Hayamim), also known as the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Six Days War, or June War, was fought between Israel and its Arab neighbors Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. It began

when Israel launched a preemptive war on its Arab neighbors; by its end Israel controlled the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. The results of the war affect the geopolitics of the region to this day.

18 Tiso, Jozef (1887-1947)

Roman Catholic priest, clerical fascist, anticommunist politician. He was an ideologist and a political representative of Hlinka's Slovakian People's Party, and became its vice president in 1930 and president in 1938. In 1938-39 he became PM, and later president, of the fascist Slovakian puppet state which was established with German support. His policy plunged Slovakia into war against Poland and the Soviet Union, in alliance with Germany. He was fully responsible for crimes and atrocities committed under the clerical fascist regime. In 1947 he was found guilty as a war criminal, sentenced to death and executed.

19 Winton, Sir Nicholas (b

1909): A British broker and humanitarian worker, who in 1939 saved 669 Jewish children from the territory of the endangered Czechoslovakia from death by transporting them to Great Britain.

20 Yad Vashem

This museum, founded in 1953 in Jerusalem, honors both Holocaust martyrs and 'the Righteous Among the Nations', non-Jewish rescuers who have been recognized for their 'compassion, courage and morality'.

21 Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

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