# Alexander Bachnar

Alexander Bachnar
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Interviewer: Zuzana Slobodnikova
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Mr. Alexander Bachnar is a very accommodating and knowledgeable man. He conversed with us about his life in an engaging and interesting manner, during which time he never forgot to also recall the people who shared his difficult life's story. According to Mr. Bachnar's wishes, we will not mention the surnames of his children and grandchildren in this interview. Like many other Jews, he also experienced manifestations of anti-Semitism, both during the Holocaust and during the long years of the totalitarian regime. Nothing, however, could induce him to leave his native land and abandon the ideals that down deep he believed in.



## Family background

Of my grandparents, I remember only my grandfather on my mother's side [Abraham Steckauer] and my grandmother on my father's side [Maria Bachnerova]. My grandfather came from Dezerice, which is a town not far from Banovce nad Bebravou. I don't know how many children there were in the family, or whether he even had siblings at all. He made a living as a shochet. He was one very strongly religious person. He attended synagogue almost every day. In his younger years he even sang in the synagogue. Later he was a member of the Jewish religious community in Topolcany, where he moved. All I know about him is that his family observed rituals, customs and traditions. Well, for example, even my mother and her sisters all wore wigs. Because with Jews it was common that a devout Jewish woman would have her hair cut off and instead of hair would wear a wig. They also ate kosher. That means that there were two sets of dishes in the kitchen - one for milk products and one for meat.

My grandfather, as a proper believer, wore payes, but not a beard, I've got to say. He used to wear a suit, and wore a cap and kippah on his head. An inseparable part of him was his pipe, with an almost meter-long stem, which he was constantly smoking. He used that pipe stem to, among other things, whack us when we didn't behave and listen to him. I still remember the little room that my grandfather lived in. You see, later on he moved to Topolcany to live with my aunt - my mother's sister Nelli Rosenthalova [nee Steckauer], who had a two-room apartment, and in the hallway one additional room in which he then lived. This apartment was located on the town square beside the rectory. But back to the room. I remember very well what it looked like, because I had to stay with him, as at that time he was almost 90 years old. The room was very simply furnished.

There were only two beds, a wardrobe, two stools and a small table. And of course a sink - that means one washbasin and one jug.

The apartment that my grandfather lived in shared a courtyard with apartments where non-Jews lived. The only Jews there were my aunt Nelli's family. I've got to say though, that they had very good relations with the neighbors. I can't say that there were any controversies or conflicts. They got along very well. It didn't change until the anti-Jewish measures began to be applied in Topolcany, and mainly when Aryanization 1 began. At that time friendships and relations with neighbors began to weaken and disappear. My grandfather died at a very advanced age - he lived to be 99 years old. I never knew his wife, my grandmother [Gitl Steckauer], because she died before I was born. It wasn't until once when I was at the Jewish cemetery in Banovce nad Bebravou, that I by chance found out that she's buried there.

As far as my grandma on my mother's side [Maria Bachnerova] is concerned, she was one immensely wise, good-looking and very good woman. By the way, she was very fond of me; mainly because of all the grandchildren I was the most dependent on her help, because our family was unmistakably proletarian and poor. We belonged among the poorest class in Topolcany. She realized this, and helped us however she could. She was born on the same day as Tomas Garrigue Masaryk 2, so 7th March 1850, but I'm not exactly sure whether she was from Hlohcov or Trnava. I don't know anything else about her parents and siblings. She lived to the advanced age of 90. She was a very good-looking woman, even though she dressed in a quite old-fashioned way. The way women still dressed in the 19th century, so she wore a skirt, blouse, and apron and as far as her head goes, she no longer wore a wig. But she covered her hair with a scarf. She was already more liberal, even though some Jewish rituals were still observed there.

Grandma lived with her son Leopold in Bratislava. My uncle had a modern, four-room apartment on Gröslingova Street if I'm not mistaken, number 21 or 51. This apartment was also nicely furnished in a modern fashion. I also lived with them at one time, when I was studying. I remember that despite her advanced age, she regularly cooked, washed dishes and cleaned. Until I remember on one day, it was on Sunday, she said, 'Kids, I feel kind of tired. I'm going to go lie down.' She lay down and never woke up again. I looked for her grave as well. Here, in Bratislava at the Jewish cemetery, but unfortunately I didn't find it. I never knew her husband, my grandfather. My father once told me that his father came from Klatova Nova Ves and made a living as a shoemaker there. That's all I know about my grandfather.

## Growing up

My hometown is Topolcany. As I recall, it was a small town with a population of around 8000. [According to the 1921 census, 7238 people lived in Topolcany, of which 1393 were Jews]. It had a very large Jewish community, which numbered almost 3000 [according to Barkany - Dojc: Jewish Religious Communities in Slovakia, 2192 Jews lived in Topolcany in the year 1930], which was more than a third of the town's population. In those days the Jewish community was neither Orthodox 3 nor Neolog 4, but status quo ante. There were various Jewish prayer halls in town. Some were visited by devout Jews and some by the less devout. My family belonged to the less devout group. Yes, and mainly due to the fact that as far as political orientation goes, they were very leftist.

But back to my town. I remember that there was a large synagogue in Topolcany. One large synagogue, and right beside it a small one. The large one basically belonged to the status quo ante

group. The little one was Orthodox. Besides this there were about eight or nine prayer halls. One prayer hall, for example, belonged to the strongly religious Agudat Israel 5. Another of the prayer halls was named Shomre Torah [Guardian of the Torah]. That one wasn't as strongly Orthodox, but all rituals, commandments and prohibitions were observed.

The town's rabbi was distinguished Mr. Weiss. He was very wise and also very distinguished in appearance. So we had our own dayyan in town. He was responsible for taking care of disputes among Jews. Because Jews had autonomy to the degree that they could handle certain disputes within the scope of their own religious community. This man was immensely wise and tolerant. All I know about him is that he lived in Topolcany until 1944, then they deported him and he died. I can't forget to talk about the Jewish religious community. If I remember correctly, its president was a certain Mr. Gelenyi. Among the religious community functionaries were better situated, wealthier Jews, who were able to finance the religious community. As far as I remember there was Mr. Feldenburg - a watchmaker, then Mr. Lickenbirk - a lumber and hardware merchant. That's as much as I remember about our religious community.

As far as education is concerned, we had a Jewish school in the town. In the morning normal subjects were taught, in the afternoon religion. A certain Mr. Trutzer taught us religion. He was a very wise man, who introduced us to the mysteries of the Talmud. And I think that this was very good, because learning about the Talmud means accepting the laws of logic. Few doctrines are as based on the principles of logic as the Talmud. I'll give you an example. Can a Jew eat an egg that a chicken laid on Saturday? One rabbi says that he can. Another rabbi says he can't. And each one defends his own thesis. These are questions that today make us laugh, but in reality, the explanations as to why yes, why no, force the student to begin thinking logically.

But back to the educational institutions of my hometown. We had a talmud torah, but not a yeshivah. The nearest yeshivah was in Nitra. Well, and in closing I also remember the Topolcany mikveh. I was in it only once. Because I preferred to bathe in the Nitra River. But let me describe what bathing in the mikveh looked like. It was a concrete room measuring about 3 x 4 meters, filled with lukewarm water, and a person sat there for five to ten minutes and bathed. People usually went there on Friday, so they could greet the Sabbath clean. That's all as far as religious buildings go.

As far as housing goes, almost the entire main square was Jewish. There were very few non-Jewish houses, companies or stores there. Jews mainly made a living as merchants. Because Topolcany was characteristic in that there was almost no industry there. There was only one sugar mill, which in 1929 they torched on purpose, in an effort to lower the production of sugar so as to raise its price. The sugar mill belonged to Baron Schtumer, and due to its burning down, sugar stayed at 6 crowns per kilo. Besides the sugar mill, there were one or two brick factories in Topolcany, and a woodworking company. So most of the non-Jewish residents were proletarian, people that were unemployed, day laborers or worked in agriculture. They were lower social classes. But let's return to residential conditions. Already in those days there was electricity, even though in the beginning not everywhere. We, for example, originally lived on Hviezdoslavova Street, but because we didn't have enough money to pay the rent, they moved us to a place outside of the town, to the so-called Jarmocisko. There we got one room and a kitchen. The floor was earthen, not wooden, and we had a petroleum lamp for light. But only for a short time. Then our situation improved and we rented a two-room apartment at Tovarenska Street No. 1, which later was named Hitler Street. We were still

living there in 1939. And as far as running water goes? We didn't have that. We used to go to a well to get water every day.

Regarding the political climate in the pre-war years, the town was politically divided into a significant portion of the inhabitants that consisted of proletarians, and that part was oriented to the left. So there was a relatively strong Communist party. So strong as to have a deputy mayor on the town council, if I'm not mistaken one of them was named Kobida and another Cervenan. Then there were bourgeois parties, republicans and mainly Hlinka's People's Party 6, which always nominated the mayor. I remember that one of these mayors was at one time Mr. Ziak, a watchmaker, who was so tolerant that he would always come to synagogue for the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. He had a place of honor in the first row. And he was a member of Hlinka's People's Party. But as I've said, most of the population was oriented to the left.

I remember one May Day demonstration in 1925. I was six years old at the time. My brother was walking at the head of the procession with a red flag. And I in shorts and bare feet, holding on to his pants, and at that time a conflict occurred. The gendarmes were shooting, luckily only into the air and they didn't injure anyone, but even so things were pretty tense. In Topolcany there was also a Jewish Zionist party, a religiously oriented Jewish party and a business-oriented Jewish party.

And anti-Jewish sentiments up to the year 1939? We experienced it only in the fact that once in a while there would be a conflict between Jewish and non-Jewish boys. They would call us names, and we'd retaliate in kind. But in a wider perspective such conflicts didn't take place. Jews were well off, had stores and the rest of the population lived in poverty. So it certainly influenced the mood and feelings of the non-Jewish inhabitants.

