

# Heda Ambrova

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Piestany

Slovakia

Interviewer: Martin Korcok

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Heda Ambrova has lived in Piestany all her life, except for the war years, when she and her family were in hiding in the mountains in central Slovakia. She's from a liberal family. As she herself says: "I no longer observe the holidays, but have Judaism in my heart." During our meetings I found her to be an intelligent and accommodating lady with an incredible memory. I would like to take the liberty to say that it was mainly her doing that in 2006 a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust was unveiled in Piestany. The once-blossoming Jewish community in this city is on the wane, and the Jewish religious community in Piestany has already completely ceased to exist. Aside from Mrs. Ambrova, only a few witnesses to the Holocaust live in the city, who for various reasons refused to be interviewed.



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## **My family background**

My father was from the Eckstein family. They lived in Orava [a region in Slovakia], in the town of Tvrdosin. I can't tell you any more about this family, because my father became an orphan when he was eight. He was born on 22nd December 1889. Besides him, my grandparents also had two daughters. One was named Vilma, and the second one I never knew. Both of them died during the Holocaust. Vilma was deported from Ruzomberok. After their parents died, the girls were cared for by their uncle, who was a doctor in Orava. But people there didn't have much money, and even doctors weren't very well off financially. My father lived with a family and made a living by tutoring children. That's how he scraped by.

My father's original name was Arpad Eckstein. When he was in high school he changed his surname to Erdelyi. He graduated from a Catholic high school in Ruzomberok and then went on to study pharmacy in Budapest. He graduated in 1912. After school he settled down in Piestany, where he

worked as a pharmacist. During World War I he joined the Austro-Hungarian army [1](#). They sent him to Poland. He was wounded during the war. His upper lip was cut open, which is why he then grew a mustache.

My father was one of the best people you could imagine. You could say that he was a do-gooder. After his death, old women would stop me and say: 'We know you. That father of yours, that was some person!' He was very sensitive and retiring. But he had a great deal of knowledge in the area of pharmacy. All the local doctors respected him. He was actually a doctor for the children of doctors. In practice this meant that when a doctor's child fell ill, he'd come and consult with my father as to how to treat him. Everything I know about my father's past is from what my mother told me; he himself never talked about it. When he was having a good day, he'd at most tell us that when he was in school he had 10 kreuzers per day. That was enough for some bread and a bit of 'bryndza.' [Bryndza is a sheep's milk cheese made in the Balkans, Eastern Austria, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine.] He'd have no money left for anything else.

My maternal grandfather was named Benedikt Duschnitz. He was born in Dolny Kubin in 1856. My grandmother's name was Cecilia Duschnitz, née Meisl. She was born in Podbiel, or Namestovo, in 1865. My grandmother was 17 when she got married. She was a dark-haired, slim lady. My mother's parents initially lived in Slanica. There my grandfather owned a button factory and a distillery. Otherwise he was a builder. During the time of World War I he designed buildings. At the age of 20, my mother, Ruzena Erdelyiova, née Duschnitz, took over the distillery. Because my grandparents had ten children, they moved from the village to the town of Ruzomberok. Once my grandfather loaded us, his grandchildren, into a taxi and took us on a tour of Slanice and the house where they'd lived. There were still eyelets sticking out of the doorframe where a swing had once hung. They'd also had a horizontal bar and a set of rings there.

The Jewish community in Ruzomberok was very liberal. My mother's family for example didn't observe kosher food practices [2](#). Grandpa Benedikt became the president of the Ruzomberok Jewish religious community. He was a very respected man, and people were 'afraid' of him. He told everyone exactly what he thought of them. He and my grandma had ten children together. The girls' names were Anna, Malvin, Elza, Leona, Frida, and Ruzena, and the boys were Berci, Robert, Ernő and Jenő. All the boys were in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I. Nothing happened to any of them.

In Ruzomberok they lived in a house that belonged to their brother-in-law, Dr. Kürti. Dr. Kürti was the husband of my mother's sister Malvin. It was a multi-story building. Downstairs was the doctor's office. Up on the first floor, in the back, lived Malvin with her family. In the front lived my grandparents, and another family rented the back part of the ground floor. Dr. Kürti died early. He had so-called galloping consumption. That's tuberculosis that progresses very quickly. The boys were named Alexander, Vojtech and Karol. All three finished Technical University in Brno. None of them are alive any longer.

At home the Duschnitz family spoke mainly German and Hungarian. They of course knew Slovak as well. My mother spoke beautiful Slovak. My grandfather was for example great friends with the poet Hviezdoslav [3](#). Once we asked Grandma what they spoke between themselves. She said: 'German or Hungarian. After all Orszagh Hviezdoslav wrote his first poems in Hungarian.'

We worshipped our grandparents in Ruzomberok. They'd visit us in Piestany every summer. The climate in Ruzomberok is quite harsh. My grandmother was sickly. She had bronchial asthma. The way it went in their family was that my grandfather's word was law. Grandpa was a very lively and educated man for the times. In our eyes, he knew everything. He was interested in new inventions, and would then tell us about them. Once he told us that a certain Russian scientist, Dr. Voronov, had performed a transplant of monkey glands. That this transplant, which rejuvenates people, is really very expensive and so on. Back then my sister and I were getting an allowance, and we managed to save up ten crowns. [In 1929 the Czechoslovak crown (Kc) was decreed by law to be equal to 44.58 mg of gold]. We then gave them to our mother, to give it as a contribution for the transplant that our grandfather had told us about.

My grandfather was a heavy smoker, and so used to cough. He used to eat black licorice candy that he had stored in a silver box. The candies had numbers on them. We asked him: 'What are those numbers for?' He told us that they were Negro [African-American] coins. My sister was a little older and knew that coins were minted. He told us that in Africa they grew on trees. He didn't lose any time, and got up early in the morning and in one garden that belonged to friends of ours he hung those candies on a tree. Can you imagine how we used to worship him when he knew how to play with us like that?! Because our grandparents used to visit us in the summer, we used to return the favor. Our parents had always raised us to be independent. In Piestany they'd put us on a train and we'd travel all the way to Ruzomberok. They told us to stand up in Ilava. There's a jail in Ilava, and back then there was a superstition that whoever would be 'sitting' in the train while in Ilava, could also go 'sit' in jail.

My grandmother did handiwork. She crocheted and embroidered beautifully. Because she had six daughters, it was passed on to them as well. Elza was the only exception. She didn't do it. It was even passed down to her granddaughters and through me to my granddaughter, too. Besides crocheting beautifully, she also grew flowers. This fondness of hers was also passed down to me. I grow all flowers from seedlings; I like to watch them grow.

Grandfather Benedikt Duschnitz lived to a relatively advanced age. He died on 16th August 1933 at the age of 77. He had a heart attack. My grandmother died relatively young, on 2nd November 1936 at the age of 71. They're both buried at the Jewish cemetery in Ruzomberok.

My mother had nine siblings. I remember all of them. Aunt Anna got married to Leopold Diamant. Mr. Diamant was from Trnava. They had a daughter, Frederika, who we called Fritzi. Fritzi married a lawyer named Gotfried, before the war. In 1936 she and her husband moved to the USA. Her husband learned perfect English in a few years. During the Nuremberg trial [4](#) he was one of the interpreters. They had a son, Paul. Paul was in the US army during World War II. He participated in the war with Japan [5](#). There he met one young lady, who he married. One part of the family claimed that she was Korean, the other that she was Japanese. He returned to the USA with her. He didn't want any more to do with Judaism, nor with Israel. He said that he'd married a non-Jew, and that was that. They had two beautiful sons. I only saw them in photos, but they were truly beautiful children. We didn't hear any more of them after that.

Then there was Aunt Malvin Kürti. Her husband, Artur Kürti, was a doctor. They lived in Ruzomberok. They had three sons. Uncle Artur died at a young age of TBC [tuberculosis]. When my aunt became a widow, she opened a store with sporting goods in the town. Her sons helped her a

lot with it. The oldest was Alexander. He was born in 1904 and studied mechanical engineering. The middle one, Vojtech, was born in 1907 and the youngest, Karol, in 1914. Both of them graduated from university in Brno, specializing in roads and bridges.

After graduation Alexander worked in some mechanical engineering company in Berlin. His superiors were so decent that when Hitler came to power [6](#), they transferred him to the Skoda plant in Pilsen [7](#) and from there he moved to the USA. Alexander had two sons. The older one was a doctor, and his son lives in Dallas. The younger one had some sort of physical defect that he suffered during childbirth. Despite this he graduated from high school with honors and was employed for 30 years. Alexander died in the USA at the age of 95, and correspondence with the rest of the family was interrupted.

Malvin, Vojtech and Karol survived the Holocaust. Both boys were very active during the war. During the Slovak National Uprising [8](#) Karol planned and stood by the landing strip for Allied planes at the Tri Duby and Sliac airstrips, and Vojtech by Brezno. We'll get back to this story a little later. Malvin died in Banska Bystrica at the age of 89. Vojtech died a sudden death in January 1989. Karol died a tragic death right after the liberation, in June 1945. He was working in the reconstruction of a railway bridge by Kozarovce. No one ever found out how it happened. Some say that someone stepped on a mine and Karol was nearby. Others say that it was an attempt to assassinate the manager of the company that was doing the reconstruction.

Uncle Berci [Bertalan] Duschnitz graduated from a high school specializing in economics in Budapest. Back then it was called an Academy, one that specialized in export and import. He married a widow. Her name was Györgyi. She brought two sons into the marriage. I never met this family. All I know is that one of the boys was named Elemér. They lived in the town of Gyöngyös in northern Hungary, where they owned a huge vineyard. Elemér was drafted for 'munkaszolgálat' [9](#), and didn't survive the war. I don't know anything about the other boy. Their mother was also murdered. Only Uncle Berci survived. But after the war our contact was very sporadic. All I know is that once he spent the entire summer with us in Piestany. He died at over 80 years of age. I'm assuming that he's buried either in Gyöngyös or in Budapest. In Budapest in the event that Gyöngyös doesn't have a Jewish cemetery. [Editor's note: The Jewish community in Gyöngyös goes back to the beginning of the 19th century and there is a Jewish cemetery there.]

Aunt Elza Lakatos married a doctor, Imre Lakatos. Imre had hungarianized his name. After World War I, in 1918, a typhus epidemic broke out in eastern Czechoslovakia. Every doctor who was willing to work in this region was promised Czechoslovak citizenship. Doctor Lakatos accepted this offer, and he and Aunt Elza settled in Subcarpathian Ruthenia [10](#), in Chust. My aunt got herself a parrot that used to sit in the waiting room of my uncle's office. Because all sorts of people passed through there, the parrot learned profanities. It progressed so far that he'd swear at everyone: 'Te marha, te marha' [Hungarian for 'You cow, you cow.']. They were childless. They had Maltese Pinschers. When the deportations began in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, they committed suicide.

