

Ema Panovova

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Slovakia

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My family background and growing up

I am from Holic, a little town with a population of about 7 or 8,000 people. There was a castle, Maria Theresa used to go to. Lancers used to have their regiments there and there were also many Jews in Holic. Jews spread all over the world and my relatives lived in Vienna and Budapest. I remember the time when they all came to Holic in summer and we had great fun together. We were a big family; there was a lot of laughter and joy.

The house of my grandfather, Julius Bondy, was located on the main square of Holic. He produced soda water; but it was rather his wife who ran the company. My grandfather died in our family; he was a widower. My grandmother Maria Bondyova, nee Buchwaldova, died quite early, I don't remember her death or funeral. So my grandfather lived with us. He had three or four sisters. One of them lived in Budapest; she married a musical composer called Karol Stefanides. He wasn't a Jew and that part of the family probably survived the Holocaust. The other two or three sisters were in Vienna and either them or their daughters were killed in the Holocaust. I don't remember but I can find out from the family tree. My grandmother had two brothers who became Catholic priests and lived on the borderland. The family had no contact with them; they were probably resentful of them, I don't know anything about their later fate.

It's interesting that my grandparents used to sit on a bench in front of their house together with a future supporter of Nazism, a hairdresser, who lived opposite. My grandparents weren't rich; they were middle class businessmen. My mother Olga Neuwirthova, nee Bondyova, their daughter, got tuberculosis and that ruined them. Though they weren't rich they used to go to the spa in Karlsbad [1](#) or Marienbad [2](#) or Luhacovice; there were always many Jews there. This cost them all their fortune, however, she recovered in Switzerland and at Semmering, Austria. My uncle, my mother's brother Max Bondy, was a forced laborer during the war.

My mother's first husband was Doctor Emil Neuwirth, my father. He comes from Zilina. His father, my grandfather Moriz Neuwirth, had three or four sisters, who lived in Vienna. They were married, had children and grandchildren. One of them was Lieselotte, she emigrated to America in the last moment. My grandmother on the Neuwirth, Paula Neuwirthova, side was in an old people's home in Nove Mesto nad Vahom during the Holocaust and died there.

Grandfather Neuwirth was a doctor. People remember him as a very good person and a very good doctor. He was from Zilina. Etelka, one of his daughters, who married in Vienna, died during the

Holocaust. Her husband was a doctor, too. One of the three brothers, called Vojtech or Bela, was a captive in World War I. He was in Austria, a student then and was taken captive there along with his Hungarian colleagues, who were all internees during World War I.

My mother's first marriage didn't last long. Her husband caught typhus and later he became mentally ill; he was treated in a psychiatric clinic. My mother stayed alone with me, later she got divorced and married to a Russian immigrant. He wasn't a Jew. His name was Doctor Sergej Panov and he was a doctor, too. My grandparents didn't like him, but when the political situation got worse, my grandfather asked him to protect the family. My grandfather lived quite long and died a natural death; he wasn't deported.

Doctor Panov adopted me and brought me up. He saved my life because with the help of his colleague doctors he proved at court that I was his daughter and that I was the child of a Jewish mother and a Christian father. He bought the house of my real father in Holic and we lived there. It was a traditional house of a doctor. He had a car and we used to go on trips. We also went to Bohemia.

During the war

In 1943 I got the documents which said I was a half-Jewish child. My foster-father, with the help of his friend Kotvan, who worked at the Ministry, could arrange on the basis of the documents, that I was allowed to continue my studies at a secondary school. In 1944 I was accepted to the final year and in the same year I passed my final exams. This was the result of the long struggle of my father: he probably just wanted for me to have a normal life, but actually it was a fight for my life.

My father took part in the underground fight, he helped the refugees to cross the border river Moravia and he sent parcels to partisans.

In 1944 it was obvious that we should either leave or hide. My father provided for us false documents and we left for Slatina nad Bebravou, or Slatinka, I can't remember exactly. I stayed there with my mother; my father went to fight in the Slovak National Uprising ³. At the end of October the Germans attacked the region, fighter-bombers flew over our place, the valley Slatinka was surrounded by Germans. It became rather wild. We lived in a peasant's house with false documents. Once partisans came and took away the local guard.

Later soldiers of the Vlasov brigade came and one never knew who was who. The Vlasovs also had red uniforms and looked like partisans. My mother lost her nerves, we didn't know what had happened to our father. So I went to the German commandeer and asked for permission to travel to Bratislava. It was a very bad idea. They could have caught us already during the journey. On the journey we talked with a woman; it was clear she was fed up with the fascist regime, so I trusted her and told her about our situation. It was a lucky chance because Germans and Slovak police were patrolling at the station. Her husband, who was a policeman, met her at the station. He also hugged both my mother and me and with the words, 'Welcome, our family, we were already waiting for you', he took us out of the station and gave us shelter in his home.

In the end, my father found us and joined us. Once a German from Holic came and he recognized us in a roundup. We were all caught. They first took us to Vlckova Street, to a Secret Police station. My father was kept there, whereas my mother and me were brought to Sered and on 6th

December we were transported to Ravensbruck. The transport was originally routed to Auschwitz, but, fortunately, Auschwitz didn't accept us.

From the distance we saw houses which were similar to the houses built in our neighborhood. I couldn't believe everything I heard before and at first I was happy that the rumors weren't right. I said to my mother, that we would live and work there. On the gate there was the inscription 'Arbeit Macht Frei', so I thought I was right. In this camp [Ravensbruck] with its jungle law, under horrible conditions, where only few could keep their human face, even there I found some solidarity and help.

When we were still in the Waschraum, something like a bathroom, we didn't know what would come out of the showers, if it was gas or water, because we already understood the seriousness of the situation. So I asked a French prisoner, who was there to keep order, if I could drink the water. And she answered, 'It's all the same, whether you die now or later'. This was such an introduction to the reality. It was water, not gas, that came out of the shower heads. Most of the girls had their heads shaved; I was somehow lucky, I wasn't shaved. We were wet, it was December, Ravensbruck is located in the north, and we had to stand outside... I don't know what to say about the concentration camp, it was horrible. It was really horrible...

I survived half a year there, but it marked me for the rest of my life. I caught kidney tuberculosis and I wouldn't have survived four or five years in a concentration camp, as some girls have.

Glossary

1 Karlsbad (Czech name

Karlovy Vary): The most famous Bohemian spa, named after Bohemian King Charles (Karel) IV, who allegedly found the springs during a hunting expedition in 1358. It was one of the most popular resorts among the royalty and aristocracy in Europe for centuries.

2 Marianske Lazne/Marienbad

a world-famous spa in the Czech Republic, founded in the early 19th century, with many curative mineral springs and baths, and situated on the grounds of a 12th-century abbey. Once the playground for the Habsburgs and King Edward VII, as well as famous personalities including Goethe, Strauss, Ibsen and Kipling, Marianske Lazne has been the site of numerous international congresses in recent years.

3 Slovak National Uprising