Before the war there was no army in Topolcany. So there were no army field days or parades. The only thing that's stayed in my memory is when Tomas Garrigue Masaryk died in 1937. All of the town's inhabitants dressed in mourning-wear and the stores were closed. Otherwise, nothing ever happened here. Perhaps the only thing worth mentioning are the Holy Spirit pilgrimages, when pilgrims would pass through town.

Every Thursday there was a market held in Topolcany. Farmers from the entire region would gather and sell their products. I for example remember, that one watermelon weighing 5 kilograms cost one crown. [Editor's note: in the year 1929 it was decreed by law that one Czechoslovak crown (Kc), as the Czechoslovak unit of currency, was equal in value to 44.58 milligrams of gold.] So a kilo of melon cost 20 halers. We used to go shopping at the market because it was cheaper. Poultry - chicken, geese, because Jews don't eat pork. Most often we'd buy a goose. You could buy one for about 20, 25 crowns. And that was already a large goose, liver included. My mother did the shopping. Though we'd also do the normal shopping. I remember that we heated with wood in a cast-iron stove. We used to go buy the wood in a general store. Across from us lived Mr. Schwartz, a businessman, and he had a very wise principle, which he also practiced. He always said that 2 x 5 equals 10, but 5 x 2 also equals 10. Which means that it's better to sell five things for two crowns apiece than to sell two things for five crowns apiece. And we used to go to him to buy groceries - sugar, flour, whatever we needed.

Something about my parents. My father was named Jakub Bachner and came from Klatova Nova Ves. Klatova Nova Ves is a town near Topolcany. Around 15 kilometers from Topolcany. My mother was named Frantiska [Bachnerova, nee Steckauer] and came from the town of Dezerice. That's

also between Topolcany and Banovce nad Bebravou, closer to Banovce. My father was born in the year 1872 and my mother in 1876.

My father used to recall that he used to go on foot to court my mother. From Klatova Nova Ves to Dezerice. All I know about their marriage is that like in most cases in those days, it was an arranged marriage. Though I don't know in exactly what year they were married, nor where they were married, one thing do I know for sure: for sure their wedding took place in a synagogue. That's a matter of course. You know, in those days it was unthinkable to have a civil wedding.

My father and mother spoke Hungarian. But they also spoke Slovak. So with us they spoke in Slovak. But among themselves I think that they spoke Hungarian, or occasionally in German. Because they, understandably, had still gone to Hungarian schools. As far as their education goes, it's hard to say. Degree of education. You know, it's hard to talk about education in a Jewish family in those days, because my mother was 18 or 19 when she was married, and then came children.

By the way, in the year 1904 my parents moved to America. One of their sons was born there, my brother Leopold. Then they returned from America because they didn't succeed in making it there. When I recall my father and what he looked like, how he dressed, I think that my father dressed normally. In an off-the-rack suit, he wore a tie and also had a black hat. Payes or even a beard, that he didn't wear, because he wasn't particularly strongly religious. As far as my mother goes, she was on the contrary, as I've already mentioned, from a very religious family. She wore a wig and otherwise went about decently dressed, mainly because my sister Ela was an excellent seamstress and knew how to find nice clothing for our mother. My older sister and her sewing talents basically saved my life. But we'll get to that later.

My father was a house painter by trade, but had very few opportunities in his field, and so even though he was a master, he usually worked as a journeyman for this one painter, Szomolanyi. Many times it happened that he didn't have enough work, and was unemployed. Our financial situation was then in a corresponding state. We belonged among the poorest of the town's inhabitants. My mother was a housewife. You know, with so many children, she didn't get out of the house much. I remember that when I came home after graduating from high school, and announced that they've got a son who's graduated with honors, my mother wanted to show off and went out on the main square. I had to take her by the arm and she walked about the square to show that she had a son who was a high school graduate. In those days that meant a lot. In those days, to be a high school graduate, that was to be a cut above. Today it's common, but back then it was a big deal.

Our living arrangements and furniture were very poor. In the best case we had an apartment that had two rooms with quite old-fashioned furniture. There were only two rooms and a kitchen. When we lived on the aforementioned Hitler Street, we even had a small larder there. We didn't have a bathroom. We had a trough, and that's where our mother bathed us. We'd always heat water, and then we'd bathe. We didn't even have a toilet. Only out in the courtyard was there one. When it was colder, we heated only with wood. We had an iron stove. As I've said, we used to go for water to a well in front of a pub belonging to Mr. Machac. We'd always go there for two pails of water. There were another four families living in that courtyard along with us. So there could be no talk of a garden. Of mice and rats yes, but not of a garden, because in that courtyard it wasn't possible to grow anything or raise animals.

What I do have to mention, though, is that at home we had a very large and rich library. Books were the only things that we were capable of paying for. For books, plus partly for records. I don't know how it was possible, but in some fashion we came by an old record player with this big horn. And I know that we used to borrow records, but also bought them. They were those old 78-rpm records. And there, with that old record player, I basically came by my affinity to music, which I still have to this day. I've got a huge record collection. I've got almost 600 LPs, around 120 CDs plus around a hundred cassettes. Mainly with classical music.

But let's get back to books and literature in general. At home we had some religious literature, but secular literature dominated. Everyone in our family knew how to read. My mother read the least of all of us, because with having to take care of the household and children, she didn't have much time left for books. My father used to read, but it was mainly we children that read. The books that made their way to us were written mainly in German and Hungarian. Otherwise, I've got to mention that I was one of the most faithful members of the town library. I used to go to the library regularly. It used to cost 20 halers to borrow one book. And I still remember the name of the librarian, he was named Drahos. He became fond of me, because every week I would come to borrow books, which helped me immensely in school. Thanks to those books I knew more than what they taught in school.

So I remember that in Social Studies we were discussing ships. Some Queen Mary or some such ship was traveling from Southampton to New York in five and a half days. [Editor's note: The Queen Mary, in its time the largest and most luxurious ocean liner. Her maiden voyage stared on 27th May 1936, and on 10th December 1967 she dropped anchor after her last voyage at her current berth in Long Beach, Los Angeles.] And I interrupted our teacher and said, 'And that's why she was awarded the Blue Ribbon [an award that was given for the fastest traverse of the Atlantic Ocean].' Our teacher was a little surprised, and asked where I knew that from, and I told him that I had read it in newspapers and books. So I'll say again, we read a lot at our place.

I can even tell you that when the anti-Jewish measures began in 1939, I stored the books we had at home in a large box that measured 1.5 x 1 meters, and took this box and buried it deep underground in our courtyard. We had a very large Marxist library and I didn't want to lose those books. It's quite possible that it's still buried there to this day.

I've already mentioned that my mother was from a very religious family and my father, on the other hand, wasn't all that religious. He attended synagogue only on Friday evening, or Saturday morning and also during the High Holidays. My older siblings rarely went to synagogue. Mainly, when they were already older and were deciding for themselves, their political orientation influenced them in this respect, as they were leftists. My father took me with him to services up until I was around 13 years old. But I've got to say, that every Friday at home we made kiddush, which is the inauguration of the Sabbath. We would light two candles and Mother would bless the barches. Accordingly, we also celebrated all the other Jewish holidays.

One of the first holidays was Passover, that was the Jewish Easter. We didn't eat bread or anything fermented. We kept the tradition of seder supper in our household. Then there was Shavuot, which was seven weeks after Passover. They were religious holidays, which are analogous with Christian ones. Then there was, there was basically New Year, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and Sukkot. Those were holidays that were observed. Besides this, there were also two holidays that didn't

have to be observed, which were Chanukkah - in memory of the Jews' battle against tyranny [the Maccabee rebellion against religious persecution initiated by Hellenized Syrians during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanus (2nd cent. BC)] and Purim, in remembrance of how Queen Ester saved Jews in the Persian Empire from the evil Haman. But those were only these halfway holidays, which didn't have any special ritual character. So that's what we observed. But as far as kosher food goes, we children had no compunction in buying ham or pork cracklings.

I've already indicated that my brothers were strongly oriented to the left. As far as my father's political opinions go, they were similar. I think that he was more of a social democrat. But he wasn't an official member of any political party. Only one of my brothers was an official member, he was named Marcel and in 1936 he moved to Palestine. He was an official member of the Social Democrats. My brother Leopold was a Communist, as well as Armin and I.

As far as my father's army service goes, I know only that he was captured by the Russians during World War I. He returned at the end of 1918. I don't know anything more, because my father didn't like talking about it.

If I was to talk about relations with our neighbors in the courtyard, I've got to say that they were relations that were basically normal and problem- free. Our neighbors were non-Jews and there was no problem there. It's hard to talk about friendships. It was mainly my father that got out and about amongst people. My mother hardly got out of the house. Friendships only when there were some family get-togethers, there yes. And besides, Jews live in this quite closed community, so contact with non-Jews wasn't something that was particularly sought out.

As far as family goes, my father was one of three children. One of my father's brothers [Arnold Bachner] fell in World War I and the second brother [Leopold Bachner] died in Lublin. Arnold lived in Trnava and Leopold originally lived in Hlohovec and then moved to Bratislava. He lived together with my grandma [Maria Bachnerova]. I think he was a partner in an artificial fertilizer business. The one that fell in the war had two children: one daughter, Olga, and one son, Alexander. The son is still alive, in Canada. He immigrated to Palestine, where during World War II he joined the British army. Through the British army he got into a Canadian unit. He lives in Canada as a Canadian citizen.

My father's other brother, Arnold, had one son. He's named Vladimir, and to this day lives in Bratislava. He's got three daughters. Besides him he had three daughters, Valeria, Olga and Adela. Not even one of them is still alive. They died during the Holocaust.

My mother had six siblings: one brother, Moric [Moritz] and five sisters, Nelli, Regina, Sarolta, Irena and Hedviga. Moric lived in Topolcany and had a general store. My uncle had three children. I don't remember his daughter's name any more, she died together with her parents during World War II. One of the sons, Mikulas, made it as far as a university professor after the war. He was an economist at the University of Agriculture in Nitra. Another of the sons, Richard, because a manager of one hotel in Presov. Both are already dead. They died last year [2004].