Uncle Robert Duschnitz was a banker and lived in Vienna. His wife's name was Liesl, and they had a daughter named Zuzana. My uncle held a very important post at the bank, because even during the beginning of the Fascist era, they allowed him to keep working there. I don't know exactly what sort of specialization it was, but they called it a 'tarifar.' Our family used to send him food from Slovakia [11](#) through friends who used to drive freight trucks to Austria. I know that right when he

was to get our last package, they were taking him away. We have no idea how he perished and neither do we have any information about the death of his wife. Their daughter Zuzana through some miracle got to England. It must have been a similar thing like Winton's [12](#) in Bohemia. My daughter visited her once in England, and that was our entire contact with her family.

Uncle Ernő Duschnitz graduated from economics. He married a divorced woman, Mrs. Stefania Roth. She was a very beautiful woman. Stefania had a son from her first marriage. His name was Juraj, and he was born in 1918 or 1919. They lived together in Bratislava. Juraj was a member of the Bratislava Bar Kochba [13](#) swimming team. He managed to escape to England before World War II broke out. My daughter was the last in the family to go visit him. He then didn't want to talk to anyone else. He especially held against us the fact that my parents had survived and his hadn't. His father was arrested in 1944 along with his wife. They were jailed until February 1945. In February they were emptying out the jails and they transported them. This transport was attacked and bombed by Allied planes by the city of Melk [Austria]. Ernő died during the bombing, and we never found out anything about the death of his wife.

Aunt Leona married Max Porges. At first they lived in Dobsina, and later in Zilina. Mr. Porges was in the wood business. They had two children, a son and a daughter. The daughter's name was Edit, and she married an engineer by the name of Bock. In 1944 they caught and executed them. The boy's name was Artur, and he was born in Dobsina on 11th November 1922. In 1939 he left with the 'Kinderaliyah' for Palestine. In Palestine he said he was a year older so that he could join the army. He was sent to fight in Italy and in Egypt. After the war he got married to a girl from Piestany by the name of Truda Sohnschein. She left with the same aliyah as he did. They've got two children, girls. One is named Irit and is a biologist, and the other's name is Ronit. She teaches geography and physical education at high school. Artur is still alive.

Aunt Leona and Uncle Max were caught in 1944. They were murdered and buried in a mass grave by Turcianske Teplice. Those graves were later opened. One lady managed to survive in the following manner: my aunt, Leona Porges, was second last in the lineup for execution, and the lady that survived was to have been last. When they were leading them there, they knew that they were going to be shot. The lady said to her: 'Let's hide behind a tree; they can't do anything worse than shoot us.' My aunt didn't hide, but that lady did. She then told us about it.

Frida was married to Sigmund Dezider. They lived in Budapest. I think that my uncle was a bank president. They had two children. The older one's name was Zsuzsanna [Zsuzsa, Zuzana], and she is still alive. The boy's name is Jakob. When after World War I the banks failed, they moved to Zilina, because my uncle was originally from Dolny Kubin. During World War I he was wounded and remained an invalid, so Aunt Frida supported the entire family. In 1936 or 1937 they made her the manager of a fuel depot - petroleum and gasoline. She was a very organized woman, and led it so well that during the time of the Slovak State they granted her an exception [14](#). When the situation in Slovakia began getting worse, they left for Budapest, because they all spoke Hungarian. Towards the end of the war, they deported her husband Sigmund Dezider from Budapest. They sent the whole group that they'd caught in just their underwear into the icy Danube. From there the Swedish took them in, into the Red Cross building in Budapest [15](#). After the war she lived with us for about a half to three quarters of a year; she was in very poor health.

Jakob left along with his cousin, Artur Porges, with the aliyah to Palestine. There they joined the English army together. He survived the war. His sister Zsuzsa was born in 1923. Because she wasn't allowed to study, she learned to sew. She was a seamstress. During the war, the Germans wanted to exchange an unknown number of Jews from Hungary for wolfram. She applied for that transport. I received a letter from her: 'We're really going to Portugal. I don't believe it, but we applied. I hope we'll meet again.' They took this postcard to Israel for me, and it's in some museum.

We didn't hear from Zsuzsa for a long time. After the war we found out that she'd ended up in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp [16](#). She was there together with Milan Mayer. Milan was from Liptovsky Mikulas. After the war they got married. They got out of Bergen-Belsen to Switzerland in exchange for some goods. [Editor's note: On the basis of an agreement between R. Kasztner, the head of a Hungarian humanitarian organization, and Kurt Becher, commissioned by Himmler to utilize Jews for labor, at the end of 1944, 1684 Hungarian Jews were allowed to leave the Bergen-Belsen camp, from where they were to continue to Switzerland. In exchange the German Reich was to receive various goods. Negotiations started, where Becher wanted 20 million Swiss francs from Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) for the purchase of goods. Though the transport reached its destination, sources say that the contract was never completed.] The Swiss more or less took care of them.

At the end of the war, the papers wrote who'd survived. Zsuzsa's brother Jakob found out in this way that his sister was alive. They met. Jakob then returned to the army, and Zsuzsa and Milan came to stay with us. We were this house of asylum. After the war, 17 people came to stay with us. Her mother, Aunt Frida, survived the war together with us. We'll get to that later. After Zsuzsi and Milan's wedding, the newly-weds moved to Prague and took Aunt Frida in to live with them.

Jenö Duschnitz was in the wood business. He was a beautiful person. He lived somewhere in central Slovakia. Doctor Lakatos arranged a place for his in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, where he also got married. He had a daughter, Vera. In 1944 they offered that they'd take the child to Slovakia. [After the First Vienna Decision [17](#), Subcarpathian Ruthenia was given to Hungary] At that time she may have been two or three years old, but it was already too late, because they deported them. Uncle Jenö survived, but only until November 1945, because he was in some facility where typhus broke out, and he died. That was somewhere in Germany.

My mother was born on 2nd November 1892, as my grandparents' seventh child. She had beautiful blond hair and blue eyes. As my grandfather was building houses, she took a distilling exam and ran a distillery. My mother was engaged to some physicist who fell during the first weeks of World War I. In those days it wasn't usual for girls to graduate from high school, it wasn't in fashion. But my mother was headstrong and graduated. She was only allowed to attend a Catholic school, part time. She attended school once a week. When they were going up the stairs she had to go last, so that they wouldn't see her ankles, and when they went downstairs she had to go first. She was the only girl in the class. Right at the beginning of the semester they told her that she'd never finish school. That the boys wouldn't allow it. She had a hard life there. During anatomy class someone put a finger on her exercise book. After that incident she left medicine and transferred to pharmacy.

After being forced to leave medicine, my mother began working in one pharmacy in Ruzomberok. There she met my father, who apparently was also working in Ruzomberok. They were married on 1st July 1919, probably in Ruzomberok. From the beginning my mother had someone to help her with the household, because she was very active. Not only did she found the Maccabi [18](#) in Piestany, but she also gave free courses in making carpets using Persian knots, and net-making.

## Growing up

I was born on 12th September 1922 in Piestany as Hedviga [Heda] Erdelyiova. We lived in what is now Teplicka Street, before it was Wilsonova Street No. 22. We didn't have any animals, not even a canary. My sister's name was Magda. She was born on 16th May 1920 in Piestany, and was two and a half years older. We didn't have nannies as such.

We attended Jewish school together, my sister for two or three years and I for only a year. The teacher at the Jewish school was an 80-year-old man named Weiss. It was a one-room schoolhouse. Several grades in one classroom. The principal of the state school told my father that Mr. Weiss is a very good teacher, but that he was 80, after all. It was a big thing for us to leave to attend a state school. I don't even think any more Jewish children transferred.

After elementary school we wanted to keep studying. There was no high school in Piestany, so our parents were trying to find out where my sister could start attending school. She was in Grade 5 of elementary school. In Nove Mesto nad Vahom they said that if she was a good pupil and wrote a differential exam between fifth year of elementary school and first year of high school, she could go straight into second year of high school. There was this one talented student in Piestany, and he was preparing her for the exam. She got into the school. I then went normally after Grade 4 of elementary school for an entrance interview, and started attending first year of high school. We had to travel to Nove Mesto nad Vahom every day.

It was an excellent high school, as it's registered on the UNESCO list of selected schools. Later I found out that our high school had been founded by the Moravian Rabbi Weisselle. He also brought in high school teachers. After the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic [19](#) the high school was taken over by the state. My sister and I both graduated there. My sister was two grades ahead of me.

On school days we'd get up at 5.30am. We'd walk to the train station, because our father was a very strict teacher. There we'd get on the train. We'd arrive at Nove Mesto [Nove Mesto nad Vahom] at 7am. That was a huge problem, because for some unknown reason, the principal didn't want to let us in the school before a quarter to eight [classes started at 8am]. There were more of us. He requested that from 7 to 7.45am we be with some family. It's very hard to find a family that would let strangers' children into their homes at 7am. Otherwise the school was tolerant, because Jewish children from devout families didn't have to write on Saturdays. Many misused this, but we didn't. Because we then had to finish it at home. We were also traveling, which is why it seemed ridiculous to us to not write. [Sabbath: during the Sabbath, 39 main work activities are forbidden, upon which injunctions on others are based. These also include writing and traveling.]

We had religion class, taught by some Dr. Weiss. We were relatively ignorant of religion. We read the Old Testament. One column was in Hebrew, and one in Czech, because we mostly had Czech textbooks. We mainly read Czech translations, but we also knew how to read Hebrew with

punctuation. We were all great friends. About 100 of us commuted, and the high school's capacity was 500. Students from villages also commuted. Back then there were no buses running, so we had classmates that walked five or six kilometers to the nearest [train] station. In general they belonged amongst the best students.

A relatively large number of Jews attended the high school. What was peculiar was that we were divided into several classes. I know that in first year there were three classes, and in second year already only two. There was a lot of screening. Later I found out that we were divided up according to religion. There was a class of Catholics and Protestants. Ours was mixed. One of our classmates was of no denomination, which was very rare in those days, one of the Czech Brotherhood and about twelve Jews. [The Czech Brotherhood Evangelic Church: a Christian denomination in the Czech Republic. It is the largest Protestant denomination in Bohemia.]

As children we studied French, and in high school as well. In Piestany a group of children who were studying French was formed. One French lady who lived there taught us. She had a bad case of rheumatism. Her name was Rauter. At the age of ten we spoke French as well as Slovak. Alas, one forgets. I speak Slovak, German, Hungarian, French, and also a bit of English. But I've forgotten a lot of the French language. My mother tongue is Slovak, as well as German. My son also says that he's got two mother tongues, because like my grandfather spoke German with us, my father spoke German with my children.