The only one of my mother's relatives to survive the Holocaust was one of her sisters, one of my aunts, and the other four aunts and one uncle died. Well, so one aunt lived in Banovce, one aunt in Dunajska Streda, one aunt in Stary Tekov, and one aunt in Topolcany - the one that survived, and one brother in Topolcany - who died along with his family, his wife and one daughter.

Another of my mother's sisters was named Nelli Rosenthalova. Her husband died very early on, in the year 1936. Nelli was the only one of my mother's siblings to survive the Holocaust. All three of her daughters managed to survive the war along with her. Two of them have since died and the third lives in Israel. Not long ago, I visited her during my stay in Israel. She was very glad to see me. She's got Alzheimer's disease, however. She doesn't recognize people very much, but despite that she did recognize me. That was the family that survived.

Another of my mother's sisters, Hedviga Fischerova, lived with her husband in Stary Tekov. My uncle owned an inn there. They had one son. All three of them died during the war.

Another of my aunts, Sarolta Diamant, lived with her husband in Dunajska Streda. Her husband managed a large farm someplace near the town. They had six children: two daughters, Valeria and Margita, and four sons, Dezider, Alexander, Karol and Ladislav. All except for one son died. Unfortunately I don't know which one of them survived.

Another aunt, Regina Webbel, lived in Banovce nad Bebravou. She became a widow very early on. She had three daughters. All three died in Auschwitz. My aunt survived Auschwitz, survived Buchenwald 7 and the day she was liberated died of typhus. That's how she died, sadly.

My mother had one more sister, Irena Biermannova. The only things I know about her is that she lived in Topolcany, her husband was named Maximilian Biermann, and that she had four children. I remember only three of them, two daughters, Ruzena and Magdalena, and one son, Maximilian. They likely all died during World War II.

I was born on 29th July 1919 in Topolcany. I spent my early childhood at home in the care of my mother and siblings. I know that I didn't go to nursery school, and especially my older sister Valeria helped my mother take care of me, and then my older brother, Leo, also helped. He helped by walking me to school, especially in winter, when there was a lot of snow. He'd put me on a sleigh and take me to school, because he was mostly unemployed and didn't have to go to work.

I absolved my elementary schooling in Topolcany at the Jewish elementary school. There I learned to read Hebrew, because in Jewish elementary school, we had general subjects in the morning, and every day after lunch, two hours of religion. In Hebrew it was called cheder, that literally meant room, but it actually means a classroom for teaching the basics of the Talmud. There I learned to read Hebrew. I was a good student. So good that my Grade 4 homeroom teacher insisted that I not got to Grade 5, but right into high school.

My parents signed me up at the Theological High School in Nitra, where the teachers were mainly priests. The principal was also a priest, and the well- known Professor Damborsky had also taught there. [Damborsky, Jan (1880 - 1923): linguist, archivist, high school teacher and journalist.] He was one of the first to create a Slovak grammar textbook. Always, when it was time for Catholic religion class, we were free, and could go out. We had that hour off. There were no manifestations of anti-Semitism at school. You could say that it was a quite tolerant school. The only problem was that they taught on Saturday as well. Well, and as we couldn't travel on Saturday, that was a sin, I lived in Nitra. I was taken in by one family in Nitra, the Schillers, where I always slept over from Friday to Saturday, and where they also invited me on Friday evening and for lunch on Saturday. Then on Saturday evening I returned home by train to Topolcany. But that lasted only about a half year. Because although I was an exemplary student, in half a year I had a four [an E] in drawing.

Thus I was forced to pay tuition. Because I didn't have money, I left school.

I returned to Topolcany and transferred to the local town school. There I attended the first and second year and then transferred to the high school in Preividza. My favorite subject at school was Latin. I liked it so much that I read it under my desk on the sly. Even Latin classics, Tacit, Ovid, Cicero. I liked it very much, and mainly because for me Latin was logic carried over into language. Very few languages are as exactly logically constructed as Latin. And this enticed me, because it taught me to think logically. That's what I liked the most. To this day I have no problem translating Latin texts. Besides this, Latin helps me in that I can basically understand all Romance languages. Not even Romanian is foreign to me. I also had French in high school. So I also learned French and don't get lost in it. I know how to read Romanian, know what I'm reading and know the same in Spanish. And I can follow French texts on television. So this is what is typical for the Jewish community, that most of us know two or three languages. I'm not even mentioning Czech, that's a matter of course.

But back to my favorite subjects. I also liked history. It also attracted me. And I read a lot of books in the vein of documentary literature. I was rather inclined to the humanities. Subjects that had to do with science didn't attract me at all; to this day I still have what they call in German 'Angstträume' - nightmares, that I have to do my final exams in physics. Today I'm very interested in physics, especially nuclear science, because that relates to cosmic questions and that very much interests me. But back then it was really a nightmare for me. To this day I know what sort of question they asked me at my final exam: What is the final effect of one convex, concave lens? I remember that I didn't have the least idea. But Mr. Kolc, the physics professor, who really wanted me to graduate, actually answered the question for me. The only thing from science that I knew was that there are two circulatory systems for blood. One small system and one large one.

I was a relatively good student. I belonged to the better part of the class. To the degree, that when we had a class with one relatively strict teacher, who was named Cervinka, and when the class didn't want him to test us, they had me ask him questions. And I, who at that time was already concerning myself with Marxism, would ask him questions. He taught us philosophy. I would ask him about things that I had read about in books at home, and in this way kept him busy. And he didn't realize that it was the end of the class until the bell rang, and by then it was too late to test us.

During my studies in Prievidza I lived at Mr. Löwingerova's for thirty crowns a month, in a loft where she stored apples. My entire furniture consisted of one bed mat, one trunk a meter square - that served as my table, then one stool and one petroleum lamp. And that was all the furniture. But it had one advantage, for I didn't have my board taken care of, and Jews had this custom that you could eat with a different family every day. But I only had my board taken care of six days out of the week. That means that one day I had no place to eat. I would have gone hungry that day, if it wasn't for the fact that I had a classmate and friend [Richard Heumann], who was the son of the richest Jew in Prievidza. Instead of one snack he used to bring two with him to class. So I ate his snack, that was my lunch, and after lunch I'd go to his place and there I'd get cocoa and cake. I was quite dependent on them. I graduated from high school in Prievidza in the year 1938.

My friends were mostly of Jewish origin. To tend towards Jewish friends, that was in my case given by my living conditions. I was more or less dependent on them. Mainly on my friend Richard

Heumann, who was the son of practically the richest Jewish businessman in Prievidza. The owner of the company Karpatia.

Besides this, I was a member of that Jewish scout movement, Hashomer Hatzair 8. As an illustration, I'd like to say that on 20th October 2005 there was a reunion of former Slovak Hashomer members in Israel. And I was the only non-resident of Israel to get an invitation to this meeting. And I also participated in it, and met there a bunch of my former friends. Otherwise I was also quite friendly with non-Jewish boys. With my classmates, that is. Mainly with Jozef Hagar, later a teacher and principal of the Prievidza high school. But also with German boys like Silvester Schwezichter, up to 1938 they were basically leftists. So some nationalist tendencies didn't crop up. But as I've already said, I spent a lot of my free time at my rich friend Heumann's place. And what did we do? He had a very large record collection for those days, so we listened to music. We did a lot of sports. I concentrated on medium-distance running, 2000 and 5000 meters. But I wasn't a particularly big athlete. I was more into reading, culture and cultural affairs.

During summer holidays I usually went to Hashomer summer camp, or wandered about Slovakia. Two of us would pick up and go. We'd hike about Slovakia with one crown in our pockets and a spare pair of socks. We slept in haylofts. Sometimes people would offer us bread, butter or potatoes. In this fashion we'd sometimes wander around Slovakia for a whole month. When we weren't in that camp.

Now that I've mentioned those travels, the first time I went by car was very early on. This was because my brother Leo was a taxi driver. So quite often I would go by car. My brother drove some sort of Pragovka, in which he still had to use his arm for a turn signal. I traveled by train very early on as well. This was because every morning in 1929 I traveled from Topolcany to school in Nitra. My train left at 7 in the morning. I remember that I traveled every morning, and for a month it cost six crowns. How many times my father had to go to synagogue at 5:00 a.m., and borrow six crowns from some richer Jew, so I could buy a ticket at the train station at 6am. How many times did it happen that we had a baked potato and black coffee for breakfast. And for lunch I got fifty halers from my father. Fifty halers, I was supposed to buy my lunch with that, and I usually bought one nut croissant, which cost fifty halers. Really. That was during the worst times. Then it got a little better, when I was in Prievidza and was going to high school there.

I haven't talked about my siblings yet. There were ten of us children at home. I had five brothers and four sisters. The oldest brother was named Dezider and was born in 1903 in the town of Dezerice. He apprenticed as and became a master tinsmith. He had a tinsmithery workshop in Topolcany. During World War II he was deported to a labor camp in Novaky 9, where he was head of a tinsmithery workshop. Unfortunately he didn't survive the war. He was murdered along with this wife Gizela and three children, Judita, Ruzena and son Jozef in Kremnicka. [Editor's note: here on the cusp of the years 1944 - 1945 the Nazis and members of the Hlinka Guards murdered 747 people, Jews, partisans and anti-Fascists. After liberation a monument dedicated to the victims was built there.]

The second to be born was my brother Leo. It was in 1904, when my parents were trying their luck in America. Leo was born in the city of New York. Because my parents didn't succeed in the States, they came back. Leo's life story is quite moving. He was quite a staunch Communist. He often participated in various demonstrations and strikes. Despite the fact that he was a locksmith by

trade, he worked as a driver. At one time he also worked as a taxi driver in Topolcany. In 1936 he left for Spain, secretly, without us knowing about it, as a volunteer in the international brigades. He fought there on the side of the Spanish Republicans. He was wounded in battle and ended up in a hospital in the town of Teruel. After the Republicans' defeat in Spain, he returned to Czechoslovakia, which was already after the proclamation of the Slovak State in 1939 10. Soon after that they arrested him. He was imprisoned in Ilava, from where he was among the first to be deported to Majdanek 11.

Next in line was my sister Ela, who was born in 1907 in Banovce nad Bebravou. Ela was a seamstress and managed to survive the Holocaust. She survived thanks to the fact that she was the head of a sewing workshop in the Novaky labor camp. After the suppression of the Slovak National Uprising 12 she hid out using forged papers in a town not far from Banska Bystrica. She hid there along with her son Ivan, at that time five years old, who in 1969 went to the USA, where he worked as a doctor. For some time he was even the director of some hospital. My nephew moved away for one, I would say ideological reason. Initially he didn't want to move away. As a doctor he worked for a certain doctor, Professor Kukura, in Michalovce. Kukura once told him the following: 'Listen, Ivan, I can depend on you in everything. You always do everything that I ask for me. You're friendly, very popular, but there's something I don't quite like about you.' Because he was the only Jewish boy there, the professor made it obvious that he was different. That was the only reason why my nephew Ivan packed up and left in 1969.

The fourth sibling in line was my brother Armin. He was born in Banovce nad Bebravou, in 1909. He was employed as a clerk in a textile store in Topolcany. Luckily he didn't experience the horrors of the Holocaust first- hand. In 1936 he moved to Palestine. He lived in the Gan Shamuel kibbutz and after the war our father went there to live with him as well. A different misfortune met Armin however; his son Amos fell as a soldier in the Israel army during the war in 1967 13. My brother lived in the kibbutz up until his death in the year 2000.

The fifth to be born was my brother Marcel. He was also born in Banovce nad Bebravou, in 1911. He worked as an upholsterer for Mr. Ratenstein in Topolcany. They murdered him during World War II.

The sixth was my sister Valeria. She was born in Topolcany in 1913. In an effort to save herself from the deportations, she married a Jewish boy from Topolcany, Max Schlessinger. [Editor's note: the first to be transported from the Slovak State were young single Jewish women.] Unfortunately they didn't manage to survive, they were murdered in Kremnicka. I've got to say that Valeria was very pretty. She was even pronounced Miss Topolcany.

I, Alexander, was the seventh. I was born in the year 1919. After me, my parents had my sister Marta. I think that she was born in 1920. Then we had two more family members, twins, Ludovit and Adela. They were born on 2nd March 1924. According to the testimony of the doctor Marta Schvabova, Adela was one of the ones that in Auschwitz stood up and proclaimed that she won't work for Fascist swine. Upon which one of the SS shot her in the stomach and forbade anyone to help her. She bled to death in the presence of a doctor and witnesses. Ludovit, as far as I know, died in Majdanek.

All of my siblings, aside from me, had only a basic education and worked as trades people. My older siblings Dezider, Leo, Ela, Armin and Marcel attended Hungarian elementary school. Vali

[Valeria], I, Marta and the twins already attended Slovak elementary school. So at home we all spoke Slovak and Hungarian, but also German. Jewish families are usually multilingual.

As far as Judaism and Jewish traditions that I remember from my childhood are concerned, I've already spoken about them. I've also mentioned the holidays we observed and talked about the Jewish elementary school that I attended and where I studied the Torah in the afternoons. I didn't undergo any higher Jewish education. My bar mitzvah is worth a mention. I had it in Topolcany. It was sometime at the beginning of August. The bar mitzvah consisted of me being summoned to the synagogue, and that I had to read one chapter of the Torah. That was all. All the grandsons of my grandfather [Abraham Steckauer] got a gold ducat as a gift for their bar mitzvah. I was the only one to not get one, because I had gone swimming on Saturday.

When I was still a child, Chanukkah and Purim were among my favorite holidays. And they were my favorite because we for one had the opportunity to play, as they were holidays of happiness. We had the opportunity to play, and the opportunity to get something. Usually for Chanukkah we got some clothing. And for Purim we got sweets. The way it was back then, was that one family would send another sweets. We unfortunately couldn't afford to bake any sweets. So when we got some sweets wrapped up on a plate, we then took what we had gotten and sent it on. This was so we would also give someone a gift; it was part of the holiday. So much for religious life during my childhood and youth.

My life before World War II broke out wasn't particularly unusual. After graduating from high school I attended the Pedagogic Academy [Teachers' College] in Bratislava, on Lazaretska Street. I didn't finish teachers' college for two reasons. One was political, because it was already after 14th March 1939 and the other was because I had practically no place to live and eat. I returned home to Topolcany and for three months worked as a typographer in a local print shop. Then I worked at a farm belonging to the Bulgarian Mirek Todorov. Then I went to Trencin to work for Zamaroci at a sawmill.

From there I was drafted into the army, to a work camp. I started in Sabinov. From Sabinov I was transferred to Presov, to the Presov divisional headquarters. There I basically had it very good, because as a teacher I didn't have to rake leaves, or shovel snow, but I taught Gypsies [Roma] to read and write. That was my morning job. In the afternoon I taught German to the daughter of the regimental commander, Hurban. In exchange I used to get cocoa and cake. I never felt any conflicts due to my being a Jew.

## During the war

The first anti-Semitic problem occurred, as far as I'm concerned, in March of 1939, with the fact that I couldn't finish school. Other conflicts didn't occur until I entered the Sixth labor camp 14. That was in February 1940. We got old uniforms, still from World War I, uniforms that had belonged to members of the Austro-Hungarian Navy that had been dyed a different color. Instead of normal army caps we got round navy caps. It was necessary to distinguish us from all the other soldiers. For example Gypsies, they were members of the work detail, and they were less discriminated than we were. When we were reporting to a higher military rank, we had to identify ourselves as - 'worker Jew.' And then it changed to 'laborer Jew', with the justification that work is an honor, and labor is mandatory. And so we had to identify ourselves as 'laborer Jew.' I got around this work detail fairly well, as I was teaching those Gypsies for some time, then I worked in more places.

After Presov I worked in a quarry in Svaty Petr, where they were building an airfield for the Minister of National Defense, Catlos 15. From there we were transferred to Oremov Laz. There the work was hard, and there was no communication. From Oremov Laz we then went to Svaty Jura. There I basically had a good work detail, I only had to take care of distributing construction tools to other guys that did the digging. I distributed uniforms. I was this little center of illegal activity, because I had hidden green uniforms, normal army uniforms. And the guys that were sneaking away from the camp would come to me, I had this house, a shack. They'd take off their blue uniforms and put on a green one so that they wouldn't be noticed, and like normal soldiers went to Bratislava, to visit their families. That was already during the time of the deportations 16. My work detail lasted until June of 1942.

I ended there and I got an order to go to the Novaky labor camp. At one time I loaded coal there. Then I taught at the local elementary school. And when the school principal, Jozef Weiss, went to a camp in Hungary, I became an elementary school principal. At that time they were teaching using the latest methods at that school, it had a very high standard. The school put out its own magazine, called Ozvena. I had thought that the magazine had since disappeared, but from Professor Niznansky I found out that one issue had been preserved. [Niznansky, Eduard (born 1955): historian and university professor.] He even uses citations from this magazine in his work. The upbringing in that school also had a very high standard.

There was this one exceptionally capable student, Tomas Kyrian, who in one introduction in this magazine wrote a beautiful thought worthy of an adult philosopher. He was 14 years old when he wrote that Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony, in an effort to show his immense feeling for humanity, for solidarity, is returning to the most elementary musical instrument, to the human voice. That was written by a 14-year-old boy. This Tomas Kyrian unfortunately died, together with his mother. His father was saved thanks to the fact that when someone shot at him he had a spoon in his pocket. The bullet was deflected by the spoon and didn't injure him. He fell down and thought that he was dead.

My sister Ela was also with me in the labor camp in Novaky. She was the head of a sewing workshop in the camp. There were around two hundred women working in that workshop. My sister, as an excellent seamstress, was the manager. Aside from other things, she also made clothes for the camp commander's wife, Mrs. Polhorova. When in 1942 the last transport was supposed to leave Novaky, the so-called Yom Kippur transport, which consisted of four hundred Jews, I was also on the list among the four hundred. We were already assembled, ready to leave for the Novaky train station, for deportation, when my sister found out that I was on it. She went to see Mrs. Polhorova and pleaded with her to intervene with her husband, the camp commander. And so it happened that Polhora crossed my name off the list and wrote someone else's instead. Someone else died instead of me. I didn't find out about it until 25 years after the war ended. My sister didn't want to tell me, so that I wouldn't have to live with the trauma that someone else saved my life. Well, and so I basically stayed alive. Because that transport was immediately wiped out after arriving at the Lublin concentration camp.

From Novaky we went into the uprising. We knew that it was going to happen eventually. We had a Communist cell in the camp and basically we prepared for it. We looked for weapons, bought weapons from Slovak soldiers. A secret fund was created, from which we used to buy the weapons. Money for weapons also came from the Jewish Center in Bratislava 17. At night we would practice

using the weapons. We had I don't know how many dozens of pistols, several rifles, we even had two mortars, of which one didn't work.

When on 29th August 1944 the uprising broke out, the Novaky camp commander wasn't Polhora any more, but his deputy officer, Gabcan. He was one immensely decent person. During his command, the conditions in Novaky greatly improved in all respects, and when the uprising broke out, we assembled in front of the gendarme headquarters in the camp, already along with our weapons. He came out, and addressed us in the following way, I can quote him exactly: 'Boys - he didn't say prisoners any longer - I knew that you had weapons, but that you had so many weapons, that I didn't know.' Well, and then he joined the uprising and fought on the side of the rebels. After the war I myself gave him a positive evaluation based on this, so I think that he even got an attestation regarding his participation in the uprising.