During our high school studies, we didn't have a lot of free time. Before that, in elementary school, we used to go on outings with our mother every Sunday. Back then going out into nature was something new among Jews. Later we began exercising at Maccabi.

Our mother also wrote children's plays, so we'd help her. She also designed costumes. She had helpers who'd then sew them. They'd sew the costumes at our place. Our mother would write the scripts, and the practices also took place at our place. The plays were put on only by Jewish children, but in the audience there'd also be non-Jewish children. We had a busy life. The plays were put on in a park in Piestany. There was this one terrace there, and in the summer various performances would take place on it. There was no admission, it was for free. Well, and then when we were already in high school, there were classes six days a week. On Saturdays we'd come home at 3.30 in the afternoon. On top of that, there was French, exercise at Maccabi and piano. My sister played excellently - she had long fingers. My daughter inherited the musical talent in our family.

I graduated, but didn't get into university, because it was already 1940 [20](#). They still accepted my sister into university, back in 1938. She was very talented. She attended the State Music Conservatory in Prague. Besides music she also studied English. Right when the Germans occupied Prague in 1939 [21](#) she had to stop her studies [22](#). By coincidence, our mother was visiting her at the time. When she was returning home, at Kutý [a town on the border with the Czech Republic], to the great surprise of the train passengers, there was a customs check. [The division of the first Czechoslovak Republic into the Slovak State and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia necessitated the creation of a border.] My sister returned, and made use of her music and English studies to give lessons. One of her pupils was the son of a highly placed Guardist [23](#), so he looked the other way and she didn't need any documents.

After graduation, I went to Nove Mesto for hakhsarah [24](#). I was very ardent about Palestine. Rabbi Fried was in charge there. A very modern man he was. He'd come to see us at hakhsarah. He



taught us a lot. There was also one Jewish teacher there with us, by the name of Eisler. He then left for Palestine. I was a member of the Maccabi Hatzair youth organization. Politically, it inclined towards social democracy. It was led by one miller from Breclav. Later this organization was dissolved. Many were successful in getting to Palestine, legally as well as illegally. I didn't leave.

My sister fell ill. In 1940, around Christmas, an epidemic of meningitis broke out, an infection of the brain's membranes. My sister didn't survive. She died on 26th December 1940. She couldn't go to the hospital, but we were getting serum from Berlin, because my father had contacts. It didn't help, even though many doctors were taking care of her. I know that it was a huge funeral. They buried her at the Jewish cemetery in Piestany.

Up to 1928 there was only one Jewish community in Piestany, an Orthodox [25](#) one. In 1928 it divided into a Neolog [26](#) one and an Orthodox one. I don't know the reasons for the division. The Orthodox Jews had their own synagogue, a very nice one. Jewish social life in the town took place only via the Maccabi. We didn't have a gym, so my mother and her friends signed an agreement with the workers' gymnastics club. They had a hall that also had a stage for theater performances. The club let us use the hall, and Maccabi purchased equipment - parallel bars, uneven bars, a mat, a pommel horse and a sawhorse. We then exercised there twice a week. Our instructors were qualified. I know that one of them had come all the way from Ostrava. His name was Müller. He found a job here, and then began instructing. He even taught preschoolers. He also taught two young women, very talented ones, from Trnava. Towards the end, a student from the Faculty of Philosophy who was taking physical fitness, English and German also exercised there. Each year a so-called Academy was held, where a gymnastics program was put on, and later also musical numbers. It was very popular amongst the non-Jewish population as well. The gymnastics numbers were so good that Sokol [27](#) came to see my mother to see whether she wouldn't take on some group of Sokol children.

Children from Orthodox families were very strictly watched. They didn't even associate with us very much. They attended only a Jewish school. Later, in 1938 and 1939, Protestant and Jewish children were expelled from the state school. A special class was created for them. The only Orthodox child that came to Maccabi to exercise was Lili Hersteinova. She was from a family of eight or nine children. She had a very nice voice, clear as a bell. She was a lot younger than I. My mother managed to pull off one master stroke. She convinced her mother, who was a widow, to let Lili leave with the 'Kinderallyah' to Palestine. She lives there to this day. From the Orthodox families, only one girl returned from the girls' transport, and that was Miriam Leitner. She was a year younger than I.

Jewish social life blossomed up until 1938. Each Purim a Purim ball was held. It was at the Slovan Hotel. Back then it was an elegant, beautiful hotel, visited by non-Jews as well. The Purim ball was also being prepared for 12th March 1938. But on 12th March Hitler occupied Vienna [28](#). Of course, my mother wanted to cancel it. Dr. Skycar came to visit and I can hear him as if it was today: 'Ruzenka, you can't do that, it would cause panic amongst people!' Dr. Skycar was the district chief in Piestany. The non-Jewish population didn't take it as seriously as all that. In the end the ball took place. That was my first and last ball in my life.

Relations amongst the population were problem-free. When we traveled to Nove Mesto, we Jews would keep together more, but we also had friendly relations with Christians. There was nothing

like you're a Jew and you're not. Boys would buy the A-Z newspaper, and the girls would buy the Hvězda weekly magazine. Each week someone else would buy one, and pass it around. They were Czech newspapers, because in those days there weren't very many Slovak newspapers.

My favorite holidays were mainly those when we didn't have to go to synagogue. For Chanukkah we'd light candles each day. We also sang. We didn't give gifts, perhaps only sweets. In the spring there was Tu bi-Shevat, of fifteen fruits. At that time you had to collect fifteen types of fruit. [The custom on Tu bi-Shevat is to put on a celebratory supper and eat fifteen types of fruit.] Then there was Passover, but we didn't change dishes. We didn't observe holidays very much from a religious standpoint. My father held seder, and I know that we'd begin with the Haggadah. That was still during the years I was attending elementary school. We'd say the mah nishtanah, and as the youngest I'd ask the questions. For Sukkot only Orthodox Jews would build a sukkah. Those that didn't have a yard, on their balcony. We used to make decorations from shiny paper and stars as well. Then there was of course Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

My parents didn't lead a very active social life. It was apparently also due to the fact that we would come home from school late, and so ate lunch at 4pm. Well, and Mother had to first and foremost take care of us. My father wasn't a social person; he was in the pharmacy from morning till evening. Our pharmacy is located in what back then was a pedestrian zone. Today in its place is the showroom 'U starej lekarne' [The Old Pharmacy]. I missed it for a long time, because it was very nicely appointed, there were these carved columns.

### **During the war**

In 1942, right when talk of deportations [29](#) began, I got married. There was a cell of illegal workers here that helped me very much. An acquaintance of mine, who lived in the former Soviet Union, came along and said: 'We won't allow for Heda to be deported. Two years ago you lost a daughter. We'll get her married for you.' Dr. Hecht came to see me, later he was named Horal. He told me: 'I'll marry you, but after the war we'll get divorced, because I've got a girlfriend in Prague. We'll help each other; I was told that you're honest people.'

He was also a Jew, it wasn't even possible otherwise. I also had a boyfriend, a Jewish boy, who was finishing university in Prague, but couldn't finish, because Adolf arrived. His name was Goldstein. We were married at the Piestany city hall. The official was this 'nice' man, and said: 'Even so, they'll deport you.' My husband was polite, and said to him: 'So we'll go together.' We didn't feel much like laughing. Someone ratted on us, that we'd been formally married. Luckily, a week after the wedding they transferred my husband to Michalovce. As a good wife, I thus had to move with him. My husband was a doctor. It was there that I got the telegram regarding my parents.

During the time of the Slovak State, as a pharmacist, my father had a presidential exception. Despite that, they took him to the collection camp in Zilina. At that time I was living in Michalovce. I got a telegram that my parents were in the Zilina sanatorium. The hidden meaning behind sanatorium was collection camp. You couldn't write it openly. We automatically knew what that meant.

I know that it was on Saturday, but travel permits weren't issued during the weekend. I traveled illegally to Zilina. My mother's sister, Aunt Frida, lived in Zilina. She explained to me what was actually happening. She said that we needed a phonogram from the Ministry of Health, so that

they'd release him, he being a pharmacist. [Phonograms are telegrams which are rung over the telephone i.e. dictated to the Acceptance Office.]

I took her advice. I asked someone as to whom I should go see. I went to Bratislava to the ministry. There I was greeted right at the door with a sign: 'No Jews or dogs allowed!' I didn't let that discourage me, and I found some friends who referred me to Topolcany, because a pharmacist lived there, a non-Jew of course, who was in charge of the pharmacy resort. I went to see him, and told him what the problem was. He said that even though he didn't know my father personally, he knew that he was a well-known expert and that he owned several patents on drugs manufactured by the company Fagner Praha. [The roots of the largest Czech pharmaceutical company, Leciva a.s., go as far back as the year 1488. In 1857 the company was bought by Benjamin Fagner. In 1930 it began operating a pharmaceuticals factory named Benjamin Franger in Prague. Leciva a.s. currently belongs to the Zentiva combine.] He told me that if I brought him the recipe for Arneumylen and the necessary know-how, he'd help him. I had no choice, as I had no money.

With bated breath we watched transports leave for Auschwitz. One such transport was composed of up to a thousand people. I heard that dirty deals were being made there. I began searching, until I got to that group of people. I asked what had happened, why was my father still here, when they'd already sent a phonogram from Bratislava regarding his release. I had of course made this up. They looked at each other and said: 'Hey, it's already been here for ages!' It was really there! We managed to get several people out in this fashion.

The pharmacist who I'd gone to see in Topolcany told me: 'Pick where you'd like for you father to work.' I was 20 and didn't know my way in the world yet. He gave me a few places to pick from, and I picked Batovce. I had a very 'good nose,' as it was a purely Protestant village. My father traveled straight from Zilina to Batovce. My mother went to Piestany, packed their things and went to join him.

That's how our family ended up in Batovce. The people there were excellent. Together we prepared the evacuation of the women and children from the Novaky camp [30](#). The local young people helped me very much. That was in 1944, but we didn't manage to pull it off, because the uprising broke out. The town had these so-called 'lochs.' A loch is a wine cellar dug deep into the ground. They prepared food and blankets in them, and that without us saying even a word. They were amazing people. Our friendship lasted until the 1970s, until that old guard died out.