I was in the uprising as a partisan until the end of the war. The interesting thing is mainly that we were basically one compact Jewish unit with 250 members. It was an exclusively Jewish unit, made up of precisely those guys from Novaky. Right in the first days it was deployed at a strategically important place on the so-called Batovia front, right at the beginning. Most of the boys were holding a rifle in their hands for the first time in their lives. Before that they had only picks and shovels. Right in the first days we were resisting the German onslaught from the direction of Topolcany, on Prievidza, on Upper Nitra. The first twelve even fell there. At that time I was a platoon commander there. Our group took part in battles on several fronts. We were at the front at Turciansky Svaty Martin, then for five weeks in the Garderska Dolina [Gaderska Valley], then we were pushed back to Krizna, that was a mountain 1600 meters high. There our group was split up. The larger portion went with one Soviet unit. The second group, under my command, went back in the direction of Vtacnik, so to Upper Nitra. At Novaky this group of mine joined up with one Soviet partisan group. It continued on within this group until the end of the war.

## Post-war

Our group was later decorated with the highest military honors. The Czechoslovak War Cross 18, medals for courage. I myself had the War Cross and a medal for courage [Czechoslovak medal for courage in the face of the enemy], as well as the Order of The Slovak National Uprising. [The Order of The Slovak National Uprising was awarded for merit during the Slovak National Uprising. It was awarded in three classes, Order I. Class, Order II. Class and the Memorial Medal, depending on the bearer's merits.] Plus one Soviet decoration. The last time I was supposed to receive, on 11th September 2001, an award from the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Right on the day when it blew up there, so I couldn't receive the decoration. Because that day everything was closed, you couldn't get anywhere. I went there for four days but stayed for two weeks, because there weren't any planes flying. I was later given the decoration by the American ambassador in Slovakia.

Thanks to this I was one of the ones, one of three, who were received by President Bush [George W. Bush] in February of this year (2005), here in Bratislava. The former ambassador, Butora [Martin Butora (b. 1944): 1990 - 1992, advisor to President of CSFR Vaclav Havel, during the years 1999 - 2003 the ambassador of the Slovak Republic in the USA], the former minister Demes [Pavol Demes (b. 1956): since the year 2000 the director for Central and Eastern Europe of the US non-governmental organization German Marshall Fund, located in Bratislava. Recently Foreign Policy

magazine ranked him among the 100 most influential intellectuals in the world] and I. Even now I've received an invitation from the embassy, that the ambassador has a photograph for me from the reception with George Bush.

My return home after the war wasn't very merry. After the war I returned to Topolcany. I found only my sister Ela and my father. All of my other siblings and also my mother had died during that horrible period of the Holocaust. My father survived as if by miracle. It was this singular coincidence, that could be used as a theme for a film. Part of my family, together with other Jews, was held at the district courthouse in Banska Bystrica. Then when they were leading them to Kremnicka to be executed, it was at night, my father couldn't keep up with the pace. One of the German soldiers hit him with his rifle. My father fell and broke his leg. They didn't see, however, that my father had remained lying there in the forest. So they escorted the others to Kremnicka and there they killed them.

My father remained lying in the forest with a broken leg until the next day. Local residents of Kremnicka found him there and had him taken to the hospital in Banska Bystrica. The director of the hospital in Banska Bystrica was Dr. Petelen, who was this one prominent, immensely noble person, who helped Jews and partisans. He placed my father in the hospital, and so as to somehow conceal him, he wrote in the register that my father had been sent to his hometown, to Topolcany. But in reality he stayed in Banska Bystrica. Then when the Gestapo was going around the hospitals picking out Jews and partisans, there was the danger that the Germans would take my father as well. Doctor Petelen put my father in a room for those with infectious diseases, and on the door he wrote spotted typhus - 'Flecktyphus.' The Germans, when they saw that sign, didn't even touch him. My father then survived there until the liberation.

I think about four or five years ago, I proposed that Dr. Petelen be decorated, with the award Yad Vashem - Righteous Among The Nations 19. He received the award, unfortunately he didn't live that long. His daughter accepted the decree regarding his decoration. So that's my father's story.

The town [Topolcany] as such hadn't changed, I mean looks-wise. The spirit of my hometown was different, though. The local inhabitants' welcome wasn't very pleasant. It's best described by comments of the type: 'More of them returned, than left.' Despite the fact that in the first postwar days, only 25 Jews returned to Topolcany! Well, and these about 25 returning Jewish citizens were put up at the house of the former president of the religious community, Gelenyi, who died in the Holocaust. I also remember that my sister Ela was cooking for these people. They also slept at that house, because their apartments and houses were basically occupied - Aryanized. Of our family possessions, nothing remained. We didn't have all that much in the first place, but even of that little bit, practically nothing remained.

Then came that sad occurrence, the Topolcany pogrom against Jews, in October 1945. At that time I was already not living in Topolcany. I lived and worked in Bratislava. On the day of the pogrom, however, I was in the town. Because at that time I was working as an army journalist, my editor- in-chief sent me there as a Topolcany native. I went in an army uniform, I had the rank of second lieutenant. They told me to take a pistol with me! We got to Topolcany around 4pm. At that time the town was already calm. I visited my sister and father in the apartment where they were staying. What happened there I don't know. I only found out later from documentation. At home we didn't talk about it and later, when my sister and father moved to Bratislava, we never got around

to the subject.

After the war I stayed in Topolcany for only a few days. In May of 1945 I left for Bratislava. Later, one of my friends, who was editor-in-chief of the daily army paper Bojovnik called me to his office. [Editor's note: an organ of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters. The word 'bojovnik' means fighter. Was founded after the merger congress of Slovak resistance organizations in the spring of 1948 (press run of more than 20 thousand). In the year 1951 it merged with the magazine Hlas Revoluce (Voice of The Revolution).] By the way, he was the well-known playwright Leopold Lahola [Lahola, Leopold (1918 -1968); b. Leopold Arje Friedmann, dramatist and filmmaker]. So he was editor-in-chief, and he called me, for me to come work for that magazine. I accepted the offer. Because it was an army paper, I stayed in the army as a journalist until 1949.

After the end of World War II, I didn't even think of emigrating. Despite the fact that many of my friends, especially after 1949, decided to leave the country and emigrate. It was either to Israel or to the West. In those days I was still living in the ideal that socialism would solve everything. That there won't be anti-Semitism, that people will have a feeling of closeness, solidarity, and so on and so on. I had all of these false, naive notions. I also created this fixed idea that this is my country, and that no one is going to drive me out of it. It was this obsession of mine. And that was also one of those reasons why I didn't show interest in emigrating. I even had a brother in Israel, whom my father emigrated to go be with. On the other hand, I had a sister here, in Bratislava. The issue of emigration basically didn't exist for me.

In 1953 I got married. My wife wasn't Jewish. She was named Jozefina and was born in 1931. We met at work. She worked as a secretary at the editorial offices of Praca 20. In this way we had quite a bit in common. She came from this one quite devout Catholic family. Just to give you some idea, on Friday evening she announced to her parents that she was getting married on Saturday. When they reproached her that she had told them late and told her that they're not going to go to the wedding, she said that she had waited until the last moment only so they wouldn't try to stop her: 'You would have stood in my way, if I would have told you earlier, because he's of a different religion.' The result was, that they didn't come to the wedding, but invited us over to their place for Sunday dinner. When we arrived, they greeted me very warmly. They accepted me as their son. My wife was one of seven girls and I was their favorite son-in-law. I even took care of them when they were ill. And I buried both of them, both my father-in-law and my mother-in-law. As far as my family goes, my siblings didn't care at all that she wasn't Jewish. They accepted her very well.

Being from a very devout Catholic family, my wife also attended a convent school in Trnava, run by nuns. Her father, my father-in-law, had before been a functionary in the Hlinka Slovak People's Party. And I was still living under the impression that she wanted to basically show her revulsion at the politics that her father had represented before. And this is very well characterized by one event. After the arrival of the brotherly armies [the armies of the Warsaw Pact] 21, I had to leave the staff of Praca. And they wanted to keep my wife there, because she was an excellent worker. So she said, 'If Bachnar isn't good enough for you, then I'm not good enough for you either.' And she left the newspaper to go work at the VUKI Cable and Insulation Research Institute, where she was the deputy of the planning department manager, and became one of the most exemplary employees at the institute. Which is illustrated by the fact that when she died, at the relatively young age of 57, three busloads came from the company to the funeral. The farewell speech was given by the company director, who described her as the best worker that the institute had ever

had.

Well, I'd like to describe one more episode, which describes her very well. During the time when anti-Semitism was disguising itself as a struggle against Zionism [during the time of the Slansky trial 22 and at the end of the 1960s], when people didn't say 'we're against Jews,' but 'we're against Zionism.' At VUKI there was this mass gathering, where everyone was railing against Jews. My wife was standing in this group of managers, and said, 'I'm Jewish too.' When they heard this, they started backtracking, that you know, they didn't mean it like that, and so on and so on. And it's typical, that she, who came from a devout Slovak Catholic family, suddenly proclaimed: 'I'm a Jew.' Back then, when everyone was railing against Jews.

My wife finished four years of high school. Her father was a locksmith and worked as a custodian at a hospital in Trnava. Then he worked at a farm machinery repair workshop in Bernolakov. Her mother, that is, my mother-in- law, was a housewife. She had six sisters. One of them died. And the other five are still alive. I'm in regular contact with them. On 1st November [All Saints' Day. On this day in many countries people remember the deceased by putting flowers on their graves and lighting candles.] I usually always go to Bernolakov, to my in-laws' grave.

I can't say that Jewish traditions were observed in my family after the war. I myself didn't become a member of the religious community in Bratislava until the year 1976. For the High Holidays, like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I did however go to synagogue. It wasn't for religious reasons however, but from respect for traditions and my parents. I know how to pray, I learned it in cheder. I even understand the prayers, because I learned Hebrew. I also know how to read the prayer, and translate it. Despite this I don't pray. I visit the synagogue on one more occasion, during the remembrance of the dead, for maskir. At that time I recall the memory of almost my entire family, who died during the Holocaust. My wife respected it, and I respected her. That's why we used to have a tree at Christmas time. From my side it wasn't any sort of a problem.