In 1944, when the uprising broke out, I had to leave Michalovce, as I was an 'undesirable element.' I went to join my parents in Batovce. Back then my husband was transferred to Trnava, to an army garrison. In Batovce I learned to plow with a horse, and we'd also go to the mill. One day a group of soldiers stopped us. They showed us their ID; they were from the Sixth Battalion [31](#). They'd disarmed the Guardists and positioned themselves along the border between Slovakia and Hungary. Because Batovce was close to the border, I had an agreement with them that when the situation would be unfavorable, they'd let me know at the pharmacy.

On 6th October 1944, a message came, so we left Batovce. We went over the mountains to Krupina. In Krupina we needed to buy food. They said: 'We won't sell any to you, unless you come husk corn for an hour! Then I'll sell you bread!' I still hear her to this day. So I had to work for an hour so that I could pay 30 crowns for a piece of bread! [The value of one Slovak crown during the time of the Slovak State (1939 - 1945) was equal to 31.21 mg of gold. The exchange rate between

the German mark and the Slovak crown was artificially set at 1:11.] At that time everything was expensive.

From Krupina we went by train to Sliac. My father, mother and I. We were heading to the Kürti's. We weren't just relatives, but also very good friends with the boys. We arrived in Sliac in the evening. It was already dark, and besides the lights from landing planes, you couldn't see anything. I sat my parents down, and though they were young, back then they seemed old to me. My mother was 52 and my father was three years older. I approached one railway worker, and said I was looking for Mr. Kürti. He asked: 'Which one?' I answered that Karol. 'I'll take you to him, I know him.' We went to some office. He told me: 'It's good that you've come, tomorrow you'll go on some trucks to Horehronie [a region in Slovakia]! And that's what happened.

They loaded up two trucks with fuel and tools. My mother was responsible for one truck, and I for the other. My father was a cardiac [had a weak heart], and we didn't want to burden him. We got to Polhora, by Tisovec. The National Committee issued us a house. We locked the gate, because we had the trucks in the courtyard. My mother guarded the trucks and I went to work.

The village radio announced that everyone up to a certain age had to go work in the army warehouse. So I set off for there. I worked in the local school with silver. They had cutlery and candlesticks there of all imaginable types. In the back room there was army underwear. In the morning pretty, slim girls would arrive, and in the evening they'd be as fat as old matrons. They'd have all sort of layers on; they were smuggling out the army underwear underneath their clothes. Stupid me, I didn't take anything. It was only the next day that one of them advised me: 'Do you have any clothes yet?' 'I don't.' 'So take some.'

The silver was confiscated Jewish property. They most likely suspected that we were Jews. We didn't have it written on our foreheads, nor did we wear the star [32](#). There were decent people there, too. We didn't have anything to eat. It was a damp fall, and so we went to the forest to pick mushrooms. There we met Mrs. Porges, my mother's sister, whom they then shot. So we went into the forest, but none of us knew mushrooms. We collected a huge amount. One local lady then picked through it, what was good and what was bad. We'd had luck. We made mushroom goulash.

One day an order came from Tri Duby [the Tri Duby airstrip], from Sliac, that we were supposed to move to Nemecka. There they ordered us to stay with one farmer. I don't know his name, but he was an unpleasant person. He led us into a room. He even removed the straw mattresses from the beds. We had only the wood planks there. He didn't want to give us anything. Another message came from the Kürtis', that we're to leave for Banska Bystrica. We of course didn't have a travel permit. An order is an order, so I went to the train station. I naively asked for a ticket to Banska Bystrica. They asked me where in heaven I was from, that the trains had stopped running ages ago. Standing in the station was one so-called armored train. I was young, so I convinced them to take me. I hid under a bench. They let me off in Banska Bystrica.

I knew where I was supposed to go. There was one German woman there, whose husband was a Jew, but he was in hiding somewhere. My parents remained in Nemecka, but when they saw that I wasn't returning and there was no news from me, they set off after me. At the intersection between Banska Bystrica and Bukoved they met two young men. The young men told them that they had weapons, but didn't have ammunition. My mother had a hundred crowns with her, so she gave it to them, which [later] saved my parents' life. They went in the direction of Bukovec, where

they found a place to stay in one house.

In Banska Bystrica, Karol Kürti was waiting for me. Right away he asked me where my parents were. I replied that in Nemecka. Karol Kürti had a red Aero automobile. He set off to go look for them. He got to the intersection where the two young men were. He asked them whether they hadn't seen an older married couple. They answered that they'd gone up the hill. He went and picked them up, and they got as far as Stare Hory. There the Soviets stopped them, and told them they were commandeering the Aero. They couldn't tell them no. They said they'd return it by a certain time. No one believed it, but the Russians returned, along with the Aero.

In Banska Bystrica, a message from Karol was waiting for me at the German woman's place, that I'm to leave at 6am and go in the direction of Donovaly, but that I'd get two children to take along. The girl was 12 and the boy 15. They were Jewish children. In the morning at 6am we set off for Donovaly. Donovaly was about 12 kilometers away. We went on foot. Towards Harmane we were stopped at an army checkpoint. No one was allowed any further – Jew or not, child or not, old people, young ones with baby carriages, wheelbarrows, everyone wanted to keep going, but they weren't letting anyone through.

Luckily I had a pass that my 'paper' husband had arranged for me. I said that the two children were my siblings. They didn't check. It was a terrible experience, because people were yelling at us to take them with us. Along the road lay dead horses and destroyed weapons. I went to a so-called lumberjacks' cabin. It was a forested region. As soon as I arrived, my mother flew out the door. Karol had driven them there in the meantime.

In the forest we found some used parachutes. There were silk ones as well as cotton ones. Because they were wet, like naive civilians we spread them out. Suddenly Stukas attacked us, fighter planes with guns. Luckily nothing happened to us, because there were bushes nearby. If it hadn't been for those bushes, they would have shot us to bits. After we'd been in the mountains for several days, some army patrol came by. They gave us food and clothing. They stood up on some high ground and threw us army shoes and clothes. What you caught, you kept. Our group was all strong men, so we got it all. Bags of sugar, and dry peas which we had to throw out though, because they were full of worms. We even got rice. There was so much of it that after the war no one wanted to even see rice. We drank coffee. I remember to this day that they'd bring it to us packed into cubes along with sugar. We'd throw the cube into a cup of boiling water. The result was a terribly sweet drink.

The younger of the Kürti brothers [Karol] was in charge of our group. We were relatively well armed. We had guns and ammunition. In the meantime, we had to leave the lumberjacks' cabin. We ended up under the open sky. But we needed to live somewhere. Well, and because our group was all builders, engineers, we began to build. There was a very steep rise there, so that's where we decided to build. We made L-shaped trenches. It was raining buckets. Great attention was paid to everything. Trees were cut right above the ground. Nothing could be allowed to betray us. Each mistake could cost us our lives. From the trees we built temporary scaffolding. We also made tent sections with which we covered the scaffolding. There we spent the first night. We lay on branches we'd cut. At least it wasn't raining on us anymore, but on the other hand the wind was blowing at us from all sides. We lived though it. In the morning we worked busily on.

After two or three days we already had a roof above our heads. The roof was made from a tarp and branches. Again nature helped us out. We stuck branches into the ground close to each other,

which we then also crisscrossed together. November was approaching. It started being cold. We were constantly improving our dwelling. We even discovered a half-ruined cottage made of bricks. So we carried those bricks over and built ourselves a stove. At least we had something to warm ourselves by. Close by, about two kilometers away, we also had a source of drinking water. It was some sort of spring. We widened its channel. You can imagine how much we enjoyed carrying it.

On 20th November 1944, the first snow fell and stayed. At that time we already had a roof above our heads, and even those parachutes had finally dried. After that we were no longer freezing. After 20th November we didn't take anything off, but put on all the clothes we had. It was so cold that our hair would freeze to the tent sections. What's interesting is that none of us even sneezed. Our situation was gradually improving. One road worker lived nearby. Because the Kürti brothers built roads and bridges, everyone knew them. He told us that he had a Meteor brand stove for us. It was really heavy. The Kürti brothers and Ruzicka went for it. They had to take turns carrying it, because the path was uphill. That was the first night we didn't put everything on. We felt as if we were in paradise.

After the snow fell, we had to set up guards. While there wasn't snow, no one would find our tracks, but afterwards it was dangerous. There were paths to the cabin from each side. He who knew the surrounding terrain could find his way there. We were erasing our tracks. I was the youngest and also the lightest, so on the way down I went first. And on the way up, I went last. We made two brooms with which we erased our tracks in the snow.

Our group wasn't composed only of Jews. One of the non-Jews was a former employee of the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak State, then a Czech engineer, Domin [Dominik] Ruzicka. There was one Russian, too – Stolpyansky, whose parents left Russia in 1917. The rest of us were Jews. During our stay in the mountains, two German women were sending us messages. We had a connection down in the village. We would also get packages of red paprika, because we'd heard that if we sprinkled it on the ground, dogs wouldn't be able to follow our scent. That's what we also did, but luckily no dogs arrived.

Once at night we heard someone shouting my name. They were looking for me. He must have known it there, because he'd gone around the guard. It turned out that my war husband, who was a doctor at Stare Hory, had fallen ill. They'd diagnosed him with typhus. They couldn't keep him at the base, and so were looking for a group that would take care of him. We went to get him. We quickly put together a stretcher, on which we carried him up. Karol and Vojtech Kürti, Domin and I went. We were this inseparable foursome. He was in the town of Rybov. As soon as we brought him up, we had to isolate him. We built a log cabin, lightning-quick. There was lots of wood. In it we put this little oven, with an open fire. That's where we put up my husband along with his brother. We'd bring them food there.

He got through it and got well. But someone told him that we'd wanted to shoot him. There was an unwritten law that partisans don't leave their wounded at the mercy of the Germany army, but shoot them. But we hadn't wanted to shoot him. In the end it turned out that he'd had hepatitis. He left us in great anger. After the war we had a relatively good relationship. He moved here and there. He finally dropped anchor at the Na Frantisku Hospital in Prague. We didn't get divorced until 1946.

We spent Christmas in our 'log cabin.' It was nice and warm there. We took a branch and decorated it like a Christmas tree. Vojtech Kürti was incredibly handy, and he made candle holders for the tree. We made some paper stars and it was Christmas. We had some food, but we were missing 'kolace' [small, usually round, sweet cakes]. Domin Ruzicka couldn't stand it and announced: 'I'm going to Bratislava.' He managed to get to Bratislava and return with ingredients. In the village they gave us flour. Mother and Malvin mixed the dough. We set out for the roadman's cabin, and baked all night. We even thought up a story for the Germans, if they came by to check. I was supposed to be an evacuee from Michalovce without anything, not even papers. We baked as much as we could and carried it back up. We had hot coffee and 'kolace.' Domin Ruzicka brought back news from Bratislava that they'd arrested my uncle, Ernö Duschnitz.

In the mountains, even everyday trifles were hard to perform. In the first place, we had to have heat. We looked for trees that were already falling apart, and thus well dried out. We had tools like saws and axes. Once by one of these fallen trees we found a box with alcoholic beverages. That day everyone got a shot of alcohol. What a treat that was! Going to the toilet was complicated as well. One C was built, not a WC [water closet, or toilet], but a C. A sidewalk led up to it, on which a ramp was built. Whoever went up would close it. That meant that it was occupied. Of course tracks were erased after everyone.

On a side path we built three walls of snow, on which we'd pour water overnight. The walls froze, and thus a women's and men's washroom was made. That was very important, because most people that were living in the mountains were infested with lice. We didn't allow even one louse. We heated snow and washed. Once a week everyone had to wash with warm water. We had two wash basins. Everyone had his own toothbrush, that was part of the plan when we were leaving for the mountains. Everyone had to brush their teeth. There was an exact program of what people had to do. Doing laundry was also one of the very difficult tasks. We'd heat water. My mother would wash the laundry, and I go to the creek to rinse it. Domin Ruzicka would go with me, with a rifle. We'd push aside the snow, cut a hole in the ice, and that's where I'd rinse. My hands were so frozen that they were purple.

One day I saw ski tracks on the slope opposite us. After that we didn't cook or heat. We would walk down to the village to find out what was going on. We found out that Dano Chladny, an officer of the Czechoslovak army, had begun to organize a partisan group, which later we also joined. I don't know why, but my cousin Vojtech Kürti signed up only the men as members. Maybe he didn't like women. When he was three years old, he was burned. His entire body was covered in scars. On one side he had someone else's ear sewn on in a plastic surgery operation, and he had only three fingers on his hand. He survived thanks to his father being a doctor, and that he was suspended in an oil bath.

One day a Soviet patrol from Jelenska Skala came to see us. They wanted to take our weapons, but our guys managed to keep them. They registered our group. Our code names were Orech 1 and Orech 2. After that we functioned on a professional level. We also began keeping proper guard. Once we received a report that above Jelenska Skala was a cave in which a woman was going to give birth in a few days. The Kürti brothers were excellent skiers, so they sent them there. We packed them some cotton parachutes, so the baby would have diapers. They were very well supplied. The baby really was born there. Mr. Gross went with the Kürtis as well, because he was a children's doctor. Mr. Gross was part of our group. He was also Jewish. The poor guy, he was more

afraid than that woman. The baby was born healthy.

The women who were in hiding with the men in the mountains were mostly Jewish, but not all of them managed to stand it and stay. Many of them went down, and that cost them their lives. Our group was supposed to be split up as well, because we had those two children they'd given me in Banska Bystrica. Mrs. Kürti, my parents, the two children and I were supposed to go to some village. Everything was prepared in advance, because we didn't know if we'd have to cross the front or not. Luckily it never happened. One night we heard a siren. The Kürtis knew that it wasn't a siren, but an avalanche. Not far from us an avalanche fell and buried many partisans who'd been crossing the front. We don't know how many people died there. Finally the idea of splitting the group was abandoned. We wintered there, and kept on guard.

During our stay in the mountains we also experienced a few close calls. Another group was active nearby. They weren't very disciplined. They used to go on the castle road, where the German army had patrols. Well, as luck would have it, they caught them. Their only one bit of luck is that they were older soldiers, Austrians. They didn't concern themselves with them, and said to them: 'You know what, we'll turn around, and you'll go away!' The second close call was when Domin and I went on patrol. Suddenly he threw me on the ground. I asked him what was going on!? 'You didn't hear that bullet?!' Back then we told ourselves that we'd had amazing luck. If it was to happen again, we probably wouldn't have survived. Daily we'd wake up to the unknown. We didn't know what the day had in store for us.

### **After the war**

We were in the mountains until the liberation of Banska Bystrica. Bystrica was liberated on 26th March 1945. We didn't want to leave our hiding place yet. Karol Kürti said that we still had very hard times in store. 'Don't be in a rush, you'll look back fondly at our stay in Turiec [a region in central Slovakia].' That happened, too. We didn't come down until 10th April. We packed everything up and set out in the direction of Bystrica. On the way we met Dr. Geiger from Ruzomberok. He joined us. Because we didn't have any way of getting to Bystrica, we went to our friend the German lady, who'd been our connection the last several months. Her name was Mrs. Müller. There we found out that my boyfriend at the time, Goldstein, had fallen in the uprising. If he hadn't fallen, I would've probably married him.

Mr. Müller greeted us, and brought duvets, quilts and blankets. Imagine that we didn't know how to sleep in a bed, that's how unused we'd gotten to it. We slept only on the floor. At Mrs. Müller's we split up. The Kürtis went to Komarno. They had a long trip ahead of them, because the trains weren't running. My father decided that we'd go to Batovce, as the last several years before the war he'd worked there. We made it to one village, about five kilometers from Batovce, where we met some people we knew. They were glad to see us. We asked them to please not let people in Batovce know that we were on the way home. One of them sat on a bicycle and went to Batovce. Imagine that they were waiting for us on the square with a band.

In the meantime they'd prepared a room for us. Because there was no future for us in Batovce, my parents went to Piestany. The guys in Batovce who'd wanted to help me during the evacuation of Novak found out that a Romanian army transport was running to Piestany. It didn't go directly from Batovce, but from some nearby village. The Romanians had an army hospital in Piestany. I knew that the Romanians spoke French, and I knew French, after all. So I put on civilian clothes and



stopped an ambulance. I asked the man beside the driver, who was an older man, whether he wouldn't take me to Piestany. He answered: 'Yes, but I have to pretend you're my wife.' Because the Soviets were checking everyone. Luckily we didn't have any complications. He told me that they'd be returning in three days, and that they'd take me, but in the meantime the front moved and they went on to Trenčin.

In Piestany, at the National Committee, I found a few good friends and they told me: 'Have your father come to Piestany right away, he'll get a pharmacy. It's empty, but he'll fix it up himself. We'll find an apartment for you as well.' In Piestany there was this one spa treatment facility named Ivanka, which they emptied, and everyone who returned got one room and three meals a day.

We returned to Piestany. My father was taking care of the destroyed pharmacy and my mother got the task of handing out things and clothing from UNRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration] for people affected by the war. My task was the household. Everyone who returned and had nowhere to live got a room in the Ivanka treatment facility. Once in the dining room of the treatment facility I heard about the bombing of an army transport that had been going to Melk. They mentioned some names, and among them was also the name of my mother's brother. I was at the Regional Court in Bratislava. There they showed me a huge list of people who'd been deported. Doctor Karadzic, I think was his name, was one of the few who'd survived the transport. They allowed me a ten-minute meeting with him, because he was seriously wounded. He told me what had happened.

Our priority was to get an apartment. There were people on the National Committee who knew us from the prewar years and they said to me: 'Find an apartment, and if there's a Guardist living there, we'll kick him out.' I didn't think too much of that, but I went around and was successful. I found one apartment where a lady from Topolčany lived, whose husband had left with the Germans. That did her in, as they say. So they moved her out. She left without much protest. We moved in there, but weren't there long, because the apartment was on the second floor, and my father had a very ill heart. He couldn't handle taking the stairs. Because my partner-to-be had fallen in the uprising, I wanted to have my own family. I got married in 1946.

For many years after the war I lived with my parents, even though I got married in the meantime. I was looking for an apartment and found one, too, but my husband didn't want to leave my parents. He felt safe with us. He said that we'd be abandoning them. I argued that that was normal, after all. That didn't help, so we remained together. We also managed to get a bigger apartment. We lived with them for 30 years. My mother was in charge of the household; we called her Mussolini, because she was bossy. If we wanted to get along, we had to find a platform. Sometimes conflicts took place, but we resolved them as calmly as possible. I went to work and my mother helped me with the children. I valued the presence of my parents greatly, and that smoothed everything out.

I met my husband, Edmund Ambra, in a very romantic fashion. During the war I lived in Michalovce for a certain time, and my parents in Batovce. I'd go visit them twice a year. As the Germans were pushing across eastern Slovakia into Romania, Jews were being evacuated, political undesirables, basically 'undesirable elements.' In the meantime, my wartime husband was transferred to an army hospital in Trnava, which they later evacuated to Stare Hory. I then went with my parents to Batovce. We blended in with the population there. I used to go work in the fields with them. At the end of August 1944 we went to the mill to grind grain. Some soldiers stopped us. They told us that

they were members of the Czechoslovak Army. They needed axes and shovels, as they'd been ordered to block the road to Hungary. This was because Levice was nearby. And my future husband was in this group. I and my 'paper husband' were divorced as soon as possible. Edmund and I were married on 13th October 1946. We were together 54 years.

My husband was from a devout family from Presov. Their name was Meisel, but afterwards he then changed his name to Ambra. The name was changed in a curious fashion. His younger brother, Imrich Meisel, was seriously injured at the beginning of the war. He was run over by a motorcycle. As soon as he'd barely recovered, the deportations began. So that he wouldn't be taken away, they arranged Aryan papers for him. In the archive they found the birth certificate of a certain Ambra who'd fallen at the front. Based on that birth certificate, they arranged false papers for him. He then survived the entire war as Imrich Ambra in Horne Srnie. Right after the war, my husband took the same name as his brother.

My husband was very intelligent and educated. He loved classical music, though he was from a simple family. His father didn't know Latin script, and knew how to write only in Hebrew. He worked as a shoemaker. My husband was very hard-working and fit in at my father's pharmacy, because he'd also graduated from pharmacy. Before the war he'd begun studying chemical engineering, but after a half year he had to stop. They recognized some of his exams, and he continued with his studies in Brno, in pharmacy.

My husband was a big joiner. To my chagrin, he was also a member of the Party [33](#). In this aspect we didn't agree. We couldn't discuss politics at home, because right away there was a big conflict. During the Slansky trials [34](#) we didn't have any problems in particular. Nothing happened, because he wasn't that prominent in the Party. But to my taste he was, all too much, but what could you do. I let him be. It was his thing, as long as it didn't affect our children. I know that once he had the night shift, and was invited to a meeting. I told him: 'Pick up the phone and tell them that you're on call!' No, he's got to go there in person. He went there in person and apologized. One friend then told him that as soon as he left, people started saying: 'That Ambra's a decent guy, hopefully he's not a Slansky supporter!?'