We had three children: two girls, Alexandra and Ivana, and one son, Ivan. I didn't take them to synagogue. Well, all of my children have been to Israel. Even my grandchildren have been there. So there is a certain tie to Judaism and to Israel in them. In our family, as far as relationships to religion go, there were never any problems. My wife very much respected my origins. She respected them to the degree that she knew better than me when the Jewish Easter, Passover, was. She used to prepare traditional foods like matzah dumplings for me. So in this respect she was not only tolerant, but also obliging. With this she basically demonstrated her solidarity with Judaism. She didn't address our children in any other way than 'my little Jewlets.' So in this respect there really were absolutely no problems in our relationship.

She even learned to cook traditional Jewish foods from my sister Ela. My sister, also not for religious [reasons], but more due to tradition, observed some customs like before the war. For example, separation of dairy and fatty [meat] foods. Besides this my sister was a very good cook and liked Jewish cooking. Jewish cooking, that was for example seafood. Fish with nuts for example that was this specialty of my sister's and my wife adopted it. And not only that one. I personally liked fish with jelly and nuts. That was a specialty that my sister prepared almost regularly - every week. And she always put aside one portion for me. My wife, a non-Jew adopted this food, so we quite often had, for one, that fish, and for another she adopted and made them very well, matzah dumplings. Among good Jewish foods also belonged stuffed gooseneck. That was a recipe where

you ground a piece of goose liver, goose cracklings with flour and that was stuffed into this larger gut casing and baked.

My wife, not that she ended with it, but she didn't insist on observing Catholic rituals. She didn't for example go to church. The only thing that was observed from Christian customs was Christmas. But that wasn't so much for religious reasons, but she wanted the children to see that the custom was observed in our home just like in other families. Basically it was about social observance of this holiday. When my wife eventually died [1987], she had a civil, not a religious funeral.

After the war, religion wasn't cultivated in our family. Our offspring weren't religiously inclined either. With us Judaism had a more, I would say traditional character. And partly the relationship was based also on the fact that my father and brother lived in Israel. So we were tied to Israel with family ties as well, and thus also to Judaism. Plus I can't forget to mention my Jewish upbringing. They brought me up in a Jewish spirit. At the same time I also studied Judaism. They taught me Hebrew and thus I could learn directly in that language the history of Jews throughout the entire time of their existence. I had a rich collection of literature, which was connected for one to Judaism, for another to Jewish history, which was, precisely because I was already concerned with it during my childhood, very close to me.

As far as our children and their upbringing are concerned, that absolutely wasn't approached in a Jewish fashion at all. What I'm saying is, these religious and ritual practices didn't exist in our home. Our children expressed their relationship with Judaism by for example sympathizing with Israel. In fact, at one time one of our daughters was considering moving to Israel. So their stance towards Israel was very, very positive and thus also their stance towards Judaism as a whole. What's more, it was influenced by the fact that their father and grandfather were Jews and always stood by their origin and identity.

When the children were still small, we used to very frequently go on trips and vacations. We were for example in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania. Then I was with everyone in Israel. We also used to go to Israel during the time of Communism. We never went all at once, but gradually all of my children were there with me, and later also my grandchildren.

In every Jew there's a bit of a Messiah. Every Jew lives with the idea that he must, according to Jesus' example, take the sins of mankind upon himself and must be a redeemer. I was also one of those that thought that now [with the coming of Communism] equality was arriving. All national, religious and other social relationships will be leveled. So I also went to 'redeem' mankind. I thought that socialism would address all of these issues that had a conflicting character. I was very active, both politically and in the party. But I shortly came upon the fact that there are certain uncertainties. For example, among the first things to evoke certain doubts in me was one of Gottwald's 23 speeches. In it Gottwald spoke about the fact that Czechoslovakia will take its own road to socialism. A Czechoslovak road. This formulation of his, which at that time we welcomed, was publicized in the first edition of his book 'Deset Let' ['Ten Years']. But the interesting thing is that when the second edition of this book 'Deset Let' came out, that formulation wasn't there any more. That means that it was clearly said: 'No Czechoslovak road to socialism. One and only one exists, and that's the Soviet road.' So already then, the first doubts set in.

Other doubts came during the practical realization of socialism, which were the Slansky trials. Understandably, this evoked in me quite significant doubts, especially after when in the first edition

of the trial transcripts it was cited that Slansky was of Czech nationality. In the second edition, it was already cited that he was Jewish in origin. So there, after that, quite serious doubts were raised. And moreover, these doubts in me were also solidified by the fact that one of my good lady friends - an important party functionary, actually even a pre-war one, who when she saw that here it wasn't about opponents and enemies of socialism, but that it was an unambiguous, obvious anti-Semitic attack, she gave up her membership in the Party. So this doubt finally also came to me.

It also had a concrete result, which was that as a journalist working for the then party paper Pravda 24, I was immediately fired. From the National Committee I got an order to go do manual labor at a cable plant, and then to Dimitrovka. [Editor's note: Chemical Plant of Juraj Dimitrov, from 1991 named Istroch. The company was founded by the Swedish inventor of dynamite, Alfred Nobel, in 1873 as a part of his wider business activities in Europe.] I worked there for two years as a welder. Understandably, it strengthened my doubts, as far as the concrete application of socialism in everyday life is concerned. Back then I adopted one quote by Laco Nomesky 25, who said, and it's true today as well: 'The symphony was nice, but the orchestra was bad.' That was my conviction, that socialism is a nice idea whose realization is worthwhile, just the application isn't good.

As far as leaving the country goes, when the conditions were as they were: Immigrating to the West - never! It absolutely never occurred to me. Immigrate to Israel? I didn't even concern myself very much with it, despite certain connections, whether ideological or personal. I was of the opinion that I had fought for this nation, for this republic. I was prepared to, now I'm going to use strong words - sacrifice my life! It's my country, which no one will make me leave, I'm not going to let myself be driven out anymore! Due to this idea I in fact stayed here. I lived with the notion that a person is at home in the place where he lived his childhood, to which are tied his memories, friends, where he can succeed, and that was important for me.

Quite often and willingly I participated in various parades, demonstrations or celebrations of holidays. Whether Communist or not. I practically still participate to this day. As a journalist I'm interested in, among other things, how people act during these events. Just the day before yesterday I was at a demonstration against neo-Nazism [November 2005]. I go to all events like this. To May Day parades, as well as on the anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia, October 28th 26. I used to also go to Stefanik's memorial 27. So with me it wasn't limited only to Party events, but I used to generally go wherever people were gathering. I've always done this, up to the present day. It was from an internal impulse. I always had this idea: 'To be there.'

I'll return back to my work. After the war, and mainly after the year 1949, my career developed in such a way that I was asked to go work on the staff of Pravda, the central Party paper, where I worked for only two years. Because then the Slansky trial took place. Then I was fired and did manual labor, but I've already talked about that. For two years I was a welder in Dimitrovka. Even a good one, so I became a foreman. Then they offered me the position of master welder. But in those days, the Secretary of the UVKSS [Central Committee of the Slovak Communist Party] was Gusto Michalicka. I knew and was friends with him from pre-war times. He arranged for me to be let go by the Dimitrovka plant. And then he called me in to the central committee of the KSS [Communist Party of Slovakia] and asked me whether I'd like to work at a paper again. I said that if he could arrange it, then yes. To which he said that tomorrow I could start working for Praca, and for me to report to the editor-in-chief. I worked as a journalist for Praca, as a secretary at Praca and then as a foreign politics journalist. I worked there until 1969, when they threw me out of Praca, and also

expelled me from the Party. They labeled me as a right-wing anti-socialist element. This happened despite my having been a party member since I was a student, from 1936.

I had a good reputation and standing among the editorial staff. It can't be said that there had been any direct anti-Semitic conflicts. What happened was that many Jews were expelled from the Party and fired from work. The origin wasn't directly with the paper; it was within the scope of the overall politics of the Communist Party in those days.

But a problem nevertheless cropped up. It was an interview. Usually, when they summoned someone for an interview, it happened that they announced to him: '... Dear ... based on the decision of the District Committee of the Communist Party, you are expelled from the Communist Party, and also from your employment.' With me the interview lasted seven hours. It wasn't that easy to expel someone who had been a member of the party since the pre-war years, a partisan commander and active party member. I also had quite prominent political functions. I was a member of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Union of Cultural Employees, I was a member of the Presidium of the Czechoslovak Peace Movement... As a journalist I was also involved in various activities. My guess is that they didn't want to get rid of me completely, only to cancel my party membership.

However, the chairman of the organization and of that interview committee began to rail against my colleagues who had emigrated in those days. While at the same time, he had prior to this confided to me that if he were younger, he would have taken his wife and two children and left the country. It was he who during that interview began to abuse my colleagues and especially one, Peter Hirsch. Peter was, among other things, also a journalist at Kulturni Zivot [Cultural Life]. He was very clever, and by the way had been a very courageous partisan, who had even by himself destroyed a German tank. He began to really rail against him. I couldn't stand it any more, and said to that chairman, 'Palo! It was tougher for Peter to leave than for you to stay here!' And that was the final straw. They expelled me from the Party and also from work. Then I was unemployed for I think three or four months. In the end a lady who was the director of the Health Education Institute took me under her wing, and I worked there until 1976, and then went into retirement.

During my retirement, I at one time, I think it was in 1986, was earning some extra money as a sales clerk in a kiosk. It belonged to the Postal News Service. I sold newspapers. After about three months they summoned me to the head office, that I've got a shortfall of 7,000. My God, how can I be short, when I didn't do anything wrong?! So my wife told me to quickly go to the bank, withdraw seven thousand, give it to them and be done with it. When I wanted to do this, they then suddenly told me that they apologize, but that I've got a surplus and not a shortfall. Despite this I ended there.