My husband's parents perished, as well as several siblings. His sister remained alive, and his brother, Imrich Ambra. His sister, Barbora, was a very pretty girl and one Jewish boy by the name of Weiner took a liking to her. When he was young he went to Belgium and learned to cut diamonds. He was from the East, and after the war he came here to pick a wife. Barbora caught his eye because she was very pretty. He took her to Belgium. They kept a kosher household, because everything was easily available. They had two daughters, who were brought up in a religious manner. They attended Jewish schools. My husband used to go visit them occasionally.

Both their children were brought up in a Jewish spirit. One of their daughters married a Belgian, a Jew. There wasn't really any other option. They had three children together. One of them finished law and didn't find a life partner. Now she's about 30, which for a Jewish girl is already an advanced age. At work she met a blue-eyed blond guy, Taras, from Minsk. Believe it or not, he's not a Jew. They brought Taras to her grandma, Barbora Weinerova. Because Slovak and Russian are related, she welcomed him very warmly. I've been invited to the wedding, but I'm afraid to go to Minsk, because that's where the wedding is supposed to be. This is because his parents can't get permission to leave.

After our wedding my husband began working for my father at the pharmacy. My father had decided to buy the pharmacy from his partner right after the end of World War I. He paid the last installment on the pharmacy in October 1938. They deported his partner. He perished, but an heir in France remained. Finally after 1948 they nationalized it [35](#). After that my father worked there as only an employee, and so did my husband. They later transferred my father to a different pharmacy. As far as management went, their opinions differed. My mother and I tried to keep it in balance. My father was almost never home. He worked from morning till night. Our pharmacy still exists to this day. It's in a pedestrian zone. Now there's a showroom there, 'U Starej lekarne' [The Old Pharmacy]. After 1989 [36](#) we fought for it, but we finally gave up. I'm glad that that's how I decided.

We had two children. A daughter, Hana, in 1947, and a son, Karol, in 1953. Inasmuch as we lived under one roof with my parents, there were occasionally differences of opinion on bringing up the children. My mother was an ambitious woman. My sister had been a talented musician, but, alas, died when she was 20. My mother wanted at all costs for my daughter to become a musician as well. The poor thing had to sit at the piano and practice at the age of six. I pleaded with her, that she doesn't have to be an artist, that if she's got talent, it'll show itself eventually. We didn't argue, but there were differences.

The children were good, excellent students. My father spoke German with them, so they learned another language. We went on hikes, always with a backpack on our backs. My husband and I took vacations together with the children. We spent our free time under Rosutec [the Maly Rosutec and Velky Rosutec mountains rise above the town of Terchova in the Zilina region], in Demanovska Dolina [Valley] and in the Tatras [The Low Tatras and the High Tatras are mountain ranges in Slovakia]. We'd stay in cabins. Then when the children grew up they each went with their own group. We didn't have a car. We wanted to find out how our children would behave in the company of other children, so we sent them to camp. The boy was in a camp by Senica, but he didn't like it there at all. And because our daughter spoke some French, we sent her to a camp with children from abroad. She wasn't happy there either. So we decided we'd rather vacation as a family.

As far as our children's religious upbringing goes, we didn't observe holidays much. My father kept seder regularly, which interested them. We didn't observe Yom Kippur, just my parents fasted. In the beginning we didn't have a Christmas tree. We finally got one when we had our grandson with us. We didn't want to completely isolate him. Because of him we decorated a small tree. In front of my grandfather's photograph I pleaded: 'Don't be angry.' Our grandfather hadn't been tolerant in these matters. Our children read a lot, and when our daughter was about 13, she told me: 'I often run into quotes from the Bible. I know very little about the various characters.' I got her a Bible and that took care of that.

Our daughter began studying in Brno, biochemistry. I'm very proud of her, because there were only five spots available for biochemistry in the entire country, and they accepted her. In the beginning she came home very often, because she was an introvert. When she finished, she applied for work in Bratislava. She went for a job interview. The secretary told her: 'You were first at school, but that doesn't mean a thing!' She asked: 'Why?' 'Do you know any languages?' 'Slovak, German, French, English. You can test me!' 'You're young and pretty, you'll get married.' 'I won't get married.' They didn't accept her. She was so annoyed that she left for Prague. There she found a job at the patent office. She grew close with one colleague there, and got married. Her husband wasn't a Jew. The

first thing I asked my daughter was whether he knew she was Jewish. She answered: 'I told him right away.' In the beginning they visited us every six weeks.

Our daughter had one son, Viktor, but alas not long after giving birth she died. My husband and I then raised Viktor. The boy lived with us from the age of four weeks. Her death was a huge tragedy. Our daughter had been working as a scientist in India. They wanted to go to America, but they told them: 'First you have to go to India.' They were working on subject matter that was being researched in India and the USA. In India she became infected by a parasite similar to a tapeworm, but which deposits its young in the cornea, or in the brain. Our daughter had the worse version, in the brain.

No one else in their team was infected. She underwent treatment in Belgium, and there they told her she could have caught it from improperly washed vegetables. Her illness dragged on for a long time. At first they thought that she was mentally ill. She was behaving strangely. They thought that it was related to late pregnancy. They said that she was 34, which is a fairly advanced age for a first pregnancy. That wasn't confirmed. The child was born via caesarean section, and at that time they found out what was really the matter. A suppurating infection of the brain membranes, which is the same as the symptoms of the parasite. I asked the doctors how they were going to treat it. The medical minds in Prague told me: 'We don't know, we've never seen it before.'

I had one friend in Prague that opened some doors for me. He'd been in the diplomatic service for many years, and so knew various ways. He said that there was a hospital for tropical diseases in Hamburg, in London and in Antwerp. Because my husband had a sister in Antwerp, we applied for permission to leave the country. We also got it, ten days later. What they'd searched for here for a year, there they found out in 24 hours. They took a live tapeworm from her, 2 ½ meters long. Alas, nothing more could be done. During the time she was lying in the hospital in Antwerp, there was a parasitology congress in Paris. Her physician, Dr. Heyes, participated in it. At the conference he presented her case. One doctor from Mexico spoke up, as this disease is very frequent there. They diagnosed it in one 14-year-old boy, too. They operated on him and he was cured. After the operation our daughter was still alive. I traveled to go see her. The third day she died. Her son ended up with us.

For the first three years our grandson lived with us. Our son-in-law insisted that he learn perfect Czech, so he registered him in a kindergarten in Prague. He then only came to be with us during vacation. After some time they invited our son-in-law to America. He's a chemist, and now he's a professor in Chicago. Our grandson lived in America for some time, he finished biochemistry, but he moved to Prague. He didn't want to live in America. He didn't like the life there. We call each other at least once a week; he always says: 'You're my mother.' His father lives in America. When they were supposed to move to America, I said to him: 'You can't go to America with a girlfriend, you have to get married!' It was very hard for me, but she's very nice and good to the boy. We still keep in touch, they phone me every month.

Our son married a woman who isn't Jewish; they're together for 30 years already, and get along very well. They've got two gorgeous girls. I see them very little. Zuzana lives with her husband in Orbiste, which is about six kilometers from Piestany, but when your legs don't serve you, even that's far. The second, Hana, has a peculiar nature. She's still got to grow up, but I love her.

Our son graduated from economics. In the beginning he worked at the spa, but they began trying to trip him up. He resigned. He had a hard time finding a job. Finally he had to take some sort of requalification course in accounting. He bought a computer and all sorts of programs. Later he started a company with a friend, and is in business.

After the war I began studying pharmacy, but my back was bothering me. In Prague they told me that I had to change my occupation. I turned to a friend who was a doctor, and he recommended me to a specialist. His advice was for me to change my occupation. Finally I found a job in a company that needed someone that knew foreign languages. In time I became manager of the entire department. I was in charge of ten women. Our department was named the study department. Our work was sorting information from all over the world. We used to get about a hundred different foreign magazines, German, French, Russian ones. I informed upper management as to what was going on in the world. We of course monitored information only in certain fields, like mechanical engineering and healthcare. It was very interesting. My greatest success was when they wrote me all the way from China, but I wasn't allowed to answer, because there was a total ban. That disappointed me greatly.

I retired when I was 58. I worked three years extra. At that time my son had come to Piestany and I promised him that I'd take care of the grandkids. So I took care of the children. When my grandson grew up, I started giving German lessons. I gave only private lessons, even though they also wanted me at school. Back then my granddaughter told me: 'Grandma, please, don't go to school. You don't know what kids are like these days.' So I didn't go. It got on my husband's nerves, because I translated a lot.

After the war there were almost no Jews in Piestany. Most of them left for Prague, and some of them went even further, to England or Israel. In 1949 there was a large wave of emigration. Back then there was the so-called 'lift.' There were wooden crates into which things were packed. Each crate had to have an exact list, which went to the customs office. They came to see my father as well, and said: 'Mr. Pharmacist, we'll pack up your pharmacy as it stands, all the furnishings and everything, and it'll go to Israel.' My father wasn't well, and didn't want to go to a place with a harsh climate. So we stayed here.

Life returned to the Jewish community in Piestany to the extent that my parents' generation occasionally met up. There was one prayer hall here, and that's where they'd meet. Likely they talked and reminisced. My generation almost wasn't. They also observed holidays in that prayer hall. When we were building the memorial, one man from Vrbova was here. He came over to me and asked where the Torahs were. I didn't know, all I knew was that when the Torah is in danger, it has to be buried. He said: 'It's got to be here, because in 1953 I had a bar mitzvah in that little prayer hall. We searched for it, but didn't find out anything. If anyone knew anything, they kept quiet.'

Currently a few older members of the community live in the town. Mrs. Vesela is 90, and I'm 85. Then there's one married couple, Dr. [and Mrs.] Braun. He's from Vrbova. He and his wife have two daughters that are very active in Bratislava, they're already in university. Dr. Stastny also came to live here, from Trnava. For some time he was also a so-called Rosh Hakol [president of a Jewish community]. There are also a lot of mixed marriages here. On 15th December 2005, we unveiled a memorial to victims of the Holocaust, and at that time we decided that we'd meet there each year

in December. An unbelievable number of people come here, non-Jews as well.

The idea of the memorial came about long before that. Sometime around the 1970s they approached me, that they wanted to write about some forgotten architects. I met with Mr. Mrna, who was looking for information on Mr. Weiss. Mr. Weiss was a contemporary of my parents'. By coincidence we had his photograph. He had a list of Jews who'd been deported and hadn't returned. I looked at it and told him that there was a huge number of people missing. The town should build them a memorial. Piestany, Trnava, Topolcany. Those were Guardist bastions. I couldn't stop thinking about it, and so I wrote my relatives in Israel, and they sent me a list of Piestany Jews that hadn't returned. That list was put together right in 1945 at the initiative of Mr. Grünwald from Vrbova.

We didn't want to write on the memorial that a thousand Jews had perished. We wanted to return those people their identities. Later they held it against us, that it could have come out a lot cheaper. We wanted to do it properly. At that time we started down the hard road of looking for the first names of children and adults that had been deported. Getting access to the birth records of the town of Piestany was a huge problem, because the permission of the mayor was necessary. I complained to a children's doctor, Dr. Sajmovic, that we weren't able to make contact with Cicutto [Cicutto, Remo: current mayor of Piestany]. Dr. Sajmovic told me: 'That's no problem, I treated him when he was a boy.' Finally the mayor gave me permission. I couldn't just look into the birth records, where the birth certificates were. One civil servant helped me immensely in this. I was writing out Jewish names and dates of birth. She would then look for the birth certificate in another file. In this manner we searched out entire families.

The biggest problem was to get into the State Archive in Bratislava. They're big anti-Semites there. Again Dr. Sajmovic helped me; he belongs to the Hidden Child group. [Hidden Child: a group of children of Jewish origin who were in hiding in territory occupied by Nazi German during the Holocaust (1939 - 1945). They currently form the last generation that survived the Holocaust.] Once during a get-together in Bratislava a lady appeared who spoke very good Slovak. She was an American who'd married a Slovak and had come here to visit. I met with her, and she gave me the name of a woman who worked for the state archive. I called her and got into the state archive. They told me that I had to announce myself two days in advance. So I announced myself.

They're large archives, and they contain lists of the names of people that had been deported. They brought me the list of individual transports, and one they forgot. They forgot to bring me the list of names of the transport of Piestany girls. There were 200 of them. I undertook that we'd write former residents of Piestany for a contribution. The Slovak Union of Jewish Religious Communities also contributed 250,000 crowns. [According to the current rate of exchange (July 2007) 250,000 SKK is approximately 7,650 EUR.] A friend put an ad into the Hebrew-Slovak newspaper in Israel. Many answered it. We communicated in English and German, but many of them still spoke broken Slovak.

During the years that we worked on the memorial, we had a lot of experiences. I even copied one story:

Mancika survived...

Bernat Templer and his wife Rachel were deported together with their children Moses and Mala (they called her Mancika) probably sometime in 1942. The fate of this family was to be similar to the fate of thousands of other Jewish families – liquidation as the final solution.

But Mancika (born 1933) survived. Was it an instinct for survival, chance, luck, a higher power? It's not our task to concern ourselves with why it happened, but how it really was.

But let's let Mancika speak, so that the story has authenticity.

'Once some uncles [some men] came to our place, they were dressed in black clothes. We had to take our bags that we'd prepared and go to the station. Then a freight train arrived at the station, which we had to board. They slammed the door behind us and we traveled for a very long time. When we got off, someone said that we were in Poland.

They led us to a fenced-in place, I don't even know how long we were there, but I was cold and I was hungry. Then they loaded us onto trucks, there were many of them, and we traveled to some forest. I was in the last truck, and a girl from Rome was standing beside me. I didn't understand what she was saying, and she didn't understand me. I knew that they were going to shoot us. Suddenly we caught each other by the hand and jumped. No one saw it. We hid in the forest. During the night we were very cold. In the morning a woman dressed like the village women back home found us. She brought us something to eat and in the evening took us into her house. She gave us some food, warm things and hid us in the cellar. Twice snow fell and melted, and it was warm. One day we were able to go out in the courtyard - there were soldiers there, but they were smiling. They drove us in a car for a long time, until we arrived in a large city and could understand what people there were saying. The soldiers told us that we were in Prague."

That's how Mancika ended up in a Prague orphanage. "Once we were out for a walk on one wide street, and I heard someone say the word Piestany. There was a man standing on the sidewalk, and I caught him by the coat and yelled, I'm from Piestany, too, I want to go home."

How do you explain to a child, scarred by the many tribulations of war, escapes, hiding, hunger and want, that she doesn't have a home, that she has no parents? What took place in that child's little head when she realized that she was heading for death? Did she even know what death was? Will her children one day believe her? Will anyone at all who lived outside of Europe during the war believe her?

At that time orphanages in Prague were overly full. The young man persuaded the management of the orphanage and with his signature guaranteed that he'd take the child to safety. He knew that in Piestany the door of the Erdelyi family was always open. Mancika stayed with us for some time. My mother always lit two candles on Friday. This time she lit four, in memory of Mancika's mother "My mother used to light candles, too," wept Mancika.

With the help of the Red Cross and Piestany natives that had left for Palestine before World War II, we succeeded in searching out Mancika's relatives. Mancika left with a normal emigrant's passport for Palestine, and we never heard of her again. I only hope that she started her own family and is happy.

It's a small world, and unusual things happen, too - on 20th July 2004 we found Mancika Templer! Today her name is Malka Vered, and she lives in Tel Aviv. She's got a nice family, is a grandmother, and will soon be a great-grandmother.

I'm happy that we can strike out the name Mala Templer, number 903 on the list. If there could only be more of them.

[Editor's note: When the list of names of the Holocaust Victims Memorial in Piestany was being put together, Mrs. Heda Ambrova had no idea that Mancika Templerova had survived the war, and that

after the Holocaust had also spent a few days with their family.]

Mr. Mrna is incredibly meticulous. When we began, I told him that we didn't have any money or connections. So I approached Dr. Samovic. He helped us a lot. Because he was a doctor and treated children as well as their parents, he had connections. With his help we gained a lot of generous sponsors. Mr. Sajmovic is still alive to this day, but is currently in Hungary. We built the memorial in the ceremonial chamber of the Piestany Jewish cemetery. The ceremonial chamber was in a state of neglect, but we had an expert, Mr. Mrna, an engineer, who said that after certain repairs it could be used. So the whole thing succeeded.

During the time of Communism we didn't travel much. We lived modestly. We saved and said to ourselves that when the children would be grown and secure, it would be our turn. Then later we went on Cedok tours. [Cedok used to be the largest travel agency in former Czechoslovakia; it was founded in 1920 with headquarters in Prague. Its name is an acronym formed from the Czech words "Ceskoslovenska dopravní kancelar" (Czechoslovak Transport Agency).] Besides that, I was in Israel three times. The first time, in 1966, I went through Belgium. I waited three quarters of a year for permission to leave the country. We landed in Tel Aviv. The entire family was waiting there for me. I was very touched by that. It was amazing, a whole different world. Then my friends arranged it amongst each other and each one of them took me someplace else. All told, I was there five weeks. It was beautiful, but in order for a person to move there, he'd have to be young.

As far as Western European countries are concerned, around 1971 we did one tour, to Vienna, Luxembourg, Ostende, Dover and Paris. The trip lasted about two weeks. There was a big difference between Western countries and Czechoslovakia. You could see it in the accommodations, too. The clean streets. I liked England the most. I don't even know why. Maybe because our English tour guide was from Liberec. She hugged us all. It was very touching. We prepared in advance what we wanted to see, otherwise it makes no sense.

My husband and I didn't collect anything. In order for a person to become a collector, he's got to have money. My hobby was art, mainly painting. My favorite period is the Renaissance. I always wrote down what I'd seen in which museum. I know that in Florence I couldn't for the life of me find Botticelli [Botticelli, Sandro (1445 - 1510): an Italian Renaissance painter from the Florence school], but in the end I found him. The second tour we went on was to northern Germany, from where we took a ship to Denmark, Sweden and to Helsinki. The trip ended in Leningrad, from where we flew home. Another of our trips was to Greece. That we really enjoyed. Our wandering feet also led us to Italy. We of course saw Rome. We were also in St. Petersburg, Riga and Moscow. After my husband's death I flew to America. Back then my son-in-law came here and told me that I've got to take a break. So I flew there.

My husband died in the year 2000, for us it was a matter of course that we'd bury him at the Jewish cemetery. That was no dilemma; even though we didn't observe the holidays, we've got Judaism in our hearts.

## Glossary

### 1 **KuK (Kaiserlich und Königlich) army**

The name 'Imperial and Royal' was used for the army of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as well as



for other state institutions of the Monarchy originated from the dual political system. Following the Compromise of 1867, which established the Dual Monarchy, Austrian emperor and Hungarian King Franz Joseph was the head of the state and also commander-in-chief of the army. Hence the name 'Imperial and Royal'.

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

**3** Hviezdoslav Orszagh, Pavol (1849-1921): Slovak poet, dramatist, translator and a member of the Czechoslovak parliament for a short time. Literary theoreticians consider him the most important Slovak poet of all times.

**4** The Nuremberg Trials: are a series of trials most notable for the prosecution of prominent members of the political, military and economic leadership of Nazi Germany. The trials were held in the city of Nuremberg, Germany, from 1945 to 1949, at the Nuremberg Palace of Justice. The first and best known of these trials was the Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal (IMT), which tried 24 of the most important captured leaders of Nazi Germany. It was held from 20th November 1945 to 1st October 1946. The second set of trials of lesser war criminals was conducted under Control Council Law No. 10 at the U.S. Nuremberg Military Tribunals (NMT), among them the Doctors' Trial and the Judges' Trial.

**5** War with Japan: In 1945 the war in Europe was over, but in the Far East Japan was still fighting against the anti-fascist coalition countries and China. The USSR declared war on Japan on 8 August 1945 and Japan signed the act of capitulation in September 1945.

## **6 Hitler's rise to power**

In the German parliamentary elections in January 1933, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) won one-third of the votes. On 30th January 1933 the German president swore in Adolf Hitler, the party's leader, as chancellor. On 27th February 1933 the building of the Reichstag (the parliament) in Berlin was burned down. The government laid the blame with the Bulgarian communists, and a show trial was staged. This served as the pretext for ushering in a state of emergency and holding a re-election. It was won by the NSDAP, which gained 44% of the votes, and following the cancellation of the communists' votes it commanded over half of the mandates. The new Reichstag passed an extraordinary resolution granting the government special legislative powers and waiving the constitution for 4 years. This enabled the implementation of a series of moves that laid the foundations of the totalitarian state: all parties other than the NSDAP were dissolved, key state offices were filled by party luminaries, and the political police and the apparatus of terror swiftly developed.

## **7 Skoda Company**

Car factory, the foundations of which were laid in 1895 by the mechanics V. Laurin and V. Klement

with the production of Slavia bicycles. Just before the end of the 19th century they began manufacturing motor cycles and, in 1905, they started manufacturing automobiles. The name Skoda was introduced in 1925. Having survived economic difficulties, the company made a name for itself on the international market even within the constraints of the Socialist economy. In 1991 Skoda became a joint stock company in association with Volkswagen.