Then I had one friend at the Slovak Union of Manufacturing Cooperatives, where they needed a gatekeeper, so I went to work as a gatekeeper until the year 1989. [Editor's note: This association of manufacturing and other cooperatives was created in 1953. Currently (2005) it includes 143 member co-ops with a total number of almost 12,000 employees. Its main focus is consultancy, procedural and informational assistance for its member co-ops in economical, legislative and legal areas, in financing, with issues regarding taxes, payroll, accounting and statistics.] I was the kind of gatekeeper where when the director needed a speech, he sent someone to the gate in my place, and I went up to the head office. There they made me coffee and I wrote speeches for the director.

On the occasion of the Velvet Revolution 28 he read a speech by me. During that time the invited me to come and work at the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters 29. At the Slovak Union I at first worked as the manager of the politico- organizational department, then I worked as the manager of the Secretariat, the union secretary, up to the moment when I didn't agree with the stance of General Husak, the union chairman. The two of us had differing opinions regarding the activities of this union. Then I worked for only two more years for the Simecka Foundation 30, where I worked in the archive on the restoration of a large quantity of documents to do with the Holocaust.

Life after 1989 continued for me, and progressed in a very interesting fashion. One didn't need to have a lot of political savvy to see that the totalitarian system, and the regime that existed here, couldn't hold on. It had no future. You can't have democracy in a society when the party, which proclaims itself to be the leading force in society, is itself not democratic. When the decision about who is going to be the director of a factory isn't made by professional officials, but the Secretary of the Communist Party. For the second time I saw that the totalitarian system was floundering between contradictions. Different were the political proclamations and different the practice that they implemented. I was among the first who even before November 1989 held the opinion that the regime was untenable. That doesn't mean that I was against socialism. No, not that. But against the practical application of that regime.

Recently my friend Vlado Czech and I were reading together a document from November of 1989, which I could sign again today. This document was also my creation, where I very critically evaluated the practices of the totalitarian system, and basically sketched out our notions of how society should further develop, especially concerning the application of democracy, solidarity and so on. Vlado Czech and I were the main people involved in the fact that the then leadership of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters was forced to resign. A new leadership was formed on new democratic principles.

My friend Vlado Czech then became the chairman of the City Committee of the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters in Bratislava, and I became the head of the politico-organizational department of the Central Committee of the Anti- Fascist Fighters. At that time I was taking care of practically all documents of a political nature. At the next congress of the Union of Anti- Fascist Fighters I was elected as the General Secretary of the union, which was basically the second function after the chairman. And I can tell you, that in this function I gained a relatively large amount of support and popularity, and still to this day, functionaries reminisce that when I - I'm not saying it to brag or anything - but to this day they reminisce that in those days the union was a lot more active. It was the time from 1992 to 1996. After that I refused to run again, because there were disagreements between the chairman, General Husak and me.

As a former high-ranking military functionary, he instituted a 'military regime.' I, on the other hand, promoted democratic principles in this respect. What's more, I also had a different opinion as far as the future of the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters was concerned. I promoted the idea that the union transform itself into one sociopolitical movement, and the chairman was for the union remaining a special-interest group. In this respect we differed. He had more support within the older leadership, and I saw that I won't be able to push through my opinion on the future of the union, and so I left. But the passage of time has shown that my opinion on this future of the union was justified. The union is now in the situation, that in a few years, when this generation is gone, its existence will be threatened.

If I was to talk about the present, I'm a relatively active and socially occupied person. I'm also very active in the Jewish community. I'd say that my activity increased mainly after 1989. I have to mention that I became a member of the religious community already in 1976, that is, in a time when it wasn't yet popular. Back then I realized that everyone has to belong somewhere. That he can't stand isolated and apart from the rest of the world. And I said to myself, that with my origins and my upbringing, I'm more inclined to belong to the Jewish community. What's more, I also became convinced that it's very honorable to be a member of such a community, which gave the world its greatest thinkers. And for that I went back in history, not only of Jews, but also in history in general.

Jews were the first to give the world one God and the First Commandment: 'I am your God, and you shall not have any other gods before me.' All religions up to that time had many gods, which they could depict in various ways. Jews said, I am a God invisible to the human eye. Jews gave the world Moses, who gave the world God's Ten Commandments. They gave it Jesus, who gave the belief in life after death. They gave the world the awareness that one can correct his errors or shortcomings. Jews gave the world people like Spinoza 31, they gave the world Einstein, they gave the world Freud. And when a person considers that Jews make up a scant one percent of the world's population, but gave the world I don't know how many bearers of the Nobel Prize, then it's not any sort of a disgrace to be a member of such a community. So, that was also one of the reasons why at that time the tendency to be conscious of my Jewish identity strengthened.

In my case, it started to show itself in that I was more and more studying the issues of Judaism, more and more concerning myself with the problematics of the Holocaust. For two years, in the National Archive, I collected a large quantity of documents that are connected to the problematics of the Holocaust, during the years 1939 to 1945. I participate in practically all activities that have some sort of connection with Judaism. I attend various openings of restored synagogues. I go to openings of exhibitions about the Holocaust. I participate in various tours. I've already been to Auschwitz three times. I was on a tour of Sobibor. Further, it has to a large degree affected me that during the Slovak National Uprising I was a commander of one Jewish partisan group. Today I'm practically the only living commander of this group. I was also for this reason recommended for decoration. Decoration with a memorial medal of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. That I was invited to meet the President of America, Bush.

As far as the present and my social contacts go, I've also got to mention my lively contacts with friends. Mostly they're Jews. I'm in constant contact with them. No, not a day goes by without me meeting or visiting someone. Yesterday, for example, I visited one friend with whom I take care of the agenda around the so-called Sixth Work Battalion. We live a very rich social life, and I'm very emphatic in this, because I'm of the opinion that people should meet. It's very important for us to meet, for us to show the other that we're here for him. I also visit a Jewish senior citizens' home. I gave them lectures on classical music and Jewish songs. Then I also played music for them. They've even been calling me, for me to come again. I brought for them recordings from when they were young. So they returned to their youth. In this respect, as I say, I'm very active and energetic.

These days I quite often go on trips and holidays. I can finally afford it, both financially and time-wise. For example, this year [2005], we were in say, Budapest, three times. Just now we've returned from a two-week stay in Israel. Before that we were in Piestany for two weeks, in Podhajska for a week, we were on a tour of journalist seniors in Ostrihom, we were on a three-day

tour in Sobibor. We've managed to do all that this year.

To finish this chapter, I'll mention one more thing, that for all of the suffering that I had to live through during the Holocaust, I got reparations after 1989. I get them from the Claims Conference. I also got a one-time reparation for my time in the Novaky labor camp.

At the very end of this conversation, I'd like to talk about those who are nearest and dearest to me - that is, my children and grandchildren. As I've already mentioned, my wife and I had three children. Our oldest son was born in 1956, and we gave him the name Ivan. After him, we had our daughter Sashka [Alexandra], that was in 1958, and after her, in 1963, our daughter Ivanka [Ivana]. All three children were born in Bratislava and spent their childhood, adolescence and also adult life here. All our children attended nursery school, and then of course finished elementary school. You know, the older daughter graduated from high school with honors. She had an almost photographic memory. So during the entire eight years of high school, I practically not even once had to tell her to go and study. Things were different with our younger daughter, who wasn't exactly the best student, and went to gardening school. She went to school in Malinovo, near Bratislava, and finished it. Our son also had problems with school. He finished vocational school without graduating. He was an electrician, and then specialized in computer repair.

Our older daughter soon got a position in the Federation of Employers' Associations. [Editor's note: Federation of Employers Associations of the Slovak Republic (AZZZ SR) - is the supreme employers' organization in the Slovak Republic (SR). The AZZZ SR is an incorporated special-interest association, which was founded in 1991 to help form conditions for the dynamic development of business in the SR.] That's a quite prominent organization. So she asserted herself very well there. Our younger daughter worked at one time at a gardening center in Bratislava. And then thanks to her sister got into a branch office of the Eastern Slovakia Steelworks here in Bratislava, so there she had a very good job. [Editor's note: the Eastern Slovakia Steelworks Kosice. On 24th November 2000, the entire smelting plant of the steelworks was sold to the prominent American steel company The United Steel Corporation.] At one time she worked for the secretariat of the General Director of the Eastern Slovakia Steelworks, Rezes. [Alexander Rezes (1948 - 2002): 1994 - 1997 Minister of Transport, Post and Telecommunications of the Slovak Republic.] Then when Rezes became minister, she worked in his secretariat. In 2002 her son was born and she left to go on maternity leave. She's currently a housewife and is taking care of raising her son. My son Ivan didn't do very well in his field.

In my household we spoke only Slovak. As far as foreign languages go, Alexandra speaks fluent English. So when I was in America that time in 2001, I took her with me. Ivana, the younger daughter, speaks only Slovak, and Ivan spoke some English, but only a little, unfortunately he was the type to never finish anything.

All of our children got married. The first to marry was our older daughter, Sasha. That marriage wasn't very good. It wasn't a very good marriage, because my daughter was oriented towards the humanities, literature, art. Her husband - my son-in-law, was the exact opposite. He never read one single book, didn't attend the theater, it was something foreign to him. Later they divorced. They had one child, a daughter, Lucia. After the divorce, he almost completely broke off his relationship with the daughter. When my granddaughter, his daughter, has her birthday, he sends her a postcard, that he's congratulating her on her birthday. That's all. This is how his relationship to his

own daughter expresses itself. At the same time, one has to take into account that he has in the meantime remarried. He and his second wife have two or three children.

Our second daughter, Ivana, married very young. At the age of 17. While she was still of school age. She met her husband in school. They have three children together. The oldest, Barbora, is 24. She graduated from high school. Her younger daughter is named Ivana and is currently studying at university. At the age of 40 they had a very dear and talented little boy. So, thank God, that family is very well balanced. They live a downright model existence. So there that environment is very positive.

My son Ivan also had a very unsuccessful, unhappy marriage. It basically led to the fact that due to stress, mainly as far as family relations went, he had a heart attack in 2003, from which he died. He and his ex-wife had two children, a son and daughter.

Despite the fact that I didn't take my children to synagogue, they knew that their father is a Jew. So that also they are half Jewish. The most inclined towards Judaism is my older daughter Alexandra. She feels that she's more of a Jewess.

## Glossary

**1 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.

**2 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.

**3 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 %).

**4 Neolog Jewry**

Following a Congress in 1868/69 in Budapest, where the Jewish community was supposed to discuss several issues on which the opinion of the traditionalists and the modernizers differed and which aimed at uniting Hungarian Jews, Hungarian Jewry was officially split into to (later three) communities, which all built up their own national community network. The Neologs were the modernizers, who opposed the Orthodox on various questions. The third group, the sop-called Status Quo Ante advocated that the Jewish community was maintained the same as before the 1868/69 Congress.

**5 Agudat Israel**

Jewish party founded in 1912 in Katowice, Poland, which opposed both the ideology of Zionism and its political expression, the World Zionist Organization. It rejected any cooperation with non-Orthodox Jewish groups and considered Zionism profane in that it forced the hand of the Almighty in bringing about the redemption of the Jewish people. Its geographical and linguistic orientation made it automatically a purely Ashkenazi movement. Branches of Agudat Israel were established throughout the Ashkenazi world. A theocratic and clericalist party, Agudat Israel has exhibited intense factionalism and religious extremism.

**6 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.

**7 Buchenwald**

Nazi concentration camp operating from March 1937 until April 1945 in Germany, near Weimar. It was divided into 136 wards; inmates were forced to labor in the armaments industry, quarries; approx. 56,000 thousand of the 238,000 inmates, representing many nationalities, died. An uprising of the prisoners broke out shortly before liberation, on 11 April 1945.

**8 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.

**9 Novaky labor camp**

established in 1941 in the central Slovakian town of Novaky. In an area of 2.27 km² 24 barracks were built, which accommodated 2,500-3,000 people in 1943. Many of the people detained in Novaky were transported to the Polish camps. The camp was liberated by the partisans on 30th August 1944 and the inmates joined the partisans.

**10 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.

**11 Majdanek concentration camp**

situated five kilometers from the city center of Lublin, Poland, originally established as a labor

camp in October 1941. It was officially called Prisoner of War Camp of the Waffen-SS Lublin until 16th February 1943, when the name was changed to Concentration Camp of the Waffen-SS Lublin. Unlike most other Nazi death camps, Majdanek, located in a completely open field, was not hidden from view. About 130,000 Jews were deported there during 1942-43 as part of the 'Final Solution'. Initially there were two gas chambers housed in a wooden building, which were later replaced by gas chambers in a brick building. The estimated number of deaths is 360,000, including Jews, Soviets POWs and Poles. The camp was liquidated in July 1944, but by the time the Red Army arrived the camp was only partially destroyed. Although approximately 1,000 inmates were executed on a death march, the Red Army found thousand of prisoners still in the camp, an evidence of the mass murder that had occurred in Majdanek.

**12 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.

**13 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.

**14 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)

**15 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.

**16 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 I. 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, http://www.holocaust.cz/cz2/resources/texts/niznansky_komunita)

**17 Jewish Center**

its creation was closely tied to Dieter Wisliceny, German advisor for resolution of Jewish affairs, a close colleague of Eichmann. Wisliceny arguments for the creation of a Jewish Center were that it will act as a partner in negotiation regarding the eviction of Jews, that for those that due to Aryanization will be removed from their current positions, it will secure re-schooling for other occupations. The Jewish Center's jurisdiction was determined by the scope and regulations of the particular instance it fell under. This fact fundamentally influenced the center's operation. It limited the freedom of activity of individual clerks. The center's personnel was made up of three categories of people. From bureaucrats, who in their approach to the obeying of orders did more harm than good (second head clerk of the Jewish Center A. Sebestyen), further of those that saw the purpose of their activities foremost in the selfless helping of people who were the most afflicted by the persecutions (G. Fleischmannova), and finally of soulless executors of orders, who were really capable of doing everything (K. Hochberg). Besides the Jewish Center there was also the Work Group, led by the Orthodox rabbi M. Weissmandel, but whose real leader was the Zionist G.

Fleischmannova. Though Weissmandel wasn't a member of the Jewish Center, he was such a respected personage that it would be difficult to imagine rescue missions being carried out without him. The main activity of the Work Group was to save as many Jews as possible from deportation. Of those in the Work Group, O. Neumann, A. Steiner and Rabbi Weissmandel and Neumann survived. In the last phase of activity of this underground group Neumann, who also became the chairman of the Jewish Center, lived in Israel. Steiner and Rabbi Weissmandel emigrated to Canada and the USA. Weissmandel and Neumann wrote their memoirs, in which they quite justifiably asked the question if the Jewish Center and especially the Work Group hadn't remained indebted towards Jewish citizens.

**18 Czechoslovak War Cross**

was established to commemorate the battle to liberate the Czechoslovak Republic from enemy occupation as a visible decoration for Czechoslovak citizens at home, units and members of the Czechoslovak Army abroad, and also units and members of allied armies that participated in the fighting which broke out in the year 1939, and who exhibited an extraordinary and successful act or command thereof, in the course of which they risked or lost their lives.

**19 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'.

**20 Praca**

A daily paper of the ROH (Revolutionary Trade Union Movement), published by the Slovak Trade Union Council. Praca has been published in Bratislava since 20th March 1946 (the initial circulation of 14,000 issues was raised from the year 1977 to more than 200,000). Praca had branch offices in Prague, Kosice, Banska Bystrica and Zilina. Praca was the first union paper in the history of the Slovak trade union movement.

**21 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.

**22 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.

**23 Gottwald, Klement (1896-1953)**

his original occupation was a joiner. In 1921 he became one of the founders of the KSC (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia). From that year until 1926, he was an official of the KSC in Slovakia. During the years 1926 - 1929 Gottwald stood in the forefront of the battle to overcome internal party crises and promoted the bolshevization of the Party. In 1938 by decision of the Party he left for Moscow, where until the liberation of the CSR he managed the work of the KSC. After the war, on 4th April 1945, he was named as the deputy of the Premier and the chairman of the National Front (NF). After the victory of the KSC in the 1946 elections, he became the Premier of the Czechoslovak government, and after the abdication of E. Benes from the office of the President in 1948, the President of the CSR.

**24 Pravda**

in the past, the newspaper was the Slovak equivalent of the Soviet/Russian newspaper Pravda. Founded in 1945 (other Slovak Pravdas existing before [in 1925-1932, 1944] were shut down), it was a publication of the Communist Party of Slovakia and, as such, it became a state-owned newspaper. Its equivalent in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia was the Rude Pravo. After the Velvet Revolution, Pravda temporarily became the newspaper of the Social Democratic Party, the successor to the Communist Party of Slovakia. Today, however, it is a modern neutral newspaper and one of Slovakia's main newspapers.

**25 Novomesky, Laco (1904-1976)**

Slovak poet, publicist, politician. From 1943-1944 a member of the 5th illegal leadership of the Slovak Communist Party (KSS). 1945-1950 Minister of Education and Enlightenment in the Slovak National Assembly (SNR). In 1951, on the basis of construed accusations was stripped of all functions. Jailed 1951-1956. In 1963 civically and legally rehabilitated. In 1964 declared a National Artist. 1968-1977 a member of the KSS Central Committee and presidium of the Slovak Republic. 1968-1974, chairman of the Slovak Matica. Works of poetry: Nedela (Sunday), Romboid, Svaty za

dedinou (The Holy Man Outside The Village). (Source: Illustrovany encyklopedicky slovnik II., Academia Praha, 1981, pg. 699)

**26 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.

**27 Stefanik, Milan Rastislav (1880 - 1919)**

Slovak astronomer, politician and a general in the French Army. In 1914 he received from the French government the Order of a Knight of the Honorary Legion for scientific and diplomatic successes. During the years 1913 - 1918 he organized the Czech- Slovak legions in Serbia, Romania, Russia and Italy, and in 1918 the anti- Soviet intervention in Siberia. He died in the year 1919 during an unexplained plane crash during his return to Slovakia. He is buried at a burial mound in Bradlo. (Source: http://www.osobnosti.sk/index.php?os=zivotopis&ID=755)

**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.

**29 Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters (SZPB)**

its beginnings reach back to the year 1945 and culminated at the IV. Slovak Congress in 1969 in Bratislava with a constitutional congress of the SZPB. It was founded by participants in the national fight for liberation and against Fascism along with citizens jailed for political and racial reasons during World War II. The Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters is a politically independent, non-party organization. The organization strives together with democratic forces of all orientations, all age categories, nationalities and ethnic groups, and religious convictions for the development of a sovereign, democratic and socially just Slovakia in a democratic Europe. (Source:

http://www.szpb.sk) 30 The Milan Simecka Foundation: founded in February 1991. Its mission is to contribute to the building of a new democratic atmosphere in the country, in civic society, the formation of a network of independent democratic institutions. During the course of its existence, the foundation has realized a number of projects. One large one is the Oral History Project, within which the theme of Czechoslovak relations, persecution by the totalitarian regime, the Jewish and Roma Holocaust, the time of the Velvet Revolution were addressed. The foundation collaborates with the Jewish religious community in Bratislava on the Holocaust Documentation Center project. The Milan Simecka Foundation is a member of many international networks on independent institutions and centers for pluralism. In 1998 it was nominated for the Hannah Arendt Prize. (Source: http://www.nadaciamilanasimecku.sk)

**31 Spinoza, Baruch (1632-1677)**

Dutch philosopher of Portuguese-Jewish origin. An independent thinker, he declined offers of academic posts and pursued his individual philosophical inquiry instead. He read the mathematical and philosophical works of Descartes but unlike Descartes did not see a separation between God, mind and matter. Ethics, considered Spinoza's major work, was published in 1677.