## **8 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.

## **9 Labor Battalion**

Under the 1939 II. Law 230, those deemed unfit for military service were required to complete "public interest work service". After the implementation of the second anti-Jewish Law within the military, the military arranged "special work battalions" for those Jews, who were not called up for armed service. With the entry into northern Transylvania (August 1940), those of Jewish origin who had begun, and were now finishing, their military service were directed to the work battalions. A decree in 1941 unified the arrangement, saying that the Jews were to fulfill military obligations in the support units of the National Guard. In the summer of 1942, thousands of Jews were recruited to labor battalions with the Hungarian troops going to the Soviet front. Some 50,000 in labor battalions went with the Second Hungarian Army to the Eastern Front - of these, only 6-7,000 returned.

## **10 Subcarpathian Ruthenia**

Is found in the region where the Carpathian Mountains meet the Central Dnieper Lowlands. Its larger towns are Beregovo, Mukacevo and Hust. Up until the World War I the region belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, but in the year 1919, according to the St. Germain peace treaty, was made a part of Czechoslovakia. Exact statistics regarding ethnic and linguistic composition of the population aren't available. Between the two World Wars Ruthenia's inhabitants included Hungarians, Ruthenians, Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs and Slovaks, plus numerous Jewish and Gypsy communities. The first Vienna Decision (1938) gave Hungary that part of Ruthenia inhabited by Hungarians. The remainder of the region gained autonomy within Czechoslovakia, and was occupied by Hungarian troops. In 1944 the Soviet Army and local resistance units took power in Ruthenia. According to an agreement dated 29th June 1945, Czechoslovakia ceded the region to the Soviet Union. Up until 1991 it was a part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. After Ukraine declared its independence, it became one of the country's administrative regions.

## **11 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.

## **12 Winton, Sir Nicholas (b**

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

## **13 SK Bar Kochba Bratislava**

The most important representative of swimming sports in the First Czechoslovak Republic. The club was a participant in Czechoslovak championships, which it dominated in the late 1930s. The performance of SK Bar Kochba Bratislava swimmers is also documented by the world record in the 4 x 200m freestyle relay, which was achieved by four swimmers: Frucht, Baderle, Steiner, Foldes. They also won several Czechoslovak championships in relays. SK Bar Kochba was also the most successful from the standpoint of number of titles of Czechoslovak champion in individual disciplines. In 1936, despite being nominated, athletes of Jewish nationality didn't participate in the Olympic Games in Berlin. The Czechoslovak Olympic Committee didn't recognize this legitimate protest against the political situation in Germany, denounced it in the media and financially penalized the athletes.

## **14 Exemption and exceptions in the Slovak State (1939-1945)**

In the Jewish Codex they are included under § 254 and § 255. Exemption and exceptions, § 255 - the President of the Slovak Republic may grant an exemption from the stipulations of this decree. Exemption may be complete or partial and may be subject to conditions. Exemption may be revoked at any time. In the case of exemption, administrative fees are collected according to § 255 in the following amounts:

- a) for the granting of an exception according to § 1, the sum of 1,000 to 500,000 Ks.
- b) for the granting of an exception according to § 2, the sum of 500 to 100,000 Ks
- c) for the granting of an exception according to single or multiple decrees, the sum of 10 Ks to 300,000 Ks
- d) a certificate issued according to § 3 is charged at 10 Ks

§ 255 enabled the President to grant exceptions from decrees for a fee. Disputes are still led regarding how this paragraph got into the Jewish Codex and how many exceptions the President granted. According to documents there were 1111 Jews protected by exceptions, including family members. Exceptions were valid from the commencement of deportations from the territory of the Slovak State, in 1942, up until the outbreak of the Slovak National Rebellion, in the year 1944.

## **15 Swedish Red Cross**

One of the oldest delegations of the International Federation of the Red Cross, it was established in 1865. In 1944-45 it played a significant role in the Jews' rescue actions in Hungary. On 11th June 1944 Carl Danielsson, the Swedish ambassador in Budapest submitted a petition to the Hungarian government, asking permission for the Swedish Red Cross to intervene in the administration of Jews in Hungary. The main policies of the planned action (for which the organization requested permission) were: contribution to the accommodation and supply of orphaned Jewish children, acquisition of Swedish free pass for persons who had relatives in Sweden, or who had confirmed business relations for a longer period in Sweden. The action was directed by Dr. Waldemar Langlet, the delegate of the Swedish Red Cross in Hungary. He much overstepped his authority in what concerned the number of the issued free passes. One must mention among the rescue actions of the Swedish Red Cross the agreement with the SS-leadership concluded by the Swedish ambassador, Count Folke Bernadotte. Under this agreement, in March and April 1945 the Swedish Red Cross took out and transported from the German concentration camps to Sweden more than 25,000 Danish and Swedish political prisoners (mainly Jews) with 36 buses.

## **16 Bergen-Belsen**

Concentration camp located in northern Germany. Bergen-Belsen was established in April 1943 as a detention camp for prisoners who were to be exchanged with Germans imprisoned in Allied countries. Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the British army on 15th April, 1945. The soldiers were shocked at what they found, including 60,000 prisoners in the camp, many on the brink of death, and thousands of unburied bodies lying about. (Source: Rozett R. - Spector S.: Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, Facts on File, G.G. The Jerusalem Publishing House Ltd. 2000, pg. 139 -141)

## **17 First Vienna Decision**

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

## **18 Maccabi Sports Club in the Czechoslovak Republic**

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

## **19 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.

## **20 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.

## **21 Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia**

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

## **22 Exclusion of Jews from schools in the Protectorate**

The Ministry of Education of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia sent round a ministerial decree in 1940, which stated that from school year 1940/41 Jewish pupils were not allowed to visit Czech public and private schools and those who were already in school should be excluded. After 1942 Jews were not allowed to visit Jewish schools or courses organized by the Jewish communities either.

## **23 Hlinka-Guards**

Military group under the leadership of the radical wing of the Slovakian Popular Party. The radicals claimed an independent Slovakia and a fascist political and public life. The Hlinka-Guards deported brutally, and without German help, 58,000 (according to other sources 68,000) Slovak Jews between March and October 1942.

## **24 Hakhsharah**

Training camps organized by the Zionists, in which Jewish youth in the Diaspora received intellectual and physical training, especially in agricultural work, in preparation for settling in Palestine.

## **25 Orthodox communities**

The traditionalist Jewish communities founded their own Orthodox organizations after the Universal Meeting in 1868-1869. They organized their life according to Judaist principles and opposed to assimilative aspirations. The community leaders were the rabbis. The statute of their communities was sanctioned by the king in 1871. In the western part of Hungary the communities of the German and Slovakian immigrants' descendants were formed according to the Western Orthodox principles. At the same time in the East, among the Jews of Galician origins the 'eastern' type of Orthodoxy was formed; there the Hassidism prevailed. In time the Western Orthodoxy also spread over to the eastern part of Hungary. In 1896, there were 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country,. In 1930, the 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities made up 30.4 percent of all Hungarian Jews. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 percent).

## **26 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 two (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 so-called Status Quo Ante advocated that the Jewish community was maintained the same as before the 1868/69 Congress.

## **27 Sokol**

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

## **28 Anschluss**

The German term "Anschluss" (literally: connection) refers to the inclusion of Austria in a "Greater Germany" in 1938. In February 1938, Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg had been invited to visit Hitler at his mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden. A two-hour tirade against Schuschnigg and his government followed, ending with an ultimatum, which Schuschnigg signed. On his return to Vienna, Schuschnigg proved both courageous and foolhardy. He decided to reaffirm Austria's independence, and scheduled a plebiscite for Sunday, 13th March, to determine whether Austrians wanted a "free, independent, social, Christian and united Austria." Hitler's protégé, Seyss-Inquart, presented Schuschnigg with another ultimatum: Postpone the plebiscite or face a German invasion. On 11th March Schuschnigg gave in and canceled the plebiscite. On 12th March 1938 Hitler announced the annexation of Austria. When German troops crossed into Austria, they were welcomed with flowers and Nazi flags. Hitler arrived later that day to a rapturous reception in his hometown of Linz. Less well disposed Austrians soon learned what the "Anschluss" held in store for them. Known Socialists and Communists were stripped to the waist and flogged. Jews were forced to scrub streets and public latrines. Schuschnigg ended up in a concentration camp and was only freed in 1945 by American troops.

## **29 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](http://www.holocaust.cz/cz2/resources/texts/niznansky_komunita)) Niznansky, Eduard: Zidovska komunita na Slovensku 1939-1945)

## **30 Novaky labor camp**

Established in 1941 in the central Slovakian town of Novaky. In an area of 2.27 km<sup>2</sup> 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.

### **31 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) Knezo-Shönbrun, Bernard: Zidia v siestom robotnom prapore, In. Zidia v interakcii II., IJ UK Bratislava, 1999, pgs. 63 - 81.

### **32 Yellow star in Slovakia**

On 18th September 1941 an order passed by the Slovakian Minister of the Interior required all Jews to wear a clearly visible yellow star, at least 6 cm in diameter, on the left side of their clothing. After 20th October 1941 only stars issued by the Jewish Center were permitted. Children under the age of six, Jews married to non-Jews and their children if not of Jewish religion, were exempt, as well as those who had converted before 10th September 1941. Further exemptions were given to Jews who filled certain posts (civil servants, industrial executives, leaders of institutions and funds) and to those receiving reprieve from the state president. Exempted Jews were certified at the relevant constabulary authority. The order was valid from 22nd September 1941.

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

### **34 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.

### **35 Nationalization in Czechoslovakia**

The goal of nationalization was to put privately-owned means of production and private property into public control and into the hands of the Socialist state. The attempts to change property relations after WWI (1918-1921) were unsuccessful. Directly after WWII, already by May 1945, the heads of state took over possession of the collaborators' (that is, Hungarian and German) property. In July 1945, members of the Communist Party before the National Front openly called for the nationalization of banks, financial institutions, insurance companies and industrial enterprises, the execution of which fell to the Nationalization Central Committee. The first decree for nationalization was signed 11th August 1945 by the Republic President. This decree affected agricultural production, the film industry and foreign trade. Members of the Communist Party fought representatives of the National Socialist Party and the Democratic Party for further expansion of the process of nationalization, which resulted in the president signing four new decrees on 24th October, barely two months after taking office. These called for nationalization of the mining industry companies and industrial plants, the food industry plants, as well as joint-stock companies, banks and life insurance companies. The nationalization established Czechoslovakia's financial development, and shaped the 'Socialist financial sphere.' Despite this, significantly valuable property disappeared from companies in public ownership into the private and foreign trade network. Because of this, the activist committee of the trade unions called for further nationalizations on 22nd February 1948. This process was stopped in Czechoslovakia by new laws of the National Assembly in April 1948, which were passed that December.

**36 